My culturally responsive tool is still in progress. I’ll give some background on why and how and outline my plans moving forward, and then I plan to update as the tool gets put together and used.

One of the challenges of my position is that I don’t have much control over my schedule, the students I see, or the location that I tutor, and each of those are subject to change on a weekly basis, or even daily. I do have a ‘home-base’ corner of a classroom, that I share with 2 ELL staff, where I have a desk and my personal items, a few plants, supplies for cultural projects, and some posters and Native Alaskan art. Last school year I started having Lunch Clubs with the students 2-6th grade who were registered in Title VI – the Federal Program that funds my position. This is program is open to those Native Alaskan and American Indian students who complete the paperwork and have supporting documentation of their ethnicity. The Lunch Clubs took place 1 or 2 times a month. I invited groups by grade/gender to eat lunch with me in the classroom, and then several times a year they were able to stay for recess to work on cultural projects – beading, ornament making, small drums, big drums, sewing, etc.

I’ve been wanting to create a hallway project, something that I could reuse year after year, that could be hung up outside my classroom or in a well-traveled space. I especially wanted it to be something that parents and families could interact with during conferences, or on other occasions in the building. I wanted something that would give those who contributed (or even just those who pass by) a visual reminder of connections they have, to physical spaces, to culturally relevant activities, and to give value and worth to a way of life and background that for many is so separate from and disconnected from what happens inside our school walls.

In past years, I’ve had this Indigenous Peoples and Languages Map of Alaska in my classroom corner.
In the first quarter of the school year, as I’ve gotten time with small groups of students in the program, we’ve talked about where they’re from, where their families are from, and their connections to places all over Alaska. Students could choose to write their name on a small sticky note and place it on the map on a village or location. In some cases, it was where they were born, or where they visited cousins in the summer, or where their parents or grandparents were from. Their names would stay there for the year, so each time they came to the space, they could see the map of Alaska (we also did this with the US map for those American Indian students with a background from the Lower 48) and their name.

This year, I’m planning to take the map and enlarge it! I have a document projector that I’m going to use to project the image onto butcher paper, and trace the outline of the state, the language groups, villages, etc. I’d like it to be at least 4’ x 5’. I’ll then use contact paper to preserve the drawing. This map will be large enough to be visible and eye catching in a hallway space, and also be spacious enough for many names to be added, as well as last a number of years, so that it can be reused.

While I was at Culture Camp in Hoonah, I reflected a lot on the activities we did each day, and the centuries of practice that many people had with them. The movements and skills were taught explicitly by elders and experts, they were enforced in stories of resilience and survival of families and tribes, and I believe are ingrained in those that participate at a cellular level, from generations of application. Even those children (and some adults) who had never actually taken part before – such as in the processing of a seal - knew their ancestors had done so “since time immemorial” through stories told from their beginnings.

I plan to give the students the creative liberty to choose how they would like to represent themselves on the map. I’ve found outline templates of animals and natural elements as examples for them to use, or they can create their own.
They can choose to color the object, write their name on it, or draw their own, and I can download other templates as requested! I'm going to encourage them to be intentional about the image they select for themselves, remind them that they'll get to see it all year, and invite them to share with others what they chose and why. Or not. The action of verbally sharing will be optional, as will the representation of an object for themselves (they can also just write their name, as in previous years). They will then be encouraged to place the completed object/name on a location on the map that they feel connected to.
I’m imagining it will take most of the first quarter for me to have access to the majority of my students, during which the map and supplies will remain in my classroom space. My goal is to transfer it to a public space in the school before parent teacher conferences, towards the end of October. I will then set up the map as a welcoming and ongoing activity for those who pass by, with a short explanation of its’ purpose and participants, and a supply of templates, blank paper, tape, and art supplies, so that others can make additions to the project.

One additional option I’m considering is utilizing the students’ school photos as a voluntary incorporation to the project, so they could post their photo on or near their name/object. This may be a bit challenging, since there are many regulations about the use of children’s photos, especially attached to names, but I plan to discuss it with our principal before making a final decision.