

How Should Young Indigenous Children Be Prepared for Learning? A Vision of Early Childhood Education for Indigenous Children¹

Mary Eunice Romero-Little

The Problem

There are numerous educational issues confronting Indigenous peoples in the United States currently, but none are quite as complex as the developments in early education. Policy-makers, who are trying to solve the problem of chronic educational underachievement of some groups of students in the nation's schools, have turned to early education as a quick fix for long-standing problems in education. The reason for doing so comes from the pressures that No Child Left Behind has placed on the nation's schools. It mandates that all groups of students--grouped by ethnic/racial background, language status, or special need--must show annual growth toward full proficiency in key curricular areas as measured by standardized test scores. Schools that fail to bring all groups along as required by law can be harshly penalized, which create problems for other schools and districts. It is little wonder that educators and policy-makers across the country are determined to close the performance gap between groups on those tests. The remedies they have tried over the past decade (increased instructional time on the subjects that are tested; greater emphasis on teaching basic skills; switching instructional approaches; teaching to the tests, etc.) have had little effect. There have been slight improvements, especially when the tests themselves are modified or cut-off scores for performance levels are adjusted, but on the whole the gaps between groups remain as great as ever (Nagel, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). The student groups that have not done well on standardized tests historically, continue to perform poorly: African-Americans, Hispanics, American-Indians and Alaskan Natives (these are among the official ethnic/racial designations for reporting student performance used by the federal government), economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English learners from all ethnic backgrounds.

¹ *Journal of American Indian Education*, 49 (1 & 2), 2010 (in press).

For children from underperforming groups, preschool that begins at ages 3 or 4 is too late, in the view of many policy-makers, as the following excerpt illustrates:

State policymakers concerned about the future quality of education in their communities are beginning to recognize the need for policy solutions that promote early learning from birth... [State policies] should be a part of a strategy to assure children are ready for school...However, to ensure these initiatives are as successful as possible, states need to focus more attention on early care and education policies for children *before* they reach preschool age. (Schumacher & Hamm, 2006, pp. 5-6)

That is the rationale given for programs like Early Head Start and state sponsored preschools targeting infants and toddlers. Infant and toddler preschool programs are meant to provide intervention services at the earliest possible time. What is their justification? The stated objective for Head Start as for most early childhood education (ECE) programs is to promote school readiness through developmentally appropriate learning activities, as well as by providing other services to enhance children's lives. Those are goals that parents and educators alike would agree are desirable and appropriate for young children.

For educational policy-makers at all levels, however, the reasoning is less benign; they are, in fact, a good deal more calculating than formal statements of goals would suggest. The thinking goes like this: the problem with groups whose children have not been successful in school is that they have not prepared their children properly. Therefore, it is necessary to get their children into school as early as possible where they can be properly prepared for school. This, the reader will recognize, is not greatly different from the justification given by federal officials for removing Indian children from their homes and communities and placing them in boarding schools in the 1800s.

From the perspective of many policy-makers and educators, the early experiences that count as preparation for school are mainstream ones. They do not recognize the validity of other ways of preparing children for life and learning, and indeed that is at least one reason why so many children from the groups that are seen as "unprepared for school" do not do well in school. That is a major problem we have yet to confront in our schools. Children in a society that is as culturally diverse as ours have had early experiences that may differ greatly from those of children from the American mainstream. The languages they speak may or may not include English. The English they speak may be a quite different variety than that spoken at school. They may have quite different approaches to learning

from the ones that are most valued in school. None of these differences mean that they cannot learn, however. They are not barriers to learning, that is, if the school recognizes these differences as differences and do not treat them as deficiencies.

