



4-24-2014

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Jamie Keyser

Traditional Assessment vs. Non-traditional Assessment: What Native American Culturally Relevant Pedagogy looks like in a Suburban Classroom



My thesis is based on Native American culturally relevant pedagogy and how this concept can be used with assessment in suburban classrooms. I did this thesis during my fourth grade internship at Mattawan Later Elementary School in the spring of 2014. The inspiration for my thesis came from the time I spent on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is located in one of the poorest counties in the United States, with high levels of unemployment and poverty. I went to Pine Ridge for the first time in August of 2009 and a second time in June of 2010. I fell in love with the land and the people on these trips, and truly felt connected to the reservation. I worked at Pahin Sinte Owayawa Elementary School on the reservation during their summer school for a week each year, and was able to work in kindergarten and third grade classrooms. It was a culture shock, in which at times I felt hostility from the students I worked with. In no way did I feel it was because of who I was as a person, but rather based on my skin color and the preconceived notions these students have of Caucasians. This is where my idea for my thesis came from. I wanted to figure out a way to be able to teach Native American students in a way that made sense to them, and in a way they felt

more comfortable with me. Due to my volunteer work, interest in the Native American culture, and passion for teaching I chose to research how Native American Culturally Relevant assessment strategies benefit children of all races and if they can be used in suburban classrooms successfully.

Literature Review

As I researched what I wanted to do for my thesis relating to teaching Native American students, I found the term Native American culturally relevant pedagogy. Native American culturally relevant pedagogy is a form of non-traditional assessment. It is a way to teach to a group of Native American students that connects to their culture and language and differs from the standard Eurocentric way of teaching content. To dive deeper into Native American culturally relevant pedagogy and assessment, I began by defining traditional and non-traditional assessment.

To understand Native American culturally relevant pedagogy, an understanding of the difference between traditional assessment and non-traditional assessment is vital. Traditional assessment can be thought of as anything including a test or quiz, with questions being multiple choice, true or false, matching, short answer, and essay. Non-traditional assessment does not include the traditional means of assessment, but instead focuses on ways to measure what students learn, or what students understand or do not understand, without using the standard test or quiz.

Today in schools with Native American students, there is a lack of culturally relevant teaching whether these schools are in urban, suburban, or rural communities. These schools are deep into a curriculum that is Eurocentric and focused on teaching to the dominant culture, rather than teaching to the diversity of students within a classroom. Dominant culture refers to power,

specifically the power of European Americans, which is the main culture focused on in the United States. Dominant culture in this context does not refer to numbers, but the power this group can hold over schooling, which is why curriculum found in schools is Eurocentric focused. Texts by Klug (2012), Whitfield (2003), and Huffman (2008) present three viewpoints of the Native American culture and show three major themes of culturally relevant pedagogy seen or unseen in schools with Native American students. The first is dominant culture perception in curriculum and pedagogy; the second is the lack of preparation of teachers to specifically teach Native American students in a culturally irrelevant curriculum; and the third is how Native American students have distinct learning styles. These themes show the lack of Native American culturally relevant pedagogy in schools, but also shed light on how to incorporate Native American cultural relevance in a Eurocentric curriculum.

Dominant culture perception in curriculum and pedagogy was the first main theme in these texts, speaking to the lack of Native American culturally relevant pedagogy in schools, even when schools have Native American students. The dominant culture seen in schools is based on a Eurocentric curriculum, which is not modified for Native American students, or for students of other cultures, but focused on a standardized curriculum to go with the standardized tests schools are mandated to give (Klug 149). According to Klug, “We establish the premise that schools have persisted in methods that fail Indian children because the schools are driven by funding and evaluation models determined by federal and state outsiders who do not understand the need for CBE” (Klug 149). People who may not understand CBE, or culturally based education, make these standardized tests, which in turn drive teachers to teach to a test based on the dominant culture, rather than teach to children of diversity.

