

The Imperative of Literacy Motivation When Native Children Are Being Left Behind

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This in-depth interview study of the schooling experiences of 120 First Nations, American Indian, and Alaska Native students contributes to understandings of their literacy motivation, highlighting tensions between their insights on literacy learning and literacy practices implicated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. With NCLB in full swing and slated for reauthorization, teachers often feel compelled to ignore intrinsic literacy motivators: students' curiosity and desire for self-expression, self-determination, and feelings of competence. Yet as these Native students report, intrinsic motivation (1) opens up space for them to learn in ways that are congruent with their own ways of being, (2) provides real audiences and purposes to express those ways of being, (3) shows paths for identity construction through literacy, and (4) constructs two-way bridges to the mainstream world. So that these children will not be "left behind," we must listen carefully to their gathered voices.

Introduction

The research reported here is based on an in-depth interview study of 120 American Indian, Alaska Native, and First Nations high school students conducted by Bergstrom, Miller Cleary, and Peacock (2003). Because our first impetus was to disseminate research results directly to students and educators, the study findings were published in a book written for them and entitled *The Seventh Generation: Native Students Speak about Finding the Good Path* (Bergstrom et al., 2003). This article reports on a further analysis of the perceptions of these students, focusing on literacy motivation.

Native Children Being Left Behind

Countless studies about American Indian/Alaska Native and First Nations education decry the gap between the success of mainstream and Indigenous students. Many studies affirm the same gap in literacy acquisition. Perhaps of greater import at this moment in history is the current and potential impact of the

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation on Native students. As I was contemplating revisions to this article, the voice of former NIEA president David Beaulieu (2006) came to me in firm but gentle tones over Minnesota Public Radio, warning of the effects of the legislation and noting that, “The more schools are focused on tests, the more the American Indian dropout rate is increasing.... Reservation schools need to focus on more than a student’s academic performance.” This article seeks to explain these recent effects by noting the relevance of motivation to students’ literacy development — a factor not considered by NCLB.

The National Reading Panel, whose work informed NCLB, conducted a meta-analysis of experimental research on five topics: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Left unexamined was (1) valuable qualitative research, which offers understandings of reading in real and diverse settings (including Indigenous settings), and (2) research on other topics essential to understanding reading success (e.g., motivation; see also Reyhner, this issue). Both the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (Krashen, 2005) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (2002) have deemed the summary of the report (upon which legislators acted) to be a limited representation of even the “scientific research” that the panel reviewed. Nonetheless, this report, translated into instructional recommendations on five discrete areas of reading, has fueled the widespread use of scripted, non-strategic drill instruction. Bobby Ann Starns, an educator at Rocky Boy School in Montana, articulates what has educators of children of all cultures concerned, and which she, with good reason, connects with Native children: “The law emphasizes the opposite of what is known about Native learning styles — that is, it rewards part-to-whole instead of whole-to-part learning, abstract thought instead of hands-on experience, and linguistic instead of visual teaching strategies” (Starns, 2006; see also Cajete, 1994, p. 31).

The research reported here raises a further concern with the sole use of “experimental research” (rightly or wrongly summarized) and its implicit curriculum. The resultant legislation does not consider motivation for English literacy or the power of identity in that motivation. In listening to the voices of Native students, this article seeks to illuminate their understandings of literacy and how motivation factors into their academic success or failure.

Few studies have sought the perceptions of students themselves with regard to their school experiences. Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999) urge researchers to concentrate on understanding the teaching-learning relationship between American Indian/Alaska Native students and their teachers; students’ perceptions are central to understanding this relationship. The study of Native students’ perceptions of their educational experience reported in *The Seventh Generation* (Bergstrom et al., 2003) and the impacts on literacy reported in this article are important because, instead of focusing on test results as primary indicators of “success” or “failure,” this research focuses on the meanings that students make of their school experiences. This meaning informs their

motivation for literacy learning, which in turn affects their academic success. Here, we pause to listen to students' views of what does and does not motivate their literacy learning.

Without heeding these student voices, it is difficult to sort through the various approaches to literacy advocated in the late 20th century. For years a part-to-whole approach emphasizing sight-word recognition, phonics, and correctness was advocated. With Dewey's child-centered approach reborn in the 1960s and 1970s, meaning-making became more central and contextualized instruction tempered a past emphasis on skill and drill (Fox, 1988). Throughout this debate, educators of color (e.g., Delpit, 1988, 1995) argued for explicit instruction of Western writing structures and Standard English correctness as a vehicle to power for those whose communities had long been denied entrée into higher education and professional positions. Many educators value the honesty of explicit instruction (e.g., explaining how a student's dialect differs from "school English"), but as Delpit states, "I do not advocate a simplistic 'basic skills' approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher-order thinking and reasoning" (1995, p. 30). Now, as the pendulum swings again, with state and federal governments advocating a part-to-whole approach deemed important in raising scores on high-stakes tests, it is important to heed Delpit's warning: Attention only to "basic skills" and "teaching to the test" is precisely the kind of curriculum that will leave Native students behind. This can come from the low expectations Delpit notes, and from students' own lack of motivation resulting from meaningless literacy practice.

How student motivation factors into literacy acquisition is especially important for communities whose past experience with Western education has been largely negative, as is the case for Native communities. It is also important to remind ourselves that most researchers see literacy as more than mere decoding, encoding, or re-encoding text. More complex literacy learning opportunities motivated the Native students in this study. And literacy acts cannot develop well without the energies of students behind them.

