

Minnesota Literacy Council
Capstone Project
2016

Native American Culture, Education,
and Resources in the Twin Cities

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Our Project:

We wanted to provide a resource for future Americorps VISTA members at the Minnesota Literacy Council who may be working with Native American students or for VISTAs who are simply interested in learning more about education and the Native American community. We started this project by doing academic and online research about the Native American community in the Twin Cities. We knew it would be important to include the voices of educators and leaders in the Native American community, so we had interviews with a teacher from the American Indian Magnet School, the director of American Indian Education at St. Paul Public Schools, and the primary guide and director at the American Indian Montessori Childcare Center. Our research primarily utilized websites that were written and aimed at members of the Native American community (ex. The Phillips Indian Educators website, which is created and utilized by indigenous educators). All of our research and interviews were used to create a handout, which we hope will be given to future VISTAs, and this more in-depth resource, which will be available on the Summer Reads website for more information.

Why This is Important:

Educator and now educational theorist Lisa Delpit wrote, “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?”⁴ All children have complex life histories that they bring with them into the classroom. Sometimes the classroom is already built to celebrate and support the culture of the student, but for many minority students, the classroom culture can be at odds with their culture. Creating a classroom that is aware and inclusive of the different cultures present allows for all students to learn and develop a strong sense of self. The Native American community, in particular, has a complicated history of United States public education being used as a tool for forced assimilation. This history continues to impact how Native Americans feel about public education, and the long tradition of racist depictions of Native Americans in media and popular culture only worsens the situation. However, this should not be taken to mean that Native American students cannot be successful in school or that they need to be ‘saved’. The community is strong, thriving, and supportive. By understanding more about the Native American community, you can help improve children’s experiences with public education and help create a better classroom environment for Native American students.

Interviewees:

Julie Downwind (Lake Superior Band Ojibwe)

She teaches first grade at American Indian Magnet School in St. Paul and has been an educator for 25 years. She is active in her community and is the proud mother of two wonderful daughters.

Danielle DeLong (Ho-Chunk)

She currently works for Indian Education at St. Paul Public Schools and is an American Indian Education Program Cultural Specialist. She also teaches diabetes prevention with a strong focus on community health. She has taught for over 10 years in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms.

LaVon Lee (Lakota Nation)

She is the current Director at Montessori American Indian Childcare Center (MAICC). She was Executive Director of the American Indian Family Center for 10 years and has served as Program Staff at St. Paul Foundation and the Grotto Foundation.

Janice LaFloe (Turtle Mountain Chippewa)

She is the Primary Guide at Montessori American Indian Childcare Center (MAICC) and the founder of MAICC in 2014. She served with LaVon at the American Indian Family Center and St. Paul Indian Education Program for over 10 years.

“Native peoples were completely disregarded in the Constitution (it excludes Natives). It was completely developed without American Indians in mind. They were not even given the right to vote until 1924, even though they were the first peoples living here. The Constitution was even modeled after the Iroquois Confederacy and their compacts with each other. The Iroquois Confederacy had fought amongst and killed each other, but they came together to develop a compact of five tribes that would work together. They buried their hatchets and weapons under a great “Tree of Life” and agreed never to fight and kill each other again. Those who worked on writing the American Constitution got together with some of the Iroquois leaders and asked them how they did this and how they could get along yet be so different. The Iroquois leaders told them about burying the hatchet.” -Danielle DeLong

Working with Students of a Different Culture:

Culturally responsive education emphasizes teachers knowing the culture of their students and being mindful to how culture, history, biases, and discrimination impact a child's experiences in the classroom. It is important to know your own culture and understand what implicit biases you may have. For example, if the only knowledge you have about Native American history is the Thanksgiving story told through the European American perspective, you should take time to understand that it is not an accurate representation of European conquest and Native American experiences with Europeans. In a culturally responsive classroom, learning about Thanksgiving would include perspectives from the Native American community, but learning about Native culture would also happen year round, not just during Thanksgiving. It is important to provide teaching and learning experiences that are culturally congruent, as successful learning experiences must incorporate the culture, values, and belief system of a child.⁷

It is important to stay curious and humble. Ask questions and keep learning! Some kids may not know much about their Tribal culture, others may know a lot but not want to share, and other kids may be very excited to tell you a lot. Be sure to ask the cultural questions that will allow you to do your work better. Keep in mind that the questions you ask may not be answered directly. Many people may have one way of acting within their American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) community and will act a different way when outside of the community. It can be said that they “walk in two worlds”.⁵

It is easy to have negative connotations that are associated with those from minority groups. Stereotypes in the media and government influence us both consciously and unconsciously. The attitudes that are created by these stereotypes can affect the way we interact with, and form relationships with, the children we work with. This makes it difficult for us to see them for who they really are.⁷

Self reflection allows you to acknowledge your misconceptions and prejudices about people different from yourself. Meeting and getting to know members of the community in which you are serving can help you learn about the culture and community from someone who personally knows about it. These actions will help create greater cultural competence. Cultural competence is your “awareness, acceptance, and valuing of cultural differences.”⁵ It is important to understand and know enough about your own culture to be curious about and develop knowledge about a new community. You should know that there may be a spectrum of reactions and interactions when working with people of different cultures, as building cultural competence is a learning process. By improving your cultural competence, you will start to build the capacity to be able to shift your perspective and behaviors to fit different contexts.¹⁰

