

# **Connecting Educational Communities to Engage in Collective Inquiry: Creating Professional Learning Communities as Sites of Action Research**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past several years, educational reform strategies have postulated that not only do children need to be ready and able to learn in school, but equally important, schools must be ready for children (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005; Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2009). In this article, Nabrin Aziz-Parsons investigates the ways in which an early childhood initiative at Northwest Indian College, building on five foundational beliefs about the readiness of schools for children, used professional learning communities (PLCs) as both a professional development forum and a methodological process to engage educators serving Lummi children and families in collective inquiry. Using the PLCs as sites of action research, the collective inquiry in which teachers engaged helped to connect educational systems across districts and communities, ensuring that schools are ready for children, redefining “Safety Zones” (Lansing, 2014) within this context, and fostering place-based education. The result was a smoother transition for children who moved from early learning to the K-3 educational system, positively impacting the growth, development, and educational trajectories of young Native children.

## **Introduction**

In 2011, Northwest Indian College (NWIC) was one of four tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) that received the American Indian College Fund’s “*Wakanyeja* ‘Sacred Little Ones’ Tribal College Readiness and Success by Third Grade” Early Childhood Education Initiative grant. The five-year initiative concentrates on strengthening systems of care and learning for Native children. The purpose of the initiative is “to bring together tribal colleges, communities, educators, and families to address early learning disparities in Native communities” (American Indian College Fund: *Wakanyeja* “Sacred Little Ones” Early Childhood Education Initiative, 2015, p. 1). The initiative addresses the following five domains:

1. Improve cognitive and non-cognitive skill acquisition among American Indian children
2. Improve early childhood teacher education quality in Native communities by partnering with post-secondary teacher education programs at tribal colleges
3. Bridge early childhood education Pre-K transition to K-3 schooling
4. Integrate Native language(s) and culture(s) into curriculum development and instruction for teacher preparation programming, early childhood education centers, and K-3 settings
5. Empower families and communities to act as agents of change in education for their children

These five domains focus on “transforming Native early childhood education from within Native communities” (T. Yazzie-Mintz, personal communication, November 18, 2015). While the five domains are interconnected and interdependent, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors placed emphasis on Domain 3: Bridging early learning with K-3 education. We invited educators serving Lummi children and families to participate in professional learning communities and think critically about developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive teaching.

### **Research Question**

Our research was guided by the following question:

*How can we, as a learning community, design a system of care and learning that prepares children for schools, and schools for children?*

Quintessentially, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to unearth the effect that connections among educators (i.e., everyone who comes into contact with young Lummi children in early learning programs, including teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, bus drivers, cooks, etc.) would have on bridging early learning with kindergarten through grade three (i.e., creating smooth transitions allowing Lummi children to thrive in their current classrooms *and* when they move

from one program/level to the next). This article explores the ways in which early childhood education faculty members at Northwest Indian College connected educational communities to engage in collective inquiry about fostering place-based education and redefining “Safety Zones” (Lansing, 2014), in an effort to positively impact Native children’s early educational experiences.

## **Context**

Northwest Indian College is headquartered on the Lummi Reservation, along the Salish Sea shoreline, near Bellingham, Washington. In addition to our main campus on the Lummi Reservation, NWIC has six full service extended campus sites located at Muckleshoot, Nez Perce, Nisqually, Port Gamble S'Klallam, Swinomish, and Tulalip. NWIC is the only accredited Tribal College serving the states of Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, offering four bachelor’s degrees and numerous associate’s degrees, including the Associate of Applied-Science Transfer degree in Early Childhood Education. During the 2014-2015 academic year, NWIC served 968 undergraduate students (Cueva, 2015) throughout the Pacific Northwest, Canada, and beyond. The educational philosophy of Northwest Indian College is based upon the belief that the opportunity for post-secondary education must be provided within Native American communities. We are also committed to the belief that “Through education, Northwest Indian College promotes Indigenous self-determination and knowledge” (Northwest Indian College, 2015). It is this mission that helps to guide the work in which we engage, in the Sacred Little Ones Early Childhood Education Initiative.

## **Foundational Beliefs and Review of Literature**

When we began delving into our inquiry, we had a vision that schools should be ready for children, taking both developmentally appropriate practices and culturally

responsive teaching into consideration. Since our focus in the Lummi community is to serve Native children, we also held true the following five beliefs, based on Indigenous knowledge and Native family values, and corroborated by research.

