

***A TEACHERS' TOOL FOR REFLECTIVE
PRACTICE: RACIAL AND CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN INDIAN
STUDENTS' CLASSROOMS***

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Prepared by

**Helen Apthorp, Freya Kinner, and
Mariana Enríquez-Olmos**

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Introduction

This Teachers' Tool for Reflective Practice is for teachers of American Indian students whose racial and cultural backgrounds are different from those of their students. As a tool, it can be used in two distinctive ways: for individual reflection, or shared as the focus of a study group. The second approach, self-reflection shared in a study group, both uses the individual approach and offers the benefits of a team learning experience within a group of people who have similar goals and challenges. When the study group dynamic is chosen, it can be coordinated by the school principal, another school administrator, or a teacher leader. Both approaches are useful in assisting teachers in learning more about themselves, their practice, and their students. The document that follows is organized into five parts: (1) purpose of the tool; (2) the journaling process; (3) study group dynamics; (4) cultural awareness self-reflection journal; and (5) resources and next steps.

Purpose of the Tool

This self-reflection journaling tool is intended to provide teachers and their colleagues with the opportunity to reflect on cultural differences between themselves and their students and to consider alternative interaction styles and contexts for learning. Nationally, more than 90 percent of Native American students attend public schools (Swisher & Tippenconnic, 1997). Although teachers may have the best of intentions in educating students from cultural backgrounds different from their own, it is important that they understand that their values, beliefs, and cultural practices can be very different from the values, beliefs, and cultural practices of students in their classrooms.

Culture is defined as “the set of ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that are widely shared among a group of people and that serve to guide their behavior” (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton & Yamauchi, 2000, p. 107). Disregarding cultural differences in the context of teaching and learning “may create unintended mischief” and “preclude effective assistance and guidance” (Tharp et al., 2000, p. 108). Some argue that when teachers do not recognize how behavior is culturally influenced, they inadvertently “alienate and marginalize some students” (Weinstein, Curran, Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). Alternatively, when diverse patterns of communication, values, thought, customs and actions are recognized and adaptations are made reflecting such diversity, students from non-mainstream groups are more likely to be able to participate on their own terms instead of at another's discretion (King, Sims & Osher, nd; Kivel, 2002).

“To develop self-esteem, students must have pride in their people and know they are worthy of respect. For students to develop this pride, you must show in your actions and develop in your classroom a respect for Indian culture and for all Indian people” (Gilliland, 1999, p. 88).

The Rocky Mountain and Plains states region has a strong history and presence of American Indian tradition and values. If the education of American Indian students is to

improve, it is time for teachers to develop positive attitudes about diversity and to examine possible stereotypes, misunderstandings, and wrong assumptions about American Indian culture.

“Touch their spirits softly with a feather of encouragement, whispering ‘You can, you will, you must, your people need you,’ and their eyes will shine like obsidian. They will glow with new understanding.” (Darryl Babe Wilson, Pit River Nation)

Why use this tool?

This tool is designed to help teachers explore how or if cultural differences and responsiveness are affecting student motivation. Teacher practices, influenced by unexamined differences between teachers’ worldviews and the worldviews and life experiences of their students, can have a lasting effect on those children. This tool provides a process, through journaling and small study groups, to help teachers reflect on their day-to-day work and the school context and explore.

To prompt self-reflection, this tool includes six Areas of Reflection, four in particular about dimensions of classroom practice that have been identified as relevant to the unique cultures of American Indian groups (Cajete, 1997; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Yamauchi & Tharp, 1995). These four areas are introduced below; the remaining areas are listed within the self-reflection journal.

Areas of Classroom Practice for Reflection

Social Organization

The social organization of everyday learning for some American Indian cultures can be very different from the social organization for learning in a mainstream classroom. Norms of cooperativeness and helpfulness are strong in American Indian cultures. Out-of-school learning among American Indians often occurs in small, peer-oriented groups. In school, American Indian students appear to thrive in small-group problem solving structures (Yamauchi & Tharp, 1995). These researchers recommend social organizations that allow teachers to float among small groups as needed, conversing with students ad hoc as the students themselves initiate and end conversations.

Participation and Roles

In the typical mainstream culture of classrooms, the teacher leads, instructs and demonstrates to the whole group, followed by individual practice and assessment. However, American Indian students are likely to respond best to small-group oriented and humanized teaching through “extensive use of narration, humor, drama, and affective modeling” (Cajete, 1999, p. 144). Listening, observing, joint production, and performing

when ready are often congruent with ways of learning and interacting as members of American Indian communities.