Pueblo historian, Joe S. Sando, described the dilemma of many Indian children whose rich preparation for learning is not recognized by the schools they attend, even in Indian country:

Indian children do not come to school out of a vacuum. They generally have a positive concept of self when they arrive at school. But the models they read about rarely if ever identify with their culture. In fact, nothing in the usual classroom relates to the child's past experiences at home and in his village. The ultimate experience of this experience is that the children develop a negative perception of themselves, their parents, and their culture. (Sando, 1992, p. 143)

This is a conflict that has affected countless Indigenous individuals and families. It is at the heart of the educational problem for many Indigenous students. And now the policy makers across the country at both the state and the federal level are discussing universal preschools for infants and toddlers from groups like ours (Dalmia & Snell, 2008). Is that the answer? Preschools that offer childcare services for infants and toddlers will appeal to many families, of course, especially for parents who work outside of the home. What could be better? And if the program promises to give children the means to be successful in school, a family could hardly refuse to participate. The only problem is this: because the children spend a considerable part of each day in these programs with teachers, who are not family members, they will end up more like their teachers than they will their own families, linguistically and culturally speaking. That, after all, is the aim of these very early education programs. For Indigenous communities, this constitutes a problem. For the community to continue, the culture and language must survive from one generation to the next, and the socialization process in which language, culture and other foundational aspects of learning must begin early, and be that of the family and community.

This is a curriculum that cannot be handed over to society. There are no professional educators who can or should accept the responsibility for laying down the cultural and spiritual foundations for a person's life. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all way to socialize children. But this does not mean that Indigenous families and communities should reject early education for their children. It can be beneficial to Indigenous children as to others, and even give them a running start for school.

In this article, I will argue that “early preschool” can be beneficial for all children, but such programs must not be in conflict with a community’s or family’s cultural and linguistic goals and aspirations for its children. Instead the principle of cultural self-determination must be central to the design of any educational program for the diverse Indigenous cultural groups in our nation. That means that communities must consider what constitutes a culturally appropriate early education for their children; they must be clear about their beliefs and socialization practices; and they must consider whether anything needs to be modified in order to prepare their children more successfully for their eventual entry into the society’s schools.

In the sections that follow, I will discuss the process of socialization that takes place in the early years of life (with a special emphasis on the culture I know best), and consider what must be preserved if children are to participate in the rich cultural life of their families and communities throughout their lives; look at what some Indigenous communities are doing to insure that their children gain both the sets of skills and knowledge needed for successful participation in the society's schools and in their own communities; and propose a possible paradigm for Indigenous early education programs.

Foundations for Learning: The Socialization Process

The early years are the family’s years

What happens in the early years of life is crucial to cultural formation—traditionally, these are the family’s years during which they give children the cultural and linguistic tools and know-how to function successfully, and to live harmoniously in the world of the home and community. What happens or does not happen during this time will profoundly influence how children turn out.

How do children learn all the things they have to know to live amicably and function smoothly in their communities? How do they learn what to do in the social and cultural environment in their communities? How do they learn the rules of comportment and the rules that well functioning members of their community must observe? How do they learn the values and belief systems, the moral precepts, and the protocol that guide discourse and interactions within the community, as well as ones that relate to the spiritual realm? All this and much more are inculcated during the early years at home. During this time children will acquire:

The language of the home and community.

A cultural and personal identity.

A sense of responsibility towards others.

Spiritual values and morals for dealing with the world.
Beliefs about what is worth learning, and what is not.
Ways to make sense of the world

Such teachings are the cultural curriculum of the community, and it takes a lifetime to master them. It rests, however, on a foundation that the family must build early in each individual's life. Building that foundation is the responsibility of the home and family. It happens as parents and other family members socialize the child into the language and culture of the home and community. It begins when the child is born, and comes into the loving embrace of the extended family. This, of course, is true for any child, born into any community--whether mainstream or minority. When children leave their homes and families to enter school, they bring with them the teachings of their homes and community. If the resources and teachings they have received in the early years of life match the ones the school expects, then their entry to school is untroubled. If what they bring is not recognized as valid, they are likely to be judged as lacking in preparation.

