

# Supporting Native Indian Preschoolers and Their Families

## Family–School–Community Partnerships

On a cold, snowy January evening, families, teachers, and other community members are deep in conversation in a school gymnasium. They gather for a simple dinner followed by a speaker—Tim Tingle, a storyteller who writes children’s books. The children watch Tim take authentic, worn Choctaw percussion instruments out of a suitcase. To their surprise, he carefully hands the instruments to them.

Playing his Native Indian traditional flute, the storyteller conducts the young percussionists, and the music begins. Families quietly listen, anticipating the Choctaw story that will follow. Soon they will embark together on a story journey, *Crossing Bok Chitto*, with Tim Tingle as their guide.



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*Note:* The terms *Native Indian*, *Native American*, *indigenous*, and *Native peoples* are used interchangeably in this article.

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**In this urban midwestern public school district**, families of Native Indian students, pre-K through grade 12, attend four multigenerational gatherings like this one during the school year—one of a number of events orchestrated by the Native Indian Centered Education (NICE) program. NICE is a program in the school district that partners with families to provide Native-centric educational opportunities for preschool children. Family events such as the storytelling activity in the opening vignette represent trends in early childhood education: building family-school-community partnerships to enhance learning and build family resources. The all-Native-Indian preschool program is unusual and rare in urban areas. (Most all-Native-American preschool programs are located on reservations). It is in its third year of funding from a US Department of Education Experimental Education Grant (four-year grant project).

To address the persistent achievement gap between children in low income, minority communities and children in mainstream, middle-class communities, we know that “both school experiences *and* home and early life experiences are important” (Barton & Coley 2009, 23). A two-pronged approach to the problem involves creating high-quality, culturally responsive, educational programming in preschools and collaborating with community partners to design engaging after-school opportunities for families.

This article briefly reviews the status of urban indigenous families and discusses an innovative all-Native-American preschool, an early childhood initiative created to address the achievement gap. The director of the program, Tami Maldonado-Mancebo; a teacher-practitioner, Paula Szczepaniak; and a family support specialist, Jacqueline Jones, provide their perspectives on the NICE preschool, with Susan McWilliams, an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (a university community partner), supplying background, research, and resources.

## Urban Native American families: Background

The research literature on urban Native American families is relatively sparse. It is not specific about the service needs of the different indigenous groups—urban Native Americans, rural Native Americans, and Native Americans living on reservations (NUIFC 2007).

Urban Native Indians have many differences within the group (NUIFC 2007). There are distinctions due to city culture—for example, an urban Native American growing up in Chicago will have different experiences than one growing up in Omaha; generational differences, such as the lack of traditional cultural exposure among younger generations and the less significant role elders play in rearing children today; and differences resulting from the multiple Native/tribal affiliations in urban areas, that is, the multiple tribal

affiliations sharing different cultural perspectives with children.

Many parents lose touch with their native heritage as a result of generational shifts away from the reservation to big city living. Lack of cultural immersion encourages families to seek out the NICE preschool program to meet their children’s cultural and educational needs and to facilitate family participation at school. Since 2009, the NICE preschool program has been housed in a community partnership building belonging to the school district. The NICE preschool program has served children and their families from Lakota Sioux, Omaha, Ponca, Pottawatomie, Kaw, Seminole, and Cherokee Native Nations/tribes. And the families themselves represent a wide range of multicultural ethnicities—many children share Latino, African American, and Caucasian heritages.

Most Native Americans live in urban areas (Utter 2001). Only about half of Native Indian ninth grade students graduate with their non-Native, same-age peers (NEA 2010). Native Indian children have the highest rate nationally of living in families with neither parent employed full time, year-round.

Half the children in the NICE preschool migrate every year because of financial and personal hardships experienced by members of their immediate family, with many families moving more than once a year. A large percentage of the preschool children enter with cognitive and speech/language delays and/or social-emotional developmental concerns. More than half are identified for special education services. Most qualify for reduced-cost or free lunch.

The history of injustices against Native Americans, coupled with poor educational practices, make it difficult for many Native Americans to trust or form relationships with teachers (Klug 2011): “Because non-Native teachers are not familiar with what has happened in the past with Native peoples, they are put into positions where there may be cultural misunderstandings” (182). The Native American preschool offers families a comfortable, nonthreatening way to become involved in their children’s school.