This article reports what Native students deemed motivational in their literacy acquisition, discussing the practices that Native students advocate to ease those teachers' concerns. Finally, I discuss the constraints on what Native students believe to be a motivating curriculum — constraints that ironically have been heightened by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Method

This qualitative study was conducted by Amy Bergstrom (Anishinaabeg-Red Lake Nation), Linda Miller Cleary (non-Native), and Thomas Peacock (Ojibwe-Fond du Lac). We began with questions left unanswered in our earlier research with teachers of Native students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998): How do Native students in the U.S. and Canada (as opposed to their teachers) understand their schooling experiences? How can students benefit from listening to each other,

and how might educators change their practice to accommodate students' understandings of their schooling and to counter the consistent gap in school success between mainstream and Indigenous students? Further analysis of the literacy research results reported in *The Seventh Generation* (Bergstrom et al., 2003) provides the basis of this report.

Participants

The research team conducted open-ended interviews with 120 American Indian, First Nations, and Alaska Native high school students from reserve, reservation, village, and urban communities who attended private, tribal and public schools. We identified schools in the northeast, southeast, midwest, southwest, and northwest parts of the United States and in western, mid-western, and eastern Canada. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (gender, type of community, type of school, and level of success in school).

After seeking permission from those monitoring research in the community or school, we asked the designated contact person (administrator or guidance counselor) to select an equal number of students who were doing very well, doing average work, and struggling in school. Given their desire to cast a positive light on their schools, we believe that several designated contacts selected participants who were more culturally aware and involved in their schools than others. It is therefore likely that the population over-represents students with stronger cultural identities and does not acknowledge the full diversity of Native students in these settings. Students participated voluntarily and after their parents signed a written consent form. Students knew that their words would be used to help teachers better understand how to teach Native students and almost all who were asked to participate wanted their voices heard. Students were of Abenaki, Aleut, Choctaw, Cree, Dakota, Hoopa, Innu, Karuk, Lakota, Mohawk, Navajo, Oneida, Penobscot, Seneca, Ute, Wampanoag, and Yurok heritage.

Interview Model

The data generated for this study came from in-depth phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2006). The theoretical underpinnings of this method stem from the research of phenomenologists in general and Alfred Schütz (1967) in particular. The interviews explored the students' experiences in relation to literacy learning. In this method, the focus is on the students' rendering of these experiences. We attempted to conduct three interviews with each student, providing enough time and privacy so that the participant built enough trust with the interviewer to reflect on and make sense of his/her experience. Because of attendance and time constraints, some interviews were collapsed into a single longer interview. The first interview explored students' past experiences in education. The second interview focused on present instructional and non-instructional issues that students perceived as helping or hindering their education. The final interview explored the meanings students made of their experiences and their suggestions for improving classroom practice for themselves, their children,

and their grandchildren. Follow-up questions gave students the opportunity to further explore their experiences. (Exact questions and follow-up questions are available in Bergstrom et al., 2003, pp. 188-189). The three open-ended, tape-recorded interviews were approximately one hour or one class period in length. Due to student absences, quite a few students did not participate in three interviews. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed as interviews were completed. Although the researchers conducted most of the interviewing, some trained assistants were used as well.

Data Analysis

We used grounded theory to examine the circumstances that helped and hindered Native students in school. Grounded theory relies on the constant comparative method, the joint coding and analysis of data using analytic induction, and the premise that theory both evolves from the body of data and is illustrated by examples from it (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Wiersma, 1995). While analysis was in progress, openness to alternative explanations for events was important. Because theory evolved from emerging data, there was no hypothesis at the inception of the research. After reading a number of interviews, we generated a list of tentative codes and expanded on that list as we went along. Each interview series was read by two of the three researchers and coded; interviews were discussed and recoded if there were differences of opinion. This process generated 260 codes and subcodes. These were sorted with the assistance of Ethnograph, a qualitative research software program. In July 2004, I added 80 new subcodes to the initial codes regarding literacy — for instance, reading/literacy, acquisition of literacy, interpretation of literature, writing, collaborative writing, creative writing, essay writing, family support in literacy, literacy motivation, and poetry. Although I did this additional analysis of students' statements about literacy, Bergstrom also responded to the analysis.

Findings: Listening to Students

Students' Experiences of Excitement in Acts of Literacy: An Overview

Not surprisingly, and congruent with other motivation literature and with interviews reported in *Collected Wisdom* (Cleary & Peacock, 1998), the Native students interviewed were motivated when there were representations of themselves in literature, when they had choice in what they wrote and read (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Morrow, 1996), when they were allowed to follow their own curiosity in research and writing, and when they undertook projects incorporating literacy with a real audience and purpose (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) benefiting their families or communities. They were motivated when they could see real results that were indicators of their growing competence and when they had teachers who trusted that they could accomplish reasonable tasks (Cambourne, 1988; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). As researchers, we paid attention when there was an edge of excitement in the voices of the students, when we sensed they had real motivation for learning. This section will report what

students said about literacy and what engaged them in literacy. The quotes used are representative of what many students said about a certain topic in the interviews unless it was indicated that only one or several students expressed something. In the process of writing, I searched for quotes that were both representative and compelling. Although some quotes were shortened, the quotes are in the students' words, keeping meaning intact.

Curiosity Feeding Literacy

We asked the 120 Native students, "What advice would you give reading and writing teachers?" "What do you find good or bad about the reading and the writing that you do in school?" To those questions, we most often heard variations on the same theme. Seventy percent of the students said things like: "Help us get into it." "I need something to pull me into it." "Help me see how what we do relates to my own life." Some of those 70 percent gave more negative versions of this theme: "Tell them not to give us boring books." "Tell them *Tale of Two Cities* has nothing to do with me." Proceeding from students' interests and perceived needs is not a new notion. As Gilliland (1988) writes, needs and interests are paramount in student learning. When students from the *Seventh Generation* study had choice or could see the connections between what they read and wrote and their own lives, they were more motivated to engage in the literacy learning process.