Ultimately understand that there is a ‘culture of power’ in the classroom.⁵ This ‘culture of power’ can be understood in three parts. The first part is recognizing that there are unequal power dynamics between the people in the school like the teacher and the student, the teacher and the principal, etc. The power structures of society are also brought into the

classroom. The second part is about the culture of the school. The culture of a school is typically based on white upper middle class norms and codes of behavior. This means that children who are not from these privileged groups have to learn this new culture in order to be successful at school, often at the expense of their own culture. The final part is recognizing that people from positions of privilege may be less aware of this culture of power in the classroom, while those without power tend to be more aware.⁵

Background and Context:

The indigenous people of North America have a rich history that began long before Europeans came to the continent. We cover just a short period of time which relates most directly to the use of education by the United States government to force assimilation and end resistance to reservations. Please continue to learn more about the different tribes in the United States and their different histories, cultures, and traditions.

From the 1800s through the 1960s, the United States government and Christian missionaries created boarding schools for Native American children and forced them to attend. The children were separated from their families, tribes, and culture. They were forced to wear Western clothing, punished for speaking in their Tribal languages, and above all, were taught that indigenous culture is shameful and inferior. The American government hoped that by separating Native children from their tribes, they would end the resistance to forced relocation and make the children into assimilated Americans.⁵

The children in these boarding schools experienced abuse, and many died from infectious diseases. The use of education to force assimilation into American society had a major impact on the Native American community.⁵ Boarding schools caused many Native Americans to feel fear and shame of who they were, and losing their traditional community support systems resulted in generations of people feeling disconnected from their culture. These schools also contributed to a mistrust of the education system and low graduation rates.¹

The education children received was very rudimentary and focused mainly on manual labor. The US government did not believe that Native Americans were capable of learning more than basic manual labor and did not see the tribes as the complex societies they were/are.²

In 1924, Native Americans were granted citizenship in the United States and were given the right to vote. They were now citizens under both the national government and tribal governments. American Indian tribes also have a Sovereign Nation status.³

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was a way to provide new sources of income for Native peoples. In the 1930s, poverty among American Indian tribes was widespread. Those who had lost their traditional arts were the poorest, as they had also lost so much of their cultural identity. This Act, through the help of elders, worked to revive traditional arts and crafts.⁷

The Federal “Termination Policy” in the 1950s and 1960s ended the relationship between more than 100 tribal governments and the federal government. These tribes were no longer recognized by the government, which resulted in a loss of federal support, loss of land, and loss of tribal identity. Most of these tribes were able to regain federal recognition in the 1990s, but this policy harmed many tribes’ ability to grow and support their communities.⁵

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Federal “Relocation Policy” promoted Native Americans to move to urban areas by promising jobs, housing, and a ‘better’ life. Those who moved and managed to stay in the city are the foundation of the urban Native American communities today. However, many who moved to the city experienced poverty, lack of connection with their tribe, and found it difficult to stay. Today, many families will travel between urban communities and their home community.⁵

Native culture was forced underground when boarding schools and relocation programs sought to strip language and cultural identity from the Native peoples. However, it was not completely lost.¹ In 1978, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was created to protect and preserve Native cultural practices and sacred traditions. They could now, legally, practice their sacred traditions without the fear of being persecuted.¹

Today, there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes in the United States, and almost 245 non-federally recognized tribes, which may be recognized by their state. 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.⁵

For tribes that had to co-exist, there may still be historic rivalries and challenges, which may not be apparent to outsiders, but still impact the dynamics of the reservation and community. Typically, tribes from the same geographic region may have greater cultural similarities due to the similar climate, ecology etc. However, in most major cities, there are Native communities that may have many different tribes and cultural customs represented. They may feel “invisible” in dispersed and multi-racial communities.⁵

Some strengths of the community today include strong extended kinship and family ties, indigenous generational knowledge, strong connection to the past, and community pride.⁵

“If you ask a student about the tribe they come from and do not understand what they tell you, do not just ask them where they are from and assume that they belong to a tribe from that state or area. Families move and do not always remain in the same area as their tribe has historically been located. My son told his teacher that he was “Native” in his tribal tongue, but she did not understand what he had said. Instead, she asked him where he was from, and when hearing that he is from Minnesota, she told him that he must be Ojibwe. She went by his location and assumed something of him that was not true. My family are members of the Ho-Chunk tribe from Wisconsin. We are not Ojibwe. However, my son believed his teacher because of her role of power.” -Danielle DeLong

Stereotypes:

Our schemas about Native Americans, and other cultural groups, are formed in our early childhood by Hollywood, the media, Halloween costumes, advertising, sports, etc. Unless we are truly informed, the image of American Indians as only living in tipis, wearing feathers, and hunting with bows and arrows will continue. Two of the most widely held stereotypes are that Native Americans are living as they did in the past and that Native Americans are all the same.² It is important to be aware of and keep in mind that the past influences the present, but we must be able to separate the two. The lifestyles of Native Americans have changed over time, and they contribute to our society in all areas today.²