According to the National Education Association (NEA 2010), “schools that infuse Native culture into the school

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climate via the curricula, staff expertise, and school activities see a corresponding increase in the participation and interest level of Native families” (3). The NICE preschool indeed has increased family participation. And since the program began, the school district has helped Native American families enroll their children in several preschool settings: 32 Native Indian children are enrolled in the district preschools (up from 3–5 enrolled in 2008). Of those 32 children, half attend the NICE preschool and the others are enrolled in district, Title I, and Head Start programs.

## Native Indian Centered Education and family-school-community partnerships

Family-school-community engagement is participatory, meaningful, sensitive, collaborative, and connected. The NICE preschool strives to achieve six components of effective partnerships in its program: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein 2008). Tami Maldonado-Mancebo, director of Native Indian Centered Education for the school district, offers her perspective on the NICE preschool program.

### Program director’s perspective

The NICE preschool curriculum focuses on the family as an integral part of children’s cultural learning experience. The program incorporates Native-centric materials in the classrooms and frequently invites families to participate. Community elders, for example, teach children traditional drumming and dancing. The dramatic play area contains traditional regalia such as ribbon shirts and dresses,

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shawls, and drums. During rest time, teachers play recordings of Native American flute and other traditional music.

To supplement the preschool curriculum, the preschool staff rely on ideas from *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms* (Jones & Moomaw 2002) and the Seven Teachings, from the Anishinaabe people (Benton-Banai 1988; Magoulick, n.d.). The Seven Teachings center on love, truth, honesty, humility, courage, respect, and wisdom.

The preschool has an outdoor classroom inspired by Nature Explore (Rosenow 2007; Arbor Day Foundation & Dimensions Educational Research Foundation 2009). Nature Explore encourages outdoor centers for dramatic arts, messy materials, gathering, music and movement, nature, art, building, and other activities. Since a parent took over leadership of the outdoor classroom project, more families participate.

In addition to the outdoor classroom, the NICE preschool has two gardens. Grant funding helped the program expand its healing garden and provide a community vegetable garden for healthy classroom snacks and to help families supplement their diets with high-quality vegetables. In the community garden, families learn how to produce a great deal of food in a relatively small area (one square foot per family). Plants in the Native healing garden include the four sacred herbs—sweet grass, sage, cedar, and the traditional variety of tobacco. In Starbuck and Olthof (2008), staff found descriptions of educational gardening projects with cognitive, social-emotional, and physical benefits. These gardening projects engage parents, teachers, children, and community members in planning, implementing, and harvesting.

Full-service schools, providing medical services, psychological expertise, and social workers to meet children’s and families’ needs, represent an important initiative and trend in early childhood education (Adelabu, Durand, & Scott 2010). The program’s on-site social worker links families with a variety of social services and community services. The school partners with the dental office from the Ponca Tribe. Dental professionals come in twice a year to teach dental-health lessons, and they provide toothbrushes and toothpaste throughout the year. Families can receive



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medical care through the Ponca Tribe or can travel to the Omaha Reservation for free medical treatment. They are also eligible to go to the free in-school medical clinic at a local elementary school.

Program staff work with community elders to reinforce the strong connection between multiple generations and young children's learning outcomes. Collaboration and communication build trust between schools, families, and partners. In preschool through grade 12, the community can provide input in all activities through quarterly Native American Achievement Council meetings or the parent committee. NICE program staff, district leaders, community elders, and interested community partners comprise the

council. Reliability and consistency

enable staff members to build trust with families. The program conducts monthly family events in the preschool, with families offering ideas and input.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's early childhood program helps us plan family nights. The university donates books to families to encourage family reading and to build children's home libraries. Early childhood teacher candidates design take-home activities that tie in with the books, to expand families' literacy opportunities at home.

During one family event, teacher candidates planned and led science activities connected to the book *The Reason for a Flower*, by Ruth Heller. Families listened to segments of the book and explored related science activities in centers.

