

Early Childhood Educational Opportunities
For American Indian and Alaska Native Children and Families

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THERE EXIST economic, social, and cultural costs to acquiring access to *quality* early childhood education for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) families. Even if individual families have the financial background to “invest” in early education, the challenge remains for an increased portion of American Indian and Alaska Native families to acquire the benefits of an early childhood education. To help parents make informed choices among available program possibilities, research needs to be conducted to investigate whether children from different economic, language, and cultural backgrounds respond differently to early childhood education in general or to specific program models (Cotton & Conklin, 1998).

Access to early education is an issue that intimately involves both child *and* parent. Access to early education requires parents, educators, and researchers to carefully critique existing educational structures and philosophies in order to focus attention on accessing quality early education. Ultimately, economic, social, and cultural investments need to be made in order to bring forth new energy and possibilities for American Indian and Alaska Native families residing in diverse social and cultural contexts.

In this paper, I present and discuss issues of access to early childhood education and educational opportunities in terms of American Indian/Alaska Native economic, social, and cultural investments. I will examine research on access to early childhood education in general and discuss descriptive demographic data, extracted from the Decennial Census 2000 and other available sources that may include American Indian and Alaska Native early childhood education data. The following questions guide my inquiry:

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

1. To what extent do American Indian and Alaska Native children and their families in reservation, rural, urban, and other settings have early childhood education opportunities available to them?
2. How can a network of tribal early childhood programs be organized for action, particularly in rural settings?

Saluja, Early, and Clifford (2002) report that overall the number of children attending early childhood programs has been increasing. What the increase means in terms of AI/AN children and families can be explored by examining descriptive data and existing research literature focused on various tribal nations and early childhood education programs. Currently, there is little research that examines in-depth the current state of early childhood education for AI/AN children (Cahape & Demmert, 2003). Cahape and Demmert found, in their review of American Indian early childhood education, that research studies tend to focus generously on educational evaluations of programs for accountability purposes and on health domains, and very little on examining access to programs.

Moreover, the existing research lacks reliable statistics about how many AI/AN children and families are served by the different types of programs. The lack of information and studies may be due to the fact that until the 2000 Census, data specifically focused on AI/AN populations were not available, not collected, collected by some tribes and not others, or were not easily accessible for analysis. However, with increased technological advances, opportunities to access meaningful national data are improving. Moreover, early childhood programs and centers are able to communicate information in ways that are readily available in published reports (i.e., Head Start) on the Internet. On the other hand many of these published reports include only those groups with significant numbers or percentages of the U.S. population, such as White, African American, and, more recently, the drastically increasing, Hispanic/Latino population.

Access to Early Childhood Education:
Review of Research

To understand access in terms of early childhood education, it is important to examine the general early education literature on access and benefits of early education, and from this work hone in on questions related to AI/AN populations. Researchers have reported that pre-kindergarten education and experiences are important for school readiness for both child and parent (Nissani, 1993). Specifically, a national research sample indicated that “attending Head Start, prekindergarten, or other center-based preschool programs was linked to higher emerging literacy scores in 4-year-olds. This correlation remained statistically significant when other child and family characteristics were taken into account. This benefit of preschool attendance accrued to children from both high-risk and low-risk family backgrounds” (Zill et al., 1995). In a review of research, Cotton and Conklin (1998) reported that parents whose children were preschool graduates were more likely to be involved in their child’s education (Lazar & Darlington, 1982), had high expectations for their child (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Featherstone, 1986), and felt comfortable contacting teachers more often (Featherstone, 1986). Access to such early childhood educational programs has been linked to income level of parents (Svestka, 1995). Interestingly, Schumacher and Greenberg (1999) and the Children’s Aid Society (1999) found that access to quality child care was very limited for families leaving welfare.

Research focused on early education for language minority students suggests that education should be inclusive of family. For example, Nissani (1993) suggests that in order to “promote the healthy self-esteem of each and every young child, early childhood education programs must be thoughtfully designed to serve both parents and children – all the more so for those who speak a language other than English at home”.