Steps to Counteract Stereotypes (These are Relevant for Working with Many Groups):²

1. Identify and understand stereotypes
2. Counteract stereotypes and sensitize students to stereotypes
3. Recognize egocentrism (judging another culture solely by standards and values of your own, superiority of one's own culture)
4. Use cultural relativism: A concept that refers to that fact that what is regarded as true, valued, and expected in one social system may not be the same in another.
5. Be aware that Native Americans have made significant efforts to maintain their traditions even under extreme duress. These traditions have religious and social importance.
6. Realize and recognize that Native Americans have concerns about how they are presented to the public today and about maintaining their legal rights.
7. Distinguish between tribes, like the Ojibwe, Dakota, Ho-Chunk, and Lakota, and realize that tribes have unique customs, their own language, and are diverse.
8. Understand that all American Indians are individuals and have individual life experiences and knowledge.

Dos and Don'ts:

Do be aware of your own perspective and thoughts on Native Americans. Are they true, false, myths, or stereotypes? Are you perpetuating your own thoughts?⁵

Do talk about race in a respectful way. It is the only way we are going to understand one another.⁶

Do be open to conversation with native students. It is important to get them talking and to form relationships with them.⁶

Do be aware of the individual child. Even if children have a common background, they can be completely different. Some may be very knowledgeable about their culture, some may not, but you need to be sensitive to who they are.⁵

Do be aware of the power you have when working with children, and be a power of change.³

Do bring in books and texts that show modern day natives and reflect how and where they currently live. Native Reflections is a good company that prints current texts.⁶

Do make sure you know the history of Native peoples, past and present, before you attempt to teach it.²

Do listen to students and ask general questions like you would do with any student. Get them to talk and give value to what they are saying. Show genuine interest and learn from them.⁶

Do present Native peoples as separate from each other, with unique cultures, languages, spiritual beliefs, and dress.²

Do portray Native societies as coexisting with nature in a delicate balance.²

Do talk about Native peoples in the present.³

Do remember that what children have to say is valuable. You have a lot to get through academically when working with them, but listening to them helps to build that relationship. Do suggest that you talk more about something they bring up a little later or during a break time.⁶

Do incorporate art, floral designs, and geometric designs into lessons and activities. Art is very important culturally.⁶

Do learn to laugh at yourself, and if people tease you, it is a form of guidance.⁵

Do be aware of gender-specific behavior. Gender roles can be very different in different communities.⁵

Do learn how the community refers to itself.⁵

Do be careful about pointing with your finger, which may be rude in many tribal communities.⁵

Do avoid looking at your watch a lot or rushing things.⁵

Do be very genuine and sincere. Say something like: “I understand that you are American Indian. I think that is very special because ____.” See them as special and give them a genuine reason for why you see them that way and why they should care. Kids are not always comfortable being different; however, they are usually comfortable being special for a genuine reason.³

Don’t assume that a child is from a certain tribe just because of the location he or she is from. Families can move far away from the tribe they have enrolled in.³

Don’t put any judgment on what Native children say. They can feel a disconnect if you do and may never bring it up again.⁶

Don’t assume that you don’t have any Native children in your class.⁴

Don’t use materials which only present as heroes Native people who aided Europeans.²

Don’t let children do “war whoops.”²

Don’t make up Indian “legends” or “ceremonies.”²

Don’t have children make “Indian crafts” unless you know authentic methods and have authentic materials.²

Don’t mention distant Native American/Alaskan Native relatives in an attempt to establish rapport unless you have maintained a connection to that tribe.⁵

Myths and Facts:

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

Fact: There are 50-60 tribes (and maybe even more) represented in the Twin Cities, and more than 50 can be identified in the St. Paul Public Schools. There are multiple tribes within the Ojibwe band as well.³

Myth: Native peoples live in the United States, but there are not a lot of differences.

Fact: There are 567 federally recognized tribes in the United States.³

Myth: All Native Americans live on reservations.

Fact: Native Americans now live in urban areas. The Indian Relocation Act, from the 1960s and 1970s, pushed for Natives to move into urban areas and off reservations. Today, there are more Natives living off the reservations than on them. They are modern people and are not “stuck in the past.”³

Myth: Native Americans are not part of the larger United States.

Fact: Native Americans have dual citizenship if they are an enrolled member of a tribe. They are part of the sovereign nation of their tribe and are US citizens. Enrolled Native Americans can vote in their tribe and in the United States government.³

Myth: I can easily pick out an “Indian.” They all look the same.

Fact: It is not always easily identifiable that someone is American Indian. The stereotype of what a Native person looks like comes from the media, sports, and movies. In many cases, you might not even know an individual is Native until you are told so.³

Myth: If a child “looks” like a Native American, he has a strong connection with his 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. Some might not even be with their biological families and may not have much access to their culture. 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.⁶

Myth: All Native Americans do not like the United States government and are not patriotic.

Fact: It is all based on individual understanding. Native Americans have the highest enlistment of any other race or ethnicity according to percentage in the United States military because there is a “Warrior Society” culture in many tribes. Being in the military allows people in today’s society to become warriors. However, there are some people who will not enlist in the military because of the historical violence the army carried out on

Native American communities. For a similar reason, there are some Native Americans who may not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.³

Myth: Native American kids need saving.