Choice. Students were more motivated when they had choice in what they read. Having choice not only tapped what motivation researchers call curiosity, it also gave them some feelings of control in their education.

I don't like to be made to read books that I don't want to read. I would want to read something that's going to help me with my future. I don't want to be sat down and read something, all right you go read for a half an hour, and you read this. I'd rather read something that I want to read for a whole hour.
— Casey (Ojibwe)

Students reported a remarkably wide variety of interests, from non-fiction and historical fiction to science fiction; classics to romances; Shakespeare and Poe to Stephen King; biographies of dead rock stars to those of country music stars and rappers. Some students had very real purposes for the reading that they enjoyed doing. For instance, Sonny (Hoopa), was convinced that the way his tribe might become self-sufficient would be to sell organic produce and bottled water from his valley in the mountains of California; he was keen to read about these possibilities for his community.

I read a lot of garden books, and I read a lot of cookbooks now, every day. If you're interested in a book, you're not gonna put the book down. You'll be into it and you'll read it, but if you're not, it's just you'll [be] forgetting what you read in the last page.

Many students liked reading about Native people, especially but not exclusively about their own tribes and communities. "Reading is a complex and

purposeful sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning with text” (NCTE, 2004). These texts help them see themselves reflected in the curriculum, diminishing the distance that some feel from their culture in mainstream schools. Choice allows this for all students.

The book was about this ranch way out somewhere, and how these people worked their ranch. And it was based on two families, one family who had cows and a ranch and an Indian ranch, which is part of my family. And it showed how much different that ranch was. That was me. That’s when I like reading a little bit, stuff about my culture, and what they did back then, learning names or who was who. — Gerard (Ute Mountain)

I love reading. Reading a script is my number-one joy. [My goal] is to be an actor. The other thing would be to read about history and Choctaw history.... I like reading about things that happened before my time, or like a few years before I was born. That would be my good reading. — Fred (Choctaw)

Similarly, the value of students’ natural curiosity in fostering writing development was also very evident in the interviews. If they had interest in or curiosity about what they wrote — hence motivation for the topic — or if they had knowledge about what they wrote, it made the act of writing less complex. This was especially true for those having trouble with writing. They were able to start with something that was already anchored in their long-term memories, something about which they already had a felt sense. Having felt sense and knowledge of a topic mutes the sometimes daunting complexity of writing. North Star (Abenaki) spoke about the necessity for flexibility with writing assignments:

What’s easy about writing is when you’re able to write your own stories, use your own mind. So I really don’t like it unless my topic is interesting. Let’s say they would give you a couple topics, but you’re the one who decides what you want to write about. Let’s say that — my brother’s a mechanic — well, he’ll write about mechanic things. The more you pressure somebody, the kid’s gonna go down [into drugs]. Choices. At school now you only have one choice; you got to go with the program, do what you have to do, and you gotta live with it. It’s not like I could go up to a teacher and say, “Hey, could you change this composition, but it will be the same [skills].” That’s what I’m trying to say.

Connections to Life: The Case of Romeo and Juliet. If students have choice in their reading and writing topics, they are probably choosing according to curiosity and connections to the topics. This is essential for students who are struggling readers and writers, but adept students still note the importance of finding connections with their writing and reading assignments. Melanie (Abenaki) gave advice to teachers about the power of story in students’ lives and in reading and writing. She found that the teacher’s ability to make reading relevant affected their success in engaging students in literacy learning:

Keep me interested. If it's a topic I know nothing about and I don't care about and that has no influence over me, I won't write a good paper on it. I won't read. I think a teacher should find ways to get kids interested in what they're trying to say or read. Make the person or [character] seem cool. I think that would work. You want the student to be involved with that story. You want it where it'll stick in their head. Or it'll help them out in the future, where they'll remember the story and they'll remember the lesson that the story told them. They'll find the hidden meaning behind the story, and they'll know how in life, how to be. Stick with what works. You want the student to be involved with that story. You don't want them to be bored.

When students were able to see the connections between their worlds and those of the characters in the stories, their natural curiosity was piqued. Remembering the power of oral tradition and narrative in making meaning of the world helps us understand Melanie's advice to teachers.

Because it is such a mainstay of school curriculum, the reading of *Romeo and Juliet* came up over and over again in students' interviews. One student told me that she wanted to read the play because other students in her school were reading it, and she feared that her class wasn't being allowed to read it because they weren't the "good" readers. Fear of a "dumbed down" curriculum was on these students' minds. Other contrasting reactions to this text were compelling. Tarilee (Ojibwe) had difficulty connecting to the text:

Like *Romeo and Juliet* — maybe everybody should be reading that, but I didn't like that at all. It had nothing to do with anything in your life right now. Books mean different things to different people because everybody thinks, and they don't think the same. So when you read something, it's real easy to think different things because we are not the same person. But the teacher didn't teach it like that. She teaches like it can only mean this one thing. We had questions and ideas that were different. I just don't say anything. She should ask what we thought about something. She's not even getting our ideas, doesn't let us explain it for ourselves, and that's the way it goes.

Tarilee's experience highlights the importance of soliciting the diverse interpretations of text based on differing student backgrounds. Native author and literacy scholar Greg Sarris (1993) states it this way:

By establishing a chasm between the readers' personal experience and classroom norms, the approach to, or practice of, reading as such robs students of the means to interact with the text in a way the text can be contextualized and, hence, the means to criticize or remake the text as they see fit. The teaching of reading, then, can be an effective colonizing device. (p. 257)

On the other hand, Desirae (Aleut), an eleventh grader, described a teacher who helped her connect to the text.