A dominant culture perception in curriculum also stems from the race of the teacher, which is mainly Caucasian, and the dominant economic social groups, which are mainly middle class. These two aspects push the curriculum used in schools nationwide to be based off the dominant culture of the United States, rather than the cultures represented in the classroom. As Klug and Whitfield state, “Values of the dominant culture influence the socialization that occurs in classrooms of teachers belonging to the dominant culture as their first ethnicity” (162). It is no mystery the majority of teachers are Caucasian and female, so for many teachers their ethnicity is of the dominant culture of the United States. Thus, what they may bring into the classroom automatically relates to the dominant culture. These teachers can connect to a Eurocentric curriculum, but many of their students may not because they are not of the dominant culture. This relates to how dominant social groups push this curriculum to connect to the dominant culture, as stated by Huffman, “A major theme associated with the notion of cultural conflict is the recognition that there is some discrepancy in the values, behaviors, and/ or political/ economic power among those of the dominant social group and those of the minority social group” (56). These dominant social groups relate directly to the dominant culture, which pushes a Eurocentric curriculum into the classroom void of Native American culturally relevant pedagogy.

A second common theme that emerged while reading these texts was the preparation of teachers to specifically teach Native American students within a culturally irrelevant curriculum. This specifically relates to teachers coming from the dominant culture being prepared to teach students in a K-12 setting of different cultures. To reinforce the lack of culture in curriculum due to what could be a lack of teacher preparation, Huffman states, “Some have argued American Indian cultures are frequently nonexistent in the content of school curricula” (30). This relates to

how curriculum is taught based on the dominant Eurocentric culture, and because teachers teach to the dominant culture they make it easy for students of other cultures to not be represented in the classroom. Adding culturally relevant teaching practices to a Eurocentric, or dominant culture curriculum, could help connect to Native American students in classrooms. As Klug remarks, “A second strategy necessary for making culturally responsive pedagogy a reality, a way to elevate the success of American Indian schoolchildren, is to educate their teachers in ways to help them become responsive to the cultural uniqueness of the children they teach” (154). It is crucial that pre-service teachers to tenured teachers who teach Native American children be educated in practices to respond to the cultural uniqueness of the Native American children they teach.

The ability to bring Native American culturally relevant pedagogy into the classroom is truly put on the shoulders of teachers who have Native American students. These teachers need to be prepared to teach students who are not of the dominant culture and in doing so, help them gain a better understanding of what they are learning, in order to connect with the content on a higher level. As Klug and Whitfield state,

What it means is that we teach for understanding by incorporating culture and language into our planning for students. This requires making adjustments on the part of teachers, but in relatively minor ways. In other words, we do not have to completely rewrite curricula; rather, we have to extend the curricula to embrace the lives of Native students and their communities. (152)

It seems that teachers may think it is too much time or work to add Native American culturally relevant pedagogy into curriculum, but it can be minor as Klug states, and teachers can incorporate Native American pedagogy in a much simpler way. The preparation of teachers does

not have to be a massive change in curriculum, but by simply adjusting and adding a variety of practices and methods, teachers can make a Eurocentric curriculum more relatable to Native American students (Klug 152). A specific example is at Pahin Sinte Owayawa elementary school in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Teachers at this school teach lessons relating to their students' culture and language. A specific lesson taught is having students create the Lakota Sioux tribal flag and learning about how and why it was made. Teachers possessing the knowledge of how to use culture and language while planning lessons can benefit Native American students and can make it so cultures other than the dominant are represented in the classroom.

