

Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum

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The *Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum* is a research-based, culturally-relevant, supplemental reading curriculum for American Indian students in kindergarten through second grade in Washington State. This interdisciplinary curriculum combines learning components of reading, writing, communication, and social studies. It is aligned with the Washington State standards.

The curriculum was born out of our previous research report entitled “*Reading and the Native American Learner*,” published by the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2001. Our intent was to create a tool that would transform how teachers approach the teaching of reading to American Indian students. It is now widely used across the entire state.

The curriculum addresses the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural differences as determined through our research. It is intended to provide children multiple opportunities for reading and writing stories from their own cultural heritage. It is intended to be taught by their Elders and other esteemed tribal community members. Its purpose is to develop the students’ communication skills for use in their communities as well as at school. Finally, it acknowledges and celebrates their own cultural heritage, gradually healing the pain of the legacy of boarding schools.

The *Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum* represents countless hours of collaboration and consultation between tribal content experts, curriculum specialists, and cultural teachers all of whom helped to develop the cultural framework for the curriculum. Perhaps the biggest challenge in the development of this project was the lack of suitable books. American Indian authors and illustrators were hired to produce 22 original stories addressing the intended cultural and literacy learning outcomes. The artists made every effort to create illustrations that are culturally and historically accurate. In individual cases, the illustrations are supplemented with historical photographs.

The curriculum consists of three separate units: Hunting and Gathering, The Canoe, and The Drum. In each section, the teachers are provided with an array of literacy development skills and activities. Most of the activities are meaning based. The teaching of individual reading skills is embedded in the task. Special emphasis is placed on the teaching of comprehension strategies and intensive vocabulary development. Where appropriate, text features are introduced and the students are explicitly taught story structure and story development for both,

narrative as well as expository text. Teachers are also encouraged to add additional skills development tasks based on the needs of their individual students.

The following innovative strategies used throughout this curriculum include:

- The concept of Re-telling by inviting participation by storytellers, tribal elders, parents, and other adults from the students' communities. This approach honors the oral tradition of the Washington tribes, includes the ancestral teachings in the story development, and places the tribal story into the center of the educational process.
- The idea of Now and Then in which young students are provided with opportunities to analyze issues from historical as well as contemporary perspectives. Emphasis is placed on historical and cultural accuracy, as well as story sequencing and story development.
- Comparison and Contrast approach enables students to investigate the similarities and differences among the different Washington State American Indian Tribes while developing the students' higher order thinking skills.

Following is our assessment of the *Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum* from the perspectives of the proposed six attributes of culturally-based education.

Recognition and use of Native American (American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian) languages:

The children participating in the program are primarily monolingual speakers of English or "Indian English."¹ The curriculum is taught in standard English and most of the instructional activities are intended to foster the development of their oral English language proficiency and reading and writing skills and strategies in English. The intended outcome is the improvement of children's reading skills and consequent increase in their academic achievement. However, the heritage languages are honored through heritage language classes offered at most of the program schools. They are not an integral part of the curriculum, however, some schools are translating our books from English to their own language.

Pedagogy that stresses cultural-characteristics, and adult-child interactions:

There are several examples of pedagogy that stress cultural characteristics of American Indian culture. For instance, the use of story telling as the centerpiece of the curriculum. The curriculum is built on the principle that the "*story is the culture and the culture is the story.*" In order to guarantee authenticity and cultural accuracy for all participating tribal communities, the children are frequently instructed to interview an Elder about a cultural topic, or invite an Elder to school to tell a story on the topic. Thus, the teaching of the curricular content comes directly from the particular tribal community. By telling and retelling and writing

and re-writing of the stories, the students are engaged in adult/child interactions with the school and tribal communities. This cycle of literacy development activities is based on the Total Language Experience Approach.

Pedagogy in which teaching strategies are congruent with the traditional culture and ways of knowing and learning:

As we said earlier, the pivotal instructional tool used in the curriculum is storytelling. This is congruent with the oral tradition of teaching and learning in American Indian communities. In addition, children are often read to, or they work in guided reading groups or read independently by themselves. They also read to younger or older peers and adults, including parents and other tribal members. Examples of traditional storytelling through pictographs are also included.

Children also engage in hands-on learning activities, such as canoe carving, drum making, cooking and feasting, etc. Frequent visits to or by tribal carvers, canoe makers and other artists form an integral part of the curriculum. On several occasions, we were invited to participate in a variety of culminating projects. An example would be a “Potlatch” at the end of The Canoe unit at Hood Canal Elementary School, in Shelton, Washington. The children participated in a “simulated” canoe journey. They acted out a ceremony of asking for permission to land. Several children were wearing their regalia. Most of them had paddles they made for the occasion. The highlight of this activity was a giveaway consisting of Indian fry bread, huckleberry ice cream and smoked salmon. Most of the food was prepared by the children and staff from recipes included in the curriculum.

Curriculum that is based on traditional culture and that recognizes the importance of Native spirituality:

The content of the entire curriculum is the product of a planning process in which 46 culture teachers, educators, artists, writers and curriculum developers participated. The majority of them were American Indians. The content was determined after long discussions about what the tribal community members wanted the children in the State of Washington to know about the Washington tribal cultures.

The content is culturally specific and different for each tribe. The curriculum is dynamic and each participating community has ownership of their teachings. For instance, the Tulalip Tribe gifted us with their canoe story, including the teachings by their tribal Elders regarding the gift of the cedar tree and spiritual preparation for a Canoe Journey. A Skokomish cultural teacher gifted us with a drum origin story. Several other tribal artists gifted us with their songs.

Strong Native community participation (including parents, elders, and other community resources) in educating children and in the planning and operation of school policies and activities:

The participation by the Native community is very strong. Not only was the curriculum content generated by the Native communities, as stated earlier, but 22 original storybooks were written and illustrated by Native artists for the purpose of this project. The curriculum is taught through a partnership between the schools and the Tribes. Tribal members participate in many different roles: as teachers, drummers, writers, storytellers, resource teachers, suppliers of materials, parents, teaching assistants, observers and finally audience. Through this process it is hoped that there will be a break in the cycle of mistrust and the perception of education as oppression. Native communities can act as advocates as well as participants in the educational process of their children. Community participation and parental involvement have been reported to be unprecedented in the history of the participating schools.

Knowledge and use of contemporary social and political mores of the community: These issues have been partially addressed in attribute number four. It is important to stress that all learning outcomes, forming the content of the curriculum, have been community-based and community-determined.

Our hope is that this approach will strengthen the bond between the community, the Tribes and the schools. The curriculum places Native students at the center of our educational mission. It communicates to the Indian and non-Indian communities that the American Indian cultural traditions are being valued and respected in the schools.

We hope that this curriculum will motivate American Indian emergent readers to develop strong reading and writing skills and ultimately enrich and improve their academic experiences. The reports that we are receiving from the participating schools talk about the enthusiasm with which the young learners approach reading and writing.

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Endnote

¹A variety of English that many tribal communities speak (in terms of vocabulary, grammar, phonology, rules of discourse); collectively called "Rez" English or Indian English (Leap, 1993; Phillips, 1983).

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