

Holistic Approaches to Educating Teachers: Sustaining a Culture of Indigenous Learning and Discovery

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Abstract

After receiving an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant, one institution provided distributed, community-based instruction to rural areas and fostered a community of practice to support pre-service school library students. This article presents approaches and assessments based on the program that incorporated a culturally responsive pedagogy in its specialized curriculum and created information literacy resources to improve student success in racially diverse and economically disadvantaged northeast Oklahoma schools and communities. The article further reviews factors that influenced learning and teaching in this program. This unique program also provided the profession with targeted K-12 curriculum, resources, and information literacy tools to sustain the efforts of all school librarians who serve in similar communities across the nation. The planning, design, development and distribution of digital format information literacy modules addresses three identified education-based needs -enhanced information literacy skills, the incorporating "faces of diversity" that help targeted viewers personally relate more positively to the learning experience, and current "standards based" training resources. Lesson plans and learning resources created during and after the program continue to provide opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous educators in shared study, mentoring, and faculty/teacher training.

1. Introduction

Northeastern State University's Project I'M READY was awarded a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services under the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, Category 5 to educate school librarians and develop specialized curriculum and information literacy resources to improve student success in racially diverse and economically disadvantaged schools and communities in northeast Oklahoma. The Northeastern State University (NSU) graduate program in Library Media and Information Technology, the NSU College of Education, and the NSU Libraries, in cooperation with the Cherokee Nation, the Oklahoma Department of Libraries, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and

select Oklahoma School Districts in northeast Oklahoma partnered to create an innovative program to educate and develop resources for school librarians who serve in rural communities with high percentages of Native American populations including rural areas with high poverty levels. Project I'M READY provided a comprehensive and holistic approach to educating school librarians to promote and perform positive educational change. This program educated new school librarians in critical competencies, and provided the profession with targeted K-12 curriculum, resources, and information literacy tools to sustain the efforts of all school librarians who serve in similar communities across the nation.

2. Objective and motivation

It was the intent of Project I'M READY to provide sufficient institutional capacity to cooperatively attain two primary goals by completing four critical outcomes. The first primary goal was to train 21st century school librarians to meet the unique needs of the targeted communities. The second primary goal was to develop and provide information literacy programming and digital learning resources to assist in improving and sustaining K-12 pedagogy that effectively increases targeted student success. These two goals were achieved by accomplishing four critical objectives expressed as Institutional Outcomes.

Under goal one, to train 21st century school librarians, two objectives were set. The first critical objective expressed as Outcome #1 was to develop a curriculum to address the unique needs of school librarians that provide kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) library services in rural communities with a high percentage of Native American citizens, including communities with high poverty levels (the targeted communities). The second critical objective expressed as Outcome #2 proposed to provide support (tuition, fees, books, etc.) to educate twenty school librarians in a tailored program to prepare them for service in the targeted communities.

Culturally relevant teaching was made popular by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the early 1990s, the term she created was defined as one "that empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically [1]. Cultural difference theorists concerned about the disparities in academic achievement between mainstream student and

students who are marginalized within the schools and the larger society include Kathryn H. Au, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Luis Moll, and Sonia Nieto who have constructed a theory of culturally responsive teaching also termed culturally sensitive pedagogy [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]. By applying these theories, educators may help to improve academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social-class groups. It is further postulated that academic achievement of these students will increase if schools and teachers reflect and draw on their cultural and language strengths. One key educational researcher who has contributed significantly to the progression of culturally relevant teaching is Geneva Gay. In her landmark book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, the author expanded the traditional view of culture beyond race and ethnicity. She wrote, "Even without being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave". The teacher who practices culturally relevant teaching recognizes that culture manifests in a range of adaptations that demonstrate how students prefer to learn. A culturally responsive teacher uses differentiated instruction to tailor learning for every aspect of a student's culture. Many of these researchers and educators support the constructivist theories of education because such perspectives recognize the value of multiple cultural viewpoints [8].

Despite the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in schools, not all teacher education programs readily embrace multicultural education or culturally responsive teacher education pedagogy. Some schools of education have acknowledged the need for developing culturally competent teachers, but others are not convinced of the academic merits of culturally responsive programming. A major part of the resistance comes from teacher educators' discomfort, if not fear of, addressing issues such as race and racism in their courses, or even on their campuses according to Cochran-Smith [9]. If this practice is allowed to continue, children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds will go unserved and there will be a paucity of culturally competent properly prepared teachers in the classroom and an administration that possess willingness to truly value and celebrate diversity in programming and practices. It is from this perspective that our institution created a distributed, community-based culturally responsive instruction that fostered a community of practice that supported the cohort of pre-service school library students in this program.

