

The Development of a Curriculum Toolkit with American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

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Abstract This article explains the creation of the *Growing and Learning with Young Native Children* curriculum toolkit. The curriculum toolkit was designed to give American Indian and Alaska Native early childhood educators who work in a variety of settings the framework for developing a research-based, developmentally appropriate, tribally specific curriculum to use with Native children aged 0–3. The curriculum toolkit should assist Native people in preserving and maintaining their unique culture and language. Challenges specific to the implementation of an early childhood program in Indian Country have been explained. A brief historical overview of Indian education has been included.

Keywords American Indian and Alaska Native · Early childhood education · Language preservation · Culture · Curriculum development

The relationship between American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people and the government has long been problematic as noted by constantly changing policies concerning status and education (Urban and Wagoner 2004). While the Dawes Act in the 1880s and the movement to

restore tribal rights to self-determination in the mid-1900s are good illustrations of these changes, the changing policies are more easily seen in the education of AI/AN children. For many children, education has been seen as opportunity; for Native children, education has been repression through acculturation (Altenbaugh 2003). Many AI/AN children and families were forced to accept an education that would *civilize* and *Christianize* children rather than one which would foster their development in a kind and nurturing environment (Adams 1995).

Formalized schooling practices often forced AI/AN children to leave their homes and families. During this time, AI/AN people were not official United States citizens; they did not have any power over their destiny. AI/AN families were forced to submit their lives and the education of their children to United States government officials (Eder and Reyhner 1988). Federal involvement in Indian education officially began in 1776 when the Continental Congress provided a minister, a blacksmith, and two teachers to become part of the New York Indian community. They were to provide instruction in agriculture, mechanical concepts, and if possible, some academic subjects (Utter 2001).

The education AI/AN children received often required them to “dress, speak, and act like white people” (Reyhner 1989, para. 2). Anything *native* (i.e., language, prayers, stories, songs, clothes, jewelry, hairstyle, etc.) was not permitted in church operated or federally funded schools (Adams 1995). Harsh and cruel punishments often accompanied any display of traditional AI/AN culture. Captain Richard Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian School, noted formal schools were to “kill the Indian ... and save the man” (as cited in Adams 1995, p. 52).

Approximately 400 treaties between 1778 and 1871 solidified the exchange of land for promises between

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Native people and the federal government. Of these 400 plus treaties, more than 100 contained elements related to Indian education (Deyhle and Swisher 1997). According to Tippeconnic and Swisher (1992), treaties, congressional acts, legal decisions, and subsequent executive orders created the legal foundation for federal responsibility of Indian education.

The recognition of the Indian as a basic member of society resulted in non-Indians assuming responsibility for the schooling experience of Native children. Adams (1995) noted that the Board of Indian Commissioners decided that the common school, which was a success in American civilization, “should extend its blessings to the 50,000 benighted children of the red men of our country, that they might share its benefits and speedily emerge from the ignorance of centuries” (p. 18). Through the expansion of the common school into Native communities, it was hoped that the Indian “could, in effect, be catapulted directly from savagism to civilization, skipping all the intervening stages of social evolution in between” (p. 19). Rapid assimilation and civilization were the anticipated result of the common school.

Despite the rapid expansion of government schools into Native communities, the process was much lengthier and resistance much stronger than expected (Lomawaima 1994). Money that had originally been given to missionaries to educate Indians was being retained by the government for the establishment of their own schools in Indian country. Between 1887 and 1900, the number of government schools increased rapidly, from 150 schools with 3,000 students in 1887 to 307 schools with over 21,000 students in 1900. As the creation of schools increased so did the money allocated. By 1900, almost three million dollars was appropriated to Indian education.

However, government day schools and on-reservation boarding schools did not achieve the desired results. At the end of the day, Indian children were allowed to return home to the *heathen* and *uncivilized* ways of their families, which greatly inhibited assimilation and civilization. The close proximity of Indian families served as a deterrent to federal education. The notions of Christianity and the teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic, agricultural and domestic arts, and moral development were “constantly undermined by the so-called bad influences of family and tribe” (Lomawaima 1994, p. 3). The solution was the separation of Indian children from their families, resulting in the off-reservation boarding school.

While all federal schools had the same purpose, boarding schools were the most insidious and, as such, have received the most attention. Consequently, the majority of existing research highlights the circumstances surrounding off-reservation boarding schools. The general studies and specific stories of the Indian educational experience during

the assimilation period weave tales of acceptance and resistance, acculturation and disenfranchisement, success and failure. The solution to the white man’s ‘Indian problem’ was not achieved through forced education.

