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When I reflect on my experiences as a beginning teacher, I always remember how unprepared I was to teach children in the classroom. The first hint came while student teaching in a first grade classroom in Texas. One little boy was absent for a few days. When he returned, both of his wrists were bandaged. He had cut his wrists with a razor! I was shocked. How could this happen to a child in first grade? I never expected this kind of tragedy. Since

that time, I have encountered many facets of teaching and learning that were not covered in my formal preparation to become a teacher.

Twenty years in the classroom have taught me that I cannot effectively teach students without becoming a learner myself: I must let students teach me about who they are, their background knowledge and prior experiences, their interests, and how they prefer to learn. This is true for both regular education and special education. I need to know my students before I can facilitate meaningful experiences that enhance and support their social and academic growth.

My teacher education courses focused on the information I needed to know as a teacher, and, like many others, I thought I had to have all the answers before I entered the classroom. I didn't consider what effects my students should have on how I teach them. And I certainly did not think about what I could learn from them or what they could learn from each other. Special education students typically receive a great deal of "extra" help in their remedial style classrooms. We easily forget that it is just as important that they be given a chance to develop--and offer their special gifts and talents, too. Here's how it worked for me.

[Life in real classrooms](#)

Before coming to Haskell Indian Nations University in 1993, I spent 14 years teaching at the elementary school level. For 13 years, I lived and worked on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana. Living in a different cultural environment was a mind awakening experience. However, it wasn't the culture differences that shocked me as much as the devastating present day manifestations of oppression. Like many others, I had been impressed with Paulo Freire's and Joan Wink's discussions of oppression and conscientization (Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Critical Pedagogy). I had wondered how it applied to North America. As a teacher, I began to learn.

I discovered that a first step to overcoming oppression--and disentangling myself from contributing to it--was accepting that my realities were not necessarily the realities of the children in my classroom. The childhood experiences that shaped my worldview

were very different from those of the children, their parents, and their ancestors. Our classroom was located 25 miles from where the Battle of the Little Big Horn took place. I was never punished for speaking my language. I've never been unable to find employment to support my family and myself. I did not spend my childhood dealing with the residual effects of these things on a daily basis. This was a difficult but very valuable lesson to learn. During the time I spent teaching on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, a co-worker and I were responsible for the management, implementation, and remedial instructional services of a Chapter I Program. (Chapter I provides federal funds for supplemental programming to schools with high percentages of low-income students.) I soon noticed that the K12 school was not very compatible with life as lived in the community, probably because most of the classroom teachers were not tribal members. As a result, students found it difficult to make connections between school and their homes.

In their communities, students were accustomed to learning self discipline through the consequences of choices rather than direct discipline from an authority figure. They learned by listening to stories and by watching mother, father, aunties, uncles, brothers, and sisters. In school children wanted to share answers and work together. They wanted to explore rather than sit, to talk and ask questions rather than listen without understanding. They saw possibilities or choices that the teacher wouldn't or couldn't see and did not like. When teachers disciplined them in ways that made them feel bad about themselves, they became unresponsive.

Students seemed to believe that their Native language and culture were not viewed with importance in the school setting. In fact some of the younger children would not admit to knowing, understanding, or being able to speak the Native language. Perhaps this came from their parents, who had been severely punished in school when they spoke Cheyenne. The students learned that when you went to school, you left your real self at home.

I suspected that academic difficulties might result from the mismatch between the students and the school curriculum. This lack of meaningful connection also carried over into the community and was expressed through poor parent and community involvement. Parents wanted their children to go to school and get a good education, but they felt they had nothing to offer to the

school learning environment.

Many times I asked co-workers, "Why isn't the language and culture of the community included in the curriculum?" I was told, "Oh, you don't want to do that, the parents wouldn't like it." Was that true? In order to find out, we conducted a community-wide needs assessment survey, which included a section on culture and language. Surprisingly, the results indicated that integration of language and culture with curriculum was a high priority to parents. Parents wrote comments on the surveys about how they could help and about what they were interested in learning.

I suddenly understood that the cultural knowledge of students, parents, and community members was the missing link between the home environment and the school environment, and it needed to be integrated into the curriculum. This recognition and validation motivated parents to become involved in their children's formal education. Thus, a large step toward providing meaningful learning experiences for children could be taken. At the same time, it also increased student and parent confidence in the school environment.

[Technology integrates culture with curriculum](#)

After attending a Chapter I training session in South Dakota and seeing a demonstration of students using computers to integrate language and culture with school curriculum, I became determined to find out more about technology. I viewed it as a potentially powerful tool for students' learning. As a result of that training session, our Chapter I Program was rewritten to focus on technology as a tool to make learning more relevant.

We purchased hardware, software, and peripherals and set up a lab, giving students access that was previously unavailable. They used Macintosh computers, digital cameras, scanners, and video with the HyperCard software program to gather, investigate, manipulate, organize, and present information. They wrote stories about themselves. They scanned their artwork and photos, which they displayed proudly on their computer screens. With a click of a mouse, a boy's voice spoke from the computer, pronouncing his name in Cheyenne. The students had very little or no prior experience with technology, but then neither did I. Thus, we explored ways to use it together. Over time, discipline problems began disappearing as the students became actively and interactively engaged with their learning.

This integration of language and culture with curriculum empowered students and increased parent involvement. Increasingly, parents, school board members, and community members became the experts on language and cultural heritage and volunteered their help. As parents became important resources for pronunciation and spelling of Cheyenne words, the community's knowledge was recognized and validated in the classroom. When disagreements arose about pronunciation, the students and the teacher learned about different districts' use of the language. Students began to experience their own Native language and culture as an important part of their learning. The Cheyenne language was displayed as text and heard as language in student-designed HyperCard stacks. The classroom became alive with student created or selected graphics, digital photos, sound, animation, and information telling wonderful stories. I observed a student who previously refused to pick up a pencil become a creative writer. This third grader wrote, "I like to do work, play, do book reports. I like to color and play hide and go seek. I like going to school. I am going to write a book of dinosaur tales."