Gay defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make

learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students.

Gay also describes culturally responsive teaching as having these characteristics:

It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.

It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.

It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.

It teaches students to know and praise their own and each other's cultural heritages.

It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (p. 29).

3. Holistic approaches to teacher education

This article provides an introduction and overview of the Project I'M READY program that incorporates these characteristics in: develop a curriculum to address the unique needs of school librarians that provide kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) library services in rural communities with a high percentage of Native American citizens, including communities with high poverty levels; providing annual regional conferences and seminars that promote and disseminate research, best practices, resources, and pedagogy for educational improvement of the targeted populations; and researching, developing, creating, and disseminating online information literacy instruction modules that address information literacy standards for K-12 instruction and focus on the needs of racially diverse populations.

A specific challenge in areas of the United States exists in the students' ability to physically access institutions of higher education [10]. Most universities are located in urban and suburban regions, and students who live in rural communities often have difficulty driving long distances to attend classes in person on a university campus. Students who are able to attend evening courses often leave work early to drive several hours to campus, attend class, and then drive hours back to their home communities. Online education mitigates the challenge of traveling for students in rural areas of

the country. However, rural areas often lack dependable Internet service, few households are able to access high-speed services commonly available in urban and suburban areas. Students who may wish to participate in online learning experiences often must contend with unreliable Internet access. This scenario represents the experiences of many of our institutions' students. While there are students in the larger suburban and urban areas surrounding the main and branch campuses who have easy access to the university and its resources, students in rural communities often struggle to attend class or to participate in activities on campus.

3.1. Addressing student challenges

In order to address the needs of those students who wish to pursue an advanced degree, but who are place-bound (living in rural areas distant from the university community), our institution applied for a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). By providing an online education program, our institution would be better able to prepare these place bound students to serve as school librarians in their rural school communities. The grant provided local hub-site instructional locations, distance education equipment, and technology and curricular resources and materials for the graduate students in this specialized cohort. Students were provided with a laptop computer with an integrated webcam, specialized educational software, a video camera, and e-reader devices. All books, tuition, fees, professional development opportunities and workshops are paid by the IMLS grant.

A major obstacle to education in northeast Oklahoma is the distance graduate students currently are required to travel to attend class. Current teachers often cannot sacrifice the cost and time of driving long distances to physically attend classes. Graduate level school library media courses are synchronously and asynchronously delivered in a hybrid distance education format, utilizing state-of-the-art videoconferencing, group meetings, and individual work on Blackboard (Version 11). Knowledge transfer was fostered using Blackboard Collaborate to create cultural connections. With Blackboards learning platforms, we were able to create and deliver exciting, engaging online courses. The learning management system offered tools to create content, the ability to discover, author, and share open educational resources and seamless integration with high-quality, education content from a major e-learning digital content. "Digital native" learners bring a new set of expectations about where and how they can access and engage with course materials, instructors, and even each other. One of the key ways the power of technology is being harnessed in the classroom is through the integration of digital content via Blackboard. This model school library

program empowered learners to be critical thinkers, skillful researchers and ethical users of information by integrating culturally sensitive evidence-based learning projects to build more practical experience into classroom instruction. The use of Blackboard technology solved the challenges of off campus learning in Northeastern Oklahoma. Thus, this innovative program illustrates best practices of using Blackboard Collaborate to influence and enhance the teaching and learning process. Further, through implementation and adoption of Blackboard technology, enrollment increased, costs were reduced, learning outcomes were improved, and student engagement was enriched.

As candidates were identified for participation in the project, the selection of geographically convenient hubs became a necessary component of the overall plan. Additionally, areas with high percentages of Native K-12 student populations were selected. Because of the rural nature of the communities and the lack of widespread Internet access in some areas, public school sites served as remote instructional sites. District administrators and building principals were contacted to discuss the possibility of obtaining space in a remote classroom, utilizing the school space after-hours, and equipping the facility with the distance education equipment. Five hub sites were eventually selected and were strategically placed in these rural communities. Many of our candidates lived and taught in these areas, and had the opportunity to utilize the equipment at other times during their work day. Each of the remote sites were equipped with computers, Smart Boards, video cameras and microphones. At the end of the grant period, each of the schools were able retain the equipment and set up areas dedicated to distance education allowing schools to continue to provide education opportunities, higher educational courses and programs, and professional development programming to the five sites.