The 1990 decennial U.S. Census revealed, “participation rates in preschool, including both public and private programs, are 81% of

5-year-olds, 50% of 4-year-olds, and 30% of 3-year-olds” (Svestka, 1995). Interestingly, when Svestka examined available data on financing preschool for all children, she found that the U.S. provides free education targeted “exclusively for the poorest children and for disabled children, while in other countries all children are included in the regular preschool classes, and children with various special needs receive additional benefits.” Moreover, the U.S. is believed to be far more financially capable of investing in the education of young children than other countries such as France and Italy. However, France and Italy reported 100% and 92% participation in preschool respectively. This information highlights our greatest challenge of persuading the general U.S. public and government to invest in high quality early education for young children residing in the U.S. If in the U.S. we are unable to create opportunities for the general U.S. population at large to achieve 100% participation in early childhood education, the question becomes: Which populations within the U.S. are not receiving quality early education?

Access to early childhood education can be defined in terms of ability or motivation to acquire programmatic and structured schooling opportunities or informal learning opportunities provided through socialization with family and interactions with a cultural or social community. The majority of the existing research discusses educational opportunities in terms of formal structured programs, such as early childhood learning centers, and programs offered by non-profit and for-profit organizations (independent for-profit, religious affiliate, Head Start, public school, independent non-profit or other public agency). In this paper I treat informal non-school learning and socialization provided by parents, family, and community as important considerations in examining the question of access to early learning opportunities. For example, a specific tribal nation may set priority on early Native language learning opportunities with village elders – and having access to this type of education may be just as important as having access to opportunities in structured school settings.

Descriptive Data

There are very limited sources of descriptive data specifically focused on AI/AN early childhood education. There are numerous reports in the form of program evaluations which may provide local and tribal specific information – certainly tribes and early childhood educational programs serving Native children would benefit from an in-depth examination of these reports or a quantitative study which provides an overview of tribal access to various types of early education opportunities. In an effort to provide an overview of the existing knowledge, I chose to focus on three main sources of data: Census 2000, Head Start Statistics, and reports generated by the Children’s Defense Fund. These three sources are widely used in research and advocacy work related to early education and populations served by such programs. Finally, by examining reports and descriptive data provided by these three organizations, I could share the strengths and weaknesses of the existing knowledge in terms of generating researchable questions for future work.

Census 2000. The U.S. Census American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File (AIANSF) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) provides both an overview and tribally specific information about enrollment in school by age and by school type: nursery school and preschool. Using the AIANSF data tool, I extracted sample data focused on two particular populations: 1) American Indian and Alaska Native 3- and 4- year olds enrolled in school, and 2) children enrolled in public and private nursery/preschool. These two samples of data were treated as different inquiries because children enrolled in public and private nursery and preschool include children who may be older than 3- and 4- years old. The two sets of information were extracted to highlight different aspects of early education access; general enrollment by specific age grouping and nursery/preschool by public and private school status. Both sets of data are important to building a fuller understanding of access to early education program type.

The AIANSF data sample showed that of the total number of

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

AI/AN children who were 3 and 4 years old in 2000, there were approximately 37,492 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in school, compared to 44,675 3- and 4-year-olds *not* enrolled in school (see Figure 1). When this same population was compared with the total U.S. non-Native population of 3- and 4-year-olds (see Figure 2), 46% of AI/AN 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled compared to 49% of the children in the total U.S. population. By contrast, 54% of the AI/AN 3- and 4-year-olds were *not* enrolled in preschool, compared to 51% of the 3- and 4-year-olds in the total U.S. population. In the U.S. population about half were enrolled and half were not enrolled. In the AI/AN

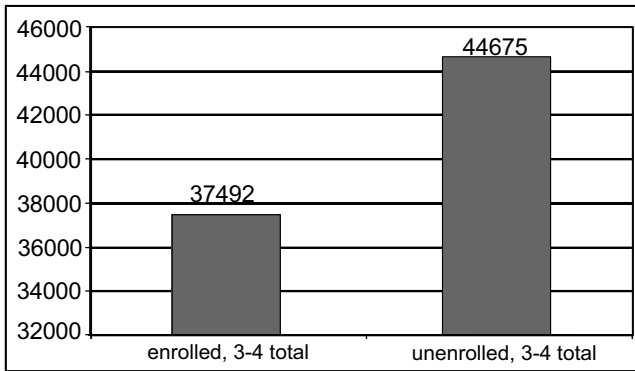


Figure 1. School enrollment status for all American Indians and Alaska Natives, 3-4 years old. (Source: U.S. Census 2000 – American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File (AIANSF) – Sample Data.)