*Native Children are Extraordinarily Intelligent and Capable of Higher-Level Learning*

Bang (2014) posits that Native children have specific, unique, and valuable intelligences, such as a deep understanding that nature and culture are intertwined; awareness that human beings ought to respect nature and that there is an expectation of reciprocity in the human/nature relationship; the ability to reason in terms of life cycles and thus have multiple perspectives when thinking critically about issues; the ability to think ecologically in terms of relationships and systems, as opposed to taxonomically (i.e., compartmentalizing issues); and a broader view of what is alive as well as the ability to take this into consideration when studying nature, the environment, and the greater world around them.

*Teachers Must Foster Classroom Environments in which Native Families' Values and Practices are Acknowledged, Respected, and Represented*

Lomawaima & McCarty (as cited in Lansing, 2014) use the “Safety Zone Theory” as a way of describing why certain aspects of Native American culture are perceived as being either accepted or forbidden, dependent upon the nation’s current economic and political state. Lansing (2014) posits that educators, especially Native educators, must therefore revisit and redefine “Safety Zones” in classrooms in order to position “Native... language and culture at the forefront of education” (p. 38). NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors agreed with this tenet, and wanted to stress the importance of having Native families, values, and communities, from which the children come, be acknowledged, respected, and represented in the classroom and the curriculum in schools both on and off the Lummi Reservation.

*There Must be a Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAPs) and culturally responsive teaching are critical not only in the early childhood years but also in primary education levels as well. According to Copple & Bredekamp (2009), children deserve developmentally appropriate programming at every age and at every level. NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors therefore wanted to ensure that DAPs and culturally responsive teaching moved forward and upward, into the Head Start and K-3 levels, in order to foster and nurture Native children's lifelong learning, competence, and confidence.

*Place-Based Education Must be Infused Throughout Classrooms and Curricula in Early Learning Programs that Serve Native Children and Families*

As London (2013) describes, “An Indigenous understanding of place recognizes and values places to be made up of relationships, experiences, histories, stories, languages, skills, and ceremonies” (p. 2). Woodhouse & Knapp (2000) describe place-based education using the following five essential characteristics:

1. It emerges from the particular attributes of a place
2. It is inherently multidisciplinary
3. It is inherently experiential
4. It is reflective of an educational philosophy that is broader than “learn to earn”
5. It connects place with self and community

These scholars further elaborate that educators who use place-based education as the foundation of their pedagogy believe “that education should prepare people to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit” (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p. 2). Because Native children have a heightened awareness of the relationship between culture and nature (Bang, 2014), NWIC Sacred

Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to further explore the notion of implementing place-based education in early learning classrooms with teachers who served Lummi children and families.

Native scholars and authors also underscore the importance of place, specifically as it relates to Indigenous knowledge. Wildcat (2014) posits that Indigenous knowledges stem from a people's long-standing history with a place. It is therefore imperative that place-based education be restored as the foundation of learning activities for Native children, in an effort to fully support not only their growth and development, but also to validate their cultural identity and history.

*Engaging in Collective Community Based Work is Essential in Order to Effect Systemic Change*

Lesaux, Jones, Harris, & Kane (2014) posit that in order for professional development to result in meaningful changes in practice, there needs to be a specific approach to knowledge-building:

1. Professional development sessions must be interactive, using discussion and dialogue
2. Early childhood educators must have the opportunity to collaborate, in order to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth
3. Professional development needs to be onsite and ongoing with frequent sessions and opportunities for discourse

This emphasis on dialogue, collaboration, and discourse is important in any educational setting, and particularly resonates with Native educators. As Strickland, member of the Lumbee tribe of North Carolina, says, "... The circle is a gathering and a gathering welcomes all... In this way, we honor the American Indian spirit of inclusion... Those of the circle, we all have an equal value, and our experience is to be a dialogue. This is in tradition of our First Americans, where all voices are to be heard and respected. Knowledge is to be shared with all" (Office of Head Start, 2013,

17:48). Ultimately, community based work, such as professional learning communities, engage participants in collective learning that connects us to one another, effectively transcending borders (created by school districts and grade levels) through education.

The aim of this inquiry is to further understand how (1) fostering place-based education enhances Native children's learning by underscoring the importance of family, culture, and community; (2) engaging educators and stakeholders in collective community based work supports Native children's transition from pre-kindergarten to K-3 education; and (3) bridging amongst a number of levels (such as content, curriculum, pedagogy, school cultures, and cultural differences) leads to the creation of increased learning opportunities for young children. The findings in this study will assist in determining a sustainable practice (that is, engaging in collective inquiry by participating in professional learning communities to explore developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive teaching) that positively impacts the lives and educational experiences of young Native learners.