Students integrated what they knew with what they were learning. One student wrote a story about a Ninja bear, expressing both his fascination with "kid culture" of Ninja turtles and with the bear, which is culturally significant. When they studied China, they narrated stories about their adventures at the Great Wall, which were recorded into the computer. Sharing learning in the classroom enabled students and parents to see that the roles of teacher and learner were interchangeable. This encouraged students to construct new knowledge.

One school board member came into the lab. He wanted to know about the camera that could put his picture on the computer. He wanted to see it done. From this point on the Chapter I Computer Lab was no longer the "remedial" classroom. It was the cool place to be.

In addition to being in the classroom I was working on my graduate school internship for Montana State University at Billings. The project involved seventh grade students from Montana and Alaska, both Native and non-Native, who were judged to be "at risk" for dropping out of school. The students became engrossed in their projects, creating HyperCard stacks to share information about their local communities with the students

in Alaska. Instead of dropping out, they came to school early and stayed late to work in the lab.

One day during my internship, local newspaper reporters came to observe and write an article about the project. After observing a class of students and their technology projects, the reporters' parting comments were, "Wow, these must be your gifted and talented students. This is fantastic!" They didn't know that the students in the class were all labeled "special education students." The comments of the reporters truly reflected the talents of those students. Technology and trust empowered them to make connections and to succeed. These students taught me and their peers how to use the equipment. They felt so proud and were so willing to help others. And usually, in the more traditional way, they gave clues instead of providing the answers directly. They were naturally gifted teachers.

My years in the classroom provided the real life training that forced me out of an "only see it one way mindset." I had to consider teaching from perspectives that were different from my own. I had to realize that my way of teaching was not the only or best way of doing things. In fact, given the choice as a student, I would have preferred not to acquire knowledge in the standard way myself.

Most Native students were way ahead of me on this point: From birth they were given many choices at home and not expected to devote a lot of time to what others thought was important. This was intended to lead them down the road toward maturity and values. Unfortunately when they carded this practice of respect and independence over to the school setting, it often led them down the road to academic failure and special education.

[Moving to a tribal college](#)

In 1993, I left the elementary classroom to teach at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan. My first assignment was to teach a preparatory (remedial) course in reading. I was very nervous about teaching college students because I previously had worked only with elementary students. I just couldn't imagine lecturing to a group of students who might not think of lecturing as pleasant. Also, I did not want to give them the same kind of remediation they had already experienced for 12 or 13 years. I wanted to facilitate learning. I wanted to encourage them to make choices about learning.

I decided to teach the college class the same way I had taught children. It worked! Well, not without some resistance. Students had to adapt. At first, they weren't comfortable changing roles with the teacher. Sometimes my suggestions were met with fright and comments such as, "You want us to work together to find the answers? ... I thought we weren't supposed to share answers ... How do we teach each other? ... You're supposed to be the teacher. Just tell us what we need to know, and we'll write it down. What do you mean we have to demonstrate what we know?"

These reactions emphasized that these students had endured (through no fault of their own) a more standard classroom protocol that was quite different from the active styles we were trying. They had always tried to take notes, memorize information, and pass the test. However, that approach led to little success in school. Something else was needed. Why not try an approach that was supported in the literature--one which mirrored the learning styles of their homes? It was worth a try.

In the teacher education program at Haskell, our students begin to recognize that there might be a conflict between the ways they have been taught in schools and how they actually learn. Now, students are engaged in gathering, evaluating, organizing, sharing, presenting, and applying information from their own perspectives. They recognize the importance of using children's background knowledge and prior experiences.

Teaching and learning with students preparing to be teachers is a very rich and rewarding experience. Due to rapidly changing technology, we don't know what the future of our students (and their students) will look like. However, we do know that we must continue to learn more effective ways to subordinate teaching to learning. We must inspire teachers to explore the new frontiers with their students rather than resisting the new possibilities.

Looking toward the future I see the most effective teachers as facilitators for communities of learners, not as the keepers and givers of all knowledge. These teachers will investigate information and make discoveries with their students. Teacher training takes the support and willingness of many people.

Teachers and administrators need time to experiment and collaborate with others. They may need to unlearn old ways of teaching and learn critical pedagogy and constructivist views of acquiring knowledge. But if you read the winter issue of Tribal

College Journal you will see it is happening at tribal colleges. In the article "Sitting Bull's Vision," we see that the principle of treating students with respect and letting them learn from each other, a central tenet of our program here at Haskell, is also being realized in teacher training programs at Sinte Gleska University and Sitting Bull College and is spreading to others.

Because of the high number of Native children in K-12 special education classrooms, tribal colleges need to train people from their communities to work with these students. This is happening as more colleges build special education training programs into their two-year and four-year teacher education programs. There is something very hopeful about this. Treating children with respect--more informal learning, less formal teaching--is clearly a central tenet of the traditional Native way. By training our future teachers in this way, we may lessen the number of young Native students inappropriately referred to special education and further assist those who need to be there.

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By Kay McCord

Kay McCord received her bachelor's degree in elementary education with a specialization in art from Texas Tech University. At Montana State University-Billings, she earned her master's degree in general curriculum education with an emphasis on bilingual/multicultural education. In 1993, she began teaching at Haskell Indian Nations University where she worked on the development and accreditation of the Elementary Teacher Education Program before it was implemented in the fall of 1995. For 19 years, her teaching career has been devoted to Native students.