Indigenous communities are not, however, like other minority group communities, although their children may appear to have similar needs and problems where the schools are concerned and from the perspective of policy-makers. Federally recognized tribal communities are sovereign nations, with the rights and privileges that pertain to other sovereign nations, although we are also participants in the larger society as well. Indigenous peoples have had to fight hard to maintain our identities, our cultures, languages, and the integrity of our communities over the five and a quarter centuries since the arrival of Europeans on this continent. The American schoolhouse, from the beginning, has been a mixed blessing for Indigenous peoples. The education it offered has given Native Americans a chance for economic survival in the larger society. Plenty Coups, the last principal Chief of the Crows advised the young people in his community: "Get a white man's education," he said. "Without it you are the white man's victim—with an education, you are his equal."ⁱ At the same time, though, the school does more than educate. It has a long history of requiring Indian children to forfeit their languages and cultures in exchange for that education. Pueblo historian, Joe S. Sando speaks not only for Pueblo peoples, but also for all Indigenous peoples of this continent when he noted that despite the massive changes our communities have undergone at the hands of outside forces, at this point in history, we have some control over what happens to us:

Conditions for change, whether of a positive or a negative nature, involve the choices of the people, as well as the external circumstances with which they are faced. At this period in Pueblo

history, the changes occurring amount to a near transformation of the society, and its potential for development. (Sando, 1992, p. 133)

Sando was referring to the way in which education can help transform and strengthen communities, by preparing members to fill leadership roles in its governance. At the same time, education is also bringing negative changes. Although many Indigenous communities continue to maintain traditional values and practices, there is a gradual diminishment in the knowledge and use of the Indigenous languages. Sando attributes this shift in language use and loyalty to schooling, and in particular to children's participation in early education programs like Head Start: "Most young children now learn to speak English in Head Start programs, and when they return home, they turn on the ubiquitous television, which reinforces their use of English" (Sando, 1992, pp 160-161). A Pueblo grandfather I interviewed regarding the language socialization of his grandson reported just such an incident:

We spoke to him only in Keres at home and he was speaking it well. But then he went to Head Start. The first day he came back and told us in imperfect English, "Don't speaky to me that way [Keres], speaky me Ing-gles. That little rascal didn't want us to speak in Keres to him anymore!" (Suina, personal communication)

Among Indigenous groups, the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest have been relatively successful in retaining their languages and cultural traditions in spite of unrelenting forces working against their continuation. Early education programs that the community's children have attended over the past several decades are frequently mentioned as being a major force at work.

Early childhood education and preschool were not traditional practices for Indigenous peoples of the United States. They are relatively recent creations for teaching young children. Prior to their introduction in the form of Head Start Programs in the late 1960s, traditional ways to care and teach young children were carried out through an intricate and dynamic socialization process shaped by Indigenous languages and guided by Indigenous epistemologies for thousands of years. This epistemology is also the foundation that frames a people's beliefs and understanding and expectations of children, their abilities and capabilities, and one's role in the care and teaching of children. In Cochiti Pueblo where I have studied the socialization process, newborns are considered highly intelligent beings who come into the world with "universal knowledge," knowledge of both the spiritual and physical realms. What is that universal knowledge? The community members I interviewed--elders of the grandparent generation,

and community members of the parent generation--were in agreement. The consensus seemed to be this:

(Children) have this incredible sense likened to having some extraordinary power of sense to recognize things, an incredible sense of intuition, like a newborn can feel all the mother's emotions. That child knows when the mother is sad or when she is happy. The child knows when something is wrong in her life or their lives. It's recognized that a newborn does not speak, that he or she is absent a way to communicate to you in words, but the child senses these emotions. So it's a spiritual phase when the child is not able to speak for itself. So we see children in a way that defines a sacred trust that you have or that we all have for a child born into a family and into our community. That's the reason for defining it in that way to impress upon how you have to care for a child who has no way to communicate with you. So that creates for this sacredness in your responsibility for that child. (Romero, 2003, pp. 147-148)

Because newborns lack the ability to communicate with others in their new physical world, they are unable to convey their unique knowledge. Eventually, as they become accustomed to their "new home," they lose this special ability. However, the special connection between the physical and spiritual worlds remains a part of their physical being throughout life. It is this epistemology of human existence that frames the belief system of Cochiti society, including their perspective of children and how adults carry out the "sacred trust" for every child.

