Native Culture and Language at the Heart for Tribal Head Start Programs & Parents

Health Equity

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November is National Native American Heritage Month and a great opportunity to highlight exciting new research findings on an early childhood program that is helping young children in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities across the country be their healthiest selves: Head Start.

Head Start, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2015, is a federally funded program to support the school readiness of income-eligible children, birth to five years old, by providing comprehensive developmental services that enhance early learning, health and family well-being. These services play an important role in AI/AN communities where socio-economic and health disparities can impact early childhood—but also where resilience and strength prevail, particularly when it comes to the health and well-being of future generations.

Of the 12 Head Start regions nationwide, Region XI focuses on services to children and families in AI/AN communities. With grants to 154 federally recognized tribes or consortia of tribes across the lower 48 states and Alaska, Region XI Head Start serves more than 30,000 AI/AN and non-AI/AN children and their families. A unique strength of Region XI Head Start programs is their focus on Native culture and language as cornerstones of their programming (which you can learn more about in the suggested resources below). With this focus, programs align their practices with Native families' and communities' goals for child development and contribute to broader Native cultural and language revitalization efforts.

Since 2013, I have been a member of the AI/AN Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (AI/AN FACES) Workgroup. The Workgroup includes Region XI Head Start directors, early childhood researchers and federal staff from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families and Office of Head Start and Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Together we designed, carried out and reported on findings from the first national study of Region XI Head Start.

AI/AN FACES 2015 was carried out during the 2015-16 Head Start year with 21 Region XI Head Start programs and over 1,000 children. The study had three broad goals: 1) to understand the Native culture and language experiences of Region XI Head Start children; 2) to understand the strengths and needs of Region XI Head Start children and their families; and 3) to understand children's development over the course of one Head Start year. Here, we highlight some of the findings related to children's Native language and culture experiences in their homes and in their Head Start classrooms and programs.

- In their homes (AI/AN children in Region XI only):
  - The majority (91 percent) of children have parents who feel it is somewhat or very important that their child learn a Native language.
  - A Native language is spoken at least some of the time in 38 percent of children's homes.
  - A Native language is the *primary* language in 5 percent of children's homes.

    - Eighty percent of children engaged in at least one cultural activity in the last month, including taking part in traditional ways, listening to elders tell stories, dancing, singing or drumming, working on traditional arts/crafts, taking part in traditional ceremonies or playing Native games.

- In their classrooms and programs (all children in Region XI):
    - More than half of children were in Head Start classrooms that included formal Native language instruction (56 percent) or that used Native language for instruction at least some of the time (65 percent).
    - Eighty-six percent of children were in classrooms with at least one AI/AN cultural item. Some of the most common items were cultural displays, Native music/instruments, Native language labels and cultural books.
    - 23 percent of children were in classrooms that used a culturally based curriculum.
    - One-quarter of Head Start children had center directors and 37 percent had program directors who identified the integration of Native language and culture and language into the curriculum as an area they needed support to lead more effectively.

As we saw in our survey, Region XI Head Start can play a vital role in helping Native families, communities and nations as a whole raise new generations whose development and identity are grounded in Native culture and language—both of which can serve as foundations to health and well-being in early childhood and beyond.

The next round of AI/AN FACES will take place during the 2019-2020 Head Start year. Based on the growing efforts of Head Start programs to foster children's Native culture and language development, we anticipate that the percentage of children experiencing their Native culture and language at home and in their classrooms will increase. The nationally representative data from AI/AN FACES are the first of their kind for Region XI Head Start. They promise to add to our understanding of Region XI Head Start children's development and can be used to align Head Start policy and practice with the needs of children and families.

Additional information about AI/AN FACES—including recorded webinars and PDFs of currently available reports and briefs are available here.

Michelle Sarche, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, in the Colorado School of Public Health, Community and Behavioral Health, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health.

Suggested additional resources:

Head Start Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Resource Catalogue Volume Two: Native and Heritage Language Preservation, Revitalization, and Maintenance (Second Edition)

Making It Work!

Native Language Preservation, Revitalization, Restoration, and Maintenance in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs: ACF-IM-HS-15-02

Office of Head Start Tribal Language Report 2012

A report on Tribal Language Revitilization in Head Start and Early Head Start