A third commonality between these three texts is how Native American students have distinct learning styles. Misunderstanding the Native American culture can lead to a misunderstanding of how Native American students learn, thus how teachers need to teach to these students when they are in the classroom. As Klug and Whitfield describe, "Of all the misunderstanding among teachers of American Indian children, teachers' lack of cultural knowledge and unfamiliarity with preferred learning styles are the most problematic" (161). The responsibility of familiarizing oneself with the culture of students in the classroom rests on the teacher, as well as teaching to Native American students' learning styles in lessons. An example of not familiarizing oneself with the culture of students can be related to summer school work on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Volunteers here can easily have a lack of knowledge about the Lakota Sioux culture. This lack of knowledge can keep walls up between the volunteers and students, and can cause a gap in teaching and learning, because volunteers may not understand how these students may learn when helping them. This directly relates to teachers who may also not have a clear understanding of how Native American students learn. Klug and Whitfield extensively explored how teachers should look within to identify their

difference in culture, versus the culture of Native American students in the classroom, and identify how to combine the Native American culturally relevant pedagogy into a Western thinking about how to teach students (161).

An important aspect for teachers to understand about learning styles of Native Americans is they are unique to their culture. Huffman states, “It is argued many American Indians possess a learning style that is little acknowledged or understood. As such, traditional teaching practices are not appropriate or even harmful for significant numbers of native learners” (32). Teachers must move beyond what is deemed as traditional in the classroom, including teaching from the book, lecture-based teaching and using tests including multiple-choice, true or false, matching and short answer questions. If teachers move beyond this, they can help students to learn and understand content on a deeper level via their learning styles, which are not traditional. Not traditional includes the use of open ended test formats, allowing students choices on when and how they will be assessed and letting students work in cooperative groups. Native American learning styles are based off their culture through the influence of specific values of Native Americans, child rearing practices, and the practices of Native American people in the community. Their learning styles are seen more as intuitive, visual, and global or abstract, versus the dominant culture and traditional learning styles (Huffman 33). A classroom reflecting these styles could be very colorful, display a variety of student work, and could be full of information regarding different cultures. These learning styles are very different than what the dominant culture perceives to be traditional, thus showing how a Eurocentric curriculum does not teach to Native American students who learn in a different way, and how important it is for teachers to modify the curriculum to adapt to these different learning styles of Native American students.

In order to understand Native American student's learning styles and incorporate their learning styles into lesson plans, Klug remarks,

A review of theories, research, and models of the learning styles of American Indian/ Alaska Native students reveals that American Indian/ Alaska Native students generally learn in ways characterized by factors of social/ affective emphasis, harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication. Underlying these approaches are assumptions that American Indian/ Alaska Native students have been strongly influenced by their language, culture, and heritage, and that American Indian/ Alaska Native children's learning styles are different – but not deficient. (152)

It is important that if there are Native American students in a class, an understanding of how they learn is taken into account by the teacher. Klug lists a variety of ways in which Native American student's learning is characterized, which differs from the dominant culture and Eurocentric curriculum they are taught from. Klug also remarks about how Native American student's learning styles may be different, but this does not make them any less capable of learning material. The learning styles of Native American students was a major commonality within these texts, and it is important for teachers of Native American students to think about these learning styles when planning lessons to teach Native American children.

These texts reiterate the lack of Native American culturally relevant pedagogy in schools, which have curriculums that are Eurocentric and based on the dominant culture, rather than the students from the many cultures who make up a classroom. The texts talk extensively about Native American culturally relevant pedagogy. These texts have three major commonalities: dominant culture perception in curriculum and pedagogy, the lack of preparation of teachers to

specifically teach Native American students in a culturally irrelevant curriculum, and how Native American students have distinct learning styles. These three commonalities show how Native American culturally relevant pedagogy lacks in a Eurocentric curriculum within schools and in classrooms where Native American students are present, but also talk about how to change this and teach to Native American students effectively.





Method and Results

To begin my research I focused on the question, “Can Native American culturally relevant pedagogy assessment strategies benefit children of all races and be used in suburban classrooms?” To answer this question I used action research in my internship classroom at Mattawan Later Elementary School in Mattawan, Michigan. In this class, there were twenty-six students in my classroom I collected data from. There was one Hispanic student, one Asian American student, one African American student, and twenty-three Caucasian students, and in the entire class six students were on free or reduced lunch. To do this action research, I taught two units using traditional and non-traditional assessments in the content area of social studies to my class. In the first unit I used non-traditional assessment strategies when teaching about the regions of the United States, and in the second unit I used traditional assessment strategies teaching about Core Democratic Values.