Fact: These students do not need saving. They just need a connection and to know that people care about them and that they matter. They need to see themselves as being valuable. Their background may be different, but they should feel like it is valued.⁶

Myth: It does not really matter if a classroom or program incorporates and is sensitive to student culture. We have too many things to get through to worry about that.

Fact: If students understand their culture and feel comfortable with who they are, they tend to do better in school.⁶

Myth: It is only appropriate to talk about Native Americans during the month of November around Thanksgiving.

Fact: Native Americans can be addressed in curriculum at any time of the year. There is so much that can be talked about from this Native perspective, and students need to understand that this culture is valued and present.⁴

It is important to promote the value of early childhood education and to establish a good routine for Native children to promote success in school. Because of the negative experiences Native American communities have had with formal education in the past, many do not want to return to the education system. We have to emphasize how important education is for success and for a thriving community. Education must help children to a greater understanding of their whole self and to be proud of who they are as a Native child.”-Janice LaFloe

Some Guidelines for Educational Materials:²

Avoid generalizations such as, “Indians lived in tipis,” when such cultural practices were not general among Native Americans but specific to certain tribes. One would not say that “Europeans lived in windmills.”

Avoid phrases such as “Mohawk Indians,” which are as redundant as saying “French Europeans.” Use instead “Mohawks” or “Mohawk people.”

Avoid using terms “Indians,” “Native Americans” or “Native people” if referring only to one people, such as the Sioux or the Cherokee.

If referring to Native people generally, use “Native people” and “Native American” as well as “Indian people.” Alaska Natives do not call themselves “Indian.” In Canada, the term “First Nation” is used.

If a story contains both Native Americans and Europeans, don’t use “Indian” to refer to the former and “people” to refer to the latter.

Use “Indians” and “whites” or “Native people” and “white people.” Avoid terms such as “squaw,” “brave,” and “papoose” instead use “woman,” “man,” and “baby” which are accurate.

Avoid stereotypical portrayals of Native people as fierce, violent, stealthy, stoic, close to nature, etc.

Checklist for Evaluating Native American Children's Books:⁹

What to look for to determine if a book is racist in its portrayal of Native Americans:

1. In ABC books, is E for Eskimo or I for Indian?
2. In counting books, are "Indians" being counted?
3. Are animals or children "playing Indian"?
4. What names do "Indians" have? Names like "Little Chief" or "Indian Two Feet" are not okay.
5. Are Native people shown as savages from the past or as complex human beings?
6. Are there distinct Native people with their own culture, language, etc., or are all people just shown as one people? Are Native people drawn as looking all alike, or are they shown as actual individuals?
7. Is language respectful or insulting (i.e. describing people as "huge, half naked Indians")?
8. How is history shown? Are there words like 'disappearance,' and was the US government just 'trying to help'? Or are the Native Americans shown as protecting themselves against Euro-American conquest?
9. Are the only Native people that are taught about people who helped the Europeans, or are there Native heroes who helped their own community?
10. Is there recognition of the diverse, sophisticated, and complex Native societies before the conquest?
11. Does the story make it seem like Native people no longer exist today, or are there connections to the present life of Native peoples?
12. Are the religions shown as primitive or superstitious? Or are the religions shown in context of a tribe?
13. Is there an understanding of the intersection of material and nonmaterial parts of life?
14. Are the people shown as living in balance with nature?
15. Is the language reflective of the strong oral tradition?
16. Are the adults mature individuals who can take care of their own people, or does it seem like a white authority figure has to 'save' them?
17. Are Native people seen having their own culture with its own merits, or are they always compared to white middle class culture?
18. Are Native values of hard work, sharing, honesty, and courage an integral part of growth?
19. Are women shown as a respected part of the society?
20. Are Elders respected and loved as the keepers of the culture?
21. Are there positive role models a child could identify with?
22. Who is the author of the story? Are they part of the Native American community?

“There are some neat things that are happening in the community and that are coming back. One example is the Berry Fast for girls once they reach puberty. This fast was a tradition that was lost for a long time but is now coming back. Young girls give up berries for a year and pair up with elders who teach them about being women and taking care of themselves. They make this sacrifice for the world to go on while learning about themselves as women. The girls wear a strawberry medallion or pin to show that they are making the fast, and they receive more support during this time of their lives. There is even a ceremony that is held for them to celebrate that they are life givers and have a great responsibility. Puberty and menstruation are more celebrated and are not taboo topics in this culture. The changes these girls are experiencing are not a shunned thing. The fast is a choice young girls can make, and it is a great support for them. Their male peers have also been very respectful and encouraging.” -Julie Downwind

Social/Cultural Identities:

A major concern in the Native American community is 'Loss of Self'. Since assimilation was actively promoted by the United States government, there is a considerable fear of loss of culture. Many children will learn their native language as a second language, which makes it more challenging to think and express ideas in their native tongue. Drumming and singing is one way that children can access language and cultural traditions that they may have limited exposure to.¹ However, many young Native Americans have the ability to 'walk in two worlds,' meaning that they can be active participants of both their Native American culture and the mainstream culture.⁵

