

Disseminating American Indian Educational Research through Stories: A Case Against Academic Discourse

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There is a need for research findings to find their way into schools and classrooms in time to save children and languages and cultures. The paper reports the rationale of the authors of the book, *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education*, for using stories to report the findings of their phenomenological (qualitative interview-based) study of 60 teachers of American Indian students, in order to close the gap between the reporting of research findings and the implementation into classroom practice.

American Indian communities have been found to be at a critical point. The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force study (1991) suggested that despite several decades of programs and efforts at both the federal and state level, and the efforts of tribes and American Indian organizations, the overall data on dropout and achievement for American Indians does not show any marked improvement. Their conclusions found the rates of educational failure uncomfortably similar to those of an earlier study, the Kennedy Report on Indian Education of 1968. Nationally, 40% of American Indian students drop out of schools (Quality Education for Minorities [QEM], 1991) and at the secondary level many of them lag two or more years behind their non-Indian peers on standardized achievement measures. In a state like Minnesota, 57% of the 14,000 Indian students failed to complete the requirements for high school graduation in 1997 (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1995). There are many obstacles to overcome to improve these dismal numbers, both in and out of school (QEM, 1991): low teacher expectations, tracking, inadequate financing of schools and education programs, few minority and American Indian teachers, testing issues, poorly trained teachers and a disregard for diversity in both educational standards and content. Deyhle and Swisher's (1997) review of literature on American Indian education cited (1) economic, social and health issues confounding students and the schools which purport to educate them, (2) inadequate funding of facilities and programs, and (3) schools which do little for the academic, social, cultural, and spiritual well-being of American Indian students. Out of school, many of these children face grinding poverty and all its side effects, including racism, negative peer pressure, and hopelessness. Children also mistrust educational systems; this is compounded by the absence of a positive educational legacy from many of their parents and other significant adults (Cleary & Peacock, 1998).

The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force pointed to schools as being essential to the social, cultural, and intellectual health of communities and to literacy, as essential to the well being of American Indian people. International congresses of indigenous people have come to similar conclusions.

Other researchers before us have scoured Indian country seeking answers to the complex problems that American Indian students have in schools, but whether these research findings will find their way into classrooms in time to save children and languages and cultures is a serious question. Some years ago it was said that the gap between the time that research is reported and the time when its results are used in the classroom was 50 years (Lehmann & Mehrens, 1979, p. 10). Through our work in many schools serving American Indian children, we have observed that this gap has persisted. In this article, we describe the rationale for the mode of dissemination we used in the book, *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education*, as a way of closing the gap between research and classroom practice.

Methodology

The data generated for *Collected Wisdom* comes from in-depth phenomenological interviewing based on a method developed for the study of community colleges by Irving Seidman and Patrick Sullivan and later described by Seidman in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (1998). The theoretical underpinnings of this method stem from the phenomenologists in general and Alfred Schutz (1967) in particular. In this model, the

researcher deems the experience of the participant with regard to the subject being studied as important in coming to an understanding of that subject. This type of interviewing strives to maximize the participants' rendering of that experience.

In our research, a series of three interviews provided enough time, privacy, and trust so that the participant could relate his or her experience, reflect on that experience, and to some extent, make sense of it. Open-ended interviews of 60 American Indian and non-Indian teachers of American Indian students were completed representing both reservation and urban Indian communities, in federal, tribal, and public schools. Another 80 teachers in Australia, Costa Rica, Belize, and on the Aleutian Peninsula and Islands were interviewed to consider the universals of indigenous education. Teachers in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest and Northwest parts of the country were included. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (by community, type of school, economic status, grade point average and gender.) The study explored teachers' perceptions: of teaching American Indian students, the issues assisting or hindering the success of American Indian students in school, effective teaching and teacher-student interactions, and suggestions for teachers, administrators and policy makers on what they felt would create conditions for the successful education of American Indian students. The first interview explored the teachers' backgrounds and experiences with American Indian people. Interview two focused on instructional and non-instructional issues teachers perceived as helping or hindering the education of Indian students. The final interview explored successful classroom practices and their suggestions to improve the education of American Indian students.

The research design was qualitative and used Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a way of studying the issues teachers felt helped and hindered the education of American Indian students. Grounded Theory relies on the constant comparative method, the joint coding and analysis of data using analytic induction (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Ely, 1991), and the premise that theory evolves from the body of data and is illustrated by examples from it. Because theory evolved from emerging data in this research, there was no hypothesis at the inception of the research. Interview data were sorted into emerging themes based on the juxtaposition of what the different teachers said. Category codes based on the themes were developed. The three open-ended tape-recorded inter-views with each informant lasted approximately one hour each. Tapes of the completed interviews were transcribed as interviews were completed. The inter-view data were sorted and analyzed with the assistance of ETHNOGRAPH, a qualitative research software program.

The Rationale and Mode of Reporting the Research

As researchers, we consciously and conscientiously disobeyed the dominant conventions for reporting our research because we believe that research must make its way into the hands of practitioners as quickly as possible. We chose to cram Collected Wisdom full of stories: our own stories, representative stories from amongst those collected from more than 60 teachers, and fictional case studies based on fact. We did this so that readers might assess our report on the basis of their own untold stories, and their own experiences. As American Indian and female non-Indian researchers, it was a natural way for us to report this research. Some of the thinking presented here actually occurred after our decisions were made in developing a format for dissemination.

