

Leveraging Family and Community Expertise to Strengthen Native Early Childhood Education

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative

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The importance of engaging families and communities, and building upon internal knowledge and capacity within Native communities, in strengthening Native early childhood education cannot be understated. Historically in schools, the school is the locus of educational focus, and families are brought in to the school through “parent involvement” programs and events, including parent-teacher conferences, student assemblies, etc. In Native early childhood education, we expand on both the “parent” and “involvement” parts of the concept.

Parent and family involvement has increasingly been a goal of schools and early learning centers¹. The research literature identifies the importance of family being involved in their children’s schooling and education²⁻⁴; however, the literature predominantly describes and analyzes “involvement” as a unidirectional process, in which parents and family members are invited in to participate in structures and processes that are already established². The work then becomes getting parents and families to “buy in” to what the school or early learning centers have already decided to do in regard to educating children.

Though it is a debatable point as to whether these kinds of processes even represent “involvement” of parents and families in schooling and education, we think of the relationship between families and schools in terms of “engagement,” the active process of working together to build strength and expertise in early childhood education⁵. Engaging families --- built on a broad definition of family as kinship relations --- means seeing family members as having important personal and contextual knowledge about their children that, when combined with knowledge of teachers and early learning centers, creates opportunities to build strong curriculum rooted in Native language and culture, coherent assessments that connect with what is being taught and learned, and educational structures that sustain effective teaching and learning⁶. In this way, generating bi-directional shared responsibilities through engagement rather than uni-directional attempts at “buy in” through involvement, we can leverage family and community expertise to strengthen Native early childhood education.



THE CONCEPT OF “FAMILY”

Traditionally and historically, “family,” in relation to the child in school, denotes immediate or nuclear family, primarily the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the child⁷.

In Native early childhood education, we expand on this concept, thinking of family in terms of the wider network of kinship relations.

This broader definition of family

- allows us in Native early childhood work to: connect education and the child with the more expansive relationships the child has in her/his life
- comes with the message that education is the responsibility of the larger community within which the child interacts, and is inclusive of the variety of familial relations that different children experience⁸
- opens up opportunities for schools and early learning centers to interact beyond just biological families.



INQUIRIES FOR RECIPROCAL LEARNING

Research often centers around inquiry that answers researchers' questions. However, in order to leverage family and community expertise to strengthen early childhood education, research must begin from those questions that are of interest and are relevant to communities and community members. Researchers can engage in community-based research that is rooted in questions that emerge from the community by building on a framework of **shared responsibility**. An important direction for community-based research is to think about inquiry in communities in terms of "Starting Place Questions" and "Shared Place Questions"⁹.

→ **Starting Place Questions** emerge from the needs of community members, rather than emerging from the needs or interests of the researcher. For example, a parent may be most interested in pursuing the best way to strap her child into a car seat properly. While this particular inquiry may not be the focal interest of the researcher, starting with this question can address this individual's questions and can create an inquiry path to other questions of more general interest — interest to other community members, to the researcher, and to the early childhood education research field more broadly: For example: What makes babies comfortable? What makes babies feel safe? What is the quality of connection between parent and child at various points throughout the day, and what factors impact the quality of that connection? These are **Shared Place Questions**.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Future directions in developing inquiries that impact communities include focusing on the questions that exist within the community. Legitimizing and pursuing these questions can ultimately lead to greater knowledge in Native early childhood education, by leveraging existing family and community expertise⁹. Further, important areas of focus for future research include particular aspects of families and communities, including the role of fathers in Native early childhood education¹⁰ and an understanding of families with special needs, from a cultural perspective¹¹. Methodologically, longitudinal studies can play a key role in inquiry over time⁵.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

At its core, this focus on leveraging family and community expertise to strengthen Native early childhood education is a strengths-based approach, seeking and building on the strengths and knowledge that exist in families and communities, particularly about teaching and raising children from birth to adulthood. These strengths --- in the form of knowledge (both articulated and unarticulated), practices, experience, and interests --- can have important and positive impacts on early childhood education in communities.

→ **For practitioners**, a primary consideration is seeing families as experts on their own children, with important knowledge to contribute to building curriculum, assessments, pedagogy, and integrated services^{7,12}. For practitioners, as well as researchers, it is important to have meaningful conversations and pursue meaningful inquiries as defined by families and community members. While the agenda of an early learning center or a researcher or policymaker may be different from that of the family or community, starting with the interests and needs of the community can lead to a productive path toward strengthening early childhood education.

→ **For families and communities**, a primary consideration is to see themselves as having important knowledge and expertise to contribute. Creating a situation and cycle of shared responsibility, in which practitioners, families, community members, and researchers work together to generate knowledge, can lead to transformative acts: restoring a language, creating pathways to economic success, generating health and wellness³. There is much to be gained in leveraging the expertise of families and communities, generating new knowledge in early childhood education and opening up opportunities for linking theories of early childhood development with indigenous theories of development with theories of development from other culture^{2, 13-14}. Ultimately, these efforts work to strengthen early childhood education in Native communities and enhance the field more broadly.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

FOR MORE RESOURCES:

- [American Indian College Fund: Restorative Teachings Early Childhood Education Initiative](#)
- [Wakanyeja Early Childhood Initiative: Creating Systems of Care and Learning for Native Children](#)
- [Indigenous Family Engagement: Strong Families, Strong Nations Literature Review](#)

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FAMILY AND COMMUNITY EXPERTISE

THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) is a national network of over 40 scholars, practitioners, and family and community leaders who seek to center racial equity in family engagement by catalyzing an expansive national research agenda and developing “next” (beyond current “best”) practices, measures and tools. We envision family and community wellbeing and educational justice as core aims in this work that begins from non-dominant family and community ecologies, creates ongoing transformative possibilities, and builds solidarities towards collective action for racial equity, from early childhood to secondary education.

We mobilize inter-disciplinary and experiential forms of expertise and see families and communities – particularly those marginalized by race, class, language, or immigrant status – as learning experts, co-designers, collaborators, and fellow leaders in the work. For more information, visit our website at www.familydesigncollab.org or email us at uwfldc@gmail.com

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The American Indian College Fund, through the Wakanyeja “Sacred Little Ones” – Tribal College Readiness and Success by Third Grade, is working to bring together tribal colleges, communities, educators, and families to address early learning disparities in Native communities.

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