Names are a very important part of identity. Many Native American students have European last names that may have been given to a family member who was in a boarding school. Their name then becomes a continual reminder of forced assimilation by the United States. Not only were new last names given to Native Americans, sacred naming rituals were outlawed in the 1800s to prevent Native Americans from choosing their own names. Some communities today are working to revive these naming ceremonies. Children may be hesitant to share with you their name because they are nervous about being teased. Also, just because a child's last name is European does not mean they will know less about their culture, and just because a child has a traditional name does not mean they are more involved with their community. It is important to not give a Native child a nickname without permission because names are still considered sacred, and a nickname can be seen as disrespectful.⁷

Another important part of social identity is belonging to a tribe. For people unfamiliar with Native American tribes, it can seem complex. Like many cultures, most Tribal Nations use a blood quantum to determine if a child is Native American. Usually when people marry across Nations, their children enroll in the father's Nation. There are a few Nations which allow children to be enrolled in their mother's Nation. However, some children from inter-tribal marriages will not meet the blood quantum and, therefore, cannot enroll with a Tribal Nation. However, this does not automatically mean that child does not have a strong connection with their Native American culture. In addition, the centuries of inter-marriage and the sheer diversity of tribes means that there is not a single "Indian look." Each person will have their own cultural identity, and many may identify as multicultural. Often in urban areas, there will be many people who identify as Native American but are not enrolled with a tribe. The number of people enrolled in a tribe determines benefits from the United States government like education, healthcare, etc.⁷

Powwows play a large part in social and cultural identity. The pan-Indian powwow, for example, reflects the Plains Indians traditions and is a way for different tribes from the area to come together. For some people, attending powwows can be the major way they interact with their heritage. The powwow can be religious or secular depending on how and when it is held. Some powwows are open to the non-Native American community, and people are encouraged to attend and learn more about the tribe.⁷

While powwows can be religious, it is important to not believe the stereotype that all Native Americans are deeply spiritual. Religious practices will vary greatly, and many spiritual beliefs and sacred practices will not be shared with outsiders. Many communities will have a strong church community.²

Family is another important part of social identity. Families are not just the nuclear family that is seen in American culture. Families may live in different parts of the state or region. Children may leave school to go and take care of family members that live somewhere else. Children may also be responsible for taking care of family members after school or may be expected to work to help support the family. All of these things are reflective of the strong emphasis on family.³

As part of a communal society, most traditional Native Americans have a relational worldview, which is a holistic approach to life. This is characterized by a communal distribution of goods, wealth, and power in Native American cultures. They view all areas of life and existence to be interrelated; the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional quadrants all interact. Since everything is part of a greater whole, Native Americans are respectful of plants and animals and thank the spirits of these creations for their gift of provision. Nothing should be wasted, as this is seen as being disrespectful.⁷

Stories and legends also reflect the beliefs and traditions held by Native peoples. Creation stories help Natives understand that the Creator looks out for all creation. Legends and trickster tales have traditionally taught morals and ethics. Oral storytelling is still very important, and children are expected to listen to, memorize, and be able to retell stories. Memorizing stories also helps children to understand how they should act in a given situation. The oral tradition is, in many ways, like science. It passes down a knowledge about the world and the events that have taken place. They give knowledge to people about how to live, how to treat the earth, and how to rightfully use its resources. Native traditions many times dictate which time of year a certain story can be told, and community stories are viewed as belonging to those who created them.⁷

Cultural Aspects and Application in Academic Settings:

Eye contact is a cultural aspect that volunteers and teachers need to be aware of when working with Native American children. Some may look you in the eyes, but others will understand that it is a sign of respect to an elder that they do not have eye contact. In nature, directly looking into the eyes can be seen as a challenge. Those who have been taught this perspective will not want to send a signal of challenge to an adult. Do not demand that they hold eye contact with you.^{3,6}

Allowing children time to work together is important when learning in the classroom, as community is highly valued. Additionally, many students will appreciate when others talk in a softer voice and when teachers make comments to them privately instead of in front of everyone. It can also be considered extremely dishonorable to ask a child to tell what another child did wrong or to criticize another Native American person.⁷

It is important to pay attention to gestures, as a lot of communication can come through non-verbals. Looking down may be a way to show respect, and ignoring someone is a way to show disagreement. Softer handshakes are usually a sign of respect. Humor may be used to communicate hard truths and difficult topics. It can also be used as a way to show affection or to offer advice and correct behavior. In addition, asking for too much clarification can be seen as invasive.⁵

Reading enrichment, traditionally, begins as storytelling.⁸ Telling stories is very important in this culture, but due to the oral tradition, stories do not always hold the same structure that Western European stories do. Encourage students to tell stories, but keep in mind that there might not be a defined beginning, middle, and end with rising action, a climax, and falling action. Stories were meant to be told night after night and to convey a message.⁵

As with any children that have gone through trauma, it is important for them to have a sense of calmness and genuineness in their lives. Having a calm environment at school and community programs can really help. Consistency is very important for these students, and they come to depend on you. It is hard for Native children to have other people fill in for their teachers and volunteers, and it can be difficult for them to process someone else being there with them. Americorps consistency helps because it is predictable for them and is routine. It also gives volunteers a chance to listen to them and build strong, impactful relationships that teachers might not have the same chance of doing.⁶