I don't like a lot of books assigned in class, can't get into them, but I did like *Romeo and Juliet*. We could see how it fit in with today, with kids today. The teacher helped us find that. People tell me Shakespeare's like hard to read, hard to understand. You just have to look at the words and think of

what they mean. And you know, find the meaning hidden in there. You just got to do that. Do it more, and they'll get better.

Judith Langer has conducted research on the value of teachers encouraging connections with past curriculum and life outside of school. The making of connections was found to help "at risk" students beat the odds, even in test taking (Langer, 2002). This research also shows the value of encouraging connections and conversations in literacy development, especially when test results are important.

Literacy to Understand and to Cope with Their Worlds. Several students had experiences in which whole texts were juxtaposed around a theme to lead the students to their own understandings of their lives. Carol (Navajo) said:

My whole class is about learning who you are. We read stories about like Native Americans and Hispanics and different minority groups and how they are affected, like how slavery impacted how African Americans act today and how Europeans when they came to this country started affecting Native American's lives, and like the whole boarding school experience. Different Native nations were affected in the same way: boarding schools, assimilated into culture, similar experiences. I didn't really think about those things before I moved here and took this class. [And] I really like my Adolescents in Literature course. Why a lot of teenagers get into trouble. It's really great to be able to know why I'm feeling the way I do, and I can understand my mother, how different things happened to her and how she reacted to it. The whole class is learning about different issues that teenage [characters] are faced with.

As we can see from Carol's words, motivation can evolve from the connections a teacher forges for students with the written word. Reading and writing can provide a way to make sense of the world. Native students' lives are not simple, especially those whose families suffer from the internalized oppression resulting in alcohol and drug abuse and other social ills. More than half of these students told us how writing helped them to heal when times were tough, allowing them to find footholds in sorting out their own problems.

Dawn (Mohawk):

I write a lot. I fill a lot of little journals; people get me them for Christmas. I cry a lot too. Me and my mom fight, probably more than we should. I usually run to my grandmother and talk to her. My mom gets mad, like "Don't you come between me and my mother." I write a lot of little poems and songs and stories about what's going on. And sometimes I write about how I want the situation to be.

Gina (Navajo):

One time we had to write a story about something we did, that we felt remorse after. And I wrote about this one time I stole a pack of cigarettes from Handi Mart, and the more I got into it, the more I realized how stupid it was. Writing just organizes your thoughts. So I went back, and I paid for them. I didn't tell them what I was paying for, but they were just kind of confused that I was giving them money for nothing. It was just kind of a nice

thing from [writing.] It's a big way of expressing, just to keep everything organized. It helps put stuff behind you, like a stress reliever. It can make you happy. It can make you sad.

Jazzy (Ojibwe):

I liked school until last year; I didn't do very good towards the end of last year. I was gone for four days in a row, and I just went down hill totally. I mean, like the bottom. I mean, I didn't care. I was really like stressed out; everything was just too much to handle all at once. I slept and slept and wrote a lot in my journal. Sleeping is a way of checking out of the world; writing is hanging in there with it.

When Jazzy was in high school, a non-Native friend of hers was killed by a group of inebriated members of a nearby tribe. The whole region was beset with racial tension. She was caught amongst caring for her murdered friend, her own confusion about and loyalty to her people, and the physical fear of going to school. Dawn, Gina, and Jazzy tell three important stories about literacy events that were connected with their lives, helping them cope with the complexities and grow in their command of writing.

"You Can Only Polish Diamonds with Their Own Dust": Imitation of Respected Role Models

When in Missoula, Montana giving a presentation to teachers about literacy, I talked about the inclination that humans have to imitate those they love and respect. One of the elders, Cecil Crawford (Blackfoot), who was helping in the presentation, sagely interjected, "You can only polish diamonds with their own dust." He then told some poignant stories about the effectiveness of community role models in learning. Several of the most successful students in our study also mentioned role models in their learning. A few even found role models in their reading. Carol (Navajo) found the inspiration to imitate in her favorite author. She was in a school situation that allowed her some control in her reading choices:

That author. I wish I could write as good as she does. I'm trying. Her words are so beautiful, and the poetry. There's this one sentence in there about this man and his personality, and it said that his personality was like an arabesque, kind of balanced and real pretty. The words just flow together, paint pictures in my mind.

I asked Quetone (Ojibwe), another successful (though somewhat rebellious) student, why he was so good at reading:

Mom teaching me. Not so much teaching me but expanding my horizons in reading and things like that. I do a lot of reading at home. That helped me educate myself. My mom used to read to me all the time. My grandma, my grandpa used to tell me stories all the time about great-grandfather who knows the order of the plants, and about the trickster of the tribe. And my mom used to read Winnie the Pooh. And she had some books made about Wenabosho. I'm a serial reader, and now my bookshelf at home is filled with series of books, from by brother. I read a series that the chairman up on Fond

du Lac reads. I have a god-daughter; I already read to her, and she's only seven months old.

Literacy comes more easily to students who have easy access to models who read to them, but students often lack role models for literacy. Yet according to motivation theorists (and Cecil Crawford, the Blackfoot elder quoted above), this is powerful. The fact that students in this study rarely talked about imitation as a motivator for literacy gives teachers an even greater challenge to tap this motivation for literacy. Teachers who read with students, read books that students suggest, and are excited about reading can become such a role model for students.

When I saw what appeared to be a hole in the data, I often asked students why it existed. I asked Quetone about other Native students' role models for reading after the tape recorder was turned off. I don't have his exact words, but he said something like: "You don't see a lot of people up there on the reservation with their heads in books, but look at the kids' t-shirts, they cover themselves with their witty inspirations in words and pictures."

