

## **Exploring a Pathway to Reshape School-wide Literacy Practices for Indigenous Students**

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In this chapter, three teachers reflect on classroom action research projects they conducted as they sought to reshape literacy instruction to support Indigenous ways of knowing. The chapter highlights teachers' voices and visions of what can be done to structure action research projects that can shift and disrupt schoolwide literacy practices in spaces that serve Indigenous students and educators.

Since the passing of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, opportunities for Indigenous students to participate in literacy instruction that is culturally responsive has been limited. For example, as part of a state mandated literacy program in a school serving mainly Indigenous students (Vaughn et al., 2015), required texts included resources that marginalized students (e.g., *Voyage of the Half Moon*, a required reading text with questions positioning Indigenous students as “these people” and “devils” (West, 1995, pp. 2-3). Unfortunately accounts of this curricular mismatch or an exclusion of Indigenous knowledge and voices in the promoted curriculum has been far too common. Moreover, contexts where teachers are pressured to “teach to fidelity,” (e.g., teaching without deviation to the prescriptive curriculum) continues to dominate classroom discourse in many schools serving Indigenous students. Given this, critical scholars emphasize the need to rethink instruction and schooling that is grounded in heritage, language, and culture indigenous to a particular tribe (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Addressing the well-documented research that examines ways to support Indigenous students in today's educational context (Reyhner, 2015), this chapter builds upon this work and examines how three teachers used action research as a tool to reshape school-wide literacy practices. Action research is a powerful tool that can support students' cultures, languages, and voices (Campano, 2007) while empowering teachers in their efforts to cultivate new understandings about their craft (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Bradshaw & Vaughn, 2016; Rose, Vaughn, & Taylor, 2015). In this chapter, we describe reflections of action research projects conducted by Kelly, Traci, and Cindy as they sought to reshape literacy instruction to support their school's 88% Native student population. We want to highlight these teachers' voices and describe how action research can serve as a navigational tool to shift and disrupt schoolwide literacy practices in spaces that serve Indigenous students and educators.

### **Who We Are**

Kelly is a Native American female and classroom teacher of 15 years who was raised on the nearby reservation and attended the school in which she now teaches. Traci, is a Native American female and classroom teacher of nine years.

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Cindy is a European American female and classroom teacher of eighteen years who also sought to teach at Lapwai Elementary. Margaret, is a European American, female and literacy faculty professor at the nearby land grant university who worked alongside Kelly, Traci and Cindy as they conducted action research projects as part of their culminating project for the graduate degree program of which Margaret was the director. In the following, we briefly describe their action research projects and discuss their visions of shifting literacy culture in their school through these projects.

### **Kelly**

The focus of Kelly's action research centered on exploring her students' stories and their perceptions about writing in school. She shared, "My vision for teaching literacy to my students is to allow them the opportunity to hear and share their own voice." Her action research project aligned tightly with her vision as it was titled, "Telling Our Stories." In her research, Kelly explored her story as a Native American elementary teacher and her reactions and experiences during her schooling. She developed a curriculum that focused on her students' language and Native culture and documented her students' understandings and perceptions of writing during culturally responsive writing units. Kelly shared the following about her rationale for her research:

My action research helped support my students' culture by providing them an opportunity to share their knowledge, stories, strengths, fears, and history through writing workshops. The curriculum that we adopted at the time did not have a lot of relevant examples of Native culture. This action research allowed me to explore culturally appropriate ways to teach literacy with relatable examples. My students also participated with a summer writing workshop that published books using their own language (Nimiipuutimpt) with the expertise and help from tribal elders to ensure the writings were culturally accurate.

Kelly's research documented the ways in which her students participated in the writing process and their reactions to a curriculum that foregrounded their language and culture. When asked about what was the most important thing about her action research, she shared:

I was able to impact the learning of my students in a better way than if I hadn't embarked on this journey of conducting research of my practice. My students who were in my class during this project are now freshman in high school. I can see how important it was for them to have an opportunity to share their stories. When I see them now they give me hugs and I know they feel valued by me and that I truly care about them and their culture. They can relate to me in a positive way and some of them still may not like writing or speaking up in class but deep down inside they know that I believe in them and that I gave them

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an opportunity to shout from the mountain tops that their learning needs were important and needed to be met. I continue to strive to meet the needs and challenges my students face and provide hands on learning and use oral history whenever possible.

### **Traci**

Traci was particularly concerned about her students' access to genres highlighted in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010). Traci's vision centered on creating opportunities in her class where her students could be successful in school and beyond. Her action research titled, "Explicit Strategies and Informational Text: An Action Research Project with Third Graders," focused on examining how to provide access to informational text so that her students could successfully navigate the complexities and language of this genre. Traci shared the following about her research and the impact of it on her students:

My action research project was instrumental in accommodating my students' love and need for informational texts. Our population of students value and have a deep understanding of the land and places that have meaning to them as Native Americans. They relate well and connect to the world around them. Informational text was a way to get them to read about topics like this (land, water, places, etc.). My research demonstrated that students are motivated by, and can read successfully, informational texts. This was important to me because many of my students benefited by having rich books to share that connected to the land and places around them. They relate well and connect to the world around them, which gives them common ground while reading about different cultures around the world or other topics such as where water comes from.