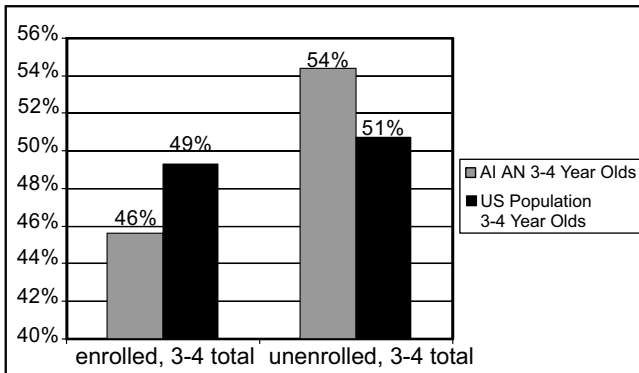


Figure 2. Enrollment in nursery school, preschool by race as a percent of total age group, 3- years old. (Source: U.S. Census 2000 – American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File (AIANSF) – Sample Data.)

the picture is much different; a greater percent were not enrolled than were enrolled.

I include Table 1 to show data broken down by selected tribes with populations greater than 10,000 members; data is available to do more careful analyses of enrollments in early childhood programs by tribe. Note that for some tribes, such as Pine Ridge, the enrollment picture differs from the overall picture of AI/AN children – more children are enrolled than are not enrolled. Other tribes more closely mirror the overall picture in which a greater number of children are not enrolled. This chart also provides a breakdown by gender allowing the possibility to analyze differences and trends between male and female 3- and 4- year olds. Additionally it is possible to look at breakdowns of programs by type of program: public and private.

Table 2 breaks down enrollments by both gender and public and private nursery/preschool (note that this table includes children

Tribe	Total Population	Population 3 years and over: Male; Enrolled in school; 3 and 4 years	Population 3 years and over: Male; Not enrolled in school; 3 and 4 years	Population 3 years and over: Female; Enrolled in school; 3 and 4 years	Population 3 years and over: Female; Not enrolled in school; 3 and 4 years
Gila River Reservation, AZ	10317	55	145	62	147
Fort Apache Reservation, AZ	11597	114	103	83	107
Pine Ridge Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land, SD — NE	14255	186	143	141	147
Chickasaw OTSA, OK	22378	128	229	274	233
Choctaw OTSA, OK	29357	231	273	231	332
Creek OTSA, OK	49564	331	531	385	542
Cherokee OTSA, OK	74739	594	931	561	800
Navajo Nation Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land, AZ — NM — UT	174847	1468	1792	1656	1610
Total	387054	3107	4145	3393	3918

Table 1. Selected tribes (total population > 10,000) by 3- and 4- year olds enrolled and not enrolled in nursery school or preschool. (Source: U.S. Census 2000 – American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File (AIANSF) – Sample Data.)

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

older than 4 years old). It is clear that the great majority of AI/AN children enrolled in school are enrolled in public nursery/preschool programs. This points to a greater responsibility for tribal and U.S. governments to provide high quality programs, as most of the children are enrolled in public programs.

Head Start. A recent report released by the National Head Start Association in the form of a fact sheet brief indicates that of the 1,072,014 children and pregnant mothers reported as receiving services in 2003, 11% were AI/AN, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Bi- or Multiracial, and other (see Table 3). Statistics provided in the brief did not disaggregate and distinguish data by

	Male	Female	Total
Enrolled in nursery school; preschool	25,610	23,672	49,282
Enrolled in nursery school; preschool; public	20,594	18,979	39,573
Enrolled in nursery school; preschool; private	5,016	4,693	9,709

Table 2. AI/AN enrollment status: Male and female by public and private nursery/preschool enrollment. (Source: U.S. Census 2000 – American Indian and Alaska Native Summary File (AIANSF) – Sample Data.)