Motivation from Feelings of Competence

Notice the difference in messages that two teachers working near the same reservation gave to Maria and Kristin:

This one teacher said, "I'm going to tell you something." He didn't make it like a challenge or anything; he just told us flat out, "Half of you kids aren't gong to graduate from high school, about half of you girls are going to get pregnant. The boys, you'll be fathers." And he was saying this stuff, and I was like, "No way, man. I'm going to graduate." I love challenges, but he was not optimistic at all. If you hear something so many times, you are going to start to believe it and give up. I feel kind of down, but I try to ignore it. I try to calm myself down, but if I really, really get mad at something [like that], it just like upsets me for the rest of the day. — Maria (Ojibwe)

Ms. C. really likes the writing I do. I like working on things [for her], where you have to get a lot of research, and you have to do it in order to have this [writing] happen, like a cause and effect thing. — Kristin (Ojibwe)

When students felt competent in their approaches to learning, they were more motivated to participate in literacy acts. Radda, Iwamoto, and Patrick (1998) also observed that their research participants found indicators of competence to be important to them. Evidence of improvement or accomplishment feeds motivation. Being pretty sure that one can accomplish something encourages deeper endeavors. Humans of all cultures find feelings of competence to be motivating. It stands to reason that students wouldn't want to do things in the public venue of school that they thought they might not be able to do well.

Accomplishable Tasks and the Scourge of Reading Aloud. Many students reported feeling positive about writing they deemed to be accomplishable. A student from a southeastern tribe who wished to remain anonymous said: "Right

now we are writing a creative paper, and all these ideas are coming into my head. We did an I-Search paper, and I found all this information, and I could do it. I like that, and there are certain papers that I like.” Several students talked about I-Search papers that reported research by telling the story of the research. They found the narrative reporting of information to be comfortable, something they could do easily.

The number of students who had no feelings of competence in reading was astounding. Forty students told stories about feeling humiliated in having to read aloud. Zel (Ute Mountain) had gotten to the point of refusal:

I like to read, but when the teacher asks me, “You wanna read out loud?” I won’t do it. I will not do that again! I will not read in front of anybody out loud [ever again]. But I love to talk because that is not reading. I don’t want to read a word and misread it, just do not like that feeling, so I won’t read anything to class, but I will read a book to myself.

The feelings Native students expressed went beyond dislike of reading to shame in demonstrating a non-perfected task in public. Forced reading was clearly counter-productive in developing literacy.

Although the National Reading Panel ignored the research showing that in-school free reading is good for readers (Krashen, 2005), it is well documented that one learns to read by reading, and that fluency is established by independent silent reading of non-frustrating texts. Gina (Navajo) noted that voluntary literacy can have its purposes.

Some students like a book that’s way below their level, just so they can get away with something. But I think the teachers should let them just read it. And they’ll be done with it before they even know it. So then they’d have to move on anyways. As long as they read, then that’s good. They’ll just start getting deeper and deeper into it until eventually they’ll find that they like to read. Anything they read will kind of bring a broader comprehension of things. In my English class at the high school, we would all have to read a book and report, and they would like put restrictions on it. Like no Stephen King or Sammauri Sword books, but King and Barker have some pretty good story lines.

Bigg Dog (Ojibwe) talked about a similar fluency in writing:

I think writing is easy for me because of the teachers that I had [in] fifth or sixth grade. We did a lot of writing that I enjoyed. I guess just more practice, the more you do it, the better you get at it. If you write more, I think you are going to keep writing and then you are going to want to look up a word to put in your writing and go on from there.

Over and over again, students talked about teachers who were encouraging and those who introduced interesting, challenging, but still manageable tasks. Carol (Navajo) noted that Native students have more need for encouragement than many mainstream students because the things that students are asked to do are often unfamiliar to them in their own culture:

At times, it's difficult to be a Native American in school because you're learning a lot of new ideas and new ways of doing things, and I think that it's difficult to try to keep like culture with some of those new ideas. I wish we could learn things about our people. I don't think [people] set very high standards for you, don't expect much. And I think a lot of times, Native students kinda get pushed to the back of the classroom, kinda put on the back burner.

Nobody likes to do the things they perceive they are not good at, but many students from mainstream backgrounds are willing to fail and try again rather than wait until they feel they are competent enough to do things publicly. Some Native students are less willing to fail publicly.

Accomplishments for Real Audiences and Purposes. The students we interviewed were most excited about literacy when their literacy had real outcomes, real audiences and purposes. Dee (Ojibwe) said:

I wrote a poem a year ago that's pretty good; they put it in the paper, [and] I read it on national TV. We did our whole drum and dance performance for them, and I read my poem. They had a camera right in my face, and I got it on tape too. The name of it, "Two Worlds: Living in Suburban Life." I probably memorized it. It starts off, "Where am I from? I'm from the middle of two worlds. I have White on one side. So does that make me White? I have Native American on the other, so does that make me Native American? I'm both, stuck between suburban life and a life of poverty. Where am I from, you say? I say that ain't the question, the question is who am I? I have to try harder than everybody else because I am both White and Native American. I make it in two worlds. But is that all that counts?"

Dee achieved feelings of competence from this media event and was not shamed by her performance because she did it for her community, not for herself. Her feelings of accomplishment through literacy overlap with the last and most powerful motivator students described — working for their community — to be addressed in a subsequent section. Feelings of competence generate self-esteem, and self-esteem has been a significant predictor of academic achievement for students in many research studies (Cleary and Peacock, 1998; Nel, 1994; Radda et al., 1998; Wlodkowski, 1999).