Communication

Communication and interaction styles at school may be different from those used at home or in a student's community. Overlapping turns, child-directed pace setting, and quiet voices may be more typical of everyday conversational styles (Yamauchi & Tharp, 1995). In a math lesson, for example, asking students to work quietly, one-on-one with a classmate to explain their reasoning may encourage more active reflection and discourse than asking students to show and explain their reasoning at the board in front of the class.

Informal Learning and Home-School Connections

Teaching that is in harmony with Native values emphasizes authentic purpose and is time-generous (Hankes, 1998). It “does not separate fact, value or principles and instruction from students' lived experiences” (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull Estrin, 1995, p. 37). Success, however, is a matter of cultural duality, learning to live in two or more worlds; and thus again, we emphasize the importance of teachers as cross-cultural experts, expecting and teaching students the language and formal methods of inquiry in each academic discipline while building on students' existing knowledge and experience.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that success for many American Indian students is a matter of cultural duality — learning to live in two or more worlds. As Nelson-Barber and Trumbull Estrin (1995) remind us, “teachers need to be cross-cultural experts.” By building on students' prior knowledge and experience, teachers can actively and effectively teach the language and formal methods of inquiry in the content standards.

How is this tool used?

Whether used in an individual or study group format, teachers are encouraged to individually write a series of journal entries based on six Areas of Reflection. Each Area of Reflection should be the focus of a separate journal entry and corresponding conversation in the study group format. By reflecting on their own practices within the classroom and in the school context, teachers have the opportunity to identify practices that may be modified to improve classroom practice. If the teacher is a participant in a study group, it is expected that the collegial dialogue resulting from the sharing of individual self-reflections will serve as a collaborative learning tool. The remaining sections are organized as follows: (1) the journaling process; (2) the study group dynamic; (3) the cultural awareness self-reflection journal, which includes the areas of reflection; and (4) resources and next steps for teachers and study group leaders.

The Journaling Process

Journaling has been traditionally used in teacher education programs as an interpretive self-observation technique to record and share observations about the author's teaching practice (Silva, 2003). According to Silva (2003), teachers have used journals to reflect on events, beliefs, emotions, concerns, questions, problems, and future plans. From this perspective, "journaling is a powerful method for documenting and learning from one's own experience [and in this way] it becomes a powerful tool for self-study" (p. 70).

The following steps describe a methodical approach to completing this journaling tool:

1. Read the first Area of Reflection and its set of questions.
2. Reflect on your teaching practice and write down what you believe is your practice.
3. Make a plan and observe yourself in action.
4. Write down your observations in your journal.
5. Reflect on your practice including a comparison of your initial beliefs and your actual observations.

Each Area of Reflection (e.g., knowing myself, knowing my fellow teachers) is extended with a set of questions that ask for analysis and evaluation as a part of the journal entries and can be used for self-reflection or in discussion during the study group. Once you have had a chance to reflect on the practices called for in Area of Reflection 1, you can move ahead and follow the same process for areas 2 through 5. If you are a member of a study group you will be able to share these reflections with your colleagues, otherwise, your self-reflections will allow you to learn from your own experience.

The Study Group Dynamic

In addition to learning about oneself, self-reflection journals can be used as the basis for collegial dialogue between teachers. These dialogues also function as a collaborative learning tool. As teachers share their self-reflections with each other, they "collaboratively pose and solve problems as well as provide reciprocal support that results in professional growth" (Silva, 2003, p. 70). Teachers may resist the idea of study groups to discuss cultural awareness issues. However, just as students often learn best in small groups, adults can also greatly benefit from working in a team. Teams improve a feeling of community, provide ways to discuss common goals, and give an opportunity to brainstorm around difficult issues. The following are areas that may need to be addressed to help the study group process run more efficiently (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore, & Montie, 2001):

- *Trust.* How well do teachers know each other? Cultural awareness is a subject that many participants find difficult to talk about because they may feel that their personal attitudes, predispositions, and world views are being challenged. Study group discussions require trust among group members. In some cases, open and

- sincere sharing will not be accomplished until participants develop a sense of community, trust, and safety within the group.
- *Group size.* Typically, groups of 4–6 participants function best. The size of the group also impact issues of trust.
 - *Group homogeneity/heterogeneity.* Just as group composition matters for student learning, it likewise plays a role in adult learning. Do you think teachers would work best in heterogeneous or homogeneous groups? Would they prefer to choose their own groups?
 - *Group member roles.* The hope is for everyone to be a participant, but groups often function best with a facilitator and recorder as well. Members can volunteer for, be assigned, and/or rotate these roles.
 - *Purpose.* Group meetings should have a purpose, and that purpose should be clearly described in the meeting agenda. It is suggested that (at most) one Area of Reflection be addressed per group meeting.
 - *Scheduling.* Finding a good time for group meetings can be challenging. Common planning periods, lunch time, or weekly staff meetings are possible times to get together for study groups within the school day.

