

American Indian and Alaska Native Early Childhood Family
Involvement: A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

AMERICAN INDIAN and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities (families, clans, tribes, etc.) have family systems, worldviews, and ways of teaching and learning that differ from those of White Europeans (Medicine, 1981; Red Horse, Lewis, Feit, & Decker, 1978; Tafoya, 1989). Understanding the cultural context of historical and contemporary AI/AN communities is critical as one seeks to examine families' and communities' involvement in early childhood programs and to understand the role that White European education has played. Through the educational system in the United States, the federal government worked to destroy tribal languages and cultures by removing children and young adults from their communities (i.e., The Boarding School Era). Families continue to face the realities of an educational system in which their children (a) are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented (Banks, 1997; Council for Exceptional Children and the National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2000; Garcia & Pearson, 1994; Reshley, 1988; Samuda, Kong, Cummins, Lewis, & Pascual-Leone, 1989); (b) are either underserved or not served at all upon being appropriately identified as having special needs (National Council on Disability, 2003); and (c) are exposed to experiences in schools that are often void of cultural and language curriculum and culturally responsive methodologies, further confounding the pursuit of equity in education (National Council on Disability, 2000; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999).

In spite of the fact that, of all Americans, as a group, Native students have the highest dropout rate from public schools, the lowest academic achievement levels, the lowest rate of school attendance,

and the lowest rate of participation in post-secondary education (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; National Council on Disability, 2003; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003), the resilience of AI/AN children, youth, families, elders, and communities cannot be overlooked. Despite AI/AN communities being nearly destroyed by disease, war, and genocide and the overt attempt by the government to eradicate traditional Native cultures and languages (Strand & Peacock, 2003), Native people have been able to maintain their tribal identities (Johnson, 2003), including religions, beliefs, values, and cultural practices. The survival of AI/AN communities and their culture has been and continues to be dependent upon communities' support, circling all aspects of life.

Early childhood, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education is but one thread of life's education; yet, that part of one's life is interconnected within all other aspects of life including emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental. The resilience to withstand, overcome, or recover from serious threat (Masten, 2001) of AI/AN communities speaks to the strengths within family systems, worldviews, and ways of teaching and learning. Red Horse et al. (1978) provided what Running Wolf et al. called "remarkable insight into the extended family system, identifying three primary differences between AI/AN families and White European or Caucasian families":

The first difference they note is in the definition of extended family. The White European or Caucasian definition identifies the extended family as three generations living in the same household, whereas in AI/AN cultures it is defined as a village-type network construct which has a significant impact on behavior and socialization processes. Secondly, in AI/AN communities this extended family structure transmits culture and conserves family patterns, which in turn contributes to identity development. Finally, according to Red Horse et al. (1978), the family promotes accountability in that it sets standards and expectations which then maintain the wholeness of the group through the enforcement of values (Running Wolf

et al., 2002, p. 34).

Resilience among AI/AN communities and families also has been referred to as cultural resilience. Cultural resilience (Ambler, 2003; Heavy Runner & Morris, 1997) is a concept that has included being proud of one's heritage; having connections with traditional Native culture and the family, school, community; and the tribe's responsibility to nurture, protect and guide children. Heavy Runner (2002) defines cultural resilience as the strength that lies in the healing process within the Native culture. This cultural resilience is also embedded within the family systems, patterns, structures, and values that are upheld within the Native community.

Research on resilience among AI/AN people has yielded some promising findings. Waller and Patterson (2002) found that an informal network of family can serve as a protective buffer against sources of stress and can be a key factor in resilience. This informal network can consist of friends, relatives and neighbors and is not limited to solely blood or clan/tribe relations. Research has also found that strong connections and ties with parents, families, communities, and traditional Native culture positively predicted school performance, school retention rates, and emotional well-being (Cummins, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 1999; Hobfoll, Jackson, Hobfoll, Pierce, & Young, 2002; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben & LaFromboise, 2001). However there remains a paucity of research on cultural resilience among AI/AN families and early childhood involvement. Therefore, as one examines current literature regarding AI/AN families'/communities' involvement in early childhood service provision, it is important to reflect upon the cultural context of parent/family involvement; that is, what constitutes family/community involvement in early childhood among AI/AN populations.

