

## Identity in the Classroom - Velma Kills Back

Maintain who they are. Do not focus on another culture. By that, I think that we need to put pictures of chiefs from a long time ago. And if you, I don't know if you were in Alternative, but we have pictures of chiefs. And so, I always tell my students to identify yourself for who you are. And that's a lesson in itself. Who are you? I'm very surprised that today some students don't look at themselves as being a Lakota. They identify themselves as who they are on the streets. Especially here in Pine Ridge. You know, you're regarded as a blues.

Here's the reds. Here's the blacks. Because every one of them is involved in a gang. Or involving in some sort of group. And they identify themselves as Serranos. And you have to understand where they're coming from. And where they're at. But I always ask them that. Who are you? And we do a writing lesson on that. And so they write, I am, my name is. I live in such and such. And so I ask them, are you Lakota? No, but I live on a reservation. So even the terminology of being a Lakota, some students do not identify themselves.

And I always ask them, they listen to rap artists. And they listen to their songs. They listen to all this music. And I always tell them, back in my day, you can hear the words. And they're beautiful words. And it tells, I said, this is all poetry. I said, every song is coming from a poem that somebody wrote. And it became, I said, poems come from the heart of the editor. The person that's writing it is the one that has it coming from the heart. So I said, what do you think?

I said, some of these people are singing, and you like them, I said, they're in the city. Maybe someplace in California. Someplace in Tennessee or Georgia, wherever. I said, they don't know about the reservation. They don't know about gravel roads. They don't know about dirt roads. I said, they don't know those things. So I said, do you know where they come from? No. Okay, then let's study on our own. Let's compose something that is coming from our heart. And then I would create a word web. Anything that they say, everything goes out into this.

I always tell them, okay, this is our think tank. All the words that you say are going to go into this think tank. And after we're all done, then we start taking things out. Do you think this should be in there? No, we take it out. How about this?

No.

And then we always end up like maybe five or six. Actually, it's words that I want them to talk about, but I made it look like it's theirs, you know, so we start out by doing that. And then at the end, or maybe at the first quarter, I would say, who's proud to be a Lakota? And so that's how we always start because most children, they don't even know their grandparents' name. I always ask them, well, who's your grandpa? I don't know. I never did have a grandpa. Well, I'm sure you do. No. That's my mom's mom. So see, they don't associate that.

All they're interested in is their small little dynamic, you know, just in their household.

And anything else, anybody else that comes to visit or to come in, they're just friends. They can't tie relation with their family. Some do. I'm not saying that they all are like that, but some feel like that. And so we have to go and teach that. And I always feel that we need to do more of that, of who they are. They need to identify themselves. What did Chief Red Cloud stand for? What did Crazy Horse stand for? What did Sitting Bull stand for? Why do you think he said, let us put our minds together and see what we can do for them?

I said, why did he say that? And then they always come up with different things. Well, I think, look at his eyes. I said, what is he thinking? And they come up with their own stuff that they think that he's thinking. But that's how we need to start. Many of our children identify themselves. They have eraser burns. They're a part of somebody's group. They have C's burned on their arms to indicate they belong to this black wall, east side, the west side. And then you got some kids from the Crazy Horse who are nomads. You know, so that is their world.

And you have to do something to get into that. And so I always tell them, is that a Lakota way? I said, you're taught to be humble. You're taught to respect. I said, what you put into this body, I said, you have to take care of the body. I said, gosh, that God gave you this body, now you have to take care of it. But what you put in here, or you shoot up, or whatever you do, I said, is that being a Lakota? I said, yeah, you know, I'm, well, Captain says, but you know what? I said, Captain.

I said, what if the Captain tells you to jump off a roof, or I already did that, so I have to use something else. But all these things tie in as to who you are and how proud we are. And I said, we are proud people. And I took a picture of that statue in front of Prairie Edge at one time. There was this Indian that was standing there with his hands tied, and he had barbed wire standing there. And I took pictures of it one time. I took the front and the back, and I brought it back one time, and I told the kids, what's wrong with this picture?

I said, write about it. What do you see in this picture? What do you think is going on here? I mean, it was really interesting to see, you know, the different kinds of things that they come up with. And one of them stood up for me, and he said this. He said, well, he said, I used to live in Yankton, but my mom moved back over here because we had some Amish people that didn't like us. He said, we lived next to a family that belonged to this Amish group. And he said, they didn't even like us. So we moved to another different part of the town.

And he said, we're still there. He said they didn't like us yet. So we had to move, and we came back over here. So he said, that's what this is.

He said they don't like us, and so that's why we're, we're put to shame, so we have our heads down. And I said: what, if? What is that barbed wire? Say then, or that barbed wire means that our hands are tied and we really can't do anything about it? And I said gee. I said yeah, I. He said: how about you? What do you think, Miss Val? What do you think? And

I said: well, I have to go with all of you. I said because what I would say, that is that I see, may not. I said it's in all of your writings too. I said: and he said so. I asked him.

I said: so how do you think they should picture us? And he said: and, and he's a one that's been exposed out there. You know, he lived in Yankton. They moved back from Chicago, his dad was. His dad was an engineer and he worked in different areas and now he's back here in Pine Ridge and he works at the hospital. So he said: well, he said my dad said we're, we're proud people. And he said they should put her head up. And he said, he said, and I said: how should it be? How should they put our hands?

He said our hands should be like this, he said because he said in each of our hands. He said he said we hold a lot of things in our hands and he said to me. He said when I stand like this, I said yeah. He said I have the whole world in my hand that I can do anything and I can be whatever I want and I can do anything to get there, to where I want to be. I said yeah, you're right. I said gee. I said huh. I said you're, you're right. But all the ones that are not exposed to the outside world, you know, think for the moment. You know, right now.

And they all said no, no, they shouldn't even have statues around. It doesn't mean anything, you know. So it depends on where these children are coming from, and they all come from all walks of families. We used to say all walks of life, but it's, it's all walks of families, it's how family has, has their dreams or visions or goals, whatever. And you can tell how children are brought up, because they don't, they don't foresee things, they only think for the moment.

But other things that are brought up with, but different things, and they're and they're involved with different areas. You know, they can see the outside. So those children that think for the moment they're the ones that we have to expose them to different things by showing them pictures. This is what you can be, this is, this is where, where, where, if you went to school, you're gonna see all these things. And also- and today, now last year's eighth graders from alternative I'll have different dreams.

They all want to go outside of their reservation to go to high school. They all want to go to college, they want to be in the military so they can see the world. And so today, or last year about today, the things are kind of changing, but it's not changing at a rapid rate. It's changing kind of somewhat fast. At one time we were standing still, but now it's.

It's changing because kids are being exposed to different things now: the internet, you know, iPads and tablets, and they're all being- you know, they can see these things on the internet and they want to be a part of it. So everyone's changing their lifestyles now. So I really think that we are. We are almost there, but not yet there. I mean we're almost there. I mean we're almost there and I, but we need a little push for our children.