Throughout their young lives, Pueblo children will have many familial and communal activities and events that will serve as opportunities for learning. For instance, in early spring, children with their families will participate in the annual spring dance held in the kivas (ceremonial chambers). Children witness not only the preparation for this event but also participate in the dance where various particular forms of learning occur (i.e., engaged observation, active and peripheral participation, hands-on, etc.). In addition, children witness their immediate and extended family members, secular and native religious leaders and other community members participating in the event. These distinct learning experiences are a critical part of their early cognitive development as well as the development of their personal and collective identities. This early education begins long before Pueblo children enter the Head Start door. And, as the grandmother I interviewed stated "It is hard work making sure your grandchildren (and children) learn their cultures. If we don't teach them, who will?" In other words, it requires the time, dedication, commitment

and initiative from the adult socializers of children to teach them in ways that no one is capable of doing.

Change happens when societal goals for children conflict with community goals

The Indigenous peoples of the Southwest have managed to retain their languages more successfully than in most other regions of the United States. Until 50 years ago, most children growing up in Cochiti as well as in many other New Mexico Indigenous communities, children learned the language of the home and community before going to school. Cochiti's language situation has undergone some major changes over the past several decades. A survey conducted two decades ago under the auspices of the Cochiti Tribal Council, revealed that there were few native speakers of Keres, the language of the community, under the age of 50. In neighboring communities, the shift began more recently, and is beginning to accelerate. Schooling has always been the force for change, but with the emphasis on early education, the language shift is occurring more rapidly. In Cochiti and in neighboring pueblos, leaders pinpoint the loss of the Indigenous language by the young people to the establishment of Head Start programs in their communities. The members of the parent generation were among those community members who had been among the early participants in Head Start. The English they learned in Head Start had an adverse effect on their home language, as it has had for many immigrant and Indigenous children throughout the nation, a phenomenon that Wong Fillmore (1991a) has documented.

Communities can choose to take action to counteract negative forces

Confronted with the evidence of the language situation in the community, Cochiti Pueblo began devoting its collective mind, energy and funds to language renewal efforts. Since its first pilot summer immersion program for children and youth in 1996, Cochiti has faithfully continued its Indigenous language revitalization efforts up to this day. The language renewal efforts include a tribal employee language class held for one hour each day, a "language nest" for children birth to three years of age, and language classes for Cochiti school-age students at the elementary-middle and high schools they attend. This has taken considerable resources and an intense effort for a community with just a little more than 600 on-reservation members. Nearly 20 years later, as a result of this work, there has been an increased community-wide awareness, understanding and conscientiousness of the importance of speaking Keres, especially to children and young adult learners. And, there have been a number of parents and grandparents that have committed themselves to speaking to and rearing their children/grandchildren in Keres at home. Most telling of

the language renewal progress is that the cohort of 4-5 year olds who participated in the first summer immersion program have continued to participate in the various level of language efforts, and are now junior and seniors in high school. These 12-15 young adults have gained considerable proficiency in Cochiti-Keres and have now enthusiastic participants in the community's traditional activities and events. Their ability to speak and understand the language has given them a better and deeper understanding of the purpose and meaning of ceremonies, which in turn has given them a greater appreciation of their traditions and way of life. When young people know who they are, where they come from, and that they are fully supported by family and community, there is little they cannot do. These students are not only doing well in their community, they are also succeeding at school.