The first unit I did focused on non-traditional assessment strategies relating to Native American culturally relevant pedagogy. In the article Issues in Cross-Cultural Assessment: American Indian and Alaska Native Students, Estrin and Nelson-Barber list a multitude of specific Native American culturally relevant pedagogy assessment techniques. I narrowed my action research down to three specific strategies to use while teaching a unit in social studies on regions of the United States. The first strategy was linking assessment to instruction and avoiding packaged tests, the second strategy was embedding assessment in instruction, and the third strategy was providing for cooperative and individual assessment opportunities. These strategies were incorporated into my teaching in a variety of ways. I taught students about the Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest and the West, and one way I embedded assessment into my instruction was when I had students create postcards about the regions of the United

States. Students were expected to pick a human or physical characteristic from the region we had learned about, and write a description of it and that specific region to anyone they wanted to write a postcard to. As students created these postcards, I was able to tell if students understood the regions as we were learning about them. Below is a picture of a bulletin board I created to display student's postcards.



After teaching each region of the United States, I put students in five small groups, each on a region we learned about as a class. In these groups, I had students work cooperatively and collaborate by creating posters and brochures on the region to which they were assigned. In their groups, students decided who would create what and how they would present their information to the class. This is a non-traditional assessment strategy relating to Native American culturally relevant pedagogy I used, in that the assessment was embedded into instruction for students to show what they learned. I found students enjoyed being able to work in a group, and each group

was able to successfully talk about the region they did their posters and brochures on. Below are pictures of students presenting their posters and brochures to the class.

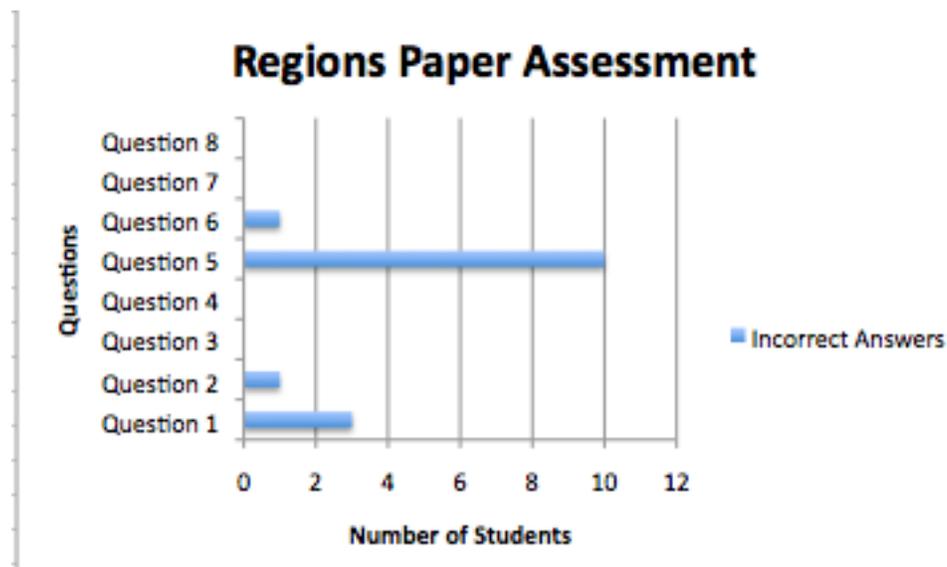


To individually assess students at the end of the regions unit, I had students pick which two regions they wanted to compare and contrast when writing a paper. I went through a compare and contrast graphic organizer with the students and gave them a checklist with eight criteria:

- Compare and contrast graphic organizer turned in complete (3 points)
- Written rough draft included (3 points)
- Title (1 point)
- Name (1 point)
- Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation (3 points)
- At least one page in length (3 points)
- Included comparisons in paper (3 points)
- Included contrasts in paper (3 points)

