



# Cultural and Practice Perspectives on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System: Voices from American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Programs



**2016  
BRIEF REPORT**

[www.tribalearlychildhood.org](http://www.tribalearlychildhood.org)

# OUR TEAM

In 2012, the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center gathered a team of American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start program representatives and researchers working in American Indian/Alaska Native early childhood education to examine the cultural appropriateness of the CLASS in American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs.

The team, called the CLASS Community of Learning (CoL), was formed in response to concerns raised during Office of Head Start tribal consultations regarding the cultural appropriateness of the CLASS as an evaluation tool in the federal monitoring of AI/AN programs.

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# OUR GUIDING QUESTIONS

Early in the process, our team developed three questions that we used to guide our work:



**How do directors of AI/AN Head Start programs use the CLASS?**



**How do directors of AI/AN Head Start programs perceive the CLASS instrument and training?**



**How do directors' perceptions of the CLASS inform us about our understanding of the cultural appropriateness of the CLASS?**

# REPORT GLOSSARY

This report contains many technical terms and acronyms. We recognize that the use of these technical terms and acronyms make reading our report more challenging. However, we feel it is important to use these terms and acronyms in order to clearly describe our work. To mitigate some of the frustration caused by the use of these terms and acronyms, we have documented the technical terms and acronyms in our glossary. We hope it is helpful to you as you read this report.

## ACRONYMS

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● AI/AN - American Indian/Alaska Native

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● CLASS - Classroom Assessment Scoring System

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● TRC - Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

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● CoL - Community of Learning

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## TECHNICAL TERMS

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● Child-centric beliefs - beliefs that children's learning is best supported by encouraging independence and engagement in learning activities by being sensitive and responsive to children's needs and interests

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● Cultural Lens Approach - an approach to evaluating the applicability of a theory to a cultural group (Hardin et al., 2014)

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● Etic approach to measurement - creating measures that are generalizable to all cultures

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● Emic approach to measurement - creating measures designed specifically for a specific cultural context

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● Reliability - the extent to which an experiment, test, or measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials

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● Validity - the extent to which an experiment, test, or measuring procedure captures information about what it claims to measure

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a brief summary of a manuscript submitted for publication by the CLASS CoL regarding our work to unearth initial evidence regarding the cultural appropriateness of the CLASS in AI/AN communities. The four sections in this report are described below.



## Introduction

In the introduction, we set the stage for the work we have done. We briefly describe existing literature in order to connect research and theory in different disciplines that formed the foundation of our work.



## Methods

In the methods, we described how we conducted our work. We described the how we worked together, our participants, our survey, and how we examined our data.



## Results

In the results, we describe our findings and share how our findings fit within the context of the literature we discuss in the introduction.



## Conclusion

In the conclusion, we summarize our findings and share the recommendations we have developed based upon our findings.



# Introduction

The CLASS is an observation tool that has been scientifically proven to measure the quality of the classroom environment and predict children's social and academic outcomes.

However, the tool's appropriateness in American Indian and Alaska Native communities has not been determined.



## Three ways the CLASS is often used in research

### Evaluation

The CLASS has been used extensively to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development programs. Researchers have found that the tool is sensitive to change in teacher practices when professional development programs focus on aspects of teacher and child relationships, are high quality, provide sufficient dosage.

Heller et al., 2012  
Raver et al., 2008  
Domitrovich et al., 2009  
Hamre et al., 2012

### Prediction

Researchers have consistently identified components of the CLASS that predict children's social and cognitive outcomes. For example, researchers often find that Emotional Support scores predict children's social and emotional health. Scores in Classroom Organization and Instructional Support often predict children's literacy and language skills.

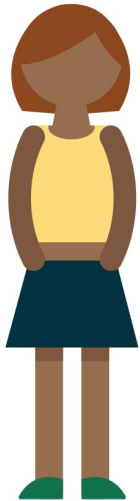
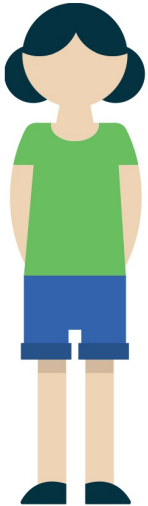
Curby et al., 2009  
Guo et al., 2010  
Howes et al., 2008  
Pakarinen et al., 2010  
Rimm-Kaufman & Ponitz, 2009

### Theory

The CLASS has been used occasionally to strengthen our understanding of how the various aspects of teacher and child interactions related to each other and form an overall classroom environment. The most recent study in this area found that there are some aspect of teacher and child interactions that we have yet to "sort" out.