Ethnicity	Children %	Staff %
White	35%	42%
Black	27%	27%
Latino	25%	21%
American Indian or Alaska Native	4%	3%
Biracial or Multiracial	4%	1%
Asian	1%	2%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%	1%

Table 3. Early Head Start population, 2002, by ethnicity. (Source: Irish, K., Schumacher, R., & Lombardi, J. (2003). *Serving America's youngest: A snapshot of Early Head Start children, families, teachers, and programs in 2002.* (Head Start Series Brief No. 3). Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

AI/AN only (for more information see the National Head Start Association web site: <http://www.nhsa.org>). The lack of disaggregated data for AI/AN children and families is overshadowed by attention paid to larger ethnic groups: White, Hispanic and African American, and by the need to generate “generalizable” research findings through national “scientific” studies. Targeted statistics revealing AI/AN access to early childhood programs and services provided by Head Start would be informative to a national research and program agenda focused on AI/AN early education.

The national study indicates that the findings of this “probability national sample” of Head Start programs are generalizable to “all newly entering 3- and 4-year-olds in all Head Start Centers operating in 2002-03, *except those serving only special populations (i.e., programs serving primarily only migrant, Native American, or Early Head Start children)*” (Westat & others, 2005, p. 50, italics added for emphasis). When national studies exclude AI/AN children and families, it is nearly impossible to examine national Head Start data in terms of AI/AN early education provided by Head Start Centers and programs. The access to data on AI/AN students may become much more cumbersome as educational researchers will be forced to extract data by tribe through other venues.

Children's Defense Fund, 2005. In 2002-2003, 44.4% of the children enrolled in Head Start in Alaska were identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (2005a). In general, early childhood education centers in Alaska do not require teachers to participate in ECE pre-service, nor does the state require family child care homes to have similar pre-service in caring for young children. The child care provided to AI/AN children and other children in Alaska are provided by programs with teachers who, for the most part, are not exposed to pre-service in early childhood care and education and by programs that have low salaries, which the Children's Defense Fund links to high teacher turnover. What this information signals is to carefully consider the quality of those programs to which AI/AN families have access, particularly if there exists high turnover in staff and little to no pre-service for

teachers providing care to young Native children.

An interesting comparison provided by the Children's Defense Fund: In the year 2000, the cost of child care was reportedly \$6,019 per child per year as compared to the annual cost of public college tuition, which was \$2,855. Early child care costs more than one year of a college education! In another report, the Children's Defense Fund (2005b) describes similar differences in annual costs for child care (\$4,627) and college (\$2,990) in North Dakota. This is relevant and important data because in the state of North Dakota, AI/AN as a group are reported as the second largest ethnic population, and comprised 11% of the total number of Head Start enrollees in North Dakota in 2003-2004. The reasons for the disparity in costs for early child care and college in Alaska and North Dakota were not discussed, only highlighted.

If family income is correlated with access to high quality child care, we have reason to be concerned about the ability of Native families to sustain access to costly early childhood education. Researchers and early childhood education advocates must consider the economic challenges of providing every AI/AN child with a continuous *and* quality early learning experience. The North Dakota and Alaska examples are only two of many states in which tribal nations reside. The information provided by the Children's Defense Fund provides evidence which motivates educational leaders and researchers to seek viable possibilities to create better educational investments in quality early education for AI/AN children.

Factors Affecting Access to Early Childhood Education

In this section, I attempt to speak about access in complex ways. Access is more than simply delivering a child to a physical location called preschool or day care. Access for parents and children must include knowing about the ways in which to interact, read (text and context), and critically engage in the structural and political aspects of the educational system. As I searched the Navajo Head Start Department's web site (see <http://www.nnheadstart.org>), I realized

that in order to benefit from the great amount of knowledge and information posted on this site, parents must first have a computer with access to the Internet. Second, parents must be both computer literate and be literate in the English language in order to access this knowledge. And third, both of these characteristics – having a computer with Internet access and literacy in English – are connected with having sufficient income to sustain Internet access and educational attainment or background.

I noticed that in order to enroll a child in the programs, parents must fill out what is called a “Head Start Recruitment Worksheet,” two pages of questions with notations that inform parents that filling out the form is not a guarantee that their child will be enrolled. This process requires the parent to know the entire process for enrollment, including the qualifications needed to be considered a viable participant. And in order to fill out the worksheet, parents must be able to read and write.

