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## Introduction

*"Language is a huge part of your culture. It is really hard to have one without the other" —David O'Connor, American Indian Studies Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2013)*

The integral connection between language and culture is one of the reasons educators find working with students identified as English language learners (ELLs) so rewarding. Experiencing this connection provides WIDA with the opportunity to learn about and celebrate different languages and cultures. Especially within the WIDA Consortium, many unique contexts and populations challenge and inspire us to move our work forward.

One population of students that is highly diverse, both with regards to language and culture, is that of American Indian students identified as ELLs. In some states, American Indian ELLs are a prominent part of the student population; in others they make up a small percentage. Whatever their environment, these students bring with them unique experiences and linguistic backgrounds that impact both the way they engage with the world and the way that their academic language develops. The education community still has much to learn about how to support American Indian ELLs in the classroom. At WIDA, we are working to deepen what we know about the special linguistic and cultural considerations of this population. We are eager to collaborate with tribal communities and Native educators to build partnerships rooted in trust that honor historical and cultural values in the pursuit of equitable opportunities for all.

One of our first steps in this journey is to learn from those who have experience in understanding and supporting American Indian students. In December, 2013, Dr. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee), President's Professor and Borderlands Professor of Indigenous Education and Justice in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University, was invited to the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison as a Visiting Minority Scholar. During that visit, we conducted an interview and discussion with Dr. Brayboy and an invited guest, David O'Connor (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians), American Indian Studies Consultant at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, about developing a better understanding of the academic linguistic needs of American Indian ELLs. Several key guiding principles emerged from that discussion.

**Our goal in this Bulletin is to help educators make connections and provide contexts to deepen an awareness of the complexity and diversity of this population of ELL students. We identify several guiding principles that emerged from our discussions with Brayboy and O'Connor, based on their experience and case studies. We also provide a discussion tool that you can use in your own local context about how these guiding principles can impact your classroom and guide your instruction.**

**American Indian ELLs:** American Indian ELLs are a complex and diverse population. In this Bulletin, we use the term American Indian ELLs to include American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian students that have been identified as ELLs. We are sensitive to the fact that various terms are used. "In most circles, however, the terms American Indian and Native American are both considered acceptable and, while there are people who feel strongly that one term or the other is more appropriate, they are often used interchangeably" (Walbert, 2014).

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## Guiding Principles



WIDA interview with Bryan Brayboy and David O'Connor

Together with Brayboy and O'Connor, we discussed the challenges of supporting American Indian ELLs, the diversity among this population, and how fostering the cultural and academic identities of these students can enhance the educational landscape while helping to support the language development and academic achievement of all students. During the interview, several guiding principles transpired that we believe will help educators working with American Indian students identified as ELLs. The guiding principles include:

- Teaching in terms of “place”
- Listening to, as well as hearing, the needs of students and the community
- Building bridges to students and to the community
- Recognizing the relational aspect of teaching

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #1: Teaching in terms of “place”

Brayboy and O'Connor discussed the importance of engaging students in language and cultural practices within a particular place or location. Brayboy states:

*“That place is a community and the lands on which that school resides, whether or not it’s formally recognized as Indian land. Many teachers don’t understand, and it’s not their fault, that they’re on Indian lands that were once occupied by and thought of with a particular kind of reverence by Native people (and still are).” —Brayboy, 2013*

Teaching in terms of place means extending learning beyond the classroom or school walls. It connects student learning with the

roles they and their families play in the community and in the interactions with the land in which learning takes place. Brayboy and O'Connor emphasized that the way students understand and engage with the world is highly impacted by the place in which their learning is situated (that is, the land on which the school is located) and by a wide range of cultural norms. When an educator understands this connection, he or she is “teaching in terms of place.”

According to O'Connor (2013), “What doesn't change is their own embeddedness.” Hare (2011) describes this embeddedness or connection to the land and the way many American Indian children learn about the world by stating, “Young Indigenous children learn to interpret their environment and understand the significance of place, territory and landscape through land based pedagogies, which emphasize stories, specific teachings, observation and experiential learning” (p. 407). As educators, we create spaces to incorporate and value this type of knowledge that students and their families bring to the school context.

Both Brayboy and O'Connor stressed that each teaching context is unique, and what works in one place might not necessarily work in another. Thus, it can be problematic to take a strategy that works in one setting and put it into practice in another context, without considering the underlying principles upon which the strategy is based and how these principles relate to the local context. However, we can still take away valuable information from success stories that are filtered through a local context lens.