## **Methodology**

We selected professional learning communities (PLCs) as a way to engage stakeholders in collective inquiry to examine, question, and reshape early learning, in an effort to strengthen systems of care and learning for Lummi children. We thus used professional learning communities not only as a way to improve instruction and learning as a collective, but our PLCs also emerged as a methodological process to document what had been accomplished as a result of this initiative; it became a form of action research, using an existing structure of dialogue to drive our analysis of professional learning communities (T. Yazzie-Mintz, personal communication, December 2, 2015). Action research is, as defined by Mills (2007), "systematic inquiry... [in which]... information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight,

developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved” (p. 5).

Because one of the project’s purposes and end goals was to support Lummi children’s transition from early learning to K-3, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and a contracted data consultant postulated that in addition to bridging content and curriculum, the project also had to focus on bridging pedagogy, people, school cultures, and cultural differences (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015). Table 1 indicates how the NWIC project’s areas of focus align with the Sacred Little Ones initiative’s goals / domains.

**Table 1:** *Alignment between project’s focus areas and initiative’s goals / domains.*

<b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>NWIC Sacred Little Ones Goal / Domain:</b>
Bridge of Content and Curriculum	Domain 1: Improve cognitive and non-cognitive skill acquisition among American Indian children
Bridge of Pedagogy	Domain 2: Improve early childhood teacher education quality in Native communities by partnering with post-secondary teacher education programs at tribal colleges
Bridge of People	Domain 5: Empower families and communities to act as agents of change in education for their children
Bridge of School Cultures	Domain 3: Bridge early childhood education Pre-K transition to K-3 schooling
Bridge of Cultural Differences	Domain 4: Integrate Native language(s) and culture(s) into curriculum development and instruction for teacher preparation programming, early childhood education centers, and K-3 settings

*Bridge of Content & Curriculum*

According to research in P-3 literacy alignment (Hugo & Parsons, 2012), “alignment of strong instruction and research-based standards... [must be] set within

a child development context, across a P-3 continuum” (p. 5). Content and curriculum must be aligned between the early learning and K-3 learning environments, both vertically (through the grade levels) and horizontally (across educational systems), enabling children to experience a transition in which what they learn in their new classroom builds on what they learned in their previous classroom, and what they learned in their previous classroom has prepared them for what they are learning in their new classroom. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors’ inquiry: *Are content and curriculum aligned between the early learning and the K-3 learning environments? Do children experience a transition in which what they learn in their new classroom builds on what they learned in their previous classroom, and what they learned in their previous classroom has prepared them for what they are learning in their new classroom?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 1).

### *Bridge of Pedagogy*

It is important for teaching methods and styles in the children’s previous classroom and in their new classroom to mesh in a way that makes it easy for the children to make the transition. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors’ inquiry: *Do the teaching methods and styles in the children’s previous classroom and in their new classroom mesh in a way that makes it easy for the children to make the transition, or is there a big difference to which children need to adjust? If there is a contrast, how can the children be supported by the teachers in making this adjustment from one teacher’s classroom to another?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 1).

### *Bridge of People*

We utilize Professional Learning Communities and other forums to help children make the transition from one team of people (teachers, aides, directors, staff, etc.) to a new team of people in the new learning environment. The following

questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *In what ways can the PLCs be utilized to help children make the transition from one team of people (teachers, aides, directors, staff, etc.) to a new team of people in the new learning environment?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

### *Bridge of School Cultures*

It is imperative that norms, rules, customs, and traditions in the children's new learning environment adapt to the children. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *Are there different norms/ rules/ customs/ traditions in the children's new learning environment? Are there different expectations of students in the previous and the new learning environments? Are there different ways in which people interact/ communicate/ collaborate with each other in the new learning environment that will be a challenge for children to adapt to?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

### *Bridge of Cultures*

Lummi families who reside on the reservation have an option of sending their children to either schools on the reservation, Lummi Nation School, or schools in the neighboring Ferndale School District. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, approximately 427 children identify as American Indian / Alaska Native in the Ferndale School District (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2014). It is imperative, therefore, to examine cultural differences (between home and school) and how those differences may impact children's educational experiences. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *How do children make the transition from a tribal school to a non-tribal school? What changes for children as they make that transition? How can adults from both the tribal school and the non-tribal school help children make that transition?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

## **Professional Learning Communities**

In order to create all of these bridges, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors drew upon places of strength and knowing and used a structure with which we were familiar to help build these bridges. NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors were familiar with professional learning communities for the following two reasons: (1) former NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Director and PLC Co-Facilitator, Smock, was involved in a county-wide professional learning community of early childhood educators representing licensed child care facilities in order to address and implement P-3 literacy alignment development and (2) current NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Director and PLC Co-Facilitator, [Aziz-Parsons], was the co-developer and facilitator who led the aforementioned professional learning communities, in which Smock participated, as a part of Northwest Educational Service District's and Opportunity Council's joint P-3 Literacy Alignment Initiative that spanned across a three-county region in the northwest corner of the State.