The study of Pueblo views of childhood and the socialization of children in several other pueblos reveals that while there are differences from place to place, there are also some recurring themes and practices that can be regarded as common underlying precepts. In Pueblo Indian country, there is a saying that translates into English as "for the sake of the children." This precept reflects the Pueblo belief about the sacred role and responsibilities held by adult caretakers for nurturing and caring for children. It is for the children of the community, who are the people's future, that all of the adults must teach all they will need to know and feel to be competent, responsible and compassionate people in their home communities and in the wider society. The adults are guided in this sacred task by the example and teachings of their forebears, who are venerated as gifted visionaries and intellectual activists--able to see the needs of the future generations. Pueblo people understand that it takes commitment and determination to ensure that intergenerational links remain strong, and that their children will develop into competent, healthy and content adults who, when it is their turn, will follow the footsteps of their caretakers-teachers. The belief is that if the children are properly socialized, they will be prepared to handle whatever demands they will encounter in life--including the demands of school. Thus, when asked what he wanted his grandson to learn, a Pueblo Indian grandfather replied:

...I want him to learn the language, very much so...I want him to participate and really be a part of the community, as early as possible. And I want him to learn (his) proper relationships with his elders, and his peers. I want him to know his place in the world, to be responsible, and to be even more than that. Hopefully, he can be giving as well...he can contribute to the community. I know that there is the other part, or the other world--English, writing, science, and all that. I think that's going to happen. I think if a child like my

grandson has the basics of being a good Pueblo person, you can't help but have the other come along.ⁱⁱ

As children's first teachers, Indigenous parents and families have understood for centuries the critical need to provide rich sociolinguistic experiences for infants and young children who are acquiring their primary language and culture. Moreover, as the Pueblo grandfather alludes to in the above excerpt, Indigenous peoples have long known and understood that the goal of early "education" is the total development of the child—linguistically, cognitively, socially, culturally, physically and spiritually. Their cultural plans for children, which are based on their beliefs and precepts about children, and their understandings of what and how they should learn, have been guided by the mother tongue, Indigenous epistemologies, and a deep understanding of the child socialization process. Essentially, they have known that along with language, the foundation for intellectual and socio-cultural learning is established in the early lives of children and is a responsibility of their home and communal caretaker-teachers, their parents, grandparents, siblings and others members of the extended family. Moreover, to ensure that their children are socialized in the values, beliefs and practices that will enable them to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of their cultural homes and communities, and later on school, parents and families need quality time in the early years of children's lives to set this crucial foundation.

However, as the Pueblo grandfather who described his grandson's eagerness and willingness to replace the Indigenous language with English suggests: there is a growing concern among community members that outside forces are increasing the pressure on their children to put aside the Indigenous language and to speak English exclusively when they are very young--too young to resist, or to understand how that can affect them later in life.

This grandfather has good reason to worry given the current expansion in preschool education in states like New Mexico. New Mexico has been developing early learning standards for preschool programs, and is aligning them to the goals of NCLB. The preschool learning standards are designed to serve as benchmarks for early childhood education programs to follow and to guide children's development from infancy to kindergarten. New Mexico's Infant/Toddler Early Learning Guidelines are organized into three age spans: Young Infants (birth to 8 months), Mobile Infants (6-18 months) and Toddlers (16-36 months). Overlapping of age groups was intended to "reflect both the impact of individual differences in the rate of development and most current research and understandings of how infants and toddlers grow and develop" (New Mexico State Children,

Youth and Families Department, 2010, p. 7). Developmental areas varying across states but in general include language, literacy (emergent literacy and numeracy)—in English, cognitive and general knowledge, social and emotional, physical, health and motor. Alas, as Tobin argues learning standards “become a problem when we lose sight of the fact that they are cultural and contextual and not universal” p. 426). And, as typically found nationwide (Niles, Byers & Krueger, 2008) these early learning outcomes do not include or address the early learning of New Mexico’s Indigenous infants and young children. Although many Indigenous parents and families (including the above mentioned grandfather) recognize and understand the critical importance of English development and English literacy for preparing their children (and grandchildren) for the expectations of school and the wider society, they worry about it. Their worry is justified, especially when the aim is to socialize infants and toddlers in English. Policy-makers and early educators who are not as sympathetic to the concerns of Indigenous communities and parents as they should be are likely to retort: "So what's stopping you from teaching the children your language when they are not in preschool?" The fact is: it is one thing to socialize children when their spirits are whole and intact; it is another to do it when their world is subdivided into competing parts. Not only that, but it is not just the language that is at stake. Children take on the values and behaviors of those who socialize them early on. There are vast differences between societal beliefs and Pueblo beliefs regarding human relationships and whether the individual or the community should come first. To Pueblo people, there is no contest. The community always comes before the individual, and Pueblo people regard as inappropriate and even offensive, the individualism and competition that so often figure in human relationships in the larger society.