For example, in one Hawaiian context the science, mathematics, and history curricula are embedded in the surrounding land and culture as students learn content and academic language through lessons about taro: about what growing taro involves, and about the historical and cultural significance of this crop. Students participate in a variety of educational activities both within and outside the classroom, including helping maintain the irrigation ponds (Ledward, Takayama, & Kahumoku III, 2008). Effective execution of this unit requires collaboration between knowledgeable community members and classroom teachers.

Teachers could successfully transfer the underlying principle of this lesson to another environment, such as the Midwest, where they could engage with and value their local community and its culture. Local educators could operationalize the principle by bringing



instructors (perhaps parents or community members) into the classroom or by creating opportunities for the community to influence how learning is contextualized in the classroom. Promoting this type of community involvement also reduces the pressure on educators to be experts in the local culture or ways of living. By tapping into the knowledge and experiences of families and community members, teachers can use them to enhance the classroom curriculum and promote student engagement.

Inupiat scholar, Leona Okakok (1989), added to this idea of connecting learning to place by stating, “To me, educating a child means equipping him or her with the capability to succeed in the world he or she will live in” (p. 411). For many ELL students, this means preparing them to appropriately navigate numerous worlds, cultures, roles, and languages. As educators, it is important to help students learn the “rules” for each realm they are members of, and how to use the language to successfully communicate in the various discourses required of them, while placing equal value on all languages or cultures in which they are involved.



Gayle Sheppard Miller, a K–12 educator from Alaska, has embraced the principle of teaching in place by honoring home culture and language while addressing content standards with her American Indian students identified as ELLs. In a recent interview, we asked her to provide an example of how she incorporates the culture of her students in the classroom. She responded:

*“You can’t not do that here. Yup’ik is such a part of everyday life. Our entire curriculum – even our English instruction – is built directly on Yup’ik life and customs. All of our reading books from kindergarten through sixth grade directly embed Yup’ik life, and our science and social studies are always taught in Yup’ik. For example, if we’re talking about the water cycle, all of the pictures, language, and even the examples of how people interact with the water cycle, all of those things are expressed in Yup’ik terms. Or if we are talking about government structures, it all starts with Yup’ik rather than English.”—Sheppard Miller (personal communication, 2013)*

Miller has emphasized a strong sense of the place in which her teaching occurs and the culture, values, and ways of life that are connected to that place. She recognizes that terms and concepts do not always directly translate from one language to another either, so it’s important to explore how different languages communicate meaning differently. With this understanding, she and her colleagues have worked to connect the content to the context, thereby validating the students’ ways of knowing and seeing the world, while still supporting their academic achievement and language development.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE #2.

### Listening to, as well as hearing, the needs of students and the community

This principle stresses the value of not only listening to, but also *hearing* students and the community. This principle requires that the listener becomes an involved member of that community because truly hearing encompasses listening, learning, engaging with, and truly valuing what is expressed. Hearing the strengths of students and the communities they are members of can provide powerful information on how to support students by building on their interests and strengths.

Educators understand that students will be assessed on certain language forms and functions, as well as on how well they can produce texts across a variety of discourses, so they need to attend to these aspects of academic language to ensure that their students master standard academic English. When looking at the overall language development of a student, it is also important to strive for what Brayboy and O’Connor refer to as a “balance” that validates students’ different discourses. This issue is about helping students develop multiple registers and different ways of talking based on context. When educators allow students the opportunities to express their messages without worrying about the form, they can create a secure atmosphere where students feel that their voice is being heard and they are in turn receptive to engaging in a conversation where they are validated as thinkers and as learners.

Brayboy and O’Connor added to this dialogue about the navigation of standard and “non-standard” varieties of English. Families want their children to be able to function successfully in all settings. Along with this desire comes the need to effectively translanguage<sup>1</sup> between languages or language varieties and realize when one code is deemed “appropriate.” Brayboy and O’Connor highlighted the importance of appreciating multiple language varieties as well as helping students to learn “rules” of use.



Kelli Bivins, a K–12 educator from Georgia, describes how she uses contrastive analysis with her students to strengthen their metalinguistic awareness while validating their language(s) and culture(s) that often include “non-standard” varieties.

*“In my classes, I encourage my kids to process the content like, ‘What does it feel like to walk in snow?’ They can get it in their language, their home language... We’ll move the language into different genres, like I’ll ask, ‘If we were writing a newspaper article, how would you describe walking in snow?’ Or: ‘How would you describe walking in snow if you were the teacher?’”*

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<sup>1</sup> Translanguaging is when a person moves back and forth between languages or language varieties. It occurs more frequently in speaking than in writing.