By creating local instructional sites, the schools benefited by receiving additional distance education equipment, and the candidates were able to meet together in small groups and develop supportive networks and communities of practice. Wenger defines a community of practice as a group of individuals who meet together for the purpose of learning from one another, to share experiences, solutions to common or shared problems, and to find areas for coordination and cooperation [11]. The small groups allowed students to have peer face-to-face communication and avoid prolonged isolation of the individual members. Students in the cohort were comprised of practicing, experienced classroom teachers, current librarians (working on provisional credential certificates), and some who were not currently employed within the education sector. This mixture of individuals gives each a valuable perspective on the readings, course work, field

experiences, and whole group discussions to contribute to a larger and more complete understanding of the issues that face the rural communities in which they live and work, as well as the larger field of school librarianship. Yukawa notes that within the context of a community of practice, “learning is not merely knowledge acquisition but more fundamentally a process of identity formation and empowerment through participation” [12]. Luna and Medina note that adult learners seek practical, pertinent learning experiences within a supportive environment. By sharing individual experiences, stories from classrooms, struggles in schools, understandings of best teaching practices, and knowledge of students each member was able to contribute their part to a larger whole of understanding and deepen the learning experience of the small group that met together. Small and Palling (cited in Dow) stress the evidence from their longitudinal research indicating students enrolled in distance education courses found greater satisfaction in the social learning aspect of their studies when there were opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships [13]. These opportunities are central to the delivery of courses and the rationale behind the establishment of these hub site locations.

This type of learning community that is built on shared experience and group knowledge development is a classic example of a constructivist learning community. Constructivist theory advances that students’ existing knowledge and life experiences are the components used to construct new knowledge structures as new information is provided. The students are active participants in the learning experience, and the teacher serves as a facilitator of the knowledge construction process [14]. Further, constructivist classrooms are beneficial to adult learners as they value the students’ lived experience. Their contribution of those experiences and knowledge are essential to the group and the classroom dynamic. Many researchers and educators who embrace culturally responsive teaching also support the constructivist theories of education because such perspectives recognize the value of multiple cultural viewpoints.

Because the learning sites were situated throughout the northeast and southeast regions of our state, learning opportunities and learning materials developed as a part of the courses were created to support the needs of the local schools and students. The program faculty members acknowledged constructing “area specific” projects, assignments, and new learning experiences that would be beneficial in positively affecting local schools in the candidates’ communities. Following Kazmer’s model of community embedded learning, the courses were designed to facilitate community-based instructional change, and students were encouraged to use local school curricula as a basis for inquiry

projects and bridge the cultures of home, school, and university. Most found that the majority of students in her study were able to make strong connections from the course content and learning objectives to their local workplace [15].

4. Culturally responsive curriculum development

Graduate level school library media courses in this unique program utilized a curriculum that was designed to provide supplemental material that addresses social, economic, and educational improvement issues in rural communities with high poverty rates and high percentages of Native American students. Existing courses in the Library Media and Information Technology program were revised to address these social, economic, and educational improvement issues through modified courses that allowed for the instructors to include specialized readings, texts, and activities while remaining consistent with the NCATE/ALA/AASL approved course sequence and major assessments and the guidelines of the institution. Gay’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd ed., was used as a supplemental text for candidates to become familiar with the practices of culturally responsive teaching and reflective self-assessment as they participate in the directed activities and experiences related to the IMLS grant. After reading this text, the candidates assessed their current teaching practices through reflective journaling and discussion board posts.

Courses were modified slightly to address the objectives of the grant. Students reflected on the grant objectives through the use of the ABC-CLIO database *The American Indian Experience* and multicultural videos available through NBC Learn via Blackboard. Selected collections of books by and about Native peoples were researched, vetted, and included for candidates to review and discuss; this allowed the candidates to immerse themselves in readings on the topic of multiculturalism. In the resource selection courses, candidates evaluated materials based upon issues of multicultural awareness. Students used evidence from articles, their own experiences, and professional thoughts to reinforce their responses by composing reflective journal entries throughout the program. In addition to these resources and curriculum provided to the cohort candidates, candidates were given assignments where they created a number of resources that could be used and enjoyed by K-12 students. One example included bibliographies of selected materials to be shared with tribal partners that might assist in the development of area tribal school libraries. In qualitative research classes, candidates conducted action research in the targeted

communities to help broaden the professions' understanding of the factors that impact student success in the targeted communities. Two courses (Advanced Materials for Young Adults, and Early and Emergent Literacy), provided the IMLS cohort candidates with additional literacy and reading terms, habits and tools needed to assess children's literature and library materials for a multicultural student population. Candidates used a variety of strategies to promote leisure reading. They also modeled their personal enjoyment of reading in order to promote the habits of creative expression and lifelong reading through a teen culture project.