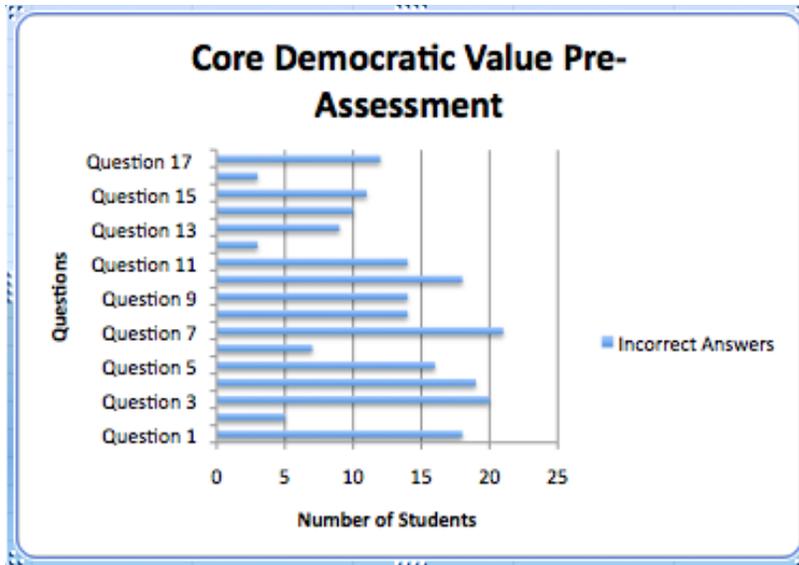
I included a modified checklist for students in special education or who move at a slower pace with the only modification being the length of their paper had to be a half page.

After grading these papers I found two students received 16/20, two students received 17/20, four students received 18/20, five students received 19/20, and thirteen students received 20/20. The data table below shows each of the above criteria from the checklist as numbered questions. The bars show the number of students who did not receive all points from the criteria given on the checklist. This data table shows question five, also known as the criteria of using correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation, being the question most students missed points on.

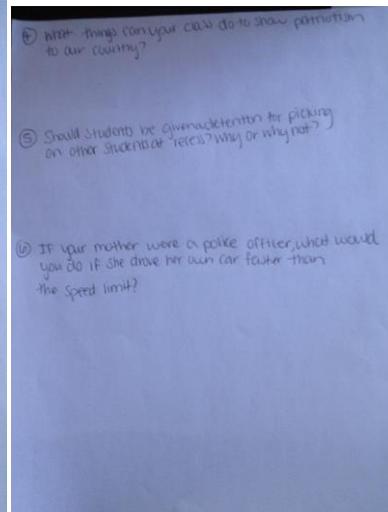
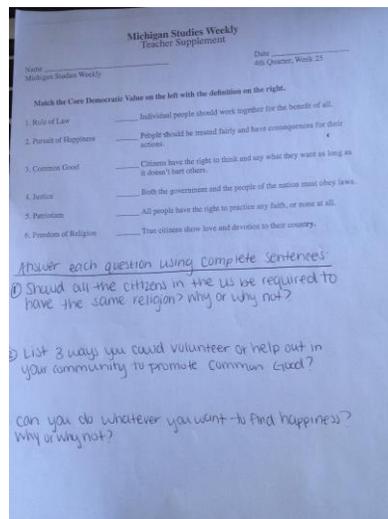
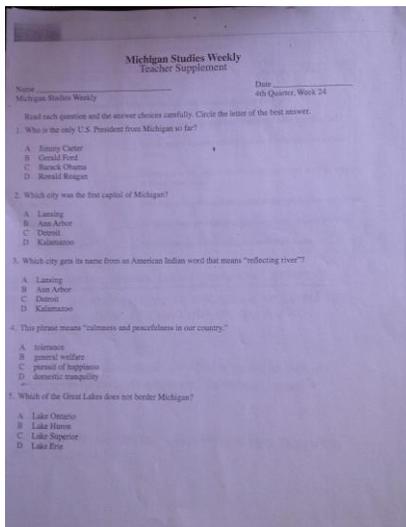