A period of educational reform began with *The Problem of Indian Administration*, commonly known as the Meriam Report. The Meriam Report (1928) harshly criticized the Indian Bureau’s educational plan and the conditions of Indian schools

the most fundamental need in Indian education was a change in point of view... education for the Indian in the past proceeded largely on the theory that it is necessary to remove the Indian child as far as possible from his home environment; whereas the modern point of view in education and social work lays stress on upbringing in the natural setting of home and family life. (p. 346)

The devastating and wide-reaching Meriam Report asserted that practices in Indian schools were intolerable. Lomawaima (1994) summarized the findings, stating that

Health and education services were judged harshly, and off-reservation boarding schools drew heavy fire, fueled by findings of severe malnutrition, poor health care, overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, restrictive discipline, low quality of teaching staff, and inordinate dependence on student labor. (p. 7)

The reforms employed after the publication of the Meriam Report included the closing of some boarding schools completely and the phasing out of others (Lomawaima 1994). Between 1928 and 1933, 11 boarding schools closed. The schools that remained open were required to implement the reforms suggested by the Meriam report. In addition, the construction of new day schools began. The day schools were to be located on or near reservations so that students could attend classes and go home at night. By 1934, missionaries’ involvement in the day-to-day operations of Indian schools was limited and students were no longer required to attend religious services and traditional Native religious practices were no longer forbidden.

After the 1930s, AI/AN education was of moderate interest to federal officials. Specific periods of interest in the 1960s and 1990s, produced comprehensive reports about the status of AI/AN education (i.e., Indian Education: A National Tragedy, a National Challenge and The Indian Nations at Risk Report). The passage of time and examinations of Native education have resulted only in minor changes. However, the Indian Education Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act from the 1970s made tribal involvement an accepted component of AI/AN education.

Although the education of AI/AN children has been transformed and tends to reflect practices consistent with modern day standards, one area that continues to lag behind is early childhood education (Demmert and Hammer 2003). Head Start was introduced into Native communities in the mid-1970s and changed the way many Native people viewed this age, but not enough change has taken place. The care and education of children younger than age 3 is of primary concern. Developmental milestones, language acquisition, and social interactions may not be attained as easily for young Native children for a variety of reasons; geographic isolation limits the type and quality of care available in many Native communities, tribal elders might view these early years as a time of babysitting rather than a time for education (L. Kills Crow, personal communication, March 21, 2007), and a disconnect might exist between culturally appropriate and developmentally appropriate interactions that occur between parent/guardian and child (Thompson et al. 2006).

While mainstream educational practice with AI/AN people has been relatively ineffective, the search for educational alternatives reveals limited research to assist Native early childhood educators and child care providers in developing curricula and instructional materials that foster the development of fundamental language skills through the use of tribal language and culture (Demmert and Hammer 2003). Since the knowledge of Native languages and cultures generally resides within tribal elders, elders must be involved in the process of curriculum development as the link between the past and future. Elders maintain Native languages and cultures, but as each generation passes on, so does the link between language and culture in Native communities. Tribal involvement is a critical element in the transmission of language and culture from one generation to the next. With this in mind, the American Indian and Alaska Native Research Initiative at the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives developed a partnership with Tribal Child Care Training and Technical Assistance Center (TriTAC) in the Office of Child Care to design and implement a curriculum toolkit for use with AI/AN children.

The purpose of the curriculum toolkit is to give Native early childhood teachers in a variety of settings the framework for developing a research-based, developmentally appropriate, tribally specific curriculum to use with native children. The curriculum toolkit is a living document as each person or Native community who uses it will continually update and modify the material to meet their specific needs. The process through which the information is presented will result in participants reflecting on current curriculum components, how the current curriculum was developed, what material needs to be updated, and what materials and teacher training will be needed. The

curriculum toolkit provides a basic set of guidelines that can be used by child care providers regardless of their prior experiences. When teacher turnover occurs, the essential curriculum components can be easily continued to ensure consistent instruction. The curriculum toolkit will foster a curriculum centered in each child's heritage and contributions each child can make to that heritage. At the core of the curriculum are appropriate learning standards.

The curriculum toolkit activities and information sheets for child care providers, teachers, and parents of children aged 0–3 are based on developmental milestones for children in this age span. However, some states have developed Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) for children 0–5 years old. The ELG can serve as a guide to tribes in developing their activities or in aligning the ones in the toolkit. Although it is not required that tribes follow the ELG, they are meant to serve as benchmarks for healthy development of young children. Even though the ELG for Mississippi have only been developed for children aged 3–5, the ELG were used as reference material when creating the activity sheets in the curriculum toolkit.