Inclination toward Self-Expression

Motivation theorists tell us that the inclination toward self-expression is an intrinsic motivator for learning, yet we know that self-expression through the written word is not all students' strength. We also know that academia expects writing competence if a student is to go on in school, to find power in the mainstream world for themselves and their tribes. Fair or unfair, students still must submit essays for college admissions and write throughout their academic careers. Written expression was a topic about which students had many thoughts.

Quetone (Ojibwe), among the most academically able students interviewed, reminds us, as teachers, to be flexible in the way we use students' self-expression toward academic ends:

Not everyone is gonna be able to write perfect English, not read 100 words a minute, but they can write and they can read, they can express themselves on paper and incorporate knowledge by understanding books. Help broaden people's perspectives by building the knowledge from reading and [allow drawing or drumming or dancing]. A lot of people don't know how to express; they know inside themselves what they want to say, but they need help until they have the capability to unleash it. They should get to do it in more than writing.

Teachers have found good success in allowing students to begin written responses to reading by drawing or other forms of expression. When other forms of self-expression are options, motivation for academic study may increase.

Felt Sense. By saying, "They know inside themselves what they want to say," Quetone described what Perl (1986) called "felt sense," that thing within you that tells you what you want to say. Over and over students talked about their interest in writing about things that they knew about or wanted to know about. When topics were interesting to them, they had things to say — a felt sense of a topic that aided their written expression. This was especially important for students who were struggling writers. Rob (Wampanoag) said:

Writing about my family's history [on the island] was pretty fun, going back to like my great-great-grandfather, what my family name means and how it's changed over the years. That was for social studies because I finally got to do something about the family. But writing about the Renaissance was difficult. The fact that I didn't read everything that we were supposed to read didn't help much either. On that, I wait 'til the last minute, or finish it the day it's due in class. But that's a passing grade so I'm happy.

The family research that Rob was asked to do was archival and interview research, taking skills beyond the reading of secondary sources for his Renaissance research, but they were motivated by both interest and felt sense. It began in something that was important to him, about which he had some initial knowledge and ended up in a form of self-expression. Jana (Hoopa) talked about a teacher who allowed a potentially recalcitrant student to use oral self-expression to help him generate ideas for later writing: "There's a boy in our class that really likes to tell stories, he talks his journal [stories], and Mr. G. lets him tell a story, as opposed to giving him detention for talking too much." Jana also talked about the value about gaining confidence in writing by writing about topics that she knew about from life experience: "I don't mind at all writing about things that I know. [Right now I'm writing about] childhood poverty, and I know a lot already."

Until some fluency is established, cognitive overload can occur if other complex demands are made on the writer's mind (Cleary, 1991). Motivation has an important impact on cognitive processing (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), and students' willingness to participate in literacy acts can be dependent on clarity of purpose from a felt sense of the topic and its connection to the world. More fluent writers and readers can work beyond their own felt sense to the more complex aspects of secondary-source research and its synthesis that research on the Renaissance might demand.

Expression as Identity Formation. Tapping “felt sense” for writing is important, but using the motivation of self-expression as a means to identity formation seemed to be a powerful motivation for many students interviewed. The complexity of traditional and contemporary Native identities is reflected to students in literature. In writing, students can sort this out to a certain extent. Our research sub-category code under self-expression, identity formation, contained many enthusiastic quotes that related family and community to literacy events. This excitement supports Bergstrom’s analysis of relational identity formation in Native students (Bergstrom et al., 2003, p. 27) as opposed to mainstream students’ quest for individuation by separating from family. Native students became excited about literacy learning when they were encouraged to write about family, their culture and identity, answering the question of “Who am I?” Many who were cut off from Native life, although knowing themselves to have Native heritage, were hesitant but then fully engaged in learning more. Will (Lakota), living in an inner city, said:

They had me write about our culture, you know; other people, they had them write an essay about their own culture. I had a lot of fun writing about it ‘cause I like to learn about my culture too, a lot more. ‘Cause I’m Dakota, and I like to learn about Dakota ways. She asked me about Indian tribes, all Indians, but I just learned about my tribe and told her about it.

Over and over again students talked about how delighted they were at having the chance to write about their family. Jana (Hoopa) said, “I write about my family and me. I really try [at] that. I’m Indian and that I’m proud of it. I like to write that in there.” Thunder (Mohawk) said, “[When my grandfather died, I] just wrote a story about crying and how my tear when it lands in the water or in the sand, kind of digs a little dip, and how it called out the spirits when the tear hit the sand like that.”

Daisy (Yurok) was the only student who talked about the connection between developing style as it related to identity formation and motivation. She saw the wisdom in her literacy teacher’s approach.¹

What was my best time with writing? [I had] the teacher who did the Indian Club, so I knew her very well. We all knew each other; it was almost like we were family, and when we all read our poems, it sounded like us. And she said that as you grow as a writer, you can start writing in the way that you are; you start to develop a certain way of writing, developing a self. You’re starting to be your own person, and that was my favorite time.

Preference for Narrative or Poetic Self-expression

Almost every student said they preferred to write stories or poetry. Some felt they wrote well in an expository manner, but many admitted difficulty with such writing. Beyond the hue and cry of “I hate essays,” some students were more articulate about coping with different writing genres. Quetone (Ojibwe) said:

I like writing stories better than writing anything else. I can write really good research papers, but parts of it have to be [narrative]. I have to put my mental part into: “Okay, I’m telling a story, so how am I going to write it and

explain all the facts while I'm doing it?" I think I'm telling a story, giving a lecture. That's how I write it down, and I just got finished writing the history of the Ojibwe like that. It's just more comfortable for me.