The second unit I did was on Core Democratic Values and focused on traditional assessments, such as tests and quizzes with multiple-choice, true or false, matching and short answer questions. I started this unit with a pre-assessment I compiled from a curriculum guide. I did this to see what information students knew before I taught them about the Core Democratic Values of justice, pursuit of happiness, common good, patriotism, rule of law, and freedom of religion. This pre-assessment included five questions based on information from the Michigan Studies Weekly papers used in the district for fourth grade students. It also included matching questions on all six of the Core Democratic Values, and I included six short answer questions on each value for students to answer. On this pre-assessment three students received 4/17, four

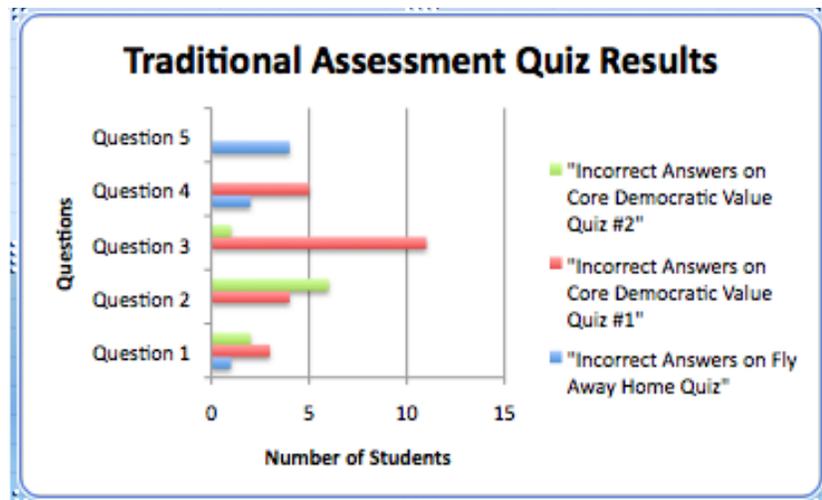
students got 6/17, five students got 7/17, four students got 8/17, one student got 9/17, one student got 10/17, one student got 11/17, three students got 12/17, one student got 13/17, two students got 15/17, and one student got 16/17. Below is a graph of the pre-assessment I had students take. It shows the number of students who received incorrect answers on the seventeen-question pre-assessment.



Below are pictures of the pre-assessment each student took before I started teaching the unit on Core Democratic Values. There are multiple-choice, matching and short answer questions, showing this to be a traditional assessment.