Candidates used young adult books representing Native cultures as their books for book discussions with K-12 students. Students located at the hub site areas were utilized for participants in the book discussions. As well, Native students from Sequoyah High School and Oaks Indian School participated in book discussions. Representative titles used for book discussion events included: Sacajawea by Joseph Bruchac, Rain is Not My Indian Name by Cynthia Leitch-Smith, Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond by Joseph Medicine Crow, Code Talker by Joseph Bruchac, Who Will Tell My Brother? By Marlene Carvell, Jim Thorpe by Joseph Bruchac, Cherokee Dragon by Robert J. Conley, and the Devil's Paintbox by Victoria McKernan. Another course assignment involved reading a poetry chapter that highlighted Native American poetry books. Titles used for the poetry assignment included: Spirit Voices of Bones, Rising Voices, The Book of Medicines, and No Borders. All candidates read the following titles: Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie for contemporary fiction and censorship; Pipestone, My Life in an Indian Boarding School by Adam Fortunate Eagle (Kindle version), for non-fiction, and Sitting Bull by Kate Petty for the graphic novel format. Journal articles and critical essays examined included: "Humor Is My Green Card": A Conversation with Sherman Alexie; Alexie-Vision: Getting the Picture by Susan Bernardin; Absolutely True Tales of Censorship; and "I knew how to be moderate. And I knew how to obey": The commonality of American Indian boarding school experiences, 1750s-1920s by Margaret Connell Szasz.

To illustrate a growing understanding of cultural responsiveness, following are several examples of comments provided by candidate regarding the Native American graphic novel Sitting Bull: The Life of a Lakota Sioux Chief:

"I came to the point that I felt like it was history that needs to be portrayed accurately. We cannot keep throwing a "shawl" over our Native American History because it's not pretty. It isn't all pretty, but it

is true and we need to provide our students with accurate information."

"I found Sitting Bull: The Life of a Lakota Sioux Chief to be the most informative piece of children's literature that I have ever read. This graphic novel held my attention throughout and I felt sad for the bloodshed that occurred throughout history between the Native Americans and whites."

"History is important and sharing the history of all peoples, especially Native Americans, is important as teachers."

In another course, one candidate reflected on the process of a reading ladder assignment with the following:

"This project paper is a reflection of how a reading ladder worked with one student. My student is an 11 year old girl who we will call Katnip. A nickname she took from a book read during this project. Katnip and I created a reading ladder based on a theme and changed it a few times along the way. The flexibility of the ladders makes them a valuable tool for the education and literacy tool box. The purpose of a ladder is to move a student's skill level higher. Katnip started with a book that had a lexile of 670 and gracefully rose to a lexile of 1000. The ability to meet student interest in the present is a great motivational asset and through the progression expands their horizons in a very gentle way. This project has convinced me that this tool should be used in every classroom and library."

In the Early and Emergent Literacy course, cohort candidates read and posted reflections on articles from the Oral Histories/ Culture/ Community section; from the Native American Literature/Curriculum section; and from the Teaching Native American Students section concerning Native American students and success in school. Additional activities included case study reflections, textbook chapter presentations/ strategy demonstration reflections, annotated bibliographies, parental involvement pamphlets, and a mini inquiry on literacy. Resource bibliographies of recommended titles for use in school communities serving Native American students were also developed for practicing school librarians.

However, there are both strengths and weaknesses inherent in the use of the community embedded learning model. While the student is able to "bring back" ideas, lessons, theories, and values gained from the university to the local community, there is often resistance to an "outsider" viewpoint. Other teachers, administrators, and community members may be resistant to changes suggested by the library candidates. Similarly, over-reliance on the

local, individual school setting can prevent the student from recognizing and valuing the differences that occur in communities other than the familiar. In order to balance this, students participating in the IMLS grant cohort had opportunities to visit a number of larger school libraries in urban metropolitan communities. This perspective allowed students to observe and begin to understand the variation in school library programs and seek ways to negotiate the differences.