I wondered about the effectiveness of the ways in which early education programs make themselves accessible to parents. This line of thought also led to questions about the current levels of literacy among American Indians and Alaska Natives, and whether or not there is a link to issues of access to quality early education. How many of the Native grandparents who care for grandchildren have sufficient opportunities to access early education institutions in meaningful ways? How does the fact that many grandparents do not speak English have an impact on access to early education? More than 75% of the total number of parents who benefit from Early Head Start programs have little or no schooling past high school (Irish, Schumacher, & Lombardi, 2003). While this data was not disaggregated by race, the percentage provides a snapshot of the overall challenges that may exist in terms of need for child care, and ability to access and interact with programs in effective ways. Early education centers and programs can be innovative in their approaches to outreach, considering creative approaches to reaching parents that they may not already be reaching with their current methods.

Access to Information about Quality Early Childhood Education Opportunities

The challenge of access to early education opportunities continues to point to the limited knowledge that parents and families have about early childhood programs and options. A study conducted by Schumacher and Greenberg (1999) suggests that families leaving welfare do not use subsidies because they do not know that they are available, or as Fuller and Kagan (2000) found, single mothers after leaving welfare did not have the time to investigate all their options for child care (Fuller, et al., 2002). Lack of information addressing the following questions may exist: Which education program is best for my child, a public or a private program? What are the benefits to enrolling my child in a racially integrated early childhood program versus a program that is racially and geographically isolated? How much time should young children spend in early education programs? What is the influence of speaking a language other than English in accessing quality child care programs? How do families choose an educational program that is responsive to learning and physical disabilities? Is educational research available to parents and families in a format that is both accessible and informative? To what extent do parents and families consider the importance of research in their decisions? To what extent do parents and families consider future educational outcomes linked to early educational opportunities in their decision to enroll a child in early education programs? Responses to these questions may prove significant in parental decisions about their child's early education. These are questions that can also inform a research agenda focused on early childhood education for AI/AN families. Lastly, parents who are knowledgeable about early education opportunities are in a better position to envision their child's early learning experiences as a social, cultural, and economic investment in their child's future.

In addition to parents, tribal communities and educational agencies can serve as valuable partners in gathering information and knowledge about early education. Community members may require knowledge

about the process for accessing appropriate and sufficient funding to create programs that meet the needs of local communities and families. Availability of programs is a massive challenge, particularly for rural communities which may not have the local resources to seek funding opportunities. Organizing rural communities in multiple ways is an action that can increase the local knowledge base and may spur local education projects. Rural Voices, a community capacity project in Manitoba, Canada, seeks to increase rural participant involvement in developing social programs, which include thinking about early childhood education opportunities. Questions about rural early education are apparent in the global context as well. Rural Voices has learned the following from their pilot and research projects with rural, northern child care in Canada during the past 15-20 years (2005):

- “Few provinces have not experimented with rural service delivery options and seasonal supports.”
- “Lessons learned and progress made rarely receive necessary attention to move forward with responsive public policy changes.”
- “Although the realities and subsequent changes in rural life continue to lessen the gap between urban and rural child care needs, the challenges of population base, geography, and irregular employment patterns mean rural input into public policy development is critical if future public policy development is to respond to rural families.”
- “In Canada approximately 30% of the population lives in non-urban areas, 80% of the land mass is non-urban - the people who live in these areas are guaranteed access to social programs under Social Union Framework Agreement.”
- “Provincial and territorial governments all acknowledge there are needs for child care in rural, remote and northern communities. The issue centers around the fact that the new service models need to be developed and put in place to meet the diverse needs of individual communities.

What can we learn from Rural Voices? We learn that our neighbor

country to the north guarantees access for rural population people – of which First Nations people make up a percentage – to social programs such as early childhood education. Rural Voices also acknowledges what we know, which is that “new service models need to be created to serve diverse populations.” Work with rural AI/AN communities will benefit from examining other progress made in rural communities, such as work conducted by Rural Voices in Canada. There exist cautionary tales particularly focused on the way in which lessons learned and progress made “rarely receive necessary attention to move forward with responsive public policy changes.” Without serious attention to creating both programs and responsive public policy, change in access to quality programs may be limited to parents and families with young children. It is clear that AI/AN parents, families and communities need to become active and knowledgeable in the educational and political agendas at the local, regional and national levels. Active educational and political participation can lead to increased opportunities for local communities to embark on developing quality early education programs close to home.

