

Observing in Programs Serving American Indian/Alaska Native¹ Children— Birth to Five

All children benefit socially, emotionally, and academically from classrooms with high-quality teacher-child interactions. However, measuring the quality of these interactions in classrooms with children from specific populations or in specific setting types poses unique challenges for observers. In response to these challenges, additional guidance has been developed for those using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®) to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions. This job aid provides observers with information about how to prepare for and conduct CLASS observations in Native American early childhood programs.

Native American cultures are often very different from dominant cultures in the United States. There are many strengths and facets of Native American cultures that are assets to children and communities. At the same time, the trauma of colonization and continued systemic oppression have resulted in many Native children living in poverty and experiencing the adverse childhood experiences associated with it. Observers need to be aware of both the unique cultural strengths inherent in these communities and the fact that Native children may have experienced historical and current trauma in higher concentrations than children in other communities. While the guidance below provides insights into CLASS observations of tribal programs, there is a need for more research and better understanding of the alignment between CLASS and these communities.

Recommended Best Practices for Observations

BEFORE THE OBSERVATION:

- Ensure you don't make assumptions about the children or teachers you will observe based on their language(s) or cultures.
- Understand that there is not a single tribal culture but many rich, varied tribal cultures including many different languages.
- Learn what languages the children and adults speak, and understand the classroom's language composition.
- Ensure a linguistic match between yourself and the primary language of instruction in the classroom.
- Find out what percentage of instruction is in English or other language(s).
- Ask about the nonverbal ways the teacher and children may communicate.
- Ask whether any elders will be visiting the classroom and how that might change the structure of the day.
- Develop an awareness and understanding of the culture(s) within the classroom so you don't miss or misinterpret interactions.
- Understand the cultural variations in behavior that may be captured in a dimension but not described in the behavioral markers in the CLASS manual; remember that the behavioral markers are examples and that other behaviors can fit the dimension and indicators.
- Ask about and understand when it is appropriate to code: Are there activities or times of the day when coding is not appropriate?

DURING THE OBSERVATION:

- Watch for culture-specific behavioral markers of the Positive Climate dimension's indicators, as some tribes may not encourage the practice or expression of
 - Physical proximity and social conversation as evidence of relationships
 - Physical affection as evidence of positive communication
 - Eye contact as evidence of respect
- Many tribal communities communicate nonverbally through body language and gestures; such conversation is rich and abundant in many tribal classrooms but requires more of the observer's attention to visual instead of auditory cues.
- More communication may come through gestures, eyebrow movements, and facial expressions than words, and the meanings of these nonverbal expressions may differ from those of similar expressions in non-Native cultures.
- Observers who have a deep understanding of the tribal culture may interpret nonverbal communication. Observers without that understanding should not attempt interpretation, as they may misinterpret the interaction.
- Especially in classrooms with both a tribal language and English, teachers may provide feedback in response to both verbal and nonverbal communication from children. (This strategy exemplifies effective teaching within the Toddler and Pre-K CLASS dimension of Quality of Feedback.)

¹In this document, we use the terms American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN), tribal, tribe, and Native to refer inclusively to the broad and diverse groups of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, villages, communities, corporations, and populations in the United States, acknowledging that each tribe, village, community, corporation, and population is unique from others with respect to language, culture, history, geography, political and/or legal structure or status, and contemporary context (Mathematica, AI/AN FACES study, 2019).

DURING THE OBSERVATION (CONTINUED):

- Note if teachers encourage children to use both their home language and the target language to explain their thinking, which is beneficial for children as long as they are making verbal attempts and teachers are repeating and extending it. (This strategy exemplifies effective teaching within the Toddler and Pre-K CLASS dimension of Language Modeling.)
- Note that there may be longer time between conversational turns in back-and-forth exchanges; additionally, teachers may not always expect a response from children. (Such interactions fall under the dimension of Language Modeling.)
- You may see elders volunteering in the classrooms. Weigh their interactions based on the number of children with whom each adult is working, the length of time they are with the children, and their responsibility for activities.
- In some tribal communities, behavioral and communication norms for children are different when interacting with elders. Many tribal cultures teach by a process called “learning by observing and pitching in.” When elders are speaking, children may be still and listening and then discuss and practice what they have just learned.

WHILE CODING:

- Frequently refer to the CLASS manual to ensure you’re considering the correct indicators and behavioral markers when assigning codes.
- Don’t force all the behaviors observed into the CLASS framework. While some cultural practices of responsivity and sensitivity can be captured in some dimensions, such as Teacher Sensitivity, there is not a specific dimension of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practice.
- Remember that the descriptions in the CLASS manual provide examples of what interactions may look like for each dimension and indicator. However, these are not the only ways that interactions play out. Focus on the intent of the dimension and indicators by referring to the definition on the face page and the key words in the manual and asking yourself if the interactions meet that intent.
- If the teachers and children occasionally speak in their native language, you can code the mere act of conversing—even if you don’t understand the language or content—as long as there was a continued verbal exchange between teacher and child.