Since President Clinton's Executive Order on American Indian/Alaska Native Education (Executive Order No. 13096, 1998) placed a significant emphasis on early childhood education and the importance of related research, it is indeed timely to examine the current efforts, barriers, and best practices that are beginning to emerge from

programs charged with meeting the needs of young AI/AN children and families. AI/AN infants and young children are served through a variety of programs including Even Start, Early Head Start, Head Start, FACE, Baby FACE, local non-profit tribal and non-tribal agencies, and tribal and public schools that have elected to serve 3- to 5-year-olds within their educational systems. When children are between the ages of 5 and 8 (early elementary) they are served in either tribally controlled, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or public schools. Given the diversity of service programs, this comprehensive review of the literature regarding AI/AN family/community involvement in early childhood education was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent are rural and reservation American Indian and Alaska Native communities (families, tribes, and others) involved in their children's schools and programs?
2. How do grade level, percentage of Native enrollment, teacher, administrator, curriculum, school governance, location of school, community characteristics and tribal differences affect involvement?
3. What are some of the best practices specific to American Indian and Alaska Native children for promoting family and community involvement in early childhood programs?

The results of this review will be followed by a discussion of the implications for practice, research, and policy development.

Extent of American Indian and Alaska Native Community Involvement In Early Childhood Education

The extent of AI/AN communities' involvement in their children's early childhood schools and programs must be framed within current, often White European definitions of parent/family involvement. Herein lies one of the challenges for researchers and practitioners; that is, to go beyond such views and definitions to collect data on all facets of communities' involvement from AI/AN cultural

perspectives. It is within this context that a review of the literature for empirical studies, program reports, and related nonempirical articles were examined. The review included an exhaustive search of the ERIC data-base including government documents, Office of Indian Education publications, PsychInfo data-base, Head Start and Early Head Start reports, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, FACE and Baby FACE reports, as well as Symposiums related to early childhood education and testimony before the U.S. Congress related to AI/AN education inclusive of early childhood education. The results indicated that since the Executive Order 13096 on American Indian and Alaska Native Education signed by President Clinton on August 6, 1998, (and before) research (empirical) in AI/AN early childhood education is scarce especially when one contrasts this with the ever increasing body of knowledge within non-Native early childhood educational arenas (Demmert, 2001). There were no empirical studies found in this review (1998-present) on the extent of AI/AN families'/communities' involvement in early childhood education; however, there were data from several reports, symposiums, and congressional testimonies that warrant discussion. There were also several studies on related service provision; wherein, AI/AN families' expressed their perceptions regarding involvement in their child's early education. These studies will be presented within the "best practices" section below.

It is also important to note that some studies and reports were conducted in which AI/AN families and children were purported to be included, yet data were reported in aggregate so that one cannot evaluate the extent to which the findings do or do not hold true for AI/AN communities. For example, in the results presented in *Celebrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Head Start* (Joseph & Cohen, 2000), data collected included African Americans, Asians, Hispanic, and AI/AN, but results were not provided according to ethnic groups. Therefore, any data from AI/AN populations are hidden and non-accessible to the AI/AN families/communities, researchers and/or practitioners. The resulting data represents generalizations about culturally/linguistically diverse populations. Generalizations are subject

to extreme caution especially when applied indiscriminately across diverse populations.

Reports Specific to AI/AN Populations

A national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program was conducted and a descriptive analysis of the Tribal Even Start Program and families served in 1995-96 were reported (Tao, Khan, & Arriola, 1998). Eight of nine projects were described and compared to 563 projects reporting nationwide; approximately, 326 parents and 507 children were represented in the tribal data set and 32,814 parents in all Even Start programs. The ethnic background of participants in the tribal projects were 83% American Indian, 11% Caucasian, <1% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 0% African American. In terms of family/community involvement, the report addressed parents' participation in adult education, parenting education, and the extent to which their children participated in early childhood educational services. The report also described the extent to which parents were engaged across all three services, the types of services received, the prevalence of children with special needs and the extent of retention and goal completion by participants.