Access to Quality Programs and Facilities

Access to quality programs and facilities are dependent upon the type of program desired, costs, location, and flexibility in hours of business. There are many different types of early childhood learning programs and centers available from which families can choose. The question remains: Do the choices meet the expectations that AI/AN families have for those programs and centers? The mere existence of choice highlights both the need to consider issues of economic, physical, and political access, and the need to question whether the choices provide the kind of early education that may socialize values and beliefs in young Native children that are in connection with family expectations. Families in urban and suburban settings may have more choices in terms of number of programs and centers; do they also have the kind of education that incorporates tribal knowledge, values, language, and culture? Surely, family and parental expecta-

tions are important in deciding among available early child care and education options.

Snipp (1988), a prominent Native sociologist, conducts empirical demographic studies particularly focused on AI/AN peoples. Snipp and other sociologists have conducted relevant research about American Indian families in urban settings. Snipp reports that many of these Native individuals resist assimilation into the White culture and retain and maintain their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This phenomenon of social and cultural resistance is important, as it allows us to question whether the early education programs available to American Indian families actually reflect cultural and social values of their family and tribe. And in terms of cultural and relevant educational programming, are these programs based on authentic knowledge and practices? Are these considerations important to AI/AN parents?

I would venture to guess that in rural areas the number of programs and centers available to families are less in number, but the need for parents to make informed choices about their child's early education remains. The choices can range from placing their child in the care of their relatives or in daycare offered by the tribe (through Head Start) or religious organizations. Again, we know little about what motivates parents to choose one option over other options. The research literature, in general, speaks to parental choice having much to do with flexible schedules and hours of operation and availability.

Access to Tribal Knowledge and Processes of Learning

Soto and Swadener (2002) discuss the need for groups perceived as "the minority" to construct educational paradigms which reflect the cultures and values associated with unique linguistic and cultural groups and reflect the experiences and values of social classes other than the White, European middle-class. With this significant perspective in mind, the research discussed to this point becomes marginal and even questionable in our efforts to define and describe access

to quality early education programs that attempt to educate young children in terms of indigenous knowledge, language, and ways. Soto and Swadener call educators to action by asking educators “to examine and critique how issues of power are affecting our lives and children’s lives...” and opening our eyes to “see the need to rethink our overreliance on a strictly scientific world-view” (2002, p. 52). Methodology used to create debate and consider theory, research, and praxis certainly should include generating questions about access to local tribal knowledge and history as early learning opportunities for young Native children. What opportunities are there for young children in programs to access tribal language and culture and interact with Native teachers and elders? Do Head Start programs serving reservation communities infuse local social and institutional culture-learning experiences, so that young children and families are exposed to both “mainstream” values and tribal values? What role does culture and language play in religious-based early childhood education? Is this aspect of early learning important to parents? These are questions which need further investigation.

Access to Culturally Responsive Teachers and Instruction

In a time of increased cultural and linguistic diversity in populations in both urban and rural settings, the teaching force providing education to these contexts needs to reflect preparation for teaching children representing diverse cultural backgrounds (Horm, 2003). Irish, Schumacher, and Lombardi (2003) reported the following breakdown of children and staff by race in Early Head Start programs (see Table 3). Irish, et al. (2003) suggest that what these statistics demonstrate is that, overall, the Early Head Start program staff tends to reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the children they serve. While this may be true when we examine the aggregate data, the data does not necessarily indicate that students and staff of the same race are matched together at the same sites. It would be important to see what the data looks like for individual races, such as American Indian and Alaska Native. Overall, AI/AN parents may

have access to Head Start programs but we don't know if they have access to culturally responsive teachers.

Organizing Tribal Networks for Access in Rural Educational Contexts

American Indian and Alaska Native nations have available to them a variety of tribal and intertribal resources, research institutions, and universities interested in improving early educational access for young children. Below I share some initial ideas for the development of tribal networks, partnerships and nationally funded research-based projects that may contribute to rural tribal needs and contexts. In order to build inter-tribal capacity quickly, tribal nations can begin work by building upon existing educational agendas, and devise research questions targeted at local tribal issues. Some of the ideas shared here are meant to target what early childhood educators can do, and other ideas are intended for consideration by tribal organizations and educational networks at large.