*“That playing around with English keeps kids laughing, and keeps the mood light and fun, which I think is really important, because once kids get nervous, they’re going to shut down and not participate. I don’t in any way want to put down the kids. I don’t say, ‘You said it wrong, don’t say it that way.’ Instead, we dabble in code-switching and I always honor the home languages, but together, we are always reaching toward academic English, because that’s what these kids need if they’re going to have success in writing and mastering English.” —Bivins, 2014*

By understanding her students’ linguistic backgrounds and their home language use, Bivins is able to not only value her students’ home language but also to help engage her students in conversations around when and how to use academic English. Similarly, by learning about the varieties of English that American Indian students identified as ELLs may use at home, socially with peers, or in class, teachers can help navigate the linguistic and cultural worlds that students are active in without demeaning the language forms and meanings communicated in “non-standard” English dialects or varieties.

A teacher’s heightened attention to the instructional language that he or she is using can help students develop the language and awareness they need for successful code switching. For example, Hollie (2012) indicated that expressions such as “fix it,” or “speak correctly” were deficit focused and devalue a student’s language, while more affirming terms such as “translate,” “switch,” or “put it another way” allowed students to build or deepen their awareness of language use across different contexts without placing more value on one language or another.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #3: Building bridges to students and to the community

Brayboy and O’Connor discussed the importance of strengthening relationships between schools and communities. They also discussed ways of using those ties to language and culture to address the academic success of students. According to O’Connor:

*“You can’t have a school without a community and you can’t have a community without a school; they’re intertwined. If you look at them as separate entities, that’s what you’re going to get; separate entities, and not a combination of the two.”  
—O’Connor, 2013*

Creating these bridges with the community can open the doors for collaboration and increase community involvement in the school. As one example, many conscious efforts have been made in Alaskan schools to incorporate Yup’ik Eskimo students’ culture in the curriculum. Yup’ik elders, researchers, and educators collaborated to connect the cultural knowledge of the community to the school mathematics curriculum. For example, elders connected the local cultural knowledge of building a fish rack used to dry fish

to the topics of perimeter, area, and physical proofs in the state mathematics curriculum (Lipka, Mohatt, & the Ciulistet group, 1998). In this example, the community shared with teachers the challenge of integrating the mandated academic standards with the local culture and knowledge in a manner that validated the experiences of the community.



*Inuit illustration*

When teachers can find culturally relevant ways to engage students, their families, and the community into the curriculum it conveys to students that teachers see value in this manner of interacting and it provides students with opportunities to learn content and language through a different perspective. During the interview, O’Connor raised the point that some families or communities are less comfortable approaching the school context because of their own negative past experiences, rather than because they do not care about the education their children receive. Both O’Connor and Brayboy discussed how a major component of the original treaties signed by the First Peoples and the U.S. government was access to education. American Indians were looking generations ahead to ensure that their children would receive an education, and that priority continues today. Educators of American Indian students are in a unique position to help build bridges of trust so that students see a link between the cultures they are a part of, and so that one culture is not valued more than another in their education.

Educators across the WIDA Consortium have shared with us their stories of how they build bridges with their communities. From the examples shared with us and in the existing research, it is evident that educators have made a conscious effort to reach out to their students’ communities and have seen gains in the level of parental, family, and community involvement. This involvement in turn has helped all students learn about other cultures and has provided educators with insight into the needs and desires of families with respect to the education they want their children to receive.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #4: Recognizing the relational aspect of teaching

The third guiding principle (building bridges to students and the community) sets the foundation for the fourth: the importance of recognizing the relational aspect of teaching. Brayboy and O’Connor identified three guiding forces that will help educators recognize the relational aspect of teaching: (a) the concept that with relationships comes responsibility; (b) the importance of knowing who our students are and having high expectations for them; and (c) recognizing that teachers are both educators and students themselves.

## With relationships comes responsibility

*“It’s about how we connect what these students know with what we know as a teacher, and that is a longer-term process... My hope is that we don’t lose the fact that we are serving other people... If we’re really going to reach Native students and communities (and I don’t think it’s exclusive to them), we engage them in ways that are really about human-to-human relationships.”—Brayboy, 2013*

Both teachers and students benefit from investing in respectful relationships that take into consideration not only the academic success but also the linguistic, cultural, social, and emotional factors that make us who we are as educators and students. Brayboy stated, “When everything and everyone is connected, a person has a responsibility to act according to her surroundings” (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p. 13).