The results indicated that parents'/families' participation in home visits varied across tribal projects ranging from none to 52 over the course of a year; the average across projects was 11 in contrast to 9 reported in the national Even Start. The model of Even Start stipulates that at least one parent and child participate in all three of the services that the program offers. The reported data indicated that more than 90% of parents in the tribal Even Start project participated in the parenting opportunities (i.e., parenting classes on parent-child literacy, child development, child's language and thinking skills, etc. and parent-child activities that included social development, arts and crafts, gross motor activities, reading, storytelling, pre-reading etc.) in contrast to 88% of all Even Start projects. The rate of participation was 20 hours for tribal parents and 27 hours for non-tribal. Nearly half of the parents, 44%, participated in adult secondary education

or GED programs that were available, in contrast to 40% across all Even Start projects. However, the number of hours that parents spent in adult education was significantly lower than that of parents in non-tribal projects, 25 and 93 hours, respectively.

The type of participation of tribal parents' children indicated that the majority were served via individualized home-based programs (78%); while, 32% participated in center-based, 18% compulsory schooling (K-3) coordinating with Even Start, 16% in services for school-age children outside of school hours, 2% daycare with educational component, and 6% in no services for their children. The extent to which tribal parents participated in all three services was 71% in contrast to 75% of all Even Start projects (Among the parents not participating in all three services, most (93%) participated in the parenting opportunities or early childhood services (96%). Early childhood education had the most scheduled contact hours; for children over 2 years old the scheduled hours were 27-32 hours per month, children younger than 3 received approximately 3 hours per week in educational services. Parent-child joint activities participation rate was reported as 3 hours per month with respect to home visits, 4 hours per month in-center/classroom, and 5 hours per month in field trips, meals, or social functions. The numbers of children with special needs were 6%, in contrast to 12% of all Even Start projects. The retention and successful goal completion reflected that tribal families were continuing their participation similarly to that of non-tribal, 62% and 60%, respectively. However, of all families for whom year-end data were received, less than 1% of tribal families compared to 6% of all Even Start had completed their goals and left the program.

This data provided some general information on the types of parent/family involvement in early childhood education (i.e., parent-child activities and parenting education activities). However, the data does not reflect traditional educational activities of families or types of activities that families engaged in within the home and community that were done outside of the program contact activities.

In a more recent report on AI/AN Head Start programs (Marks & Graham, 2004), subjects voiced their perspectives on goals for

their children, including the strengthening and continuation of tribal identity via language and cultural skills, basic academic skills including literacy and math, as well as respect for diversity by integrating other ethnic group traditions into the curriculum, health and wellness, social and personal growth, self-esteem, respect, moral sensibility and personal responsibility, contributing to society, and confronting prejudice and racism. The subjects indicated that parent/family involvement and safety and stability were critical for family/community well-being. Tribal leaders, parents and family members, and Head Start staff shared the impact that many programs had on language acquisition and cultural activities that children were benefiting from as well as family engagement in education. They also identified the need to increase family engagement in the education of Native children and the need to encourage more men to participate in AI/AN education of young children and youth.

Subjects in the study by Marks and Graham also identified some of the challenges to strengthening and continuing tribal identity and culture. Factors that were highlighted included disagreement regarding the proper place for such learning to occur, which languages to integrate into programs that serve multiple tribes, the declining number of fluent language speakers within some tribes, and competing with electronic media. Although this report lacked specific data on family/community participation, strengths and challenges were summarized which emphasized parent/family involvement/engagement as a strength of the tribal Head Start programs; while also emphasizing the need to build upon that strength by increasing and sustaining involvement throughout their children's educational pathways.