Throughout our PLC sessions and interactions with participants, we were guided by Hord's (2008) "five components of research-based learning communities" (p. 12):

*A Common Vision:* NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to create better systems of care and learning for Lummi children and families, guided by the question, "What does a healthy Lummi child look like, based on Lummi family values and practices?"

*Distributed Leadership:* We wanted our professional learning communities to give rise to shared leadership and shared responsibility, and thus members of the Sacred Little Ones Coordinating Team helped to plan and facilitate the sessions, and each subsequent session was guided by feedback from participants (in the form of evaluations).

*Supportive Conditions:* We wanted to establish relational and structural conditions that were supportive of participant learning and engagement:

1. Relational Conditions: listening, connecting, building trust, etc.
2. Structural Conditions: addressing PLC participants' needs, based on logistical details, such as meeting location, date, and time.

*Collective Learning and Application:* We wanted participants to collaboratively learn about fostering place-based education and redefining “Safety Zones” (Lansing, 2014) in classrooms so that Native children feel seen, heard, and valued. Moreover, we wanted Native children to have a sense of belonging to the classroom community and ownership of their educational experiences.

*Shared Personal Practice:* Once NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors helped to establish and sustain trust among the group of PLC participants, teachers felt comfortable lowering their classroom walls, and inviting their peers (across systems, districts, and grade levels) to give feedback about their teaching and learning practices based on observations of teaching and classroom tours focusing on environments. We thus see a shift in the paradigm, in which teachers begin to “de-privatize” their practice by observing each other’s classrooms, providing feedback as peer mentors, and supporting one another’s acquisition and application of new learning.

In order to truly support Lummi children and families, however, we realized that while Hord’s (2008) five components were excellent principles on which to build our professional learning communities, we also needed to adapt our PLCs, taking into consideration the strengths and needs of the Lummi community. Contrary to educational research stemming from the Western Academy, which postulates that professional learning communities ought to remain small (Guskey & Peterson, as cited in Hord, 1997), we knew in our final year of the project that in order to effect systemic change, we had to reach out further into the Lummi community.

Therefore, we began inviting teachers and administrators from all Lummi early learning programs (including Lummi Early Head Start, Lummi Nation Child Care Center, and Teen Parent Child Development Center) to participate in our PLCs. This innovative practice, which directly ties to creating supportive *relational* conditions (Hord, 2008), helped to ensure that all Lummi families with young children enrolled in a tribal early learning program were being represented, that all early childhood educators serving Lummi children were included, and that they had common understandings and language to use with colleagues and with parents / families.

### **Partnerships**

Our inquiry and bridge-building efforts were not pursued in isolation, but rather, in collaboration, with the following partners: Northwest Indian College Associate of Applied-Science Transfer in Early Childhood Education degree program, Northwest Indian College Early Learning Center, Lummi Nation Head Start, Lummi Nation School, and Eagleridge Elementary in the Ferndale School District.

Our partner sites consisted of both Native and non-Native educators and administrators. Table 2 provides a breakdown of Native and non-Native lead teachers, from among our formal partner sites, who consistently participated in our professional learning communities:

**Table 2: Breakdown of Native and Non-Native Teachers at Partner Programs.**

Name of Partner Program	Number of Native Teachers	Number of Non-Native Teachers
NWIC Early Learning Center	4 Lummi Teachers 1 First Nations Teacher 1 Native Descendent Teacher	0 Non-Native Teachers
Lummi Nation Head Start	1 Lummi Teacher 6 Lummi Teacher Assistants	5 Non-Native Teachers
Lummi Nation School	1 Lummi Teacher	3 Non-Native Teachers
Eagleridge Elementary	0 Native Teachers	5 Non-Native Teachers
Total	14 Native Teachers	13 Non-Native Teachers

### **Data / Evidence**

We triangulated our data, and collected evidence stemming from three different sources: (1) attendance logs; (2) teacher interviews/focus groups; and (3) participant evaluations.

