

**Preparing Teachers of Native American Students with Culturally Responsive and Inclusive
Methods**

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Introduction & Need for Strategy

Embracing and encouraging the diverse tapestry of Native American culture and traditions in classrooms is not just beneficial—it's essential to learner-centered teaching. We reviewed the literature to critically examine the gaps within teacher education research that affect Native American students, advocate for culturally responsive and inclusive teaching methods, and emphasize the need to adapt educational strategies to the practices, traditions, and values of Native American communities. In doing so, we propose strategic paths for preparing and developing pre-service teachers to culminate a synthesis of best practices.

Connection to Literature

We first examined the relationship between the education system and Native American students by drawing attention to the historical trauma Native American communities have experienced (Stevens et al., 2015). Negative experiences at boarding schools spanning several generations have led to the fractured relationship between these communities and the education system, highlighted by mistrust and apprehension (Stevens et al., 2016). We urge educators to acknowledge these issues and facilitate a systemic shift that is mindful of and sensitive to the complexity of these historical experiences.

An opportunity to mend these fractured relationships may be achieved by creating an aware and knowledgeable educational environment through classroom teachers willing and able to connect with Native American communities. Research has found teachers of all content areas unprepared to teach Native American students (Sleeter, 2001; Weisman & Garza, 2002), inexperienced in building relationships within multicultural communities (Kern et al., 2017), and lacking the skills to support these relationships (Gonzalez et al., 2006). These findings reinforce the calls of many who encourage teacher preparation programs to consider how they currently prepare pre-service teachers in these areas (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011; Sleeter, 2008). Leaning on Reyhner & Jacobs' (2002) suggestions, we posit pre-service teachers must “be reflective and responsive in teaching,” “focus more on extended family involvement in teaching and learning,” and “appreciate that the wisdom in [Native American] cultures can benefit Indians and non-Indians alike” (p. 86).

Gay (2010) articulates culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Similarly, we adopted the definition of inclusive teaching (also referred to as inclusive pedagogy) as “an approach intended to promote a culture of accommodating all and ensuring practice based on the use of diverse teaching strategies” (Makoelle, 2014, p. 1260). We suggest culturally responsive and inclusive methods for teachers of Native American students must be grounded in applying community-centric educational practices and integrating Native American traditions and values.

Since community involvement and connection are cornerstones of Native American culture, teachers must include these in their programs with Native American students, families, and communities.

How it Works & Implementation of Strategy

With the above definitions and characteristics in mind, we present two avenues for how teacher preparation programs might equip pre-service teachers to provide quality, learner-centered instruction to Native American students through culturally responsive and inclusive methods. First, we recommend teacher preparation program curricula and programs of study expose pre-service teachers to Native American culture, history, traditions, values, and practices. We propose that teacher educators regularly consider the coursework beyond their departments to ensure that the content and curricula align with the current needs of teachers and the students they will be teaching. Our experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have shown us that some courses we traditionally advise our students to take no longer include the same content we desired nor meet our expectations for our teacher preparation program coursework, requiring us to reconsider the courses we recommend to our pre-service teachers. Additionally, we assert multicultural education components of teacher preparation programs may be more effective if supported by mindsets emphasizing diverse learners' needs. Though culturally responsive and inclusive practices may be delivered at great depth in the classroom, these methods are only effective and impactful if the teachers who wield them believe in them.

Second, teachers must be able to connect and build relationships with Native American leaders and communities. We recommend teacher preparation programs use field experiences as opportunities to develop skills and acquire the necessary experiences to build these meaningful relationships. To facilitate these experiences practically, teacher educators must establish these relationships by identifying and connecting with tribal educators and leaders who may assist in carrying these experiences out. We note an essential piece of this recommendation is for pre-service teachers to receive preparation in the form of education and training beforehand, so they understand proper and respectful communication with the community.

Advice to Others

As we have shared significant gaps and issues expressed in the literature, we stress the ever-growing need for teacher preparation programs to motivate learner-centered teaching among pre-service teachers. These efforts must equip future teachers with culturally responsive and inclusive methods to better teach and support Native American students. Incorporating Native American culture, history, values, and traditions alongside meaningful field experiences is crucial in this process for teacher preparation programming. Hence, we call for a systemic shift toward responsiveness and inclusivity, advocating for improved teacher preparation programs to achieve true educational equity in all classrooms.

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