Hamre et al., 2014

## What characteristics of individuals predicts reliability on the CLASS?



- Trainees who ascribed to child-centric beliefs were more likely to be reliable
- Trainees who held intention teaching beliefs were more likely to be reliable
- Trainees who were white were more likely to be reliable

Cash, Hamre, Pianta, & Myers, 2012

# The CLASS in the Multicultural Context

## Research with Latino and Hispanic Children

Most research conducted with classrooms serving Latino and Spanish speaking children have found the CLASS has good reliability and validity.

Downer et al., 2012; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004

## Research with Children in Finland

In Finland, the CLASS was found to have good reliability and validity.

Pakarinen et al., 2010

## Research with AI/AN Children

No studies have been conducted with AN children. In the only published CLASS study conducted with an AI tribe, the CLASS was used as an effective evaluation tool but did not report reliability or validity.

Roherig, Dubosarsky, Mason, Carlson, & Murphy, 2011

## A Deeper Analysis of the CLASS in Rural Latino Classrooms

Most of the articles reviewed examined the statistical properties of the CLASS to identify how well the CLASS worked in culturally diverse classrooms. However, one article regarding the CLASS in rural Latino classrooms describes a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to their study of the CLASS.



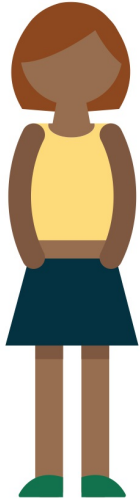
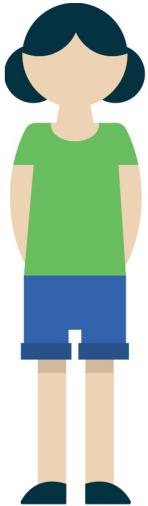
These researchers found good reliability and validity of the CLASS. Moreover, they found that there were culturally based interactions between teachers and children that were not captured by the CLASS, but were related to certain CLASS dimensions.

The researchers concluded that the CLASS can be an effective tool in classrooms serving rural Latino children while acknowledging that the way codes are assigned in culturally diverse classrooms might be different.

Reese, Jensen, and Ramirez (2014)



## What characteristics of individuals predicts reliability on the CLASS?



- Trainees who ascribed to child-centric beliefs were more likely to be reliable
- Trainees who held intention teaching beliefs were more likely to be reliable
- Trainees who were white were more likely to be reliable

Cash, Hamre, Pianta, & Myers, 2012

# Multicultural Measurement

Many researchers have addressed cultural responsiveness of assessment and measurement in the fields of Education, Medicine, & Psychology.

Influential researchers in the field of multicultural measurement (often referred to as cross-cultural measurement), described the importance of two distinct but related concepts, which we describe below:

1. universality-cultural specific continua
2. etic/emic approaches to measurement