As all areas of life are connected in the Native view, some children will not focus on school at school and home at home. What they experience at home has bearing on what they

experience at school (or another community program). It is important to listen to what a child is facing in another area of his or her life. Children may not do as well if their needs are not responded to holistically. It is important for Native children to be “in balance” in their spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical lives.⁷

There are Native American boys who have long hair, and a lack of understanding that this is a cultural norm can result in boys feeling alienated. Some little boys have been referred to as girls because of this, and their peers tease them. However, hair can be very spiritually tied, and it is not okay to go up and touch someone’s hair or them without asking them.³

Projects about citizenship can highlight the dual citizenship that Native Americans enrolled in a tribe have. This can also be a form of connection with other students who may have dual citizenship. This can open up the door to understanding others.³

The Montessori Method is very compatible with Native American values and worldview, as both value and respect the world and the whole child. Children are not so much taught as they are guided and nurtured to reach their potential. The primary guide offers ways for them to learn by doing in a culturally relevant environment that incorporates their language and culture. The goal is to instill a love of learning, to get children “school ready,” and to help children get used to being in the community. Children have freedom of movement and are encouraged to be self-directed learners in an environment that focuses on the whole child, as nothing happens in isolation.⁸

“Children must feel like they are in a place of comfort at school or at a community site through the environment that is created. Education is the great equalizer that gives them an open world with so many choices for their lives. In this place of comfort, children need to be pushed academically. You want them to have a level of comfort and work to enhance it.

Acknowledge what they do say, and help them to feel comfortable. This acknowledgement should stem from what they bring up. If you share a book that you really like with them, acknowledge why, but have the conversation come from them. This works with any student as well. To help build comfort in the classroom, it is beneficial for students to see connections between cultures in ways like dress and traditions to better understand and identify with others”

-Julie Downwind

Major Issues Facing Education for Native Students:

Some of the major concerns in the Native American community in the Twin Cities are trauma, poverty,⁶ homelessness,³ food scarcity,⁶ health problems like diabetes, smoking, cancer, lack of health resources⁸ and low education and employment opportunities.⁸

These factors affect whole families, as they tend to struggle with their standard of living, and some children may end up in foster care. Diabetes is a critical problem in the community that affects around 1 in 4 Native Americans over the age of 40. Health is a large part of the balance of the whole person.³ It can be hard for children to go to school or work on academics when being faced with these issues. It can be very difficult for them to process what they are going through, and these issues can come out in many ways at school and community programs: not being focused or engaged, acting out, tantrums, etc. These children and their families may need to be introduced to resources, or just having someone there to listen and to help them process what is going on can really help.⁶

Native Americans also tend to be the least understood of all diverse populations by their teachers, as Native American cultural values may be less visible in White American society and have been exoticised to appear very different from Western European values. Often when thinking or learning about racial and ethnic minorities, Native Americans are not mentioned or included. Many educators and administrators have not valued continuing Native traditions and have many times believed that Native cultures are inferior. In addition, Native children have, at times, been wrongly referred to special education, speech/ language therapy, and similar programs because of educators' lack of knowledge about cultural practices and features.⁷

Twin Cities Organizations and Agencies:

There are many organizations and agencies that work to meet the needs of this community in the Twin Cities. This fits with the tribal structure of Native American societies, as it takes a community to raise a child, not just the parents. It is the responsibility of the community to raise the whole child with all of his or her needs met. A lot of families have experienced trauma, and many parents may not feel that they can advocate for their child. These resources and agencies seek to address the needs of children and families. The agencies often collaborate to support the population. These agencies are tied to tradition to assist individuals as a tribe system would. They often hire Native American people and ensure all their employees are capable of providing culturally sensitive social services. In the past when a parent could not care for a child, someone else from the tribe stepped in, and no one was homeless. Today, homelessness is a big challenge for American Indians, but there was never an issue when they had clan systems working together. The tribal support is not always possible today, so it is important that these agencies have different purposes and can help in many ways.³ The following is a short list of some of the agencies that can be helpful to learn more about.

American Indian Community Development Cooperation:

Their mission is to “provide culturally unique initiatives, housing and entrepreneurial programs that will strengthen American Indian communities.” They seek to provide culturally specific housing for Natives and help the most vulnerable in the community acquire and maintain housing resources through affordable housing. This organization was largely started to address the needs of homeless Natives and their families. They provide assistance with housing, rehabilitation, maintenance, and management of homes or apartments. By conducting research and providing advice to similar organizations, they help to formulate housing policies. Finally, this organization works to combat the deterioration of low- and moderate- income residential housing units for the Native American community.

<http://www.aicdc-mn.org>

American Indian Family Center:

This nonprofit provides therapeutic, employment, and educational services for Native American families and youth in Saint Paul. They draw from the Native American tradition of viewing all people holistically and provide services which address all aspects (physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual). All of their programs are culturally sensitive. One of the programs they provide is a kindergarten readiness program, which is connected with the American Indian Magnet School. There are also culturally specific mental health services, a men and sons diabetes support group, and pre- and postnatal services for women to ensure healthy pregnancies.