Participants in the study group should follow, individually, the five steps described in the journaling process indicated in the previous section, The Journaling Process. Once the study groups have been scheduled, participants need to agree on the Area of Reflection that will be addressed during their meeting. During the study group sessions participants will have an opportunity to share their observations and reflections about their practice. Together they can pose and resolve problems, brainstorm new ideas on how to improve their practice, and share resources. It is highly recommended that study groups invite experts or American Indian colleagues who can share their values and worldviews.

Cultural Awareness Self-Reflection Journal for Teachers

Instructions. There are six areas of reflection to help organize your thinking in this cultural awareness journal. The areas of reflection are grouped into two sections: “about myself and my students;” and “about my classroom and my teaching.” Select one Area of Reflection for a period of a week or two, review and respond to its set of questions, and write your self-reflection.

When used as an individual self-reflection tool, as well as when preparing for a study group meeting/discussion time, the process of journaling will take some time to complete. Follow the steps described below to accomplish this process:

1. Read the first Area of Reflection and its set of questions.
2. Reflect on your teaching practice and write down a journal entry of what you believe is your practice.
3. Make a plan to observe yourself in action.
4. Write down your observations.
5. Reflect on your practice comparing your initial beliefs and your actual observations.

To help think about each Area of Reflection and set of questions it is useful if you ask yourself:

- What did I do?
- What did my students do?
- Did my students from an American Indian cultural background react differently to my instruction?
- Did my students from an American Indian cultural background react differently to the specific activities used in the classroom?
- Did my students from an American Indian cultural background react differently to the content of my instruction?
- Why did this happen?
- What was I thinking/feeling?
- What can I learn from this?
- How can this help me improve?

Let your thoughts “flow” when you write about each Area of Reflection — this is a private dialogue with yourself. You can use your journals to brainstorm on any specific insights you discover or introduce questions to your small study group. Your study group or another colleague can help you determine your next steps. A section on Resources and Next Steps is also available at the end of this tool to support you in this effort.

Areas of Reflection

I. About myself and my students

When addressing each Area of Reflection and set of questions it is very important to keep in mind that your own culture — your beliefs, practices, communication style, overall worldview, etc. — permeates your interactions with your students and your teaching practices, the processes of instruction that you use, and the content of your instruction. In a classroom setting, the processes and content of instruction can either validate a student's cultural background and promote learning and self-esteem or undermine a student's feelings of self-worth and the motivation to learn.

Becoming aware of your own culture is the first step to realizing and understanding the impact that your culture has on your teaching practice.

Area 1: Knowing myself, knowing my fellow teachers.

1. Who am I and who are my fellow teachers? What is my/our background:

a. Geographically?

b. Economically?

c. Culturally?

d. Educationally?

2. How has my family and community background guided me as a student? As a teacher?

Area 2: Knowing my students, their families, their community.

1. Who are my students and their families? Who is their community? What is their background:

a. Geographically?

b. Economically?

c. Culturally?

d. Educationally?

2. How has my students' family and community background guided them as students? How would my own cultural background have guided them?

II. About my classroom and my teaching

Area 3: The social organization of my classroom.

Group arrangement

1. How do I use whole group instruction in my classroom? In what ways are students actively processing the lesson content during whole group instruction? Compare and contrast participation of American Indian and non-American Indian students during whole group instruction. What can I learn from this?

2. How do I use small group instruction in my classroom? In what ways are students actively processing the lesson content during small group instruction?

3. How are small groups divided (random, gender, by interest, familial relationships, etc.)? How is this effective for active student participation? Think of one or more of your American Indian students. Does group composition or size influence his or her motivation and learning?

Instruction and interactions

4. How do I use group competitions or other collective goals in my classroom? How are students interacting and processing the material during group competitions? What interaction and communication styles am I modeling when striving toward a shared goal?