The process of developing a curriculum toolkit for cultures as diverse as AI/AN is quite complex and a number of challenges are to be met: the involvement of tribal leaders, teachers knowledgeable of native culture and language, multiple tribes living on one reservation, and researching local communities to understand implications for providing local child care. Tribal leaders must be involved to facilitate curriculum development and implementation due to their influence over all tribal matters (e.g., programs and funding). Due to the rural location of many tribes and villages, travel to meet with elders can be a long and difficult task due to climate and terrain. The difficulties associated with climate and terrain are frequently found in references to life on reservations. Thompson and Hare (2006), in their study of child care on reservations in one state, found that the “excessive distances between families on the far reaches of the reservation and the severe weather conditions in winter” (p. 2) presented numerous challenges. These same conditions have to be overcome in involving tribal leaders in the development and provision of appropriate child care for all AI/AN families, regardless of location on a reservation.

Effective child care is dependent on effective leadership at the tribal level. As Bordeaux (2006) stated “Effective leaders need to completely understand the modern and traditional cultures of the local community, including the political environment, the economic conditions, the family relationships, and the traditional communication practices” (pp. 156–157).

The relationship between tribal leaders and educational leaders (including leaders in the provision of child care) is vital in providing opportunities for AI/AN children to be

successful in school and in life. It is incumbent upon those providing child care and schooling to provide the education necessary for tribal leaders to first understand and then support efforts to improve opportunities for AI/AN children.

Teaching the culture and native language in any early childhood setting is dependent on the knowledge and skill of the teacher, which is made more difficult by the high turnover rate of employees in early childhood settings. The turnover rate and shortage of well trained and highly qualified child care providers mirrors the growing shortage of well trained and highly qualified teachers for our K-12 schools. Thompson (2005) described well the conditions of working in child care in a want ad for a preschool teacher.

Wanted

Preschool Teacher

Hours 7 AM to 5 PM Monday to Friday. Qualifications: high school graduate or GED, prefer some college in education, early childhood, child development, or related field. Some experience working with children preferred. Must be energetic, hard-working, well organized, team player, mature, responsible, creative, an excellent communicator, committed to children and the community, willing to make at least a one-year commitment. Responsibilities include: planning and implementing a full-year preschool program for 10 children ages 3–5, including developmentally appropriate academic, social, and physical activities; sports, recreation, and creative arts instruction; developing and assessing learning outcomes; building links with community agencies; and communicating with parents and with other school personnel. Salary \$6.00–\$6.50/h, depending on experience. Benefits: no health benefits available.

(adapted from Blue Print for Action 2004, p. 6)

It is easy to understand the shortage of child care workers everywhere and especially in Indian Country, given the problematic conditions of rural living.

The training and professional development of child care providers is critical. Training and professional development are not limited to the more traditional aspects of teaching and child care on a day-to-day basis. Clay (2006) stated the importance of positive adjustment in the transition to kindergarten: “Not all children adjust to the academic and behavioral expectations of kindergarten programs that are both effective and appropriate” (p. 80).

Implications for the training and professional development of teachers and child care providers are explicit.

Clay (2006) also noted “Children who experience greater discontinuities, such as language, culture, and socioeconomic background, between preschool and kindergarten programs may need more supports in order to adapt to the new school and benefit from learning activities” (p. 81). Given the conditions related to language, culture, and economic background under which many AI/AN children live, the requirements for training and professional development of AI/AN teachers and child care providers are exacerbated, as well are the expectations of developmentally appropriate curricula.

The challenges faced in attempts to maintain tribal culture and languages are intensified with more than one tribe living on a reservation. The challenge of maintaining culture when there are multi-tribal cultures represented in early childhood programs is monumental. Thompson and Hare (2006), in their study of child care on reservations in one state, noted that there were families from over 60 different tribes living on one reservation. The challenges presented by having so many different tribes with their different languages and cultures are tremendous. Efforts to teach native language and culture in child care settings to the children of these 60 tribes are almost unimaginable.