Tribal Networks – Beyond Single Nationhood (Inter-tribal Consortium)

Tribal nations already demonstrate innovation in intertribal collaborations to meet their needs. In conceptualizing tribal networks among small rural tribes, we can learn from successful tribal consortia which currently exist — for example, the Northwest Intertribal Court System. The Northwest Intertribal Court System is an advancement of tribal sovereignty comprised of the following Northwest tribes: Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, Muckleshoot Tribe, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Sauk-Suiattle Tribe, Shoalwater Bay Tribe, Skokomish Tribe, Stillaguamish Tribe, and Tulalip Tribes. This intertribal system was created to respond to individual tribal needs and maintain legal autonomy from the state legal system (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2003):

The reality was that many western Washington tribes simply

did not have the resources to maintain their own court systems. Some of these tribes are extremely small, consisting of a couple hundred citizens. Many of them could not provide the necessary funding or professional staff to operate independent tribal courts. And, yet, because the tribes lacked robust dispute resolution mechanisms, tribal citizens were regularly forced into state courts for the resolution of critical tribal disputes.

Early childhood education for small, rural tribes share similar characteristics as the tribes of the Northwest Intertribal group; programs lack economic resources, have small populations within tribes, and have limited staff to support educational opportunities which must respond to both geographic distance and quality in terms of trained educators and opportunities for continued professional development.

Use of technology. Early childhood teachers serving AI/AN children in rural areas can use electronic networking to communicate with other teachers serving similar populations. Honey and Henriquez (1993) suggest that this type of professional interaction supports a sense of autonomy for teachers. In addition, access to email, Internet, and electronic discussion groups serve as other resources for teachers in their search for quality research and information on teacher practice (Rothenberg, 1995). Use of technology by early childhood teachers in conjunction with other modes of conferencing, pre-service, and in-service may provide continued networking with other early child educators. Access to technology may prove to be a problem for programs with little funding to support this type of interface.

Tribal research inquiry. Tribal research inquiry – research initiated and conducted by the tribes themselves – is imperative to the process of increasing access to early education, particularly for rural tribal nations. When research is conducted about programs serving AI/AN children by non-Native researchers or researchers from outside of the local community, findings may not bloom into implementation

of quality programs or policies which target improving educational opportunities for AI/AN children and families. It is important that tribal and intertribal initiatives be developed to carry out and document promising practices in terms of policy, program implementation, and funding at the local, regional, and national levels. There exist multiple venues for sharing research conducted by tribes, such as the National Indian Education Association annual meeting, and early childhood education conferences, such as the Head Start annual conference, or via a National AI/AN early childhood education research center.

Tribal, tribal college and university partnerships. Partnerships among these three political entities – tribes, tribal colleges, and universities – are crucial. Tribes, as sovereign nations, have much power to control the development of early childhood education initiatives. Tribal colleges and universities have the capacity to help guide tribes to fund and develop research projects which respond directly to tribal and inter-tribal early education needs. Strong partnerships create sustained opportunities to create longitudinal studies of early education and provide the means to include research-based recommendations in local, regional, and national policy. Endless possibilities exist both for individual tribes and inter-tribal networks.

Early Childhood Education As a Cultural, Social, and Economic Investment

AI/AN children and families need to be empowered to access quality early childhood education in ways that extend beyond physically entering centers or programs. Educators and researchers must be challenged to think about access in complex ways, including questioning current research informed mainly by “generalizable studies” with “representative samples,” which ultimately do not include or apply to AI/AN populations. Alternative research methodologies may lead researchers to discover new and important findings.

The investment in early education makes sense when *all* Native

children – regardless of family income – are provided the opportunity to be exposed to quality learning opportunities – both in and out of formal programs. In turn, researchers and educators must remember that our low participation rates are low because there are minimum qualifications to participate in most government-funded or non-profit programs. Not all children and families qualify to enroll, and many of these families that never qualify may be on the cusp of economic need and at the same time fall just below the ability to afford to enroll in private or other early education programs – not funded by government subsidies. The reality is that we will not reach 100% participation until multiple organizations, tribes, and the U.S. government at large sees that early education is a social, cultural, and economic investment in every child's future.

Access is about both entrance/participation and quality. Entrance or participation in low quality programs is not really access at all. Critically examining access to early education is much like “looking a gift horse in the mouth.” We are receiving “free” education, and yet I am asking that we look carefully at what it is that we are getting that is “free.” What is the quality of this free education? Finally, we need to ask ourselves, “Do we want access to an educational system built on weighted political agendas and mediocrity?”

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