Another event built on the stories in Eric Carle's (2008) book *The Rabbit and the Turtle*. Families read the book and played take-home games with university early childhood students while sitting on quilts in the school gym. Through family activities, the students gain experience in family engagement and cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Paula, the preschool teacher, is at the heart of the program's work with preschool children and their families. During the first year of operating the Native Indian preschool program, Paula embarked on a self-initiated study of the histories and cultures of Native peoples. She is committed to experiential learning and ensuring cultural relevance through developmentally appropriate practice.

### Preschool teacher's perspective

I am a white woman teaching in a classroom of indigent children with widely mixed racial and cultural backgrounds. The traditionally male- and elder-centered families that the preschool serves questioned whether a Caucasian female teacher could—or should—teach their children. After nearly three years of hesitancy, a tribal elder said, "You have changed the lives of our children. You have reminded us old ones to see the good in a person before seeing the color of their skin. You honor our children by teaching them to see themselves as proud native people and strong, able learners. Thank you."

Overcoming the challenge of being a Caucasian educator who works with contemporary Native American families requires consistency and reliability over time. However, there are times when I have to make decisions about how to help families without getting overburdened myself. One winter, when one of the children started missing school, I called her mother. I learned that she had no transportation but did not qualify for district bussing. As the mother described making two round trips a day, to and from school, I realized that she walked close to four miles a day in cold weather so her child could attend preschool. I told

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the mother that if she could get her child to school in the mornings, I would take her home after school. Although I thought very deeply about my decision to assist, it was the right thing to do. Actions build trust over time.

One key to family engagement is quantity. To get parents interested and involved, teachers must offer frequent invitations, numerous opportunities, and multiple work and play options. Effective family-centered programming, on the other hand, relies on quality. To create a program that revels in family involvement, teachers must offer many high-quality, meaningful, family learning experiences that not only attract family members but also hold their hearts. NICE staff strive to build strong home-school connections. Before the start of a new school year, we conduct home visits to introduce the NICE program to families and invite them to participate. Families become involved in myriad unique and meaningful ways:

**Monthly parent-child interactions.** Afternoon activities in the classroom include a culturally relevant craft or arts project, such as learning traditional dances, building family totems, and writing family stories; an engaging, developmentally appropriate language and literacy activity, like the two mentioned earlier; and a snack from the community garden.

**Districtwide Native family nights.** These evening events draw families with children from preschool through grade 12. Family nights, such as the story night with Tim Tingle, encourage community fellowship, offering a meal followed

by age- and content-appropriate programming for children and adults.

**School gardens.** Gardening is another hands-on family-involvement activity. To build children’s strong connections with the earth, the program regularly welcomes parents and family members in the preparation, planting, and tending of the Native healing garden, outdoor classroom, and community garden.

**Annual harvest celebration and powwow.** Gathering and uniting the preschool’s extended families in meaningful ways honors native family traditions. Community elders lead the powwow, drumming, and prayers and help the children learn traditional powwow etiquette. The school sets up centers for beading and other crafts related to the harvest or the powwow.

**Volunteering.** Many parents, grandparents, and older siblings become regular classroom volunteers, adding to the familial richness and meaningful work/play of children.

Parents unable to be in the classroom often fulfill requests for inexpensive classroom materials or help with project preparation tasks.

In addition to administrators and teachers focused on the needs of children and families, family-school-community partnerships benefit greatly from a skilled family services coordinator like Jacqueline, who is available for student/family support.