Ellen (Karuk) said:

I always thought of that as an essay because it gave information about a certain place. But I don't think it's really an essay that she's having us do. I just think of it more as a story because it's like what's happened. I always think of an essay is like teaching you information. Like when we went to Scotland a couple of years ago, I wrote an essay about a village over there. Usually when people hear "a short essay," it's like, "Oh, God!" Or if there are essay questions on our test, "Oh!" I guess if I think of an essay like a story, it would be a lot easier for me.

Perhaps because of Native students' oral orientation to imparting information, there was a "genre blur" in students' comments about writing, a general confusion about what constituted different genres. More explicit instruction may be needed in teaching different genres and how to take ideas from one genre to another for different audiences and purposes. There is no reason why students couldn't tap "felt sense" about a topic in any genre as a means of idea generation and then take the ideas into another format. Helping students see clear distinctions between narrative and expository writing is essential for those who wish to go on to college, and helping students see how to move into exposition through narrative.² However, it is essential to feed motivation for writing by giving these students continued opportunities to write creatively in addition to the other types of writing expected of them.

Need for Audience Sense. Another notable hole in what students discussed was the potential motivation from writing for real audiences beyond the teacher. Carol (Navajo) talked about her desire to do this sort of writing in the future:

We're learning about different adolescents [in literature] who are confused with their identity, as well as emotional changes. You're trying to figure out who you are and how you fit into this great circle, pattern, seeing where you fit into the picture. Being able to write about it in a class really helps you sort through your ideas. [Before] I almost felt embarrassed to be Native American. I'd never really denied it, but I wouldn't always put it forth, maybe because students of other ethnicities, they'd tease Native Americans: "You're just like little Johns," or "You're rez'd out." I always felt embarrassed. I've noticed that Native children sit in the back of classrooms; they won't speak up in class and defend themselves. So now I think that when I get back home [to my rez], because of this language arts course, I'm going to really try to speak up about Native American rights, to explain them to others.

That few students discussed opportunities to gain motivation and writing skill from writing for audiences beyond themselves and their teachers suggests a potential that might be tapped.

Feelings of Self-Determination

In motivation theory, “feelings of self-determination” are considered strong intrinsic motivation for learning. For instance, when a child is first able to say “cracker” and that word gives the child a sought-after result, the word becomes power, furthering the child’s motivation to use language for the things the child wants or needs. Having choice in one’s world (in one’s reading) allows children to determine what happens. Although many groups in the world are silenced, feeling able to use language in a way to act on the world engenders feelings of self-determination that motivate further use of language for real audiences and real purposes that serve the individual and the individual’s community.

Power from Reading and Writing. What Carol (Navajo) talked about doing in the quote above was not for herself. She wanted to speak up about Native issues and rights to a larger audience, for the sake of her people. And what Dee experienced when she read her poem aloud in a national television documentary was about pride, not for herself, but for her people — for national understanding of her people. In both events, the students had feelings of power, and actual or potential accomplishment for their communities. This is how Carol began to understand a purpose she could get behind:

I had to write this paper in my U.S. history class, about the communities that I have like deep ties to, and that I would defend, and what makes me a part of them. And I thought about it, and I had to write this paper about what interests do those communities have and like what do they want to uphold and protect. When I go back, I’m going to do something.

Ellen (Karuk) and Diddems (Hoopa) both had requirements at their school to do cultural research projects. In these projects both a literacy and an action component built motivational feelings of self-determination. Ellen said:

It’s a cultural project that she gives us like three or four months to do. It’s a big thing, and it’s a lot of our grade. You have to write a paper on it, too, about action, connection, reflection, but the biggest part is your project. And you can choose different things you want to do, like you pick, and you just have to pass it by her, whatever you choose. There’s like a list of standards [to meet], but we do them [in the projects].

Diddems said:

For my cultural participation research project, I did a poem translation. I wrote a poem, and I translated it into Hoopa, and then I read it out loud to the class, and I did a lot of work on that. And then put it in a contest for Indian something and then won first place in my division. I was supposed to get a certificate, but I never got it yet.

In the literacy field, we often call the results of such projects, the last stage of the writing process, publication. What this high school has done effectively is help students find real purposes and real audiences for literacy while accomplishing learning and recording of cultural information. When the students feel results, they gain new motivation for literacy-related activity; actions that give results far outweigh the impetus of grades.

The Power in Media Technology and Multi-Modal Literacies. There are new opportunities for students to bring the intrinsic motivation of real audience and purpose behind a broader mode of expression that can include the visual and oral/aural. Art, music, design, and language combinations have (1) opened up space for these young Native students in ways that may be more congruent with their own ways of being, (2) provided real audiences and purposes for them to express those ways of being, and (3) provided two-way bridges to the mainstream world. Sipsis (Abenaki) spoke of her use of the World Wide Web to help with identity formation:

I have a Website, and I speak of who I am on it. I write about dancing group, trips, about what I feel during my shows and everyday life. Most Innu people have their own Websites which speak about them. I like being with people like me, not different. At school, it is different. There I am reserved. I am a student, but I do not speak of my nation because they won't be interested.

Developing Powerful Literacy Events

Wendy Morgan (1997) urged teachers to “develop practice to engage the pleasure and desire of students and teachers, explore how they may be powerful, productive, legitimized” (p. 27). Teachers can carefully construct a pedagogy that allows such motivation for Native students, indeed, for all students. The teacher of Travis (Dakota) provided such a situation.

