

Ensuring Equity, Visibility, and Cultural Responsiveness in Curriculum

Introduction

It is my responsibility as the Director of Instruction to ensure that all students in my district are represented, supported, and acknowledged in the curriculum. As directors, our work needs to be grounded in equity, cultural responsiveness, and to make every effort to dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate misrepresentation of our students. From an Indigenous perspective, we must make sure that our approach allows our students to build their cultural identities, strengthen their connection and representation in the content, and to honor and respect the traditions of historical teachings. For many of our students, their stories are like those Ozhaashko Bines tells:

Young Indigenous Peoples today face an identity crisis. It's a crisis that includes not feeling connected to their culture, and it's a feeling that I feel is even more prevalent in urban centres.(Bines, 2022)

Bines goes on to speak about the importance of reclaiming his Indigenous identity. Identity reclamation and revitalization of language and culture is a large part of ensuring that our students feel supported and seen. In my role as Director, I need to create a learning landscape in which my students' cultural identity is well represented, supported, affirmed, and acknowledged. I must ensure a vibrant, culturally rich, high-quality, relevant, curriculum that allows equitable access for all students.

How to Assure Students Aren't Invisible or Misrepresented:

In my district, this approach will take an Indigenous lens. Our student population is a diverse mix of over 24 different Sovereign Nations. This will require infusing into our educational landscape as many opportunities as we can for access to language and culture. It will also require an amount of decolonizing for the curriculum to adequately represent our students and to support their identities.

Decolonization can be understood as a way of life that recognizes the spiritual, symbolic, material, and living knowledge that Indigenous peoples continue to produce.(Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024)

We must conduct curriculum audits in which we identify gaps in representation, and to increase cultural visibility in the content, and also identify the misrepresentation that is inherent in the majority of the curriculums from an Indigenous perspective. These audits need to focus on: whose stories are told in the content, and whose stories are silenced or underrepresented in the curriculum. We need to harness the power of our Indigenous voices. This approach should include elders and community members in curriculum review processes. It is imperative that we have a “clear understanding of tribal-specific histories.” (Ngana & Kambutu, 2024) We have to make sure that all voices are represented, and we support and respect our oral traditions and teachings.

We need to ensure that we provide support and professional development for our educators. Most educators have not had adequate exposure to culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma-informed practices. This knowledge is an important component to building educational environments that engage, empower, and respect the cultural identities in the classrooms. Educators should feel comfortable and capable when teaching culturally aligned content. They need to understand how to build culturally responsive practices into their educational approach. A thorough understanding of these approaches will help to bolster student success.

Trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices are promising strengths-based approaches to addressing the academic disparities experienced by First Nations students.(Krishnamoorthy et al.,2024)

Adding these practices to the classroom not only acknowledges the students, but strengthens their identity. In doing this we will also fortify academic progress.

District policies have to be in place to ensure that we build understanding through our data-driven practices. We need to collect not only achievement data, but disciplinary data and engagement data. Achievement data will demonstrate the success of curricular improvements. It can demonstrate the successful removal of obstacles that students might face, that all students have equal access to the curriculum, and are properly supported. This data will also be used to shine a light on our assessment protocols. By evaluating our assessments we can understand if the assessments demonstrate any cultural bias, that they are culturally relevant, and written in a way that incorporates tribal identity. It is also important to analyze behavior data to ensure that our discipline and engagement data does not demonstrate any disaggregation. We need this data to understand what areas our educators may need more developmental or pedagogical support.

How We Incorporate Multiple Perspectives, Values, Histories, And Cultures

When considering the specific needs of our school system, it is essential that we ensure that all of our diverse perspectives are authentically represented. We have a wide variety of voices and many tribal oral histories that must be considered. To a certain extent, we will first identify as First Nations, however within that context we need to understand the individuality and sovereignty of each of our tribal representations in the school. This is important to address during ceremonial activities. The beliefs and creation stories of each Tribal Nation are unique to them and it is important to acknowledge that. Encouraging students to share their stories helps to encourage and support their identity reclamation processes.

Following a traditional framework of storytelling will allow our students to have access to multiple stories and traditional teachings. This content can be shared and engaged with by all students. There may be some instances though, where certain content like ceremonial teachings may pertain only to a certain group of students. This learning would be offered as part of a “culturally sustaining”(McCarty & Lee, 2014) event for those students. These events are powerful opportunities for our students to be actively engaged with their language and cultural practices. We often have elders come into the building to work with specific tribal groups of students to extend these specific teachings to those groups of students.