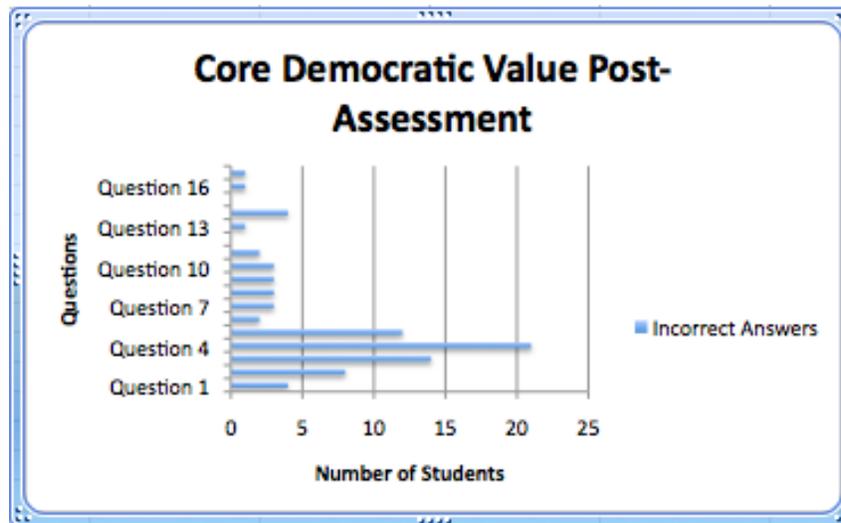


During this unit I gave three quizzes to assess where students were as I taught the unit. The first quiz was on a story I read relating to the Core Democratic Value of common good called Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting. This quiz included one multiple-choice question, one true or false question, and one short answer question. The second quiz I gave was over the two Core Democratic Values common good and freedom of religion. On this quiz there were four questions, two of which were true or false, one multiple choice, and one short answer. The third and final quiz I gave was over the three Core Democratic Values of patriotism, justice and rule of law. On this quiz there was one multiple-choice question, one true or false question, and one short answer question. Below is a graph compiling the results of each quiz. The graph shows the number of students who answered questions incorrectly on the quizzes.

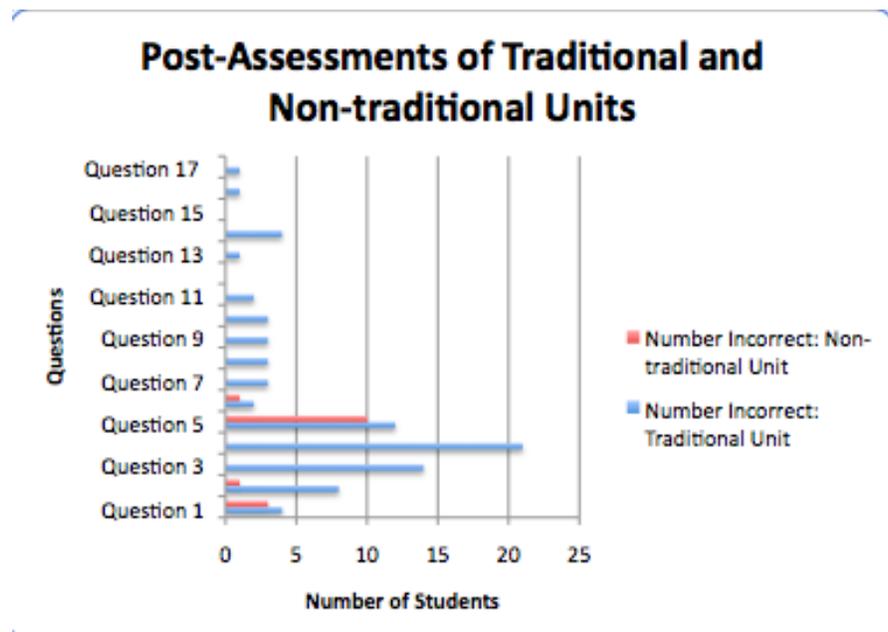
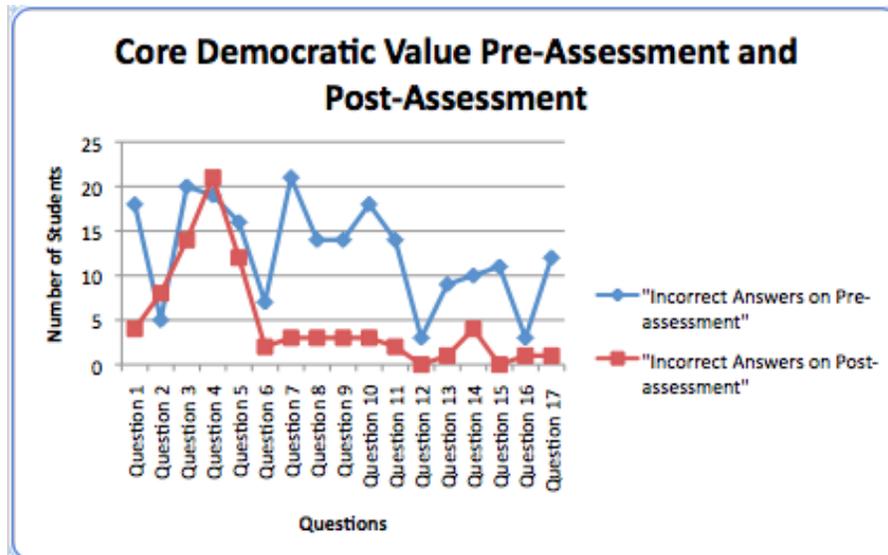