The Limitations of the Discourse of the Dominant Research Community

Academic discourse is the mainstream model of discourse used to report research findings in scholarly journals, as well as college textbooks. One way to look at the reporting language of academia is to view it as a male versus female. Based on the analyses of Tom Farrell (1979), Linda Miller Cleary (1996), and Jean Sanborn (1992), and Donald Rubin and Kathryn Greene's analysis of Virginia Woolf (1992), one might characterize male discourse as that which begins with final conclusions, adds argumentation and facts as support (with little room for interesting lines of thought or questioning of results,) and repeats the conclusions at the end. In contrast, female rhetoric has been described as being an additive style, contextualizing points with narrative and deferring conclusions. It is a form of discourse that is not linear and one which entertains the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints.

Perhaps, unconsciously, researchers have written for practitioners in a way that they would communicate with

their peer researchers, using words and discourse structures unfamiliar to practitioners and assuming knowledge that practitioners, who are very involved in their work, might not have had time to acquire. When one adds cultural difference (real and often unrecognized differences) and the tenacity of cultural discourses and ways of being, the gap might be too great.

Another way to view discourse differences is to consider the lens from which the researcher views and interprets the world. Viewing and reporting research findings from an Ojibwe standpoint epistemology, which is rich in stories and metaphor, runs counter to the linear reporting of data, facts and findings.

As female non-Indian and male American Indian researchers, we consciously chose to report our findings combining elements of narrative rhetoric and Ojibwe standpoint epistemology, the lenses through which we each view the world. We avoided whenever possible the extensive use of literature reviews commonly employed in academic discourse: literature reviews are a discourse uncommon (and often not useful) to many practitioners. When we did report the research base we had examined, it was to confirm and emphasize the findings reported by teachers in our study. Moreover, we consciously avoided doing a rigorous review of literature until after we collected and analyzed raw interview data from the teachers, so it would not influence our own findings.

As researchers and as disseminators of our research, we took the moral high ground. We did not write for an audience of researchers who had been steeped in the language and discourse of academia. For years, qualitative researchers have fought for recognition for research that moves inductively from real contexts to results, to further questions, and emerging themes. It is our stance that this research should be presented, both initially and immediately, in a way that can best reach those most closely involved with educating children.

Collected Stories

Many American Indian people learn their way in life through stories. So, in being consonant with our topic, much of our material was introduced with stories. The use of stories reflected both Ojibwe standpoint epistemology and female narrative discourse. This presentation differed from what many academic readers are used to, but we persisted even when some of our early readers wanted academic discourse with our conclusions up front.

We collected many stories in the book. Clifford (1986) said, "Any story has a propensity to generate another story in the mind of the reader (or hearer), to repeat and displace some prior story" (p. 100). As Clifford suggests, "convincing" or "rich" stories can be almost metaphoric. They can lead readers to patterns or associations in their own experience, combined with which they will generate their own unique meanings.

Teachers told their stories in the book and, as authors, we added case study narratives, posed questions and problems, and told our own stories along the way so that readers might work actively toward their own understandings of the educational issues the book explores. Thus, though teachers-as-soloists were featured in profiles, and the rest of the sixty teachers came in with a chorus of quotes, all of us -teachers, readers, and authors -took part in composing meaning from the material. And through this composing, we all constructed a new knowledge base from which to act.

Using Teachers' Voices

In our research we were scrupulous in moving from teachers' stories and related experiences, the collected wisdom, via analytic induction, to our results. After reading what all the teachers had to say about their experiences in teaching American Indian children, we presented the commonalities of that experience, we raised questions when there were divergent data, and we did so in representative stories, compelling stories from teachers. In a way, we made the readers researchers, charged with their own search, finding their own truth by comparing their own experiences in American Indian educational settings with the experiences of the sixty teachers. We felt this more inductive presentation was particularly important in reporting research to teachers, prospective teachers, administrators, and concerned citizens from two cultures. We summarized the

findings of each chapter in linear presentations at the end of the chapter for those who best take in information in that manner.

An example of engaging teachers' voices in the reporting of the research findings is shown below as Kevin Ritchie, a non-Indian teacher from the North-east (one teacher representative of many) described how he perceived American Indian use of metaphor versus mainstream writing:

I'm used to a story developing its plot and climax and insight. But their stories are filled with these little equally important features, and then it's over. They don't tell a story as much as they give you little snapshots or episodes. Like there's some sub-text of the culture that you're not a part of, and so you don't pick up on the whole process. If I take my best White writers and my best Native American writers- I have two kids in my head right now- the best White writers are idea-driven, they want to develop ideas, or they want to explore ideas. And the Indian kids are image-driven. One Indian junior is just a wonderful writer. His writing is very evocative, imagery. Even his poetry is poetry; his prose is poetry. Whereas, for White kids, some of the best writers write poetry, but they write more theoretically. Something about that seems like there's a cultural difference there, not just a personal difference. Something about the way they see, experience. (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 185)

Disseminating research in this way may be the most ethical way to report research to people who come to understandings and who think at abstract levels by putting together stories, ideas, data, and snapshots in an inductive way.