Additionally, a culturally-responsive teaching component embedded within the IMLS grant sought to encourage the student candidates to look beyond their immediate responses to situations and beyond easy answers to issues of diversity within classrooms. This component helped offer a broader world-view for the students, and recognize the powerful role that culture plays in classrooms, schools, and communities.

5. Author workshop experiences

Throughout the grant, three Library Media Workshop (Author/Illustrator speaker series) author workshop experiences were provided where candidates were introduced to Native authors and storytellers such as Mr. Joseph Bruchac, Ms. Cynthia Leitisch Smith, and Mr. Sherman Alexie. These venues were available to grant cohort candidates and the community at large. In the author's speaker series, cohort candidates were provided with an opportunity to broaden their understanding of the writing process and foster an appreciation for Native literature as they listened to the author and read the author's works. Candidate's written reflections demonstrated how the author's works supported the curriculum. After attending the presentations given by the author/illustrator students wrote a reflection paper on the author visit and books. The reflection papers included a summary of the presentation and what the student learned as it relates to how the stories, songs, etc. might be applied to the curriculum in a culturally responsive manner. Reflective journaling included comments on the question, how did the presentation deepen your understanding of Native American culture? What did you learn about Native American culture that can be taken back to your classroom? Responses included such comments as:

"Hearing Joseph Bruchac play the drum and flute and his use of chants or songs showed me how the Native American culture used these instruments and their music as a form of communication. He said, 'Singing is a great way to learn things.' Native Americans used singing as a way of teaching and passing their heritage down to their children. I never knew how many different Native American tribes,

cultures, and languages there are in North America. I also was not aware of how many stories there are in Native American cultures or other cultures throughout the world."

In response to the question "What did you learn about Native American culture that can be taken back to your classroom?" candidates considered:

"The thing that I am most excited about taking back to my class is the opportunity for them to learn about the different Native American tribes. Every year our school hosts a "Cultural Day" in which Native Americans from the Cherokee tribe come and tell stories and share things from their culture (games, dress, dances, music, crafts, etc.). I want to share with students some of the stories that I have heard and allow them to research some other Native American tribes. One thing that I took away from this presentation that I thought was neat, was that we all have roots (ancestors, family, places, and personal experiences). This is a simple concept but I really liked how it was presented".

The cohort candidates took part in intergenerational singing and storytelling programs – programs that bring skipped generations together to create learning and interactional opportunities through singing [16]. Such programs clearly illustrate participants' learning, communication, and relationship-building. Recounting of this observation can have a productive effect on listeners, opening them up to the potentialities of children and elders or at the very least, inciting them to ask questions and wondering about their own assumptions concerning education. The intergenerational classes are beautiful examples of curriculum and pedagogy that have created opportunities for people to communicate and learn together within the context of relationship. It can provide educators with insights into how the curricula in such programs might expand participants' communication and identity options while helping to foster and support intergenerational relationships as well as cultural understanding. Intercultural communication workshops and storytelling workshops with Gayle Ross - Cherokee Nation storyteller and descendant of chief John Ross, the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation during the infamous Trail of Tears, and with Gene Tagaban - an internationally renowned Tlingit Native American performance artist, musician and global educator provided venues for Indigenous and non-Indigenous to share Native wisdom and talent via dance, native flute and storytelling. As the Project I'M READY candidates began their own professional careers, the knowledge gained at these conferences and workshops strengthened their practice. Engaging in group discussion and reflection on topics and

sessions allowed the faculty and students to develop deeper professional relationships with one another. Outside of the confines of the classroom environment, apart from the structure of assignments and grades, students were willing to ask deeper questions, reveal personalities and preferences, and engage with faculty in a more natural and relaxed manner.

6. Culturally sensitive K-12 curriculum resources

As noted earlier, the second primary goal of the program was to develop and provide information literacy programming and digital learning resources to assist in improving and sustaining K-12 pedagogy that effectively increases targeted student success. Under the second goal, to develop and disseminate K-12 information literacy resources and research, two additional objectives were set. The third critical objective, expressed as Outcome #3, set out to develop and disseminate K-12 information literacy resources and research through the research, development, creation, and dissemination of online information literacy instruction modules that address information literacy standards for K-12 instruction and focus on the needs of racially diverse populations.