#### *Attendance Logs*

We met with representatives from partner early childhood education programs that served Lummi children and families 20 times over the course of three years (April 2012 to May 2015). Twenty (20) attendance logs were collected and documented the following numbers of participants over the span of the three years:

- 59 of 85 PLC participants attended 05% - 25% of PLC sessions (1-5 sessions)
- 17 of 85 PLC participants attended 26% - 50% of PLC sessions (6-10 sessions)
- Eight of 85 PLC participants attended 51% - 75% of PLC sessions (11-15 sessions)
- One of 85 PLC participants attended 76% - 100% of PLC sessions (16-20 sessions)

It is important to note that there is a high turnover rate in non-Native teachers in tribal early childhood education programs (Pavel, Strong, Dolata, & Baker, 2014).

Taking into consideration this and the fact that, in general, “teacher turnover is an issue of continued concern in early education” (Carolan, 2013, p. 1), the above figures are demonstrative of PLC participants’ commitment to Lummi children and families who want to strengthen systems of care and learning for Native children, and to one another as collegial peers who engage in collective inquiry.

### *Teacher Interviews*

In spring 2015, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors conducted interviews (with nine PLC participants) and focus groups (with 15 PLC participants), to better understand participants’ experiences with and satisfaction of PLCs. During the interviews, PLC participants were asked to describe how their teaching experiences would be different, had the Sacred Little Ones project and professional learning communities not existed. Brooks (2015), a veteran teacher at Lummi Nation Head Start, responded:

[Without Sacred Little Ones] I wouldn't have met the kindergarten teachers from Eagleridge or Lummi Nation. It's nice to talk to them about what they're doing... [Y]ou don't get that usually, you know, in a school district... and so I like that” (p. 10).

Grah (2015), a newly hired teacher at Lummi Nation Head Start, responded:

With me being brand new, [the PLCs are] pretty much the only time I talk to the other teachers [in my own building]... because we're all always... so busy. And even when the kids aren't here, you're still busy preparing and cleaning and organizing and [doing] paperwork. So it's kind of time to connect (p. 8).

The aforementioned quotations from our professional learning community participants exemplify how valuable and meaningful PLCs were to participants in terms of bridging educational systems, both vertically (through the grades) and horizontally (across systems), and bridging people. Furthermore, The Washington

Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, a process developed to enhance children's success in schools, includes collaboration between kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators, to discuss student learning, as one of its three main tenets (Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2015). Thus, bridging educators from the early learning and K-3 educational systems is aligned with promising practices and state efforts that result in children's school readiness and school success.

NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators deliberately continued to revisit the concept of "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) with professional learning community participants throughout the 2014-2015 academic year. First, in an effort to define and exemplify the concepts of place-based education and "Safety Zones," PLC Co-Facilitators guided and supported teachers to answer the question, "What do place-based education and 'Safety Zones' mean and what do they look like in early learning classrooms/environments?" PLC Co-Facilitators used visual and verbal descriptions, as well as catalogs featuring educational materials and supplies, through which teachers looked and about which they discussed, to think critically about these two concepts that help Native children's transition from the early learning to K-3 educational systems, and from tribal to non-tribal schools.

Next, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators began to construct and collectively make sense of these terms, place-based and "Safety Zones" with PLC participants. PLC Co-Facilitators who had spent considerable amounts of time studying these concepts shared ideas, gave participants opportunities to meet Lummi artists, helped teachers to search educational websites, and encouraged them to create their own educational materials that were supportive of and aligned with place-based education and "Safety Zones."

Then, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators provided topics and resources to implement place-based education and "Safety

Zones” in each respective classroom. PLC Co-Facilitators provided research articles about developmentally appropriate practices and a video during which an early childhood educator played tribal music for a Lummi infant and the ways in which the Lummi infant responded to her tribal music, demonstrative of the importance of culturally responsive teaching.

Last, PLC Co-Facilitators made a commitment to help PLC participants spend mini-grants (ranging from \$500 to \$750) on classroom enhancements, designed to help foster place-based education in early learning programs, via coaching, reviewing requests, and providing feedback to teachers about their draft requests in an effort to strengthen their proposals and prepare them for approval.