As part of the curriculum, we need to support the sovereignty of our students' tribal nations. Reclaiming one's identity is grounded in the understanding of belonging to a Nation. Our instructional perspective and teachings should empower our students to deeply understand the importance of this. It is important that we incorporate tribal governance, land history, and the understanding of historical trauma into the content of our curriculum. This validates and acknowledges our student's cultural identity and supports how they interact with the content of the curriculum. Their perspective must be respected and honored. Being supported in this way is the first step in a long journey to begin to heal the sustained effects of historical trauma. We also need to ensure that we have culturally vibrant curriculum offerings. Language and culture needs to be a living representation of our students. This ensures the longevity of tribal identities. This cultural visibility will increase engagement and build academic success.

Limiting The Factors that Impact Curriculum in a Biased and Westernized Way

To ensure that our curriculum best represents our students' identities, we must prioritize eliminating Colonial curriculum structures. Many of these approaches “prioritize linear, individualistic learning over communal, cyclical approaches.”(Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024)

Our students learn best when engaged in cooperative learning styles that more closely resemble traditional learning formats. We also need to extend this approach of “Colonial extinguishing” to our assessments. We need to conduct assessment audits to ensure that our testing is structured in a way that limits to the fullest amount possible any testing bias. We have found that our students perform significantly better in two assessment situations. The first is being tested in a group of their peers. When they are in inclusive classrooms of their peers, they demonstrate higher levels of mastery than when they test in public school settings in which they have no other Indigenous representation. Many traditional teachings tell us that “we should be of one mind and that when we bundle ourselves together we are stronger.” The increase in student achievement in this environment demonstrates exactly that teaching. Secondly, we have found that our students demonstrate higher levels of mastery in instances where the content of the test is more culturally inclusive. This finding is reinforced by the fact that many assessments contain “linguistic bias that can significantly impact test performance, even when students possess the requisite knowledge.”(Persaud et al., 2025) We need to ensure that as a district we limit both the Westernized approach to curriculum and instruction, and testing bias to ensure the greatest chance of success for our students.

Another impact to curriculum can be seen in State-standards. It is important to understand how the State-standards can “narrow curricular focus, and discourage the inclusion of alternative narratives.”(McCarty & Lee, 2014) This limitation on diverse narratives can perpetuate the dominant narrative. When this sort of narrative is continually perpetuated, it acts as a form of erasure bias in which marginalized and underrepresented minority groups are often left out of the content. While it is important that we include state standards in the rigor of our content structures, we also understand the necessity of presenting and acknowledging alternate narratives to include Indigenous perspectives. This is especially important when addressing historical topics that include colonization and genocidal practices that are part of the Indigenous narrative. It is also important to incorporate “Land Acknowledgement” practices as this is “essential to dismantle oppressive structures.”(Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024) These kinds of restorative practices will offer students a feeling of security, as a large part of Indigenous identity comes from a strong sense of belonging to the land.

How We Assure Access to Culturally Relevant Materials and Voices

As a director, it is my responsibility to take an intentional approach to the inclusivity of our curricular programming. It is important to gather from a rich and diverse knowledge base many resources that are relevant and represent the cultural identity of our students. It is

important that these resources are vibrant and full of life. They need to represent lived experiences in ways that connect traditional ways of life with modern understandings. We need to respect and acknowledge the way in which students will define their identity and shape their cultural lens. This will come from the perspective of youth and looking forward to the future. It is a balance of honoring traditional teachings and concepts while embracing the modern definitions of Indigenous culture. We can collect these resources from programs such as Native Knowledge 360, National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education(NCCIE), and local tribal cultural departments. We can utilize these sources to help broaden our curricular knowledge and to collaborate with other Indigenous educational programs.

To stay grounded in traditional knowledge, we can utilize our Elders by encouraging members of the community to share their oral traditions with us. These traditional teachings are the backbone of much of our language and culture curriculum. This curriculum is developed through an interview process. We conduct elder interviews and add these teachings to our knowledge base for future lessons.