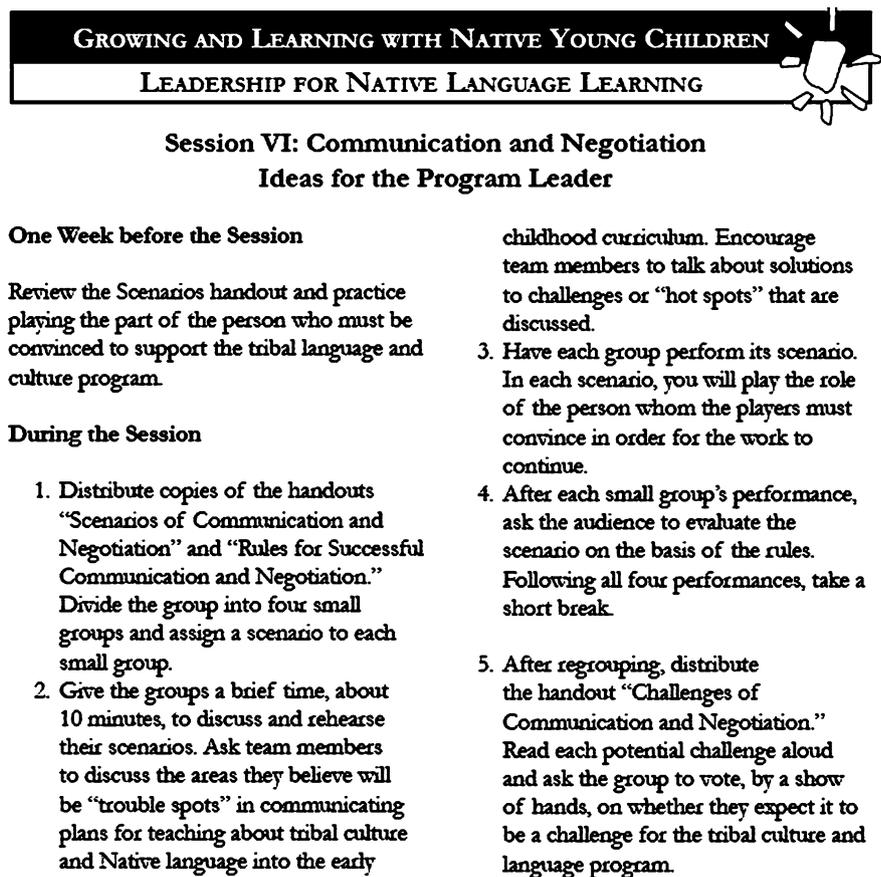
Teaching a single AI/AN culture and language in schools is not without controversy. Rinehart (2006) called these “politically and emotionally sensitive” (p. 63) and further explained

AI/AN parents and families care about their children’s success and work at providing the best for them. Because of this inherent need to protect and to ensure their children can fully participate in the outside world, some parents may want English language learning first as the best goal for their children, even when it risks the loss of home language. Overt and covert discrimination is very real and very much alive. When an Indian child learns to be grounded in tribal traditions and languages, their speech patterns are different and they think, interact, and perceive their experiences in different ways. (p. 64)

It would seem, then, that parental and family concerns with teaching the English language and American culture along with their Native language/Native culture would be enhanced when their children are taught multiple languages and multiple cultures at the same time.

Researching AI/AN communities to understand implications for providing child care and educational opportunities for AI/AN families is a necessity. The dearth of research in AI/AN communities is well documented and what little research there is is most often conducted by non-AI/AN

Fig. 1 Excerpt from Session VI: Communication and Negotiation; Ideas for the Program Leader



researchers (Schafft et al. 2006). Banks-Joseph and McCubbin (2006) addressed these issues when they noted.

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. (pp. 135–136)

The creation of the curriculum toolkit involved a number of researchers (both native and non-native) and child care professionals (both native and non-native) from many states. The curriculum toolkit, *Growing and Learning with Native Young Children* (Grace and Thompson 2007) can be accessed at http://www.earlychildhood.msstate.edu/news/3-19-07_growing.htm. The toolkit is presented in two guides. The first guide, “Leadership for Native Language Learning,” is designed to assist in conducting planning sessions by child care personnel or community leaders. This guide addresses the concerns expressed earlier over the necessity of involving tribal leaders. Further, many Native child care providers may not consider themselves “leaders” in their communities. To assist the child care

providers in developing and implementing the curriculum toolkit, a series of checklists and resource sheets have been created. These materials range from discussing the process to use when planning the first community meeting to assessment of current program operations. The basic outline of the leadership guide includes six sessions: reflection, goals, objectives, timelines, budget and communication and negotiation. Figure 1, for example, provides information regarding the communication process and offers strategies to implement to aid in the communication process. All of the information in the “Leadership for Native Language Learning” guide is intended to assist the person (the leader) in creating a curriculum that promotes and maintains the tribal language and culture.