During the spring 2015 interviews and focus groups that were conducted with 24 PLC participants, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to better understand the evolution of PLC participants’ understanding of place-based education and “Safety Zones.” PLC participants were asked to explain how incorporating language and literacy that reflected Native values and practices into the classroom impacted their classroom communities by fostering place-based education and redefining “Safety Zones” in the classroom. Ballew (2015), a Lummi teacher at Lummi Nation School responded:

As a Lummi teacher, I’ve always tried to incorporate Lummi culture, even before Sacred Little Ones. But this is just... what’s the word... inspiring me, or validating. And making what I feel in my heart initially and why I went to school to become a teacher, and this is just enhancing what I already feel (p. 3).

Howell (2015), a teacher in the Ferndale School District working with Lummi children and families, responded:

I just appreciate being able to be a part of [the professional learning communities and Sacred Little Ones project]. It’s opened my eyes in many ways and it’s made me think of a lot of things differently... and take [smaller] steps sometimes with some of these kids who are just not ready to be where

somebody else is telling me they should be. So it's thinking for yourself and trusting yourself and knowing what's best [for children] without somebody having to tell you that or tell you different (p. 30).

Howell further explained:

[Using Personal Narrative (Matteson & Freeman, 2005)], I'm telling all these stories about when I'm growing up... I noticed one day I told when we lived on Lummi Island and I was talking about being on the beach and waiting for the ferry boat, and the Lummi kids are starting to say, "We know that beach! We know where that is!" And they got so excited that my next story I told was [that] my father was a fisherman, and he fished on reef netters and gill netters. I wouldn't have even said those words except for they got so excited before. So one boy goes, "My dad does that too! Do you know the difference between a reef netter and gill netter?" And I told him what my experiences were, and he goes, "You're right! And what kind of fish did you catch? Because when I go out on a gill netter, I catch..." And it was something that I probably wouldn't have gone into had I not had those ideas [about place-based education] presented to me [at our professional learning communities] (p. 1).

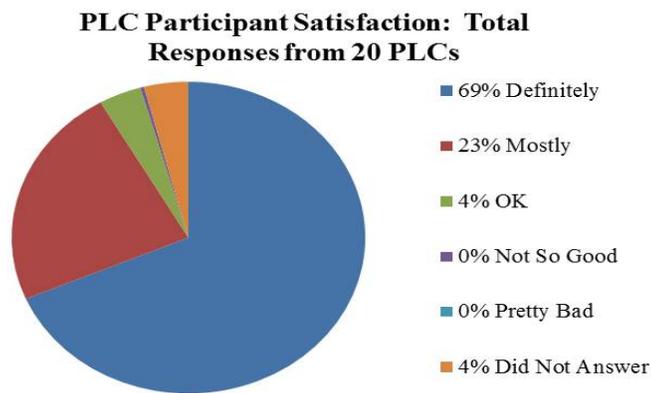
The aforementioned quotations from our professional learning community participants convey positive changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors, as a result of the concentrated effort on easing children's transition from early learning to kindergarten by bridging people, pedagogy, content and curriculum, and developmentally appropriate practices, and engaging in collective inquiry focused on place-based education and "Safety Zones" during our professional learning community sessions.

### *Participant Evaluations*

Participant evaluations were distributed at every single professional learning community session, in order to gauge effectiveness and participant satisfaction. 296 participant evaluations were collected over the course of 3 years, at the 20 professional learning community sessions. An overwhelming number of participants (92%) reported that they "definitely" or "mostly" found the professional learning

community sessions to be “useful, interesting, and / or a good experience” as professional development opportunities (Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: *Measuring Levels of Satisfaction: Percentage of PLC Participants who Found the PLC to be “Useful, Interesting, and/or a Good Experience.”***



### **Analysis and Findings**

Our professional learning community sessions were focused on engaging educators in collective inquiry, in order to redefine “Safety Zones” and foster place-based education in an effort to work together to create strong early learning experiences for Native children. During the 2014-2015 academic year we intentionally explored these notions by: (1) introducing the concept of place-based education as a way to honor Lummi children’s identity and support their learning by making classrooms more reflective of their family and community; (2) distributing literacy kits (Figure 2 below) that fostered place-based education and helped to redefine “Safety Zones” in classrooms; and (3) awarding mini-grants to educators to help transform their early learning classroom environments into ones that reflect Native values and practices.