We also try to expand our curricular offerings to include Indigenous authors. Several times a year we have an Indigenous author come and visit the district to share with the students both their personal stories and their writing. Indigenous perspective is rich in story telling. By inviting these authors to come, we are upholding the importance of story telling. It demonstrates to the students the value of this practice. It in turn helps us to build more inclusive library offerings that contain relevant materials of high interest and engagement.

Lastly, we build upon our ability to offer high quality culturally relevant materials through a continuous professional development schedule. It is important that our educators are continuously aware of the knowledge base that we have available to us, and the places in their educational environments that this content should be offered. This helps increase cultural representation in the content, and creates an educational landscape that is continually seeking places to infuse representation into the content. This professional development cycle also brings an awareness to educational staff of where bias and marginalization might appear in content, and how to properly address it and frame it in their instruction.

How we Assess and Respond to Bias in Curriculum and Resources

The process of assessing and responding to bias is an ongoing process. The primary goal of this assessment is to locate bias. Bias can be hidden in content in many ways. It can be illustrations that depict Indigenous people in unfavorable ways, stereotypes in which characters have “Indian” names like “Boy with Two Feet” , or evidence of tokenism where

character diversity is limited. It can be the approach taken in a text. The language utilized to frame a question. It can be the perspective bias of primary source and historical documents. Many times in historical context, bias can happen in the form of the absence of representation or persistent misrepresentation. This is known as erasure bias. Because of the plethora of places in which bias can appear, it is necessary to build a framework around identifying and evaluating material for bias.

One way to create a consistent approach to evaluating content is to create a rubric and evaluation framework. The state of Montana in 1992 worked with several Tribal Nations to help build a framework for understanding how to evaluate curriculum for bias. The Montana Department of Public Instruction published a resource for its schools to utilize to help understand the perspectives and understanding needed to properly frame a curricular evaluation. (McClusky & Ferguson, 1992) Other resources for evaluating bias can be found online. One resource of note is the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards that are offered by the EJ-ROC. (Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard - EJ-ROC | NYU Steinhardt, n.d.) Tools like these can be used to help create district specific rubrics and evaluation frameworks. It is important to develop these tools with our students' specific identities in mind.

Another important piece to curriculum evaluation can be done through community evaluators. These community review panels should be made up of tribal elders that can give specific feedback to any bias that is found in the curriculum. Their perspective and interpretation can be invaluable. They can give specific guidance on how to best respond to the bias. This could be a directive to eliminate the content or resource completely, or it can be a direct response to the bias. This direct response is where the bias is presented to the student for what it is, and addressed in a corrective manner. By directly addressing the bias, we acknowledge and honor student identities by not shying away from the presence of bias. This gives a sense of empowerment to the students when they are encouraged to openly address and have the ability to discuss the presence of bias.

It is also important to instruct educators on the rubrics and frameworks utilized by the district for curriculum evaluation. By doing this, it helps to ensure that any materials they may select or utilize in the classroom are appropriate and represent the cultural perspectives of the district. As part of curriculum PLCs, they can have discussions in their content areas and help to ensure a best practices approach to understanding cultural representation in the curriculum. It is also important that all educators are informed and have professional development to understand bias and have an awareness of their own implicit biases as well. This

understanding can be guided by professional development offerings and also through data analysis of instructional settings for disaggregate patterns.

Conclusion

To fully achieve equity in a curriculum, a director needs to continually be reflecting, collaborating, and assessing the curriculum. This constant awareness is essential to ensure that all students feel affirmed, challenged, inspired, and supported. We accomplish this through the experiences and resources that we offer our students. All of this work is centered in a cultural responsibility we have to our students to help them to build their identities and to strengthen their academic success. Students need to feel safe and supported in order to have the highest chance of success. We create this through dismantling biases, decolonizing curriculum, honoring traditional knowledge, increasing Indigenous representation in the content, and ensuring authentic relevant representation in educational approaches. By doing these things, our students have a better sense of self and a greater depth to their academic understanding. Not only is it important that our curriculum be grounded in cultural relevance, but it is important to give all of our students a culturally rich environment in which they can begin to reclaim the parts of their identity that have been taken away from them. In my district it is our foundation that we create environments that celebrate and support Indigenous voices. We are building the future of our Nation's community and revitalizing our language and culture. In doing this, we are ensuring that our students have a strong Indigenous identity, the best opportunities for success, and are empowered to be strong voices for their Nation.

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