At the end of the unit I gave a post-assessment to see what students had learned about the six Core Democratic Values I taught. The post-assessment was the same assessment as the pre-assessment, which helped to see where students grew in their knowledge, and what concepts students still needed help with about Core Democratic Values. This assessment included seventeen questions, with five being multiple choice, six being matching, and six being short answer questions. One student got 8/17, one student got 9/17, three students got 11/17, one

student got 12/17, one student got 13/17, seven students got 14/17, seven students got 15/17, three students got 16/17, and two students got 17/17. The graph below shows the number of students with incorrect answers for the seventeen questions.



The graph below shows the comparison between the pre-assessment and post-assessment scores. This graph clearly shows an increase in learned knowledge throughout the length of the unit. It is interesting to notice the red line, indicating the number of students with incorrect answers for the post-assessment, is similar to the blue line for questions one through five, which happened to be the questions about the Michigan Studies Weekly newspapers students read during the unit. This shows students did not significantly retain the information they read from these newspapers. Questions six through seventeen, directly relating to the six Core Democratic Values taught, significantly improved from the pre-assessment.



The graph above shows the seventeen questions from the post-assessment traditional unit and the eight post-assessment criteria from the checklist in the non-traditional unit. Looking at this graph, the number of students who got incorrect answers on the post-assessment for the traditional unit gets to twenty-one for question four, whereas the highest number of students to not receive full points on the non-traditional assessment gets to ten students for question five, which was the criteria of correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation on their regions paper. This

leads back to the research question I focused on during my action research teaching these two units.

Conclusions

Can Native American culturally relevant assessment strategies benefit children of all races and be used in suburban classrooms? The above graph represents both post-assessments, clearly showing students learned the content, and did so in both units, using both traditional and non-traditional assessment strategies. The true difference is how students still struggled on the traditional assessment with the questions from the weekly newspaper they read. This perhaps comments on the significance of these questions, and if they really needed to be on the assessment found in the curriculum guide to show students learned the concepts of the six Core Democratic Values successfully.

The above results show how non-traditional assessment strategies are effective and can be used in place of traditional assessment strategies. Most importantly, the results show how students in a suburban classroom can benefit from Native American culturally relevant assessment practices in a positive way. From teaching both units, I found that if Native American students benefit from this type of assessment, students in suburban classrooms could benefit from this type of assessment as well. Students in suburban classrooms can learn successfully using non-traditional assessment strategies relating to Native American culturally relevant pedagogy, where they are able to do more hands-on, cooperative learning activities, and not be given traditional assessments. This non-traditional way of thinking about assessment can reach more than one type of learner and can be easier to differentiate instruction to a group of very different students when teaching content.

Native American culturally relevant pedagogy assessment practices can truly benefit students of all races. Trying to change the Eurocentric curriculum the United States uses is not the most logical option to teach to students of all races, but learning how to teach students with different learning styles and different races, and having teachers who are prepared to teach this way whether they are in rural, suburban, or urban school districts, can clearly be beneficial to any student. The action research I did by teaching two units in social studies using traditional and non-traditional assessment strategies showed how students can gain knowledge and learn what they need to do with traditional assessment, but they can do the same if not more using non-traditional assessment strategies that connect to varying learning styles students have. By doing so they are able to show their individuality through their work, collaborate with their peers, get out of their seats and be actively involved in their own learning. Using Native American culturally relevant pedagogy assessment practices is beneficial to teachers and students in any classroom regardless of their race or learning styles.

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