Figure 2 depicts one of the many checklists included in the curriculum toolkit. The checklists have been designed to aid the leader in gathering the thoughts and feelings of child care personnel, community, tribal elders, and families about teaching Native language and culture in the early childhood facility. Information about the use and education practices about Native language and culture are sought. If child care personnel are going to begin a language and culture program, then they need to know how the program might impact the community at large.

Fig. 2 Excerpt from Session I: Reflection for Parents

GROWING AND LEARNING WITH NATIVE YOUNG CHILDREN

LEADERSHIP FOR NATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING



Session I: Reflection
Parents

We want your ideas about what and how we should be teaching your child about our tribal culture and Native language. Asking questions about your family's teachings of our culture and Native language helps us to better prepare our lessons. Skip any questions you do not want to answer. Thank you for your help.

Check "Yes" or "No" in answer to each question.

Yes No

1. Are there family members that carry on our traditions in your home?

2. Do you ever tell tribal stories that describe the history of the tribe and that of your family?

3. Are foods chosen and prepared in your home that reflects the tribal history and culture?

4. Are objects that reflect tribal culture such as paintings, sculpture, toys, furniture, baskets, wall hangings or rugs part of your home environment?

5. Is the Native language spoken in your home on a regular basis?

6. Do others in the family understand the language but do not speak it?

7. Do you have a desire to contribute to the children's lessons on tribal culture, history and/or Native language?

8. Do you want to participate in Native language/ tribal cultural classes to learn more about them?

9. Do you talk with elders in your family to learn more about the family and the tribe?

10. Would you be interested in serving on a parent committee to plan more activities and lessons about tribal culture?

Please share the names and telephone numbers of any Native language speakers in your family who might be willing to visit our classrooms:

Fig. 3 Excerpt from Activities Section: The Eighth Month; Blanket Fun Activity

GROWING AND LEARNING WITH NATIVE YOUNG CHILDREN

USING NATIVE LANGUAGES AND TRADITIONS IN EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES



Activity: The Eighth Month

Activity: Blanket Fun

Description: If your baby can sit up easily without support, he or she may enjoy a slow and easy ride along the floor, as long as your starts and stops are very gentle.

As your baby rides from room to room, identify household objects and teach your baby to say these words in English and in your Native language.

Materials: A bed sheet, blanket, or bath towel.

Procedure: Place your baby on the floor on top of a blanket or bed sheet. Walk from room to room pulling the sheet with your baby riding along. Talk to your baby in your Native language about where you are going and make sounds as you slow down or speed up.

Reference

Lansky, V. (2003). *Games babies play: From birth to twelve months*. Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers.

Fig. 4 Example of Early Learning Guidelines used in the creation of the Curriculum Toolkit

Early Learning Guidelines:

Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibits developmentally appropriate oral language for communication purposes. • Expresses wants, needs, and thoughts in primary language.
Scientific Investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores materials, objects and events and notices cause and effect.

The second guide, “Using Native Languages and Traditions in Everyday Activities,” is intended for use in training teachers and caregivers in early childhood settings. A variety of resource materials have been created that will assist any child care provider, teacher, or parent in understanding the stages of development, needs of young children, and how to interact in meaningful and educative ways. Lesson ideas and teaching materials for use in either center-based or in-home settings by teachers and child care providers are included. Further, most of the materials for child care providers and teachers can be given to families as resources. Figure 3 displays an example of an activity that might be used by a parent/guardian or teacher when interacting with an 8-month-old child. Prior to the activity sheet, information about the developmental stage of the child is provided in the curriculum toolkit.

Figure 4 (Mississippi Department of Education 2001, p. 15 and 49) represents the Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) applicable to the activity above. In reviewing child development milestones for children 6–8 months of age, it is a time when oral language should be introduced. Introducing new words and the repeated use of the strategy will help build a large vocabulary that will be needed when children enter the formal school setting.

American Indian and Alaska Native people are encouraged to use the *Growing and Learning with Native Young Children* (Grace and Thompson 2007) materials as a resource in designing appropriate developmental activities for the young children in their communities. The materials should be a living document—one that grows and changes as the needs of the community grow and change. Each tribal community has the opportunity to personalize the curriculum toolkit to its history and heritage; thus, preserving the language and culture of this tribe for future generations. After all, the successful educational attainment of children in AI/AN communities is a first step in overcoming the history of education abuse of their ancestors.

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