This guiding principle necessitates a responsibility on the part of educators for maintaining students’ well-being in the classroom and for providing opportunities for them to thrive in school. For ELLs, this may be facilitated through the use of language supports. Sensory, graphic, or interactive supports ranging from physical activity to pictures, charts, or group work, allow educators to learn about students’ abilities, preferences, and learning styles. Educators understand the importance of building positive relationships with their students. When they learn who their students are, and what their competencies are, they can better meet their needs.

## Knowing who our students are and having high expectations for them

Educators understand the importance of building positive relationships with their students. In so doing, this helps educators learn who their students are, where they are at academically, and to continue to support their education. For ELLs, this also requires teachers to know where students are at in their language development, where they need to go next, and what support will help them achieve their language goals.

According to Holbrook (2011), American Indian students present very different language profiles, generally represented in the following two groups:

1. Students whose first language is an American Indian language and who are learning English as a second language. This situation is easier to identify than;
2. Students whose parents/guardians and/or grandparents learned English as a second language, but did not fully acquire standard English and who now speak a non-standard variety of English.

Students in both categories have rich and complex language backgrounds. However, the language varieties of the second

group can often be misunderstood and mistakenly undervalued. Compared to students in the first group (American Indians identified as ELLs), these students present a different language profile and the language support provided to them may not be as effective as for other American Indian ELLs (Holbrook, 2011). Creating and maintaining a language learner portrait for students is one powerful way to deepen one’s understanding of where students are in their English language development, who they are as learners, and how best to support them in the classroom.

## Teachers are educators as well as students themselves

Many teachers choose the profession out of a desire for continual learning. Brayboy and O’Connor stressed the importance of being open to learning from students, colleagues, and the community. They identified some simple approaches that might be helpful with American Indian ELLs, such as recognizing that word choice, sentence structure and length, and discourse level (who speaks and how much, for various purposes) are influenced by culture.

## Discussion Tool

The four guiding principles are interrelated and overlapping. They help us recognize and foster collaboration among students, the school, and the community. The following section provides a list of questions intended for individual reflection or as discussion starters with colleagues, administrators, or professional learning communities. It suggests how the guiding principles discussed above could be incorporated into your own classroom context and how the information may help you support your students’ language development in a respectful manner. WIDA would appreciate your feedback on this tool and to hear about any part of the dialogue that ensued as a result of using it.

### Language learner portrait:

Creating a student portrait around language can help to cultivate a deeper understanding of a student’s strengths, interests, learning styles, linguistic background, and home culture(s). When creating such a portrait, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- student’s linguistic and cultural background
- language proficiency in his/her home language
- English language proficiency in each language domain (reading, writing, listening, and speaking)
- what classroom context(s) the student succeeds in
- student’s beliefs about language learning as well as his/her family’s beliefs about language learning
- student’s strengths as a speaker of another language
- student’s interests, passions, and what he/she is proud of

## Reflecting and Connecting to your Context

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #1: Teaching in terms of "place"

1. How is the learning in your context located in a particular sense of "place"? How does it connect to the culture(s) of students?
2. What opportunities do you have or could you create to collaborate with members of the community to contextualize the curriculum?
3. How could you incorporate family or community knowledge(s) into an upcoming lesson or unit?

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #2: Listening to, as well as hearing, the needs of students and the community

1. How connected do you feel to the community in which you teach? If you don't feel connected, why not? What obstacles do you find connecting with the community?
2. Often as teachers, we are used to doing the talking. How do you incorporate opportunities both to listen as well as hear your students? What would you like to hear more about from your students?
3. What opportunities do you have to learn about the cultures of your students? How do you both listen to and hear what their families want for their children's language development?
4. Teachers are often required to look at the language forms and functions their students are using. What opportunities do you have to ensure that you are also tuning into and valuing the intended messages of your students? How are you letting your students know that you are both listening to and hearing their intended messages?

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #3: Building bridges to students and to the community

1. What is your definition of parental and community involvement in schooling? How might you expand or redefine this definition of what parental and community involvement might look like across different cultures?
2. What opportunities exist in your classroom, school, or district for parents and the community to advocate for their children? What additional opportunities to advocate for their children do you think would be beneficial and how might you facilitate them?
3. How do you show families and the community that you appreciate their involvement and incorporate their feedback in your instruction?