Some AI/AN families have the opportunity to participate in Family and Child Education (FACE) and Baby FACE programs, which are sponsored by the Office of Indian Education Programs and the BIA. The programs focus on family literacy and the "integration of tribal languages and cultures is fundamental" (Tippeconnic & Jones, 1995, p. 7). These programs also focus on "school readiness, high school completion, adult literacy, lifelong learning, and parental participation in education" (p. 6) through center-based and/or home-based

programs. Within this review of the literature, no current data on the extent of family/community involvement in FACE and Baby Face programs were found. There was a description of the FACE program and lessons learned (Momentum, 1999; Tippeconnic & Jones, 1995) as well as testimony provided by Potvin (2000) in the hearing before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families of the Committee on Education and the Workforce House of Representatives, One Hundred and Sixth Congress, 1999. Potvin described the FACE model as a strength model:

It builds on family strengths, rather than pointing out deficits. This is a factor in family involvement and helps develop a partnership with the school that continues when the children enter the Kindergarten-12 system. Many of the parents in our program did not have a positive experience when they were in school. When they voluntarily enroll in FACE, they are inviting us into their homes. The parents are the first teachers. Our role is to strengthen and support them as their child's teacher...there are currently 22 FACE programs in over 180 Indian schools. FACE is unique in providing services from prenatal through third grade. Waiting until a child is in kindergarten to start working on parental involvement may be too late (pp. 6-7).

Comprehensive ongoing research on early childhood education programs and models is critical to understanding the unique strengths and needs of AI/AN families and communities.

Reports that Included AI/AN Populations in Aggregate Results

Joseph & Cohen (2000) included data conducted on children enrolled in Head Start, 1992-1993 and 1998-1999, in which 3.8% and 3.4% of the populations, respectively, were AI/AN. The results included home languages status, recruitment strategies, staff-to-children ethnic ratios (AI/AN approximately equivalent), multicultural

materials and activities and parents' perceptions of these efforts, the importance of parent involvement and parent activities (i.e., "search for employment through classes on self-esteem building, goal setting, career options, self-marketing, job skills training" (p. xi), health services, and suggestions for improving the ability of Head Start programs to serve families from culturally/linguistically diverse populations.

Data on parent participation and perspectives were gathered utilizing focus group and interview methodology through site visits to 30 programs that served culturally/linguistically diverse children and families. The findings indicated that there were differing perceptions among program directors and other staff regarding parental involvement. The directors indicated very high involvement; while the other staff members indicated low involvement. Some of the difficulties that were reported to be barriers to involvement by staff were echoed by parents, including the need for translators, transportation, child care, developing and maintaining relationships between staff and families, and communication. Parents indicated that they were pleased with many of the services that they participated in. In addition, there were differences in how home visits were done (i.e., a continuum ranging from service providers who were aware of and responsive to cultural values and traditions of families while conducting home visits to those who conducted home visits that were not individualized and in some cases ignored the family's cultural values and traditions). The data were reported in aggregate which poses challenges for determining the extent to which the key findings on parent participation and perspectives (successes and challenges) relate to specific ethnic populations for determining aspects that are critical to obtaining as well as maintaining high levels of family involvement.

Recent Early Head Start and Head Start evaluation reports as well as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study were conducted with diverse programs. Some of the data results were compared utilizing a control group, while other analyses were examined within the program group only (Flanagan, & West, 2004). Upon examining those reports and related papers, data on various results including

those on parent/family participation in early childhood home visiting, and mixed-model programs effects (Administration for Children and Families, 2003), American Indian populations were either not reported on, mixed in within the demographic category of “other” or mixed in with all populations. Thus, the degree to which any of the results hold “true,” in terms of effective models, parent/family participation, and challenges unique for AI/AN families/communities remains an unknown.