<https://www.aifc.net>

American Indian Magnet School (AIM):

AIM is a K-8 magnet school focused on incorporating Ojibwe and Lakota languages and culture into the curriculum. This school was started to address the problem of a low graduation rate for Native American students and to figure out a way to keep these children in school. AIM seeks to address cultural issues and assist with identity retention. In many public schools, it is not unheard of for a Native student to be the only one in a classroom, and in such an environment, one can face struggles with identity, fitting in, and not feeling as comfortable in school. This school was a way to bridge these challenges. Two language specialists work with elementary classrooms, and another specialist works with middle school classrooms. About one-third of educators from AIM are from a Native background as well. All students learn indigenous languages along with academic language, and the D/Lakota Virtues and Seven Ojibwe Teachings are woven into the school environment.⁶

<http://aims.spps.org/AIMS>

American Indian OIC:

Their mission is to “empower American Indians to pursue career opportunities by providing individualized education, training, and employment services in a culturally rich environment.” The OIC was founded to assist those living in the area around South Minneapolis in addressing the many educational and employment disparities they face. They also seek to help individuals achieve an educational foundation that will secure them positions of employment while setting them up for opportunities of growth in the future. This organization now makes its resources available to support all people, not just those from Native descent. They are seen as a national leader in workforce development and have brought together over 20,000 people in the Twin Cities and in tribal nations around the US.

<http://aioic.org>

Anishinabe Academy:

Anishinabe Academy is a Minneapolis Public School which uses Native American culture and language to support high achievement in school. Anishinabe is about 90 percent American Indian. The school is an elementary and middle school, with a High-5 program that helps prepare students for entering kindergarten. The students learn Ojibwe and Dakota languages and about the two tribes’ cultures, including the Seven Grandfather Teachings. This learning is supported by their Indian Education teacher and Ojibwe language teacher, and the parent council fosters parent involvement. The school shares space and some resources with Anne Sullivan Communication Center.

<http://anishinabe.mpls.k12.mn.us>

Bdote Learning Center:

A year-round Dakota and Ojibwe immersion school, Bdote Learning Center is a K-5 charter school in Minneapolis. They focus on experiential and place-based learning based on a curriculum that is relevant to the geographical surroundings, local history, landscape, ecology, and Native languages and cultures. Through many active projects that span disciplines, the school seeks to develop a lifetime love of learning in its students, an understanding and connection to language and culture, and preparation for further education. They run on a year round calendar to provide more continuous instruction and combat the learning loss that typically occurs during summer vacation.

<http://www.bdotelearningcenter.org>

Department of Indian Work:

This department is part of the nonprofit Interfaith Action and works with Native American families in Ramsey County. There are emergency services provided, such as a food and clothing shelf, and more structured programming. American Indian Youth Enrichment is a culturally specific after-school and summer time program that serves about 100 students each year. The children are able to go on field trips, learn about Native American art, and learn about indigenous history. They also support literacy, physical education, and social and emotional learning.

<http://interfaithaction.org/diw>

Little Earth:

The largest urban, Native American housing community in the United States, Little Earth is located in the heart of the Native American community in Minneapolis (in the Phillips and Seward neighborhoods). It provides housing for close to 1,000 people, about half of whom are under the age of 21, in a subsidized housing complex. Little Earth was founded in 1973 and has been a center of support for Natives ever since. They offer educational and social programs, pre-school, Hennepin County services, elder services, health initiatives, and cultural programs. 98% of their residents are Native, from 32 different tribes, and 65% are on public assistance. Through many initiatives and programs over the past six years, the number of services available to this community has continued to grow, crime has been lowered by 60%, and residents are now feeling more comfortable and safe in their community.

<http://www.littleearth.org>

Minneapolis American Indian Center:

This is one of the oldest Indian Centers in the country (founded in 1975) and is located in Minneapolis. The center provides educational and social services to more than 10,000 people a year. One service is a year round after-school program for Native American youth

that aims to increase the sense of pride and resiliency they feel toward their community, support academic success, and promote a healthy lifestyle. There is also a youth intervention program which works with youth who have had issues with truancy or chemical dependency. The Center continues to have a majority Native American staff and leadership and continues to provide services that are oftentimes unavailable to urban American Indians.

<http://www.maicnet.org/community-resources/>

Minneapolis Indian Education Department:

MPS Indian Education provides services for students and families in the Minneapolis Public School District. They help teachers and schools to serve Native students better through professional development and the development of culturally relevant curriculum for instruction. They provide resources, support and advocate for families, and help parents to be more involved in their children's schooling. Counselors also work with students individually and in groups to prepare for academic success, visit colleges, obtain financial aid, and enroll in their tribes.