**Figure 2:** *Place-Based Education Literacy Kits (photo courtesy of author).*



The following evidence suggests that early childhood educators who participated in our professional learning communities used literacy kits and mini-grants as intended for fostering place-based education and redefining “Safety Zones” for Native children:

1. Teaching staff attendance at one or more of the three PLCs focused on professional development addressing the use of literacy kits and mini-grants to create place-based education and redefine “Safety Zones” in early learning classrooms:
  - a. 94% (17 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms (partner classrooms consisted of three NWIC ELC classrooms, six Lummi Head Start classrooms, four Lummi Nation School, and five Eagleridge Elementary classrooms)
  - b. 60% (6 of 10) of additional Lummi early childhood education (ECE) program settings (additional Lummi ECE programs consisted of two Lummi Teen Parent Child Development Center classrooms, three Lummi Nation Child Care Early Head Start classrooms, and five Lummi Early Head Start Home Base programs)

- c. 100% of respondents to PLC evaluations indicate interest, enthusiasm, and intention for increasing place-based, safety zones in their classrooms for tribal children at all levels, infancy through grade one.
2. Receipt of literacy kits that help to position “Native... language and culture at the forefront of education” (Lansing, 2014, p. 38), thus helping to redefine “Safety Zones” in early learning classrooms:
  - a. 100% (18 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms
  - b. 100% (10 of 10) of additional Lummi ECE program settings
3. Requests for classroom enhancements / mini-grants:
  - a. 94% (17 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms
  - b. 60% (6 of 10) of additional Lummi ECE program settings
4. Mini-Grant requests that met NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors’ standards to redefine “Safety Zones” and foster place-based classrooms:
  - a. 100% of PLC partner classrooms
  - b. 100% of additional Lummi ECE program settings
5. Mentoring and Coaching
  - a. Several teachers required re-thinking and changes to their requests, and to support their learning, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors gave them feedback
  - b. This resulted in stronger proposals and more clearly place-based materials (e.g., changing an order with pan-Indian imagery on small picture frames to Coast Salish imagery).
6. Classrooms / Settings
  - a. 100% (15 of 15) of PLC classrooms observed (3 ELC, 6 Head Start, 2 LNS, 4 Eagleridge) demonstrate use of place-based elements.

The aforementioned data suggest that participating PLC teachers and classroom staff gained a clearer understanding of the importance of redefining “Safety

Zone” via literacy kits and mini-grants and used them well for enhancement of classrooms and curriculum. This redefinition of “Safety Zones” (Lansing, 2014) helped to put “Native... language and culture at the forefront of education” (p. 38) and resulted in fostering place-based education for Lummi children. Over the past several years, research highlights the importance of place-based pedagogy and its impact on student achievement. According to Promise of Place (2015), “Students participating in place based education often show more enthusiasm for learning because it is more relevant to their daily life, their home, and community.” Moreover, Emekauwa (2004) underscores the importance of place-based pedagogy in *rural indigenous communities* especially and the positive impact it has on *Native* student achievement, which resonates with teaching and learning on the Lummi Reservation.

One of Northwest Indian College’s seven Sacred Little Ones project goals is to “improve cognitive skills acquisition, specifically language development and literacy, in both Lummi and English.” NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors continued to focus on language and literacy development throughout our initiative, and in an effort to learn about the ways in which the initiative has affected children’s cognitive skill acquisition, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 24 PLC participants, in spring 2015, to determine the effect that making Lummi values present in young Native children's classrooms have on their language and literacy development.

After analyzing the data gathered from these interviews, themes emerged, and the following findings, in terms of language and literacy development, were discovered.

### *Learning Lummi Language*

When asked if and how the Sacred Little Ones project helped to support Lummi language in teachers’ classrooms, Somerville (2015), a Lummi PLC participant

and early childhood educator shared, “We can't teach something we don't know” (p. 4). Addressing this challenge, Sacred Little Ones provided PLC participants the opportunity to learn more about Lummi language by hiring a certified Lummi Language Teacher who worked with early childhood educators during our PLC sessions. Furthermore, Sacred Little Ones gave Lummi teachers, specifically, at Northwest Indian College’s Early Learning Center the opportunity (via financial support for tuition and release time from work) to take Lummi language courses in order to learn their Native language, reflect on their learning during professional learning community sessions, and use Lummi language with Lummi children for whom they care. This Lummi teacher observed the effect that her speaking Lummi language had on one specific Lummi child, sharing:

He is behind where he should be verbally. He has a very, very limited vocabulary compared to his peers. And there are other things too that suggest there might be some delays. Very few English words and maybe I would say at least...at least two Lummi words. We’re talking about a child who has around five words in total and two of them are Lummi words! (Somerville, 2015, p. 7).

Sacred Little Ones has helped this teacher to develop critical perspectives in teaching and learning, and take a strength-based, asset-oriented approach to teaching and learning, an incredibly important shift in the paradigm.