Using Case Studies

A way in which Ojibwe standpoint epistemology is made manifest is by the use of case studies which are integrated throughout the book. Case studies (fiction based on fact) allow readers to view the concepts and theory presented in each chapter in context. Cases are in actuality stories, and stories are the traditional way in which knowledge, and ultimately wisdom, is passed down in Ojibwe communities:

The Ojibways have a great number of legends, stories and historical tales, the relating and hearing of which, form a vast fund of winter evening instruction and amusement.

There is not a lake or mountain that has not connected with it some story of delight or wonder, and nearly every beast and bird is the subject of the story-teller, being said to have transformed itself at some prior time into some mysterious formation -of men going to live in the stars, and of imaginary beings in the air, whose rushing passage roars in the distant whirlwinds.

These legends have an important bearing on the character of the children of our nation. The fire-blaze is endeared to them in after years by a thousand happy recollections. (Copway, 1987, p. 72-73)

An example of how this knowledge was given in story form is shown below in an excerpt from "The Storyteller," a case in which a young boy's uncle comes into a classroom to tell traditional Ojibwe stories:

He then told the students about some of the different plants and how the Ojibwe used them as food, medicine and in ceremonies. He told them the story of when rabbit ate all the roses, and how that affected the balance of things and how all the animals that depended on roses were harmed. And in telling the story he explained how the rabbit and the rose came to be as they are today. (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 118)

Using Researchers' Voices

We believe the "doing" of research probably affects the researcher more than those who read the results. Hence, our own voices were added to the "collected wisdom" presented in the book. We believe that research is shaped by the researchers and that researchers owe it to their readers to declare their connections to the topics being studied. For this reason, we have included our own experiences and have made it clear when we

are speaking from our own opinions rather than from the data in the text. Finally, we don't mask the intense emotional connections we have to the topic. We hope that the results of our research will have immediate positive effects on the education of our own grandchildren, and on their children, so we put our hearts and souls into the book, as we should:

When you talk to a person, you tell them. Instruct them. You want them to know you talk with your heart. When you talk from your heart it goes up out of your eyes, into the other's eyes, and comes back down into their heart. That's the way these stories and instructions were told to me.

It goes from one heart to another heart and it keeps going around like that. That's the way our old people did it and that's the way I think about all the things that I do now. The old ones passed it from heart to heart. That's the way I was told. They'd say, "Look at me. I want to talk to you."

So you sit there and you don't say anything back. You just keep quiet. When they get to a certain point and they want to make you understand, their voice changes and becomes like, ready to cry, it gets so intense. That's when you know they are very sincere. Their voice gets shakey.

"Listen."

You listen. Then you can feel the tears come out of your eyes and you know the feelings that they've given you. They stay there. It's so intense. (Axtell & Aragon, 1997, p. 204-205)

An example of the use of author's voice as part of the collected story is provided below as it appeared in the Epilogue, "Coming Full Circle," part of which describes the tenacity of culture, and the realization that the struggles of Indian education may be handed down to future generations:

My granddaughter was at the pow-wow [an annual veteran's pow-wow on the Fond du Lac Reservation attended by the co-author, Thomas Peacock], and at one point I walked her over to the mini-donut stand to make sure she had her fill of sugar.

Just several days later, possibly reflecting back on the pow-wow, she would proclaim to me at one of my summer cookouts, "Grandpa Tom, I'm an Indian."

"You sure are, " I replied, wondering what a three year old was thinking when she said such a thing.

"Indians don't wear any clothes, " she said.

"But you have clothes on, and you are an Indian," I told her, wondering again where she could get such ideas. (Cleary & Peacock, 1998, p. 252)

Both the pow-wow and the conversation with my granddaughter reminded me of how far we have come, as Ojibwe people, to retain our tribal ways, and of how far we have to go in educating others about who we are and of the struggles to convince this country to include American Indians in the American story. Somewhere deep in my soul, I know that my granddaughter will be fighting many of the educational wars I have fought over the years. Although my generation has come a long way in addressing the educational issues facing our children and the schools which purport to serve them, we still have a long way to go.

Conclusion

It often takes undue time for research findings to filter down from scholarly journals or college textbooks to classroom practice. There is a need to put the findings of research in the hands of practitioners as quickly as possible. This can be accomplished by avoiding academic discourse which is often foreign to classroom

teachers. We believe that research should be reported in language accessible to practitioners. By reporting findings through the use of the representative stories of teachers, readers can construct their own truth, comparing their experiences with those of other teachers. Using case studies (fiction based on fact) challenges readers to view the concepts and theory in context; and engaging the researchers' own voices to declare their own connections to the topics being studied, is an honest way to report research. The problems of American Indian education need resolution, sooner not later. Time is running out. There are things to be accomplished; there are disappearing languages and oral histories and stories to be protected, rights to be protected, and purposeful and hopeful futures for students to be found. Children deserve it and our collected wisdom demands it.

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