Culturally sensitive K-12 curriculum resources that focused on literacy were developed during the grant program and continue to be produced. Research, development, creation, and dissemination of online information literacy instruction modules that address information literacy standards for K-12 instruction and focus on the needs of racially diverse populations served as a major outcome. The planning, design, development and distribution of digital format information literacy modules will address three identified education-based needs. First, recent data from a project of the Oklahoma Library Skills Initiative demonstrates that freshmen students in Oklahoma have significantly lower information literacy skills than comparable freshmen students at similar institutions nationwide. The learning modules created in Outcome #3 will be used to enhance information literacy skills in K-12 students to better prepare them to complete high school and to attend college. Second, research shows that students are more likely to model behavior of individuals that "look" like them [17]. These modules will incorporate "faces of diversity" showing real high school aged students (consultants) in learning/teaching situations that help targeted viewers personally relate more positively to the learning experience. Sparks points out:

"In many Native American cultures, children learn new skills by observing them and then doing them. This hands-on technique is part of their natural

learning style and should be used to the maximum extent possible. Teachers are realizing more and more that an active, hands-on curriculum benefits all learners and usually leads to a fuller understanding of the concepts represented." [18].

Third, all school library programs desperately need additional current "standards based" age appropriate information literacy training resources that can be used to supplement and reinforce existing instruction efforts.

6.1. Learning from authentic literature

True multicultural education promotes understanding and cooperation through the use of authentic literature. Educational materials provided in libraries and used in classrooms should be as authentic and accurate as possible. Guiding students toward asking questions and finding their own answers is vital. One helpful technique in this process is to expose students of a variety of ethnic groups and ages to authentic works of native literature. Learning from authentic literature means not learning or perpetuating stereotypes. Literacy through themes that native students understand can provide positive opportunities for increased educational success. Multimedia footage gathered from the Cherokee Heritage Center's Indian Territory Days (2012-214) was edited and processed for cultural history videos placed on the IMLS Facebook page. The Heritage Collection includes footage on aspects of the Cherokee language, of bow making, of blacksmithing, and of storytelling. Video footage gathered in 2012 from the Sequoyah High School related to the philosophy and history of the school was also incorporated. Grant staff attended a first annual regional 7th-8th grade stickball event at the Stillwell High School in the fall 2013. Cherokee Nation representatives, NSU Cherokee Promise Scholars, and University of Arkansas students and administrators participated in the cultural event. Three Cherokee Promise Scholars and Dr. Leslie Hannah were interviewed later in the month to provide additional perspectives on cultural heritage/educational videos. Teacher informational packets with accompanying lesson plans, Smartboard activities and accompanying worksheets with quizzes, and a video summary based on the game of stickball reside on the Project I'M READY website. Other venues where multimedia footage was gathered include: the Cherokee Art Market show (2013), with National Treasure traditional weaver; footage of Will Rogers impersonator, Andy Hogan who serves as Historical Museum Guide at the Will Rogers Memorial Museum; footage from the Visiting Indigenous Scholars series Storytelling exhibit of "Native Words, Native Warriors" Comanche Code talkers, and Gayle Ross storyteller;

footage of Dr. Linda Wilson describing the Native Dolls collection; footage gathered from the Chickasaw Cultural Heritage Center's 'Three Sister's Ceremony" event; and audio interviews of: Cherokee Immersion School curriculum developers; and Mr. Ron Graham, President of the Muskogee Creek Freedmen, who discussed the history of Freedmen in Oklahoma's Muskogee Creek Nation.

Specific examples of supplemental learning resources completed include: seven templates of SmartBoard activities (games for literacy and numeracy; poems and songs about culture; Camtasia products on how to modify templates for SmartBoard games); 17 documents that comprise various lesson plans on *Jistu, the Trickster Rabbit*; 33 worksheet examples on topics supported by various videos listed above; and two graphic e-novels – *How Jistu Lost His Tail* and *How Raven Brought Salmon to the World*. Five multi-media video series pieces were developed: a 21st Century learner video project based on Common Beliefs and 21st Century learning standards; a history of the Cherokee Nation as it relates to education in Northeast Oklahoma; and the philosophy behind the Cherokee Immersion School and Sequoyah High School as models to revitalize and maintain the culture for Cherokee youth. Two additional projects included a video series from the Cherokee Nation Immersion School, and a "Diverse Voices of NSU" project of six videos. The "Voices" project focused on students who were asked to record their stories, histories, and their everyday experiences. Additional multimedia footage (video, photographs) was developed from NSU hosted seminars, workshops and conferences.