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE #4: Recognizing the relational aspects of teaching

1. How do you show your students that you value what you have learned from them and their families?
2. Do your students have opportunities to see you as a learner both inside and outside of school?
3. What opportunities do your students have to learn from one another in class? What opportunities do you have to learn from your students? How has this impacted your teaching practice?
4. In what ways does the curriculum in your context allow students to learn about the world and themselves? In what ways does it allow you to learn about your students' ways of viewing the world?

### Follow up questions:

Did you try using this tool? If so, with whom? Was it helpful? What would you change?  
Please share your feedback by contacting: Rosalie Grant at [rmgrant@wisc.edu](mailto:rmgrant@wisc.edu) or  
Paula White at [pawhite1@wisc.edu](mailto:pawhite1@wisc.edu).

## Next Steps

The WIDA Research Team is currently engaged in conducting a feasibility study to gauge stakeholder interest and to consult broadly with American Indian educators and researchers. The second phase of the study encompasses partnering with these stakeholders, along with other organizations, to undertake research which advances academic achievement through language and literacy development of American Indian ELLs. The expected outcomes and impacts of both phases of this study are: (a) a better understanding of the language development and needs of American Indian ELLs; (b) improved teaching and learning for American Indian ELLs through professional development and instructional tools; and (c) improved high school graduation rates for American Indian ELLs.

WIDA researchers are seeking your success stories in understanding and addressing the needs of American Indian ELLs. If you are interested in sharing your success stories, please contact Rosalie Grant (rmgrant@wisc.edu) or Paula White (pawwhite1@wisc.edu).

## About WIDA and this Study

The mission of the WIDA Consortium is to promote educational equity and academic achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students through the development and dissemination of curricular, instructional, and assessment products and resources. Currently, some 30,000 American Indian ELLs<sup>2</sup> in WIDA's 2012-2013 database comprise about 2.4 percent of all ELLs in 31 WIDA states and territories.

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## Further Reading, Web Sources, and Videos

**Listening to learn:** The following resources include examples of American Indian students, teachers, and elders telling their stories—their educational experiences, hopes, and dreams. These resources provide a window into their worlds and a means for educators not only to listen to, but also hear from American Indian students and their communities.



The Ways—contemporary American Indian language and culture. This website seeks to expand and challenge current understanding of American Indian identity and culture. The site has an ongoing series of stories on culture and language from American Indian communities around the Central Great Lakes. The resource for Grades 6–12 students includes

<sup>2</sup> These data are for students whose ethnicity was recorded as American Indian and Alaskan Native. Data for Hawaiian Native students could not be separated from those who were recorded as South Sea or Pacific Islander students.



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videos, interactive maps, and digital media exploring contemporary American Indian culture and language. <http://theways.org/>



Education in Indian Country Running in Place: An article in *Education Week*. This website provides stories from the Oglala Lakota Sioux nation at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, home to almost 40,000 members. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2013/native-american-education/running-in-place.html?cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS1&override=web#.Up9ecAi7Fts.mailto>

#### Resources for adapting content to local cultural contexts



Mathematics in a Cultural Context by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks This website shows examples of how mathematics content can be embedded within the Yup'ik cultural context. Mathematics in a Cultural Context is a supplemental elementary school mathematics series that consists of ten mathematics modules for Grades 2–7, as well as eight stories to accompany the modules, and DVDs and CDs showing exemplary cases and a preparation guide. <http://www.uaf.edu/mcc/modules/>

#### Resource for developing English language proficiency levels for American Indian ELLs



Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners This website provides information on English language development levels (or bandscales) for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The material is designed specifically for teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elementary to middle school students who speak a language other than standard Australian English in their home or community. Although this is based on Australian students, American Indian ELLs may acquire their English language skills in a similar sequence. <http://education.qld.gov.au/students/evaluation/monitoring/bandscales/speaking/index.html>

#### Resources for developing an action plan for American Indian ELLs



What Works. The Work Program If you are seeking an instructional tool to guide you and your colleagues through a process to develop an action plan for improving the outcomes for American Indian ELLs, consider the 'What Works. The Work Program.' Although this website is designed for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the principles and tools can be adapted for discussions in your context.

The Work Program website provides information, useful tools and checklists organized around a three step process of:

- Building awareness
- Forming partnerships
- Working systematically

Materials to support each of these steps are provided, along with over 50 case studies of successful practice around Australia. The range of other publications includes a set of short papers about core issues. <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=homePage>



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