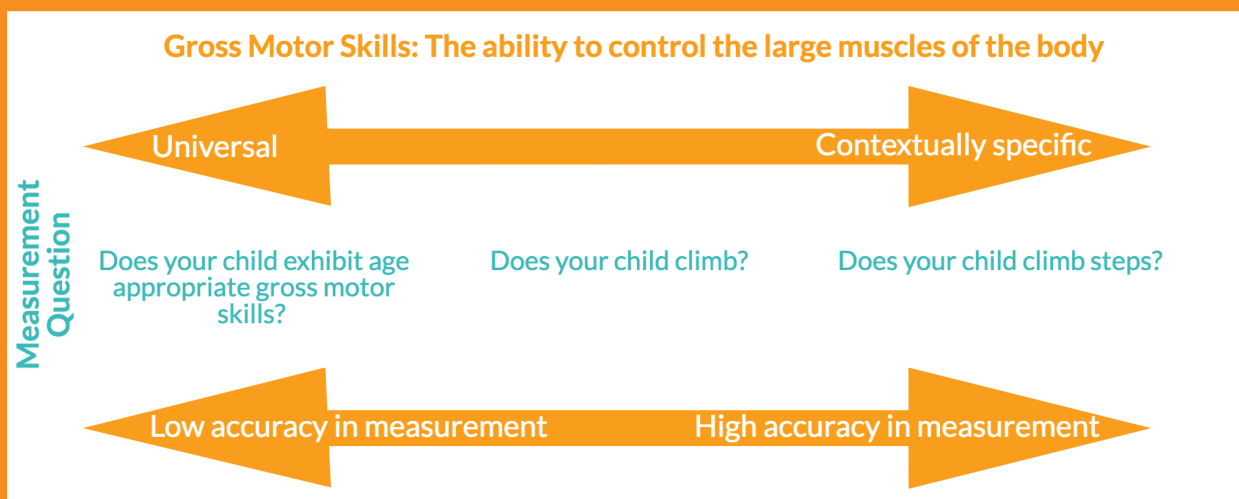
--Hui & Triandis, 1985

## The Universality-cultural Specific Continua

Hui and Triandis wrote about the importance of examining how abstract a concept is when conducting multicultural measurement.

A concept that is quite broad will be more difficult to measure accurately, while concepts that are more specifically and narrowly defined are easier to measure accurately.

However, as we narrow down broad concepts, we are also moving away from the universality of the broader concept. Below, we use work from Whitesell, Sarche, and Truckess (2015) to illustrate how the measurement of gross motor skills moves from being universal to being culturally or contextually based as we narrow down specific and measurable behaviors.



## Etic and Emic Approaches to Multicultural Measurement

### Etic

#### **Merriam-Webster definition:**

of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who does not participate in the culture being studied

#### **Etic approach to measurement:**

creating measures that are generalizable to all cultures

### Emic

#### **Merriam-Webster definition:**

of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied

#### **Emic approach to measurement:**

creating measures designed specifically for a specific cultural context

While an emic approach allows for the development and use of cultural specific measurement tools, these tools will not allow for cross-cultural or multi-cultural studies. For example, let's say that a survey for parents and teachers regarding AI/AN children's social skills was designed using an etic approach. This imaginary tool could provide accurate information about AI/AN children's social skills. However, the tool would not be appropriate for use with non-AI/AN children.

This dilemma has challenged those who conduct measurement work in multicultural contexts for many years. Hui and Triandis suggested that a combined etic-emic approach could be used to address this dilemma. They purport that one could create a measurement tool that could be used across cultural contexts by using an emic approach in measurement development within an etic structure.

*But how  
do we do  
this?*

This suggestion has been followed by thousands of researchers seeking to address issues of multicultural measurement in their scholarship. However, most of the research in this field fails to utilize an emic approach for measuring an etic construct (Hall, Yip, & Zárate, 2016; Hardin, Robitschek, Flores, Navarro, & Ashton, 2014). There has not been a clear path for how measurement developers can use a combined etic-emic approach.



# METHODS

## How did we work together?

The members of the CoL met via video conferencing regularly to determine the research questions, develop the methods and survey to address the research questions, analyze the data, interpret the findings, and review drafts of products describing our work.

It was a lengthy process that often included meeting weekly or monthly beginning in March of 2012. All members of the CoL completed a certified research ethics training. It was important that all members felt comfortable voicing their opinions, dissent or agreement, throughout the process.

## Who participated in our study?

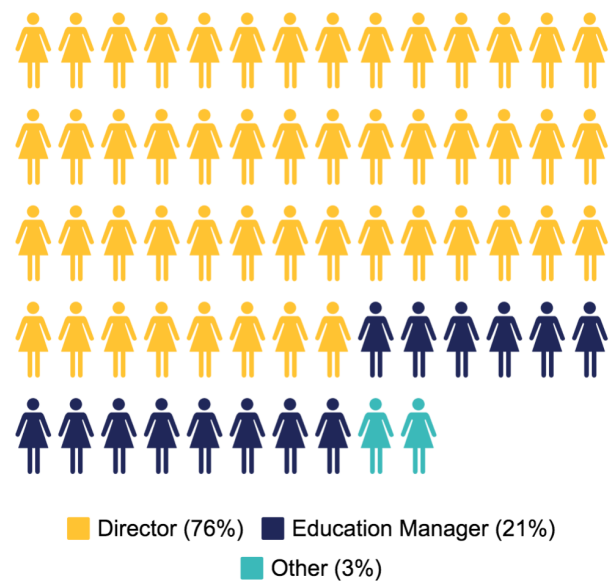
Head Start and Early Head Start directors and administrative staff of programs that serve primarily AI/AN children were asked to participate at the National Indian Head Start Director's Association in June of 2013. A follow-up email was sent to all directors with a link to an electronic survey. Approximately 44% of all directors of AI/AN serving programs completed the survey.