## Building Effective Family-School-Community Partnerships

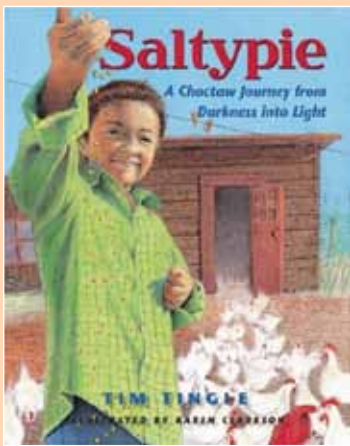
Recommendation	Strategies	Benefits
<b>Families, schools, and community partners have mutually beneficial goals.</b>	Plan events that <i>benefit all partners</i> : families, schools, and community partners.	Builds trust, increases participation, and engages partnership volunteers in purposeful work. All give and all receive.
<b>Vision fosters intentionality in planning, collaboration, and implementation.</b>	Be proactive in developing and promoting your vision with all partners. Hold brainstorming meetings. Use strong communication practices. Distribute books to multiple age levels, infants through adults.	Leads to transparency among partners, which assists in developing understanding, dialogue, and a new and better group vision. Collaborative input from all partners fosters enthusiasm and a sense of ownership. Develops relationships, the heart of education. Enables families and children to continue to share reading experiences at home and promotes literacy in the home.
<b>Program staff know families and understand cultural and ethnic diversity.</b>	Use culturally relevant practices at partnership events. Encourage interaction among family, school, and community partners at events. Check out community resources for the best fit with parental need before recommending them to families.	Enriches all partners with experiential education regarding traditions and cultures. Builds a sense of community among families and partners. Promotes successful interactions and positive outcomes with parents, builds trust, and develops relationships.
<b>Program seeks out new ideas and resources in the community.</b>	Tell your story to others, and encourage community members who are interested to attend family events. Use local resources and encourage volunteers.	Engages the community and promotes cultural understanding and awareness among community members. Connects families to community resources by bringing them to the school. Educates families in areas of interest and need, such as health, safety, nutrition, special education services, art, the outdoors, and other areas.

## Family services coordinator's perspective

I serve preschool families by connecting them with social services and community resources, helping them find employment, and advocating, for example, with legal issues, when necessary. Laying the groundwork for family experiences is crucial. Parents often stop in and ask if I know of an entity that can help with the power bill or if I can help them with questions about food pantries or federally subsidized housing. I keep lists of programs, charities, and organizations under topics such as housing, pregnancy, and energy. I call ahead to an agency to find the best fit before directing parents to the agency. Because parents are already in a high-stress situation, they may be discouraged and give up after a few no's. Calling ahead helps prevent that and increases the likelihood of successful experiences.

### Note from the Authors

Several key resources are invaluable in our work with Native Indian families and in preparing teacher educators:



Klug (2011) and Joe and Malach (2011)—see References—provide histories of Native peoples, with educational emphases, that are valuable to educators. Joe and Malach write specifically for those serving young children and families. Utter's (2001) book, *American Indians*, remains a classic and must-read

for those interested in carefully documented histories of Native Indians.

For sparking dialogue on racial/ethnic stereotypes for staff development and also with early childhood teacher candidates, we recommend Tingle's (2011) recent autobiographical and award-winning children's book, *Saltpie: A Choctaw Journey from Darkness into Light*. Written for an older elementary school audience, *Saltpie* is one of a very few children's books in print with a contemporary Native Indian boy on the cover. The theme is racial/ethnic harassment and violence and the love of a family. In the afterword, Tingle implores educators to challenge our own generalizations and stereotypes about Native American peoples. Subsequent discussions and self-reflection make *Saltpie* an excellent resource for teachers.

**At the foundation of family engagement is intentional planning for developing quality family relationships that engage family members with other families, with schools, and with community partners.**

Preliminary work and communications and successful outcomes improve relationships with families and lead to trust, both of which can be difficult to gain in the social work field and in Native American communities. As a result, parents tend to open up more, come back if they need help, and refer others.

Setting the stage for successful experiences promotes families' autonomy. Providing families with a list of services gives them the opportunity to learn about the resources and use them independently in the future, should the need arise. Parents request copies of the lists so they can pass them on to a family member or friend in need.

I help parents find employment and learn job-hunting skills. I review job applications with preschool parents and explain résumé writing. I assist them in composing their résumé and posting it online, and I follow up weekly.

I was encouraged when a mother whose child had graduated from the preschool remembered me as a resource for help with her résumé. Offering social services for parents in the preschool is a strong link in the family-school-community partnership.

### Summary

Klug (2011) encourages educators to consider "a constellation of factors that we know influence indigenous students' willingness to learn and to become part of the educational system" (187–88). Early childhood trends in developing family-school-community partnerships serve as one bright star in that constellation of effective ways to influence and support children's learning. At the foundation of family engagement is intentional planning for developing quality family relationships that engage family members with other families, with schools, and with community partners. For a successful family-school-community partnership to work well, the project must benefit all partners, promote the pursuit of a shared vision, encourage understanding, and build and strengthen families' access to community resources.

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