The extent to which grade level, percentage of Native enrollment, teacher, administrator, curriculum, school governance, location of school, community characteristics and tribal differences affect involvement in AI/AN early childhood education is unknown at this time. Studies have been conducted within Indian education that indicate that youth who develop strong cultural identities experience higher levels of success in education (Huffman, Still, & Brokenleg, 1986; Vadas, 1995; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001). The importance of the role that caring families and teachers have on building resiliency as well as providing high expectations and opportunities to participate (Demmert, 2001) adds further support for the need to understand the factors that support family/community involvement in early childhood education and beyond. Students with involved parents, regardless of income or background, are more likely to experience success in academics and social skills, as well as persist through graduation and post-secondary education (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Best Practices for Family and Community Involvement

Promoting family/community involvement in AI/AN early childhood education is fundamental to ensuring physical, emotional, spiritual, mental health of tomorrow’s leaders. Cummins et al. investigated the correlates of physical and emotional health among AI/AN adolescents and stressed that “the connection to family remains a consistently powerful factor in the lives of these youth” (p. 38). Further, Congress designed several specific procedural safe-

guards to allow parents/caregivers input into school decisions and to maximize the likelihood of providing an appropriate education for children and youth with disabilities (Yell, 1998). Therefore, identifying best practices for promoting family/community involvement is warranted. The best practices highlighted here are based upon a review of related literature (descriptive narratives of various programs and models, opinion papers, related research studies, etc.). The need for research (qualitative and quantitative) regarding the validity of these components/practices, as well as models utilizing various combinations of these practices, cannot be overstated.

1. Integrate language and culture (curriculum, methods) throughout service provision programs (Aakhus & Hoover, 1998; Banks, 2004; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Pavel, Banks, & Pavel, 2002).
2. Acknowledge and build on families' strengths (Banks-Joseph, 2005; Potvin, 1999; Tippeconnic & Jones, 1995).
3. Build trust through respectful, reciprocal relationships between families/communities and service providers (Joseph & Cohen, 2000; Cross, Earle, Echo-Hawk Solie, & Manness, 2000; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999).
4. Implement and/or develop programs in tribal-specific manners matching their unique family-based cultural values, beliefs, and kinship systems (Medicine, 1981; National Council on Disabilities, 2003; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999).
5. Involve families/communities (i.e., children, parents, aunties, uncles, grandparents, elders) in the decision-making processes (Demmert, 2001; Howard, Williams, & Lepper, 2001; National Council on Disability, 2003; Olson, Olson, Pingayak, Sterling, & Pierzchanowski, 2002).
6. Utilize mixed methods of service delivery (i.e., home-based and center-based) as opposed to a single method (Joseph & Cohen, 2000).
7. Recruit and retain AI/AN service providers (administrators and direct service providers) (Pavel, Banks, & Pavel, 2002;

- Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2000).
8. Provide interpreters consistently when needed (Joseph & Cohen, 2000).
 9. Provide transportation and child care consistently when needed (Tao, Khan, & Arriola, 1998).
 10. Utilize family liaisons/community friends/advocates when needed (Banks-Joseph, 2005).
 11. Provide ongoing professional training (cross-cultural communication, learning styles, curriculum development, disabilities, etc.) (Demmert, 2001; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2000; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999).
 12. Provide ways for families/community members to provide ongoing feedback (Banks, 2004; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; Hernandez, 2001; National Council on Disability, 2003).
 13. Provide collaborative teaming networks with all agencies providing services to young children and families (Howard, Williams, Port, & Lepper, 2001).
 14. Invite families whose children have moved on to elementary and/or secondary school to serve as support families (i.e., ongoing community involvement) (Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003; Barnhardt, 1999).
 15. Set up family/community involvement transition plans.