Number of participants who  
completed a survey

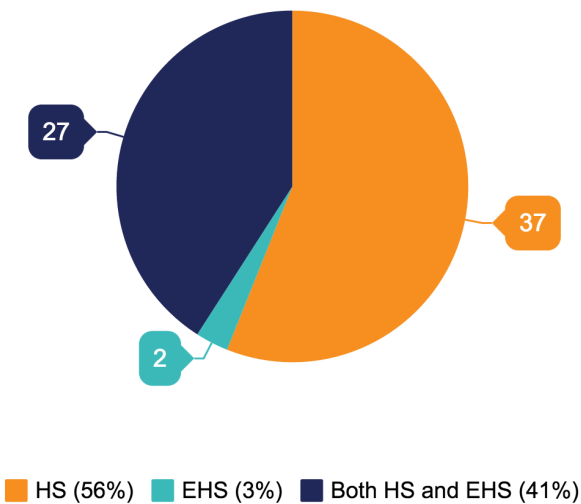
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# Survey Participant and Program Information

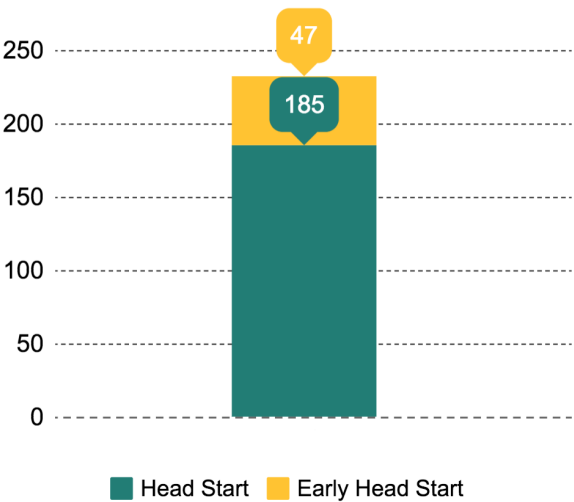
## Role in Head Start



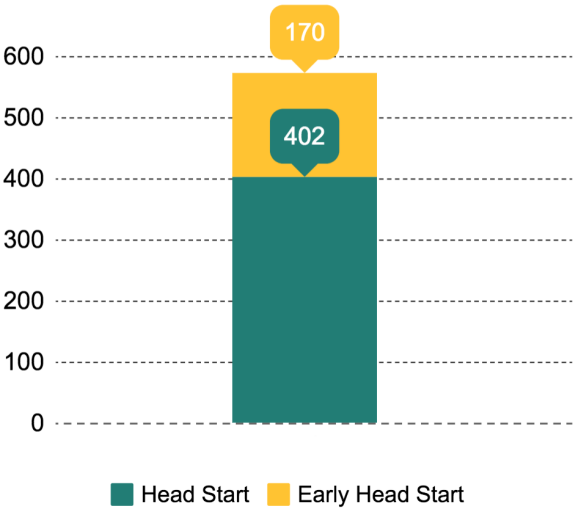
## Program Represented



## Number of Centers Represented



## Number of Classrooms Represented



## What information did we gather?

Data sources for the study included the following:



CLASS CoL survey included items regarding cultural inclusion in the program, use of the CLASS, and perceptions of the CLASS

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Reflections from the CLASS CoL group members

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Notes from the CoL discussions

The survey items were developed by the CLASS CoL and were intended to gather perceptions of the CLASS within the AI/AN context.

The average time to complete the survey was one hour.





## How did we examine our data?

Three of the CoL members (1 researcher and 2 community partners) worked together extensively to analyze the qualitative data. In their analysis, they coded the data via identified themes both individually and collectively. Complete agreement was achieved in coding the data by all three member of the data analysis sub-team.

