



CASE STUDY

Natchez

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What is your Design Challenge?

Through the empathy process, we discovered that many of our students lack self-awareness and understanding of what it means to be who they are. We teach on the Pyramid Lake Paiute reservation in Northwestern Nevada, and almost all of the students who attend Natchez Elementary are of Native American descent. We recognize the importance of identity work for all students and acknowledge that we have a unique situation where we can also support the community and students in their local traditions and cultural identity.

How might we give every learner the opportunity, resources, and experiences to research and explore their identity, ancestry, culture, geographical background, and the historical events and behaviors tied to their identity?

Six years ago, a group of 1st-grade students were asked if they were Native American. None of the students raised their hands or joined in the conversation. It was only after one student said he was Mexican that the rest of the students identified as Indian. While we understand that Indigenous People of the world identify with different “titles or labels,” as one might say, it felt that the students only had one way to determine. Several years later, this same group of students, when asked to create a self-portrait of themselves that induced artwork that supported their cultures and traditions, produced art that only included popular branding of the time, TickTock, Nike, YouTube, etc... This became another opportunity for us to take a look at the environment in which we educate students and if it supports the identity of their community or the identity of westernized culture.

What did you do?

To support students in developing identities and creating connections between the school and community, we need to build a culturally inclusive curriculum that allows students to research and engage in their culture. This work originated during the spring of 2023 when three teachers created lessons to support students in investigating their identities. During the 2023-2024 school year, the team expanded to include additional collaborations, which continued the additional work and began developing a culturally inclusive curriculum that can be embedded throughout the school day. This area can help improve student identity, directly supporting their academic and non-academic success.

Artifact #2: [Investigating Identities](#)

What was the biggest surprise/barrier in implementation?

What was the impact?

The biggest barrier we have encountered was originally getting buy-in from other teachers in the school. The impact at the time was minimal as we were just continuing with the lessons and art activities in isolated classrooms. We also know that we need the community to support the work and that the stories and historical context needs to come from the elders in the community. Having the time to connect with them when we all work full time can be time consuming and complicated.

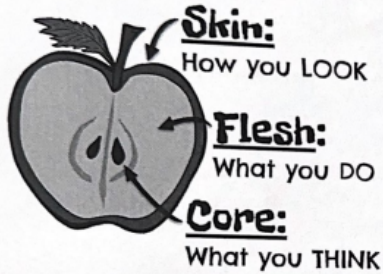
<https://youtu.be/ifLLLewv8HY?feature=shared>

What was the greatest success? How did this success impact young people or how might it impact young people on your campus? What are their perceptions?

Our most tremendous success is that students have had conversations with their family unit to discuss their ancestral lineage and how that makes them who they are. While for some, this might have been happening all along, for others, it is a new experience. Students can say these are my talents, this is what I am naturally good at, and these are the things I still need to work at. We have also had interest from other teachers who have yet to participate in the pilot, wanting to incorporate more identity and community connection activities in their lessons, both currently and in the future.



Layers of Identity



Skin: How do you LOOK?

Your physical appearance- hair, race, age, height, clothes, etc.

Short, Dark Brown Eyes, Brown hair,
Brown skin, long hair, 7th grade,
spirit animal munky

Flesh: What do you DO?

Your actions- interests, talents, skills, ability, language, etc.

Powwow Dance, Basketball, crafting,
eating, movies, Drawing, rolling in
The Dirt, Bedding, dog, family

Core: What do you THINK?

Your beliefs- values, culture, religion, traditions, feelings, etc.

family, Powwow Dancing, manners,
Basketball, Kindness, friends, math

Name: Bonnie

There is more to our identity than how we look!
Draw a self-portrait that visualizes at least one (or more) item
from each layer of your identity. Show who you are inside & out!



What's next? How does your team plan to evolve this work? What are the most significant pieces of learning you see impacting adult work and young people's experiences? What school level, district level, state level policy may need to be addressed?

Our next steps are to continue refining and defining the curriculum framework we have started. With additional teachers wanting to be a part of the process next year, we will need to look at those pieces of the curriculum to see where we need to improve in addition to that, we plan to build a stronger relationship with those in the community who have the connection to the culture and the teachings, aligning out curriculum with that of theirs, and inviting them in to help students continue to make the connection between their identity and how they contribute to their community. We also want to start a student council in the next phase so that students will have input into the process and curriculum so we can tailor the lessons and focus on what they believe is important.



We are shifting how we build relationships with families and students in ways that honor their rich culture, their heritage, and their ability to balance the many different worlds they live in. By taking time to engage with students in conversations that are not always about the academics in the classroom, we create connections to their likes and dislikes, wants, and dreams so that we can incorporate those in our lessons as well as the standards and other content that needs to be taught.

This project can not be measured by traditional accountability systems. While ultimately, academic performance will improve as students feel safe, welcome, seen, and heard in their classrooms, our project can not be measured that quickly. Through student portfolios and a building of understanding over time about individual strengths and challenges, students will see themselves as connected to their community and understand how their academic journey supports their contributions to others around them.

Research + Resources that inspired and informed our thinking

Being part of the Portrait Project for the past two years has been our greatest resource. We know that we have the support of the state team and colleagues from around the state who, while working on projects that are specific to their needs, know our challenges and can support our growth.

Additionally our thinking was supported by the staff in our building and members of the community who understand the importance of allowing students to determine their strengths and then to build an identity from there.