I had a history class, and the teacher never taught anything about Native Americans, except maybe one chapter that lasted one day, when you spend weeks on other chapters. So I was kind of upset, ‘cause kids really didn’t know what the real story was. And so we had to choose a topic in history, what we wanted to do. Anyway, we had to get up in front of the class and explain what happened. So everyone chose World War I and World War II, the Civil War. [When it came to] Wounded Knee, almost every kid in the class looks at me, and I was like, “All right.” So I [read everything I could find] and got in front of the class, and I had pictures of a Gatling gun, of what they used on the women and children after they were in the hills and they were in the valley. I turned all the lights off, and I told them to close their eyes, and I told everyone. I told the story about what happened, some of the detail: the soldiers walked up to a baby, put a gun to his head, point blank and shot it. And sometimes to save bullets, they’d beat the heads in with the butt of the gun. Everyone was in tears. I guess that made me feel better because now they knew.

Travis was able to help other students be skeptical by putting before them information that conflicted with the expurgated version of Wounded Knee in his history book. When his version was juxtaposed to their text and his story was told, the students learned to be skeptical of their printed text. In this example Travis felt intrinsic motivation for literacy that came from an overlapping of the intrinsic motivators outlined above. He had choice of a topic that held a purpose for him (the felt need to let others know of a terrible injustice, to set the record straight), that tapped his desire to express himself about something he felt needed to be said, satisfied a curiosity to know all there was to know about his topic, gave him a

real audience, and in the end, gave him feelings of competence, accomplishment, and self-determination. This was a powerful literacy event.

Conclusions: Beyond the National Reading Panel Report

The worst possible consequence of NCLB on American Indian/Alaska Native students would be the adoption of testing-centered, scripted curricula in schools serving Native children. Yet in their concern for students, many educators succumb to what they assume to be “safe,” scripted reading programs and a skill-and-drill approach to writing, hoping this will enable students to pass the high-stakes tests so central to NCLB. To nurture youth who actively seek self-determination for themselves and their communities, an entirely different sort of literacy is imperative.

Langer (2002) reports that schools with large numbers of “at risk” students who beat the odds, even in testing, are characterized by a focus on: (1) how skills and strategies work in a larger meaning-full, integrated activity; (2) the knowledge and practical skills necessary for school and life success; (3) connections made by students among ideas, knowledge, and skills and among lessons, classes, years in school, and life; (4) strategies for thinking and doing; (5) deeper understandings and ability to generate ideas and knowledge; and (6) content and skills developed in the context of peer settings and useful for understanding the conventions necessary to success after graduation. The Native students quoted here articulate many of the same concepts, contextualizing them in their everyday lives.

These students’ experiences provide insights to educators concerned about their Native students’ English literacy development. The students’ offerings give us keys to a Native literacy pedagogy that embraces intrinsic motivation, gives students ways to use their own voices toward personal fulfillment and communal well-being, and crosses the necessary two-way bridge between their own and the mainstream culture, always with their own purposes intact.

But the student interviews also indicate that approaches to literacy that have failed Native students for years are still being replicated in many schools. Native students’ school lives are often fraught with frustration and discouragement. They are required to learn rhetoric which is unnatural while not understanding why. They are asked to trust teachers’ imprecations that their work will “help them in the future” without seeing that as having been true for their parents and grandparents. As Morgan (1997) says, “Students may not agree that teachers’ beliefs of powerful discourses are indeed powerful” (p. 15). Teachers need to ask themselves: What discourses serve children in their home communities as well as the mainstream society? What discourses will bring self-determination for their Native communities? What discourses do they need to do political work?

Several years ago I went to New Zealand and interviewed a Māori researcher who had just finished an interview project of Māori students similar to that reported in *The Seventh Generation*. He said:

We are really doing research in a way that is so fundamentally Māori that it's in the language; everyday expressions are based upon the notion of self-determination. In a *powhiri* [formal greeting] you say, "I recognize you; I acknowledge your particular strengths and your particular power." So I finished that project, keeping true to the fundamental belief that people are able to talk for themselves and explain their own experiences. Never have I been more justified in an assumption that those young people were extremely articulate, clear about problems and solutions. They just told us volumes about what was going on. I'm not saying to empower; "empowering" is not an activity I am interested in. I am saying, "Recognize the power they have already." You don't have to give them power. You are just going to recognize and implement it.

Recognizing, acknowledging, and acting upon the good advice of the First Nations and American Indian/Alaska Native youth we interviewed are imperative in getting literacy instruction "right." NCLB advocates claim that skill-driven instruction has raised word recognition skills, but the price of a few points in that narrow aspect of literacy is too high. Given what Native students have said in these interviews, it is likely that motivation for literacy instruction will decrease under NCLB, increasing the gap between Native and mainstream children and leaving Native children further behind. The emphasis on discrete word skills valued by standardized tests leaves little instructional time for contextualized, meaning-driven and motivated learning; time devoted to fostering critical thinking is inevitably decreased. Children may well acquire the phonetic representation of more words, but meaning-driven and analytical processes that allow Native students to forge a place in their worlds will diminish in kind. It is unconscionable that Native students attend school without the pleasures attainable through feeling powerful and competent in their worlds, satisfying their curiosities, voicing concerns, and acting, through multiple literacies, to determine the course of their lives.

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Endnotes

¹There are resources for teachers who want to spark students' self-exploration, such as T. D. Allen's (1982) *Writing to Create Ourselves*, that can guide writers in researching topics for the real purposes of exploring identity in narrative and multiple-genre formats. See Macroire's *I-Search Paper* (1988) and Romano's *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multi-Genre Papers* (2002).

²Following James Moffett's (1968) lead, I have found it useful to have students start with narrative and pull out several themes in their own narrative, then write a letter to the editor or essay based on a theme or lesson in that story, using the story itself as one of several examples. It is important to help students to be conscious of what they are doing in these steps.

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