Once data were analyzed by the sub-team, the data were presented to the full CLASS CoL to review findings and engage in a detailed analysis of the data using the Cultural Lens Approach (CLA; Hardin et al., 2014). We used the CLA to assist us with the critically reflecting upon the cultural alignment of the CLASS in AI/AN communities. The CLA includes 5 steps:

1

Articulate how central constructs have been defined and operationalized.

2

Identify the groups from which these definitions have been derived and to which the constructs have either not been applied or with which surprising results have been found.

3

Identify the relevant dimensions underlying cultural variability.

4

Evaluate the definitions/operationalizations of the central constructs (step 1) in the context of broader cultural knowledge about those groups (step 3).

5

Derive research questions and specific hypotheses based on the answers from step 4.

# RESULTS

## Research Question 1: How do directors of AI/AN Head Start programs use the CLASS?

Results from our study suggest that the vast majority of AI/AN Head Start programs were using the CLASS (n=53, 80%) in the 2013/2014 program year. In analyzing the qualitative data about why programs used the CLASS, we found two categories of reasons for using the CLASS:

Used the CLASS to improve program services

Used the CLASS to prepare for federal monitoring

Many reported using the CLASS for both reasons. For those who indicated both reasons, we placed their responses in the category of "to improve program services". Below are a few quotes from our data.

### Prepare for federal monitoring

"We want our teachers to be informed on what is expected during a CLASS review. We have had several trainings on CLASS but feel that we need to always remind our teachers what is expected from this tool."

— Head Start Director

### Improve program services

"We are required to use CLASS. We also use it to design training. I see CLASS as a way of getting a picture of where our staff is at: what strengths they have and what areas we could assist by providing additional training. We utilize this information to discuss with staff what they feel they need to learn and to make suggestions on how to accomplish this."

— Head Start Director

## Research Question 2: How do directors of AI/AN Head Start programs perceive the CLASS instrument and training?

In our focused analysis to identify implications of using the CLASS in AI/AN programs, we identified two themes:

1. ➤ Cultural responsiveness of the CLASS training
2. ➤ Strengths and limitations of using the CLASS

### 1. Cultural Responsiveness of the CLASS Training

How was your experience with CLASS training?

**62% had a very positive or positive experience**

"I think all of the CLASS trainings I have been to, the trainers acknowledge Head Start classrooms may look different due to culture or regional aspects. But [they focus on] engaging children [in] learning, asking questions, being curious, and being respectful – this is what CLASS is wanting to document during observations. If this is not being observed, then working with teachers so learning for children can be optimized."

– Head Start Director

**18% had a somewhat positive experience**

"I attended 3 different trainings. The first training was a negative experience. The trainer "taught to the test" and there was no opportunity to understand the tool. The second training was more helpful, but was expensive because we had to travel to another location and pay a fee for the training. The third training was provided to our program and was extremely beneficial."

– Head Start Director

**20% had an experience that was a little positive or not at all positive**

"I disagree with the position of the training. It does not take into effect the quietness of our community and how it is inappropriate to be as vocal as they desire us to be. Difficulty to create scaffolding in our native language."

– Head Start Director

Was the trainer sensitive to any cultural implications of using the CLASS in tribal programs?

49% thought the trainer(s) were very sensitive or sensitive

"All trainers acknowledge that Native teachers may not be as verbal or speak out as much – but we have to practice using as much vocabulary as possible with children. We have to be intentional in using vocabulary, using open-ended questions and having relevant conversations with children."

– Head Start Director

24% thought the trainer(s) were somewhat sensitive

"The trainer is only aware of cultural implications if they are informed by the program, however, there should be some level of assumption made that there are cultural implications for any tribal grantee."

– Head Start Director

27% thought the trainer(s) were a little sensitive or not sensitive

"The trainer simply used a script provided and did not deviate from it to include how this could impact tribal programs nor how tribal programs could be different."

– Head Start Education Manager

"Tribal situations were not discussed."

– Head Start Education Manager





## Advantages and Limitations of Using the CLASS

### Advantages of using the CLASS in AI/AN classrooms



"Relationships between child/teacher are critical. Overall classroom environments are also critical. Historically, we have children from families who do not have an abundance of printed materials in the home (books, newspapers, magazines, etc.). We also have a huge percent of children with speech and language delays and impairments. So the language modeling and feedback loops are important as well."