5. How do I use individual goals in my classroom? How are students interacting and processing the lesson content during individual exercises?

6. Describe three examples of lessons where students created some product (e.g., a map, a story problem, a children's book). What was the practical purpose of the product from the students' perspective? How did students interact and process the lesson content? What was effective about these lessons?

7. What are the norms of cooperativeness and helpfulness in my classroom?

a. In what ways do students help each other in my classroom? How is this effective for active student learning?

b. Do particular students help others? Why? What can I learn from this reflection about encouraging more helpfulness?

8. How do students interact during free/non-structured time?

a. With each other?

b. With me as a teacher? With other adults?

Area 4: Participation and Roles.

Level of participation

1. Think of two or three students from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds and reflect on how similar or different they are: Do students seem most comfortable sitting quietly or are they more comfortable participating? How does this relate to their roles with their families and friends?

2. What kinds of decisions do they make and responsibilities do they have in my classroom? To what extent and how do I show respect for student autonomy?

Teacher and students' roles

3. Describe your role when students are working in small groups. Are you a participant, facilitator, an expert, one who assists, a listener, an evaluator? How has your role affected how students have resisted or engaged in learning when you join their small group?

4. Think of two or three students from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds and reflect on how similar or different they are: Do students look to me for guidance, or are they more likely to look to their peers? How does this relate to their roles with their families and friends?

5. What is my role in the classroom (constantly performing vs. resource/support)?

6. How much do students defer to me? Is this too much? Too little? Why?

Area 5: Classroom communication.

1. What is my style of explanation/talk (e.g., short or long, formal or messy and creative) as compared to my students' style of explanation/talk (think of two or three in particular)? What can I learn from this?

2. How much do I talk in my class, as compared to the amount of time students talk? What can I learn from this?

3. How much do I listen in my class, as compared to the amount of time students listen? What can I learn from this?

4. Think of one or more of your American Indian students and reflect on how similar or different they are: How loudly do I talk to my students, as compared to how loudly do my students talk? What can I learn from this?

5. How long is wait-time in my classroom? How can I improve the use of wait-time in my classroom?

6. What is the “tempo” of the classroom?

a. Am I directing classroom tempo, or are students directing classroom tempo? How can I improve the tempo in my classroom?

7. Think of one or more American Indian students and reflect on how similar or different they are: How do students respond when I ask questions to which I already know the answers? What can I learn from their responses?

8. What are your classroom expectations for student responsibilities? How do you communicate these expectations and hold students accountable?

9. Do your American Indian students know and understand your expectations? How could you improve student understanding of expectations? Are your expectations aligned with content and proficiency standards *and* responsive to the unique cultural attributes and life experiences of your American Indian and other students? Are there conflicts between unique cultural values and school or state standards? How might you and your students critically analyze and understand the differences as they relate to the human experience? How might you and your students identify and come to better understand shared ideals such as the democratic process, equality, civil rights and due process?

Resources and Next Steps

This section provides suggestions and resources on how to learn more about your students and the communities you serve.

Principals and teachers in schools with diverse student populations meet with rewards and challenges particular to the communities they service. These communities often have cultural richness and strength, strong family histories, and value experiential education. However, they frequently are also challenged by poverty, lack of English language skills, and differences between home and school cultures. These challenges certainly tell us some things about students, but they do not determine student achievement (Betsinger, Garcia, & Guerra, 2001). The CREDE and Creating Sacred Places websites listed below have suggestions on steps and materials to help teachers and principals improve learning for American Indian students and students from other diverse backgrounds.

The “Youth Leader’s Guide” focuses on HIV/AIDS education for students, but it also includes some valuable resources regarding learning about your students (Chapter 3) and giving your students a multicultural education (Chapter 6). In addition, when working in areas with diverse student populations, research suggests that positive school-home relationships can positively impact student learning, as can the partnership of teachers and principals (e.g., Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). Resources from the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools may help principals and other education leaders to better connect with families and communities. The “A New Wave of Evidence Family and Community Engagement Self-Assessment” can be found through the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, and can help principals and lead teachers track/gauge their schools connections with the families and communities they serve. Finally, the *Reflective Practice* book further details ways to engage in small group work in schools.

For teachers:

A Youth Leader's Guide to Building Cultural Competence (1994). Retrieved November 10, 2005 from <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/guide.pdf>.

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE). Links and resources on improving education for students from diverse backgrounds. Found at <http://www.crede.org>.