Traci also recognized that the school lacked many culturally responsive texts at the time of her research. She reasoned that by exposing her students to informational texts that she could help them to reconnect with relevant and interesting topics aligned with their interests and Native culture. She also shared that because she mainly chose narrative texts to share in her class with her students, the action research helped her to examine her practice and to highlight informational text as a genre to connect with Native culture.

### **Cindy**

In Cindy's action research titled, "An Examination of a Writer's Workshop in a First Grade Classroom on a Native American Reservation," she examined how incorporating culturally relevant texts, and resources, (e.g., graphic organizers, language) could help to create a culturally responsive unit of writing. Cindy shared that her vision for teaching her students focused on building a solid literacy foundation for her students and a classroom where her students felt confident

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about their roles as readers and writers. She shared that her action research helped her students to, “share their voice” but also that it deeply affected her work to become a culturally responsive educator. She shared the following:

I learned how to create a culture in my first grade classroom of writers that take pride in their work and see themselves as writers. I want to highlight my students’ culture as Native Americans. This learning has impacted my teaching and continues to influence the books I select as anchor texts and the activities I plan for my kindergarten students even today.

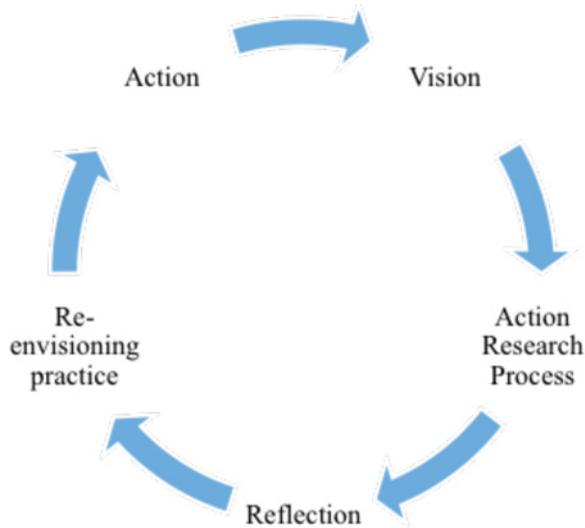
Cindy shared that the knowledge gained by conducting her action research continues today as she creates culturally responsive writing units anchored in her students’ language and culture.

### **Conclusion**

Together, Kelly, Traci and Cindy’s action research projects reflected critical literacy tenets by disrupting understandings of common practices; examining multiple viewpoints, taking action, and promoting social justice (Lewison, Seeley Fint, & Van Sluys, 2002). When we think about ways to support Indigenous students, one pathway is to consider how to engage Indigenous educators and teachers who work with Indigenous students in the process of action research. In each of these projects, Tribal Elders were an integral component of their literacy instruction. Elders could be found sharing their stories, listening to students, answering questions about the Tribe and supporting the way literacy was viewed and taught in the school. Moreover, Kelly, Traci, and Cindy articulated visions focused on supporting their Native students in literacy. Duffy (1998) shares that because teaching is much like balancing round stones, effective teachers must possess a vision for teaching literacy. Other scholars have documented the need for visioning as a tool (see Figure 1) to navigate the complexities of teaching in today’s highly standardized educational context (Hammerness, 2006; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2013). We extend this work to think strategically about ways to explore teachers’ visions as a catalyst in the action research process. Taken together visioning alongside action research can provide teachers with the space to reflect, problematize their own knowledge and practice.

The importance of listening to Indigenous educators and educators who work with Indigenous students as they engage in action research to critically examine and disrupt practices distant from supporting Indigenous students is needed. Through action research, practitioners can engage in applying knowledge of their practice, students, and reflect on their practice to meet the individual needs of their students. Because action research anchors the research on teachers’ understandings of their practice, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) state it is the “construction of knowledge and teachers’ ways of knowing” (p.143). As a result, through this process of inquiry, teachers are able to weave their vision for teaching and influence local and schoolwide practices thereby creating a cultural shift in schools.

**Figure 1. Visioning as a Tool**



Kelly, Traci and Cindy developed these action research projects to support their students and to provide access to resources that the school did not have. As such, action research can be used to shed light in schools that those who inhabit them can see. These teachers held a vision of what could be and acted on their agency to guide them in contexts where they believed their students' cultures, languages, and strengths were not heard given literacy mandates. These spaces are not without risk. In some schools, a teacher is reprimanded for not complying with curricular materials and resources outlined in the mandated program. In another school, a teacher is written up for not complying with the outlined pacing guide because her students needed additional time on the subject at hand. Indeed Kelly, Traci and Cindy were risk-takers as they critically examined their practice and made changes to meet their students' cultural and linguistic strengths. We issue a call to Indigenous educators and those educators working alongside Indigenous educators to examine their vision much like Kelly, Traci and Cindy and engage in action research. The words of bell hooks are particularly relevant in thinking about this call, "The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility" (hooks, 2014, p. 207).

The classroom is indeed a location of possibility and by documenting Indigenous educators and those who work with Indigenous students voices' and their action research, successes about shifts toward culturally responsive practices can be cultivated.

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