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- Head Start Director

"I think it is important to have the VERY BEST quality of classrooms across the country as we can. We need supportive documentation to be able to prove that."

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- Head Start Education Manager



## Limitations of using the CLASS in AI/AN classrooms



"Cultural nuances – for example – less verbal – more/facial eye expressions, gestures. Also respect for the teacher may look/sound like they are being negative. Listening cultures do not talk constantly – talking back to elders or teachers may be viewed as disrespectful. Children learn as a community and whole body style."

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- Head Start Director

"It doesn't catch subtle, visual, or non-verbal interaction. It does not understand cultural components that include listening, reflection, and quiet as being more important."

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- Head Start Education Manager





### Research Question 3: How do directors' perceptions of the CLASS inform us about our understanding of the cultural appropriateness of the CLASS?

In conducting our analysis of perceptions of the CLASS instrument, we found it interesting that many of the comments regarding cultural appropriateness were aimed at the sensitivity of the training to cultural differences. We believe that this finding is because the task of identifying the aspects of the CLASS that are culturally inappropriate is very complex for researchers and community partners. One must consider each of the individual elements of the CLASS, the CLASS instructions for scoring, knowledge of child development, and the various aspects of culture that might be in conflict with the instrument.

With this in mind, our CoL used the CLA (Hardin et. al, 2014) to dive deeper into the data provided regarding perceptions of the CLASS to form a conception of the cultural appropriateness of the instrument. The following section describes how we addressed each step of the CLA.



Articulate how central constructs have been defined and operationalized.

The CLASS is solidly grounded in prior research that defines the critical constructs, dimensions, indicators, and the manifestations of the indicators, defined as behavioral markers. Of those who felt using the CLASS provided benefits to their programs, many identified the clear definitions and research base as a strength.



Identify the groups from which these definitions have been derived and to which the constructs have either not been applied or with which surprising results have been found.

The research studies used to develop and validate the CLASS were conducted in traditional American early childhood education programs. These programs included many low-income children who are primarily white, Latino, and African American. The instrument was developed using an etic approach, focusing on developing an instrument that could be applied universally across diverse groups. No studies have been conducted to address validity of the CLASS in AI/AN early childhood education programs.

### 3

## Identify the relevant dimensions underlying cultural variability.

Even when considering the vast differences in social class, spiritual orientation, etc. between American Indian and Alaska Native children and those included in the original validation studies, there are most certainly differences in how children and families function that are grounded in cultural differences.

Karen Swisher has written extensively about American Indian and Alaska Native learning styles. Swisher and others have described cooperation, observation, careful listening, supervised experimentation, and self-assessment as being important processes for Native children in the classroom (Cheeseman & Gapp, 2012; Dumont, 1972; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

It is plausible that these differences in learning styles are a result of differences in worldview. Wilson (2008) has described an Indigenous worldview as one that is non-linear, holistic, artistic/visual, spiritual, and intuitive. In accordance with these differences in worldview, there are differences in patterns of relationships, non-verbal gestures, and verbal communication.

In addition to differences between AI/AN and non-AI/AN individuals, there are differences across AI/AN groups (Sarche & Whitesell, 2012; Sleeter, 2012). For example, in some AI/AN communities, direct eye contact, which is often touted as a sign of respect in early childhood education, is a sign of disrespect. But this does not hold true for all tribes. It is important to recognize and honor the fact that there are diverse patterns cultural characteristics within and across tribes.







Evaluate the definitions/operationalizations of the central constructs (step 1) in the context of broader cultural knowledge about those groups (step 3).

As described above, the administrators in our study were quite adept at identifying the ways in which the CLASS constructs and definitions worked in their communities. Many individuals described the importance of the broader concepts such as the overall relationship between teachers and children and language modeling.

While recognizing the value of these broad concepts, survey respondents also identified discrepancies between some of the behavioral markers of the CLASS and cultural ways of being. The culturally specific patterns of relationships, non-verbal gestures, and verbal communication in AI/AN communities are at odds with aspects of the CLASS that do not value “listening, reflection, and quiet”.

In addition to these culturally based behaviors, there are specific non-verbal gestures and patterns of verbal communication that are tribe-specific. We expect that these tribe-specific differences in communication style would make observation of the CLASS challenging for an observer who is not familiar with the tribe’s culture.