AI/AN parents, families, elders, children and young adults, communities, teachers, and researchers have shared their concerns and suggestions for improving schools (i.e., BIA, tribal, public, etc.) and related educational services (i.e., general education, early childhood education, special education, etc.) for decades (Banks, 2004; Charleston, 1994; Cross Earle, Echo-Hawk, Solie, & Manness, 2000; Cummins et al., 1999; Cross, 1986; Medicine, 1981; Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996; St. Germaine, 2000; Running Wolf et al., 2002; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). It is imperative that as programs are implemented, developed, and modified, that data are gathered across multiple dimensions in a culturally appropriate manner. The need for such research is urgent given the ongoing failure of schools and

educational systems to facilitate the expression and growth of AI/AN children's gifts and talents.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this review of the literature on AI/AN family/community involvement in early childhood education, including special education, indicates the scarcity of studies, not only in this topic area, but also within AI/AN early childhood education more broadly. The extent of AI/AN family/community involvement in early childhood education is unclear. So, too, is how that involvement may differ according to grade level, percentage of Native enrollment, teacher, administrator, curriculum, school governance, location of school, community characteristics and tribal differences; and what constitutes "best practices" in promoting AI/AN family/community involvement. This is particularly disconcerting given the amount of research conducted in early childhood within the non-Native populations. Additionally, according to Banks (2004):

In a report to Congress (2003) by the National Council on Disabilities, family/tribal involvement in general and special education, culturally responsive service delivery, reading and standard English performance, family/professional communication (cross-cultural communication) and collaboration, parent/caregiver information and resource dissemination, among other issues, were identified as needing improvement (National Council on Disabilities, 2003). Recommendations for improvement include establishing effective research-based interventions, developing and implementing culturally responsive curriculum, implementing language and cultural programs, developing Tribal policies regarding special education and disability services, developing inter/intra-agency collaboration/partnerships to effectively build seamless responsive services (driven by child, family, and tribal needs and priorities), cross-tribal advocacy for disability issues at the state and

national levels (use sovereignty to effect educational change for all indigenous people), and incorporate Tribal consensus regarding accountability of any and all service delivery systems (p. 7).

Research that is funded and collected at national and state levels would be more beneficial to participants and programs if data were reported both in aggregate form and disaggregate form. Specific information is needed for making recommendations for funding, policy development, and refining future research questions as we seek to improve early childhood educational service access, delivery, and implementation for AI/AN children, families, and communities.

Family/community involvement research that clearly defines “involvement” from an AI/AN traditional contextual context is needed to insure that the research and subsequent implications are comprehensive and relevant. In addition to clear and culturally appropriate definitions of “involvement” in education, Johnson (2003) points out the need for research to be conducted in a postcolonial framework using an indigenous set of experiences, traditions and epistemologies. Rather than approaching educational research from an “at-risk” mindset with the sole focus on family and the children, it is important to also consider systems of power and colonialist educational practices that may be negating the resilience of AI/AN families in education and the traditional and cultural models of childhood development. The paucity of research on AI/AN family involvement could be due to the “at-risk” ideology which has led practitioners and educators to provide interventions and support systems outside or away from the family and culture (Johnson, 2003) and therefore making it difficult to understand, conceptualize, and research family involvement through an indigenous framework. Research needs to examine policies of social systems that support and enhance family and cultural resilience that in turn can positively affect early childhood development and education. The concept of cultural resilience can be strengthened by further refinement of the underlying constructs including ethnic identity and ethnic family schema which appear to

have protective value in promoting resilience in other indigenous groups (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005). Such research could serve to empower communities as they seek to ensure that their children and youth are prepared to meet the successes and challenges that life long learning will surely present.

Conclusions

AI/AN families have been described as the most marginalized groups with respect to educational equity (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003). Family involvement in early childhood education that extends to community, tribal, and intertribal relations are essential to effect systemic change for future generations. To accomplish this, outreach efforts (i.e., identifying, informing, training, soliciting input on services needed and the efficacy of those services, etc.) to address AI/AN families' needs in schools and related wellness areas on and off reservation are truly needed. How long will the children and families have to wait? All AI/AN children and families have precious gifts to share within their communities and beyond. Traditional, holistic, community-centered educational practices implemented within AI/AN early childhood education may facilitate growth, healing, and wellness for future generations – a goal in need of immediate pursuit.

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