<http://indianed.mpls.k12.mn.us>

Montessori American Indian Childcare Center (MAICC):

MAICC was founded by Janice LaFloe through a Bush fellowship grant with the help LaVon Lee as an advisor for the program. The center opened in October 2014 to fulfill a large need in the community for early childhood education and to address the achievement gap for Native American students.⁸ MAICC is also working to revitalize culture and language use in the community.¹ Janice is the main guide in the children's house (classroom), of 15 Native American children from a diverse background of tribal affiliations. The center is open to children ages three through six, who learn and work together in the same room. The program focuses on encouraging natural curiosity through the use of very concrete materials, and children are able to learn up to second grade concepts. Language is also integrated into the classroom by a fluent Lakota teacher. Native American imagery is present and used in the classroom, and elders who are Ojibwe speakers come in to teach the children in Ojibwe.⁸

<http://www.americanindianmontessori.net>

St. Paul American Indian Education Programs:

The St. Paul Public Schools Indian Education program exists to identify which families and students are American Indian and to provide a quality education with a positive cultural influence. They strive to assist American Indian students in graduating from high school with a quality education and positive cultural/personal identity. They provide student opportunities, tutoring, curriculum guidance, community resources, a parent committee,

community referrals, and information on culture and tradition. There are over 900 American Indian students in the SPPS district, and when these students can meet together with other Native students, they feel empowered. They have others to connect with, to form groups with, and to reach out to others with.³

<http://www.spps.org/indianeducation>

On these sites, you can find a more comprehensive listing of the different agencies and organizations in the Twin Cities metro area:

<http://www.mntrecc.net/pdf/MetroFamiliesResourceGuide.pdf>

<https://diversity.umn.edu/gradededucation/tcdirectory/americanindian>

“Most times this community is totally invisible. I see Native people all the time, but in the general population, we are invisible because we can blend in easily. Native Americans are very rarely mentioned in minority groups; we are almost always left out. Recently, I have heard the phrase, “We are all immigrants,” but we are not all immigrants. The Native American Tribes and Nations were here long ago. We are now a thriving community. We do have issues like every other community that go very deep, and children carry this with them. However, we are not invisible. We are here, and the children notice when they are overlooked.” -Julie Downwind

Key Take-Aways:

Do not assume what a student's connection to the Native American community might be. Some students may know a lot about their community and tribe, while others may only know that they are Native.

The impact of historical trauma cannot be understated. The Native American community has experienced a lot of violence, forced loss of culture, and poverty. All of these experiences continue to impact Native American communities today.

Many Native American children struggle in school because the traditional educational methods do not value who they are or how they learn best. It is important for these students to see themselves represented in their classrooms, educational materials, and schools.

Be a consistent presence in a child's life and be genuine. Work to create a relationship with them as an individual. Many times, they do not have the support they need at home, or they may be facing some tough situations at home that make learning academics even more challenging.

The Native American community in the Twin Cities is a modern, thriving community with many organizations and agencies that are supporting them in their daily lives. They have their issues, like any other community, but community members are working hard to address them.

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*A note on how citations are used here: Each citation has a number, and when that source was cited, the superscript number was used in place of parentheses. The exception is the block quotes which were taken from the interviews we held. With these quotations, we simply put the name of the speaker after their quote. The lists which have a superscript number after the title were all cited from that one source. Citations were also placed after the idea or section that all came from one source. Paragraphs which just have one citation at the end should be read as all of that information coming from one source.

Additional Resources:

Indian Affairs Council:

<http://mn.gov/indianaaffairs/index.html>

Dakota in Minnesota:

<http://bdotememorymap.org>

Lower Sioux Community website:

<http://lowersioux.com>

White Earth Nation website, quick history of the Ojibwe/Chippewa:

<https://whiteearth.com/history/>

“Living Stories” of Native peoples:

<http://www.oyate.org/index.php/resources/45-resources/living-stories>

Phillips Indian Educators (PIE), a really great resource curated by Native teachers with various curriculum ideas:

<http://pieducators.com>

Articles discussing the legacy of Native American Boarding Schools:

<https://www.minnpost.com/mnopedia/2016/06/sad-legacy-american-indian-boarding-schools-minnesota-and-us>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>

<http://aioic.org/the-k-12-system-didnt-fail-the-american-indians/>

Minnesota Tribal Resources for Early Childhood Care:

<http://www.mntrecc.net>

General tips on supporting Native students:

<http://www.se.edu/nas/files/2013/03/NAS-2009-Proceedings-M-Price.pdf>

Best practices for Indigenous pedagogy:

<http://pieducators.com/best-practices-indigenous-pedagogy>

Sources for Native-owned book services:

<http://www.davestrainbooks.com/view.php?page=0&catID=21&subID=>

<http://birchbarkbooks.com/childrens-books>

<http://www.nativerellections.com/products.php>

American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL) Blog:
<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>

Ojibwe and Dakota curriculum and activity ideas:
<http://www.ojibwe-dakota-in-mn.com>

Lesson ideas from Minneapolis Public Schools Indian Education:
<http://indianed.mpls.k12.mn.us/curriculum>

Dakota language materials:
<https://sites.google.com/site/dakotaanishinaabeacademy/web>

Experiential Learning:
<http://pieducators.com/sites/default/files/experiential-education.pdf>

An article about taking cultural differences into account:
<http://www.edutopia.org/discussion/being-mindful-cultural-differences>

An article about the importance of place for educating students:
<http://pieducators.com/sites/default/files/Critical-Pedagogy-of-Place.pdf>

An article about how to watch for implicit bias:
<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/keys-to-challenging-implicit-bias-shane-safir>

An article about the challenges students who hear different languages at home may face in the classroom:
<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/dont-say-your-child-cant-read-tamara-spencer>