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Collective Work and Inquiry: Transforming Early Childhood Education from within Native Communities

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Individual. Institution. Community/Tribe. System.

These four pillars form the foundation of Native early childhood education—community-centered, culture-based, linguistically focused, and connected to broad systems of care, learning, and education. They are central foundations in the work to transform Native early childhood education from a system in which schooling is externally developed to one in which early childhood education is decided on and developed from within Native communities. Indigenous knowledge and connection to the child's culture, language, history, and traditions are the starting points in this transformation.

The American Indian College Fund's Tribal College and University (TCU) Early Childhood Education Initiatives—starting with the *Wakanyaja* “Sacred Little Ones” Tribal College School Readiness and Success by Third Grade Initiative in 2011 and encompassing five distinct though linked projects (*Wakanyaja* “Sacred Little Ones” and four subsequent Native early childhood initiatives: *Ké’* Family Engagement, Cultivating Lakota Early Learning Opportunities, Restorative Teachings, and Wisdom of the Children)—are founded on the concept that building systems of care and learning for the education of young children is the most effective, efficient, and sustainable way of creating early learning that serves the developmental needs

of Native children, and the cultural and educational needs of families and communities. These systems of care and learning involve and impact *individuals* (e.g., children, TCU students, teachers), *institutions* (e.g., TCUs, early learning centers), *communities/tribes* (e.g., families, elders, tribal nations), and *systems* (e.g., preK and early learning, K–12 education, teacher training and preparation).

These collectivities and collaborations—both vertical (for example, between individuals and institutions) and horizontal (for example, between children and teachers, between families and TCU faculty, across TCUs)—serve as the foundation for and drive the success and sustainability of the work of transforming early childhood education in Native communities, in which knowledge emerges from and is developed within Native communities. As one example, the president of a tribal college noted that a central feature of this work is that, at these primarily teaching institutions of higher education, “It is exciting to build research with the kids.”

The TCU early childhood education initiatives were conceived as a way for TCUs to transform early childhood education from within Native communities. To this point, seven TCUs have engaged this process within their communities: College of Menominee Nation (Keshena, Wisconsin); Iḷisaḡvik College (Utqiaḡvik, Alaska); Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (Baraga, Michigan); Northwest Indian College (Bellingham, Washington); Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (Albuquerque, New Mexico); Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, Montana); and Sitting Bull College (Fort Yates, North Dakota). Each TCU designs and focuses its work based on the needs and priorities of its communities.¹ The initiatives have thus far directly impacted 3,975 children, 2,398 families, and 1,185 teachers.

The purposes and processes by which these initiatives move from concept to actualization focus sharply on collectivities: collective work within TCUs and tribal communities, as well as across TCUs and tribal communities. This collective work leads to short-term outcomes as defined within the parameters of a particular initiative, and generates long-term success measured in sustainability over generations:

- Creating a collective strategy for educational transformation from externally developed early childhood education to learning and curriculum designed from within Native communities
- Designing and implementing systems and structures of care and learning for the education of our earliest learners
- Working from a theory of change that prioritizes strengthening family, teachers, and community engagement
- Focusing on critical and foundational areas such as health and wellness, economic security, and culturally based education, with the purpose of strengthening birth-to-career pathways that ultimately lead to educated children and racial equity
- Accessing and building partnerships with both local and national individuals and organizations who can assist communities in achieving their goals for early childhood education (American Indian College Fund, 2018, p. 8).

Connection and collectivities play critical roles in the success of these initiatives at the grantee TCUs, and several of them have documented this aspect of the work over the first years of the initiatives. At Northwest Indian College, work has been focused on creating collectivities of teachers, through professional learning communities, to form links and bridges that provide children with a smooth and coherent learning experience from the early learning center into kindergarten and then through elementary school (Aziz-Parsons, 2017). In addition, connection and interconnectedness—important values of the Lummi Nation in which Northwest Indian College is situated—drive the work in early learning: “Our project, based upon connections—children with their parents and teachers; early learning professionals with one another across programs, age-levels, and school systems; parents with one another; and children with their family heritage and indigenous language—resonated with the boards, commissions, and tribal council of the Lummi Nation” (Macy, 2017, p. 84).

At Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, the focus of early childhood education teacher preparation is on creating “teachers as nation builders,” teachers who are prepared to engage with the communities within which they work: “With future teachers positioned to value Native culture, language, and beliefs as foundational to learning, AI/AN [American Indian/Alaska Native] pre-service teachers will develop the cultural integrity to give back and contribute to the livelihood of their communities” (Lansing, 2017, p. 62). These “teachers as nation builders” will be prepared to help build early childhood education from within the communities in which they work.

On the North Slope of Alaska, Iñisaġvik College, in the Iñupiaq community of Utqiagvik (Barrow), has engaged the community in the development of an early learning program through this initiative: “As a community collaborative initiative, it was critical for implementation to involve both events for community members to come together and activities that were important to serving the community” (Meany, 2017, p. 113). Using the metaphor of “breaking trail,” which is what the crews of whalers in this whaling community do each spring to prepare for whale-hunting season, Meany (2017) sees the collaborative work of the whalers (even those of different crews) as similar to the development of community initiatives: “Striving for communal rather than individual success, competition—for campsites and whales—gives way to cooperation” (p. 110).

At each of these sites, the work of developing early learning programs, centered on the language and culture of the Native communities being served, was not just about content and curriculum. Rather, the development of content and curriculum, the enactment through pedagogy, the engagement of families, and the successful learning of children have been dependent on the connections, collaborations, and collectivities formed to create and sustain the work. Through these sustainable and ongoing community processes, the transformation of early childhood education in Native communities—in which our earliest learners are growing and developing through learning and curriculum created by and within their own communities—is a visible and tangible reality.

NOTE

1. TCUs engage in the work of transforming early childhood education in their communities by building on a common framework of “The Five Domains” of work (family engagement, teacher quality, cognitive and noncognitive skill development, strengthening of preK to K–3 transitions, and incorporation of native culture and language in teaching, learning, and assessment), guided by a unifying “Theory of Change,” and achieved through communities engaging in the “Strategic Cycles of Educational Transformation” (for more information, see American Indian College Fund, 2018).

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