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“Nurturing Culture In the Classroom for Success of Indigenous and Pacific Islander Students”

Abstract: Poverty, substance abuse, and high incarceration rates are rampant among Native American/First Nation populations; these problems appear in many colonized cultures. However, some areas, such as Hawaii, seem to have overcome those issues with a respectful embrace of the indigenous culture and practices of the indigenous population of the area. As demonstrated in literary works from other related cultures, specifically the Maori and Native Americans, having representation and an understanding of one’s culture lowers the incarceration rates and lays a foundation for indigenous peoples to rise out of poverty. This presentation will equip teachers with tools and resources for raising awareness of indigenous students and cultures and implementing inclusive and diverse practices in the classroom.

Description: This presentation will provide teachers with resources and tools for implementing cultural learning in the classroom with the goal of cultivating a more inclusive and diverse curriculum sensitive to the needs of indigenous and Pacific Islander students. This presentation reveals the research regarding the impact cultural learning has on indigenous students as well as the literary examples which describe the impact from a fictional yet representative perspective. One method is including diverse texts based on or from indigenous cultures. While not all texts are appropriate for use in a high school classroom, some remain prime examples of indigenous cultures that are perfectly appropriate for high school use. Disney’s 2016 film *Moana*, for instance, introduces Western societies to concepts common in the Pacific Islander culture, namely the concept of *mana*. *Mana* is the Polynesian equivalent of a soul, encompassing an individual’s beliefs, actions, history, and identity. *Moana*’s deep dive into the identity of the main character from a Polynesian perspective not only introduces Westerners to the concept from Polynesian cultures but does so in a manner to which many young adults relate. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, a popular young adult read, presents the struggle of determining identity from the Native American perspective. The protagonist grapples with straddling the line between two cultures while being true to themselves and their interests. By maintaining relevance with adolescents through the search for identity, these texts present a foothold for gaining the attention of young adults while introducing concepts from the indigenous cultures, creating a culture of inclusivity and raising awareness for the indigenous cultures. The target audience for this presentation is secondary educators as well as those with a respect for Native American, First Nation, and Pacific Islander culture.

Bio Statement: Sarah Aten is an Eastern Illinois University graduate student studying English education. Her experience includes two years teaching science and math at the high school level. She is currently student teaching with the anticipation of completing her studies in December 2021.