Using an updated project plan, an external team (The Center for Digital Archaeology - CoDA) was contracted to use the remainder of the year-long grant extension to develop the learning resources and multimedia teaching tools that would power the curriculum and provide the crucial outreach to K-12 teachers and their students. CoDA was brought on in Fall 2013 to assist NSU in their goal to create an online content management system to house the curriculum, related media, and archive legacy data for the project. In the collaboration, we determined that a customized version of Mukurtu CMS would ensure that the content is shared in culturally appropriate ways. CoDA assessed the materials from the Project I'M READY and converted these materials into archival and representational formats, all housed with the originals when possible. We collaborated with CoDA and education specialists from Washington State University to create the site structure and implementation plan. Our final product is the online portal at www.projectIMREADY.com, and backups of the archival materials housed on CoDA servers and shared with NSU. CoDA has agreed to support the platform through June 2015 and provide consultation to NSU during that time to

seek further funding for continued hosting, outreach, and expansion upon the materials. Currently, all finished project videos reside on the Project I'M READY YouTube channel located at: <http://www.youtube.com/projectimready>. To date, there are 545 subscribers to the channel, and 86,962 views. In spring 2012, a Facebook page specifically designated for the program (<http://www.facebook.com/ProjectImReady>) was created to be used extensively as a means to inform the public regarding the project, and to advertise current projects and conference events.

The fourth critical objective expressed as Outcome #4 set out to provide annual regional conferences and seminars that promote and disseminate research, best practices, resources, and pedagogy for educational improvement of the targeted populations. Significant project achievements were accomplished through hosting of annual conference venues for professionals to discuss Native American education and the realities of generational poverty that impact children. Specific activities included the following events: the first conference and training workshop took place during late August, 2011 on the University branch campus and featured Dr. David Loertscher who presented his national renowned "The Big Think" technique; two author's workshops and one conference offered during the summer of 2012 featuring nationally recognized author of Native American storyteller Joseph Bruchac; a seminar on understanding poverty presented during fall 2012 and featuring Dr. Rita Pierson; a summer 2013 conference and workshop event that involved a two-day author's workshop venue facilitated by Ms. Cynthia Leitch Smith, New York Times best-selling author of fiction for children and young adults. A member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, who writes fiction for children centered on the lives of modern-day American Indians; a summer 2013 conference and training workshop facilitated by Dr. David Loertscher based on his "Virtual Learning Commons" technique; a spring 2014 author conference and workshop with Sherman Alexie that premiered to a packed house at the University's main campus Auditorium; and a summer 2014 Storytelling theatre presentation and workshop featuring Ms. Gayle Ross and Mr. Gene Tagaban which took place at the University's main campus Auditorium. These two renowned Native storytellers discussed their words, craft, and how to bring a story to life. All events were open to students, faculty and administrators free of charge. Candidates also attended conferences throughout the grant period (Oklahoma Technology Association/EncycloMedia conference, Oklahoma Library Association, American Association of School Librarians) and presented at the American Library Association (ALA) conference in Chicago in July of 2013. After

each session, candidates completed a conference reporting form and incorporated the information they learned into their teaching practices and classroom settings where appropriate.

The objective of the grant was to provide an example of a work in progress that used culturally responsive pedagogy. It provided a forum for scholars/practitioners in the field that focuses on fostering interdisciplinary and participatory dialogue and linking theory, empirical study, policy, activism, and practice. It also provided an opportunity to incorporate intercultural rhetoric and Indigenous research methodologies that flow from tribal knowledge while being allied with Western qualitative approaches such as ways of knowing, story as method, cultural protocol, meaning-making, and ethical responsibility. Further, it offers a “success story” to key administrators who may wish to create courses and whole degree programs that link Native and Western ways of knowing, and that blend ancient wisdom with modern curriculum. As Sonia Nieto notes, without an awareness of the issues of power, privilege, identity, and diversity in education, teachers are doomed to approach their instruction, and their students, in simplistic and uncritical ways that will do little to prepare them for the complex and heterogeneous world in which we live. The Project I'M READY program offers opportunities to share practical suggestions on knowledge transfer/ techniques that deepen both faculty and student understanding from a cultural context. Through theoretical discussions, practical applications, and culturally responsive lesson plans and activities, this program will help provide a template for all K-12 teachers to bridge the gap between their own reality and that of their students.