### *Fostering Place-Based Education and Creating “Safety Zones” for Native Children*

Parris (2015), a Lummi PLC participant and early childhood educator, shared, “When we... order books we... try to find books that would be really relatable to our community or to the age group and back to how I was saying about [children] being able to relate to things, it helps them learn better and makes them want to learn more” (p. 13). During our professional learning communities, teachers examined the importance of place-based education, and as a result, realized that literature must be connected to children’s culture and community as well. Sacred Little Ones had an

impact on teachers' approach to selecting literacy materials that foster place-based education for Lummi children, which supports Native student achievement.

### *Implementing Developmentally Appropriate and Culturally Responsive Practices*

When asked during an interview what teachers noticed when children can relate to the stories being read and told in class, Parris (2015), a Lummi PLC participant and early childhood educator, shared:

The [children] really enjoy [a book from the place-based literacy kit]... It becomes one of their favorite books and they'll want to read it more often, and then they'll talk about it when they're playing; they'll talk about it when they're at home; parents will come in and tell us that they're talking about it because it's sticking with them... When they find like a book that they can relate to, it gets them really encouraged to want to learn and read...other books (p. 5).

As discussed in our professional learning community sessions, literacy is more than just letters and words. Taking developmentally appropriate practices into consideration, literature is especially important when children can relate to and talk about it. In a joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, researchers posit, "It is the talk that surrounds the storybook reading that gives it power, helping children to bridge what is in the story and their own lives" (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, p. 32). Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' focus on important indicators of learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and culturally responsive teaching, has helped teachers to deepen their understanding of language and literacy development. Furthermore, PLC participants realize that not every book accomplishes this goal. Rather, in order to foster a love for reading and learning in young Native children, teachers must incorporate relevant and engaging stories to which Native children can relate.

### *Impacting Student Achievement*

Analyzing which classrooms successfully submitted and received their enhancement requests to foster place-based education, resulted in the finding that attendance at PLCs was supportive of: (1) helping teachers to deepen their understanding of place-based education, and (2) encouraging them to craft and submit their request for educational materials and supplies that foster place-based education. Nearly 95% of participants who consistently attended PLCs submitted and received their classroom enhancement request, as compared to only 60% of participants who did not have the opportunity to consistently attend our PLCs. These figures exemplify that the teachers who continuously attended professional learning communities and engaged in collective inquiry around place-based education were more apt to foster place-based education in their early learning classrooms, which impacts school readiness and school success, as “students participating in place-based education... often exhibit higher scores on standardized measures of academic achievement, improved behavior in class, greater pride and ownership in their accomplishments, increases in self-esteem, conflict resolution, problem solving, and higher-level thinking skills” (Promise of Place, 2015).

### **Educational Significance and Contributions**

As evidenced in this article, professional learning communities supported early childhood educators of Lummi children by bridging early learning with the K-3 educational system, focusing specifically on alignment of content and curriculum, pedagogy, people, school cultures, and cultural differences, in an effort to support Lummi children’s transition from early learning to K-3 (and in some cases, from tribal to non-tribal educational institutions). PLCs also resulted in positive changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors towards developmentally appropriate and culturally

responsive practices, and helped educators to deepen their understanding of place-based education (which positively impacts Native student achievement), thus helping to redefine “Safety Zones” (Lansing, 2014) in early learning classrooms.

While professional learning communities within the Lummi tribal early childhood education context are sustainable, doable, practical, and feasible, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors learned that PLCs do require time and personnel to: (1) address PLC participants’ critical thinking; (2) juxtapose participants’ feedback with initiative goals; and (3) collect and analyze data to ensure that PLCs remain relevant, vibrant, and true to honoring Native children. There also needs to be an emphasis on collective community based work because *honoring all voices* is a tribal value and practice. The work, therefore, must be inclusive of everyone who touches the life of a young Native child, including early childhood educators, elementary school teachers, teacher assistants, paraprofessionals, administrators, support staff, community members, elders, and leaders from across grade levels, districts, systems, cultures, and communities. Such emphasis on collective community based work will help to reach the goal of engaging early childhood educators in collective inquiry in order to positively impact the lives and educational experiences of young Native children.

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Reprinted from *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, Volume 1, Issue 2, published by the American Indian College Fund.

**Citation:** Aziz-Parsons, N. (2017). Connecting educational communities to engage in collective inquiry: Creating professional learning communities as sites of action research. *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, 1(2), 30-58.