Creating Sacred Places. Links and resources regarding improving education for American Indian students. Found at <http://www.creatingsacredplaces.org/>

Some ideas for your classroom...

- Use students' experiences, their families, and their community as resources for your classroom.
- Remember that your students are individuals as well as part of a larger cultural group.
- Serve as a resource for your students. You don't have to be "on" as a performer all the time.
- Engage in small group work.
- Extend wait time.
- Use "self-directed" turn-taking (if someone wants to talk, they talk when they want to and for however long they want to).
- Gauge parent attitudes toward student behaviors. What do parents consider positive or negative characteristics?
- Stand back and let students dictate the tempo of the classroom. Slow down and allow more "free" time.
- Talk less and listen more.
- Speak softly when talking to students one-on-one or in small groups.
- Remember that students may look down (NOT make eye contact) as a sign of respect.

For principals:

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE). Links and resources for improving education for students from diverse backgrounds. Found at <http://www.crede.org>.

Creating Sacred Places. Links and resources regarding improving education for American Indian students. Found at <http://www.creatingsacredplaces.org/>.

Ferguson, C. (2005). Developing a collaborative team approach to support family and community connections with schools: What can school leaders do? Retrieved October 27, 2005 from <http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-briefs.html>.

This “strategy brief” developed by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools includes helpful background information and a 6-step plan to connect families, schools, and communities.

Ferguson, C. (2005). Organizing family and community connections with schools: How do school staff build meaningful relationships with all stakeholders? Retrieved October 27, 2005 from <http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-briefs.html>.

This “strategy brief” developed by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools includes helpful background information and practical, step-by-step instructions for a starter activity that can begin to connect families, communities, and schools.

Ferguson, C. (2005). Reaching out to diverse populations: What can schools do to foster family-school connections? Retrieved October 27, 2005 from <http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-briefs.html>.

This “strategy brief” developed by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools includes helpful background information and a specific tools and suggestions to foster positive home-school relationships for schools with diverse student backgrounds.

National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. Links and resources to help schools, families, and communities work together to improve student success. Found at <http://www.sedl.org/connections>.

[A New Wave of Evidence Family and Community Engagement Self-Assessment.](http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/Self-assessment.pdf)

Developed to gauge school or school district level connections with families and communities. Found at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/Self-assessment.pdf>

York-Barr, J., Sommers, W. A. , Ghere, G. S. , & Montie, J. 2001). *Reflective practice to improve schools: An action guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

This book is an important resource for principals or lead teachers. It details journaling ideas for both groups and individuals.

Some ideas for your school...

- Reach out to your students' families. Use home visits to promote positive home-school relationships.
- Help arrange carpools and childcare for families during meetings.
- Don't let language be a barrier. Arrange for translators to be present for meetings and provide translations for parent/family notices.
- Ask for community businesses to help supply school materials (e.g., pencils and pens, notebooks, calculators) for students to use at home.
- Develop cultural competence as individuals and as a school (see guidance provided by the National Association of School Boards of Education, 2002).

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FEEDBACK FORM

The product you have in your hands, *A Teachers' Tool For Reflective Practice: Racial And Cultural Differences In American Indian Students' Classrooms*, is the result of McREL addressing a need expressed by educators of Native American/American Indian students. We are seeking your comments about how valuable and useful this Tool has been for you. Please take a few moments to respond to the following questions.

Have you used the Tool to reflect on your own and/or others' teaching practice? Yes No

If yes, please rate the product in the following areas:

	Poor				Excellent	
1. Clarity of the instructions on how to use the tool.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. Overall quality of the Self-Reflection Tool.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. Overall utility of the Self-Reflection Tool.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. Clarity of the self-reflection questions.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. Overall quality of the additional resources provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. Overall utility of the additional resources provided.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

To what extent do you expect that the use of this instrument:

	To no extent				To a great extent	
7. Will improve your teaching practice.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
8. Will improve your relationship with your American Indian students.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

9. Please provide any additional comments you may have about this instrument.

Are you a: Teacher School Administrator other _____
 Which grade/s do you teach? _____
 What subject area/s do you teach? _____
 Your ethnicity is: Caucasian Latino/a//Hispanic African American
 Native American other _____

Please return this feedback form to Dr. Helen Apthorp

By mail:
 McREL
 4601 DTC Blvd., Suite 500
 Denver, CO 80237

By fax:
 303-337-3005

By email:
 haphorp@mcrel.org

Thank you very much for your time!