For example, in some Alaska Native tribes, an individual will raise his/her eyebrows in the upward position to communicate affirmation. Alternately, in many non-AI/AN communities as well as other AI/AN communities, this facial expression would indicate concern or caution. An individual coding the CLASS would have a difficult time accurately scoring the CLASS when observing interactions among people with different verbal and non-verbal communication styles. As stated by one of our CoL members, in many AI/AN communities, a great deal of communication is expressed via non-verbal gestures and facial expressions. And specific gestures and expressions often have different meanings.

Although the CLASS was developed in a way that does allow for some differences in behavior expression of the ten dimensions, the flexibility built within the measure only allows for more subtle differences. Nothing is either written in the manual or included in standard training material that directly addresses these issues. What the manual does state is:

“It is important to note that although Table 2.1 provides a general scoring guideline, the CLASS is not a checklist and observers should view the dimensions as holistic descriptions of classrooms that fall in the low, middle, or high range. In many cases, it is not necessary to see indicators of all markers presented in the description of a given range to assign a score in that range. For example, within Positive Climate it is possible for a classroom to score in the high end, even if positive peer connections are not clearly demonstrated, as long as there are consistent indications of positive teacher-student relationships, positive affect from students and teachers, and mutual respect.” p. 15-16

Unfortunately, this statement, and the flexibility inherent within the CLASS, is not enough given the vast differences in culture and normative behavior across tribes.



Derive research questions and specific hypotheses based on the answers from step 4.

Given the evidence of the benefits and challenges of using the CLASS in AI/AN communities, our CoL believes that further examination of these issues is essential. Our work has led to the following research questions and hypotheses:



Do the CLASS domains, dimensions, indicators, and behavioral markers fit within the cultural context of AI/AN early childhood education programs?

**Hypothesis 1:**

We believe that the domains and dimensions will fit well within the cultural context since these constructs are more abstract and thus apt to be universal.

**Hypothesis 2:**

We believe that there will be indicators and behavioral markers that will not fit within the cultural context.

**Hypothesis 3:**

We believe that there will be indicators and behavioral markers important to the dimensions for young AI/AN children that are currently not present in the instrument.



What are the processes needed for the CLASS to be conducted effectively in AI/AN early childhood education programs?

**Hypothesis:**

We believe that a CLASS coder who do not have an in-depth knowledge of the tribe's culture will be unable to provide accurate data about an AI/AN classroom.

# CONCLUSIONS

Our findings have led us to revisit the idea posed by Hui and Triandis in 1985 that one can develop an etic structure while still using an emic approach. We propose that one could do this by using an etic approach to develop a measurement framework while using an emic approach to incorporating within that structure flexibility at the most specific units of measurement.

In other words, one could use an emic approach to identify the cultural specific aspects of a phenomenon that fit with the global or universal aspects of the phenomenon. The result would be a tool with an etic structure at the most abstract level and an emic structure at the most concrete level.

The CLASS is an example of a tool that was developed solely using an etic approach. However, we believe that the CLASS could be reconfigured within its existing structure to support an emic structure at the concrete levels of measurement (indicators and behavioral markers). We have developed a series of recommendations to continue this work.

1. ➤ A qualitative study should be conducted to identify the culture-specific variations of the CLASS domains, dimensions, indicators, and behavioral markers. While we know it would be unrealistic to expect a study such as this to include all tribes with early childhood education classrooms, very careful design strategies would need to be employed to ensure adequate representation from different tribes.
2. ➤ Information from the qualitative study of culture-specific variations should be used to either modify the CLASS's structure or develop a new instrument with etic and emic structural equivalence.
3. ➤ A full quantitative and qualitative study should be conducted to evaluate the tool's use in AI/AN communities. This study should mirror the studies conducted to establish the initial validity and reliability of the instrument. Again, very careful design strategies would need to be employed to ensure adequate representation from different tribes.
4. ➤ Coders of the newly revised or developed system should have strong cross-cultural understanding as well as an in-depth knowledge of the cultural context of the classrooms in which they are observing.



# THANK YOU!



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We are thankful to our colleague Racquel Martinez who provided valuable insight and feedback. We are also grateful to Hiram Fitzgerald, Miles McNall, and Dorinda Carter Andrews for providing thoughtful edits of our work.

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