7. Professional development through conferences and workshops

A final aspect of the grant program was to provide annual regional conferences and seminars that would promote and disseminate research, best practices, resources, and pedagogy for educational improvement of the targeted populations. Educators serving in schools need a clearer understanding of the complex cultural factors facing indigenous students to be able to remove information barriers that result in social inequality. School librarians and allied educators need appropriate scholarly venues to openly discuss the socioeconomic class differences that create conflict and challenges in educational settings for both teachers and students. School librarians and allied educators need a collegial framework to share scholarly research for educational improvement. To achieve this goal, a series of annual conferences and seminars were offered. The profession would greatly benefit from

venues that would pull together researchers, students, educators, administrators, and community stakeholders to discuss and seek solutions to the complex cultural, social, and economic issues surrounding Native American student achievement.

Conferences and workshops allowed the candidates to network with other students, practicing librarians, and a number of other professionals from across the state. The university conducted annual conferences that provided continuing education and research presentation opportunities for librarians and allied educators. Participants gained a better understanding of how economic class affects behaviors and mindsets and learned concrete strategies that impact the achievement of students from poverty. Candidate comments from events include:

“The most valuable aspect was identifying that kids in poverty need me to build bridges to become trusted and part of their support resources.”

“This was one of the most powerful, thought-provoking days that I've ever experienced. I learned a lot about the different classes and the hidden rules that go along with them. This has been a wonderful workshop! I also feel the resources section will help me in dealing with my future students.”

“Formal resource assessment with myself and students... (have neglected to do that this year)! Thank you so much for making such a huge difference in this world!”

The program faculty members, both of whom have extensive experience as practicing school librarians at all grade levels in public schools, recognize the need to serve as mentors to their pre-service students. While the once-a-semester meetings allowed for face-to-face contact, the dynamic of the teacher-student relationship situated in the classroom experience did little to allow a mentoring relationship to develop. In order to provide additional time together in other settings, candidates were frequently given opportunities to attend professional conferences and workshops alongside the program faculty. New discussions and spaces for conversations were opened outside of the traditional, or even online, classroom.

The University was able to provide a variety of conference venues for professionals to discuss Native American education and the realities of generational poverty that impact children. Conference speakers explored research applications that could be used to mitigate educational inequalities and aid communities in transitioning out of poverty. Selected themes of the conferences

explored resources that all educators could incorporate into their classes that can be useful to student learning and success. In this way, the project will help insure that K-12 students are users of high quality information and understand the depth and scope of the Native American resources that are available to them as part of their heritage and part of their broader communities' support resources.

8. Conclusion

Cultural, racial, economic and social diversity is the underlying theme that flows throughout the stated goals and outcomes achieved through this program. We believe that diverse communities can succeed and flourish together. We believe that the failure of one segment of our school communities is a failure for us all. Educational improvement begins as we transform ourselves as library leaders through education, reflection, and a moral imperative to construct vital changes that improve the condition of education. NSU has a proud tradition of successfully serving Native American populations since it was founded as a Cherokee seminary in the Tahlequah, Oklahoma area over 100 years ago. Today, our university serves the highest percentage population (just under 33%) of Native American students of any public higher education institution in the United States. The racial composition of faculty and staff of our institution mirrors the diversity within the student body. Fifteen percent of the faculty and staff are American Indian or Alaskan Native, representing a wide range of indigenous cultures. This program utilized the strengths and wisdom of our student body, its faculty, and its tribal partners to enhance diversity and cultural awareness in our communities.

Project I'M READY helped us attain our vision of positive change in the education of the 21st Century School Library Media Specialist. Librarians are better prepared to meet the daunting challenges they will face in providing high quality library services to students in highly diverse and economically disadvantaged communities. Research-based strategies that were developed and presented provide Library Media (LIBM) graduates with hands-on techniques that will help them narrow the achievement gap for under-resourced students. This project provided avenues for school libraries to develop programs and collections that are more culturally responsive to community needs and promote an increased level intercultural understanding.

This program increased institutional capacity to train candidates, and advanced the state of the art of library and information science by providing digital instructional tools for teaching information literacy concepts to K-12 students. The overall effect of providing culturally responsive teacher librarians,

developing appropriate library material selection policies, and identifying quality learning materials and resources to improve culturally sensitive learning environments for Native students is crucial for long-term positive impacts on student retention and success. All Information Literacy products produced, librarians trained, curriculum developed, research generated, and learning experiences offered through conferences will continue to guide, support and influence the profession well into the future.

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