For many Indigenous (and immigrant) parents and families who are trying to teach the Indigenous language and culture at home and community, the new effort to prepare their children for school in the earliest years of life will mean that their children will acquire English at the expense of their Indigenous languages and cultures, and not coincidentally, their self-confidence and cultural identities.

This presents a real dilemma for the Indigenous communities in the state. They might not object to the provision of early education programs even for their very young children, but the programs must not be in conflict with a community’s or family’s cultural and linguistic goals and aspirations for its children. Instead the principle of cultural self-determination must be central to the design of any educational program for the diverse Indigenous cultural groups in our nation. That is not as simple a matter as it might seem at first.

What Should Indigenous Early Education Be?

Challenging as it is, there is mounting evidence from successful early education efforts in Indigenous communities worldwide the success of any such effort must begin with a period of self-study. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all solution in education. Success depends on the goodness of fit between the cultural perspectives, beliefs and practices of the people who are seeking to find better ways to educate their children, and the ones that will be used at school (Tobin, 2005). Instructional practices work best when they are a logical extension of the socialization practices and beliefs of a people--or at least, they are not in conflict with them. A community must first decide what they want their children to learn. In the design of an early childhood education initiative it is essential that a community identify its cultural precepts and beliefs about children, their growth and development, and their early learning experiences at home and in their community, including what, how, why and when they learn. Especially in the case of Indigenous communities where the socialization of children is based and carried out through oral traditions, this knowledge will provide the foundation for Indigenous children's later learning in school and elsewhere.

The design of the curriculum itself must begin with a consideration of what children will need as they grow into the roles that the community and the world outside of the Indigenous community expect them to fill. To a large degree, that curriculum must cover the knowledge and skills children will have to have to participate in the work-world outside the community to give them flexibility and choices as to whether to work inside or outside of the Indigenous community as adults. Most of all, planners must consider how the Indigenous language and English will be used and developed since both are necessary.

Thus, a community wanting to find an early education model for the young children in their communities must begin by identifying and understanding their own child rearing practices. What do people believe about a child's potential for learning? How is that potential developed by members of the family and community? What developments do people believe are critically important for ensuring that their children's enter school ready to succeed?

Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico has been involved in just such a self-study effort. They have identified a number of important considerations that a community must consider in the visioning and creation of quality early childhood education for Indigenous children. This Towa-speaking community is not far from Cochiti Pueblo, and shares many traditions, although it is larger, and the situation there is quite different from the one that exists in Cochiti. Thus what works in Cochiti may or may not be

needed in Jemez. Because each Indigenous community is different, the philosophy and goals for a community's early childhood education will reflect its culture, resources (linguistic, cultural and economic), language ideologies, and needs. Among Indigenous communities in the U.S., Native language vitality, for example, varies from as few as 5 speakers in some Native California communities to over an estimated 100,000 speakers of Navajo, an Athabaskan language spoken in the southwest. As well, each community's history of contact with the world outside the Indigenous community may differ substantially from that of other communities. Some communities have experienced greater degrees of assimilation, so their cultural traditions and native language are not as evident and or active as those in communities that have managed to maintain their traditional practices and native language through continuing use. Depending on the vitality of the native language, usage of the native and English language and beliefs about the two languages will differ from one Indigenous community to another (and within families as well). In some communities, the older as well as younger members may question the value or the purpose of trying to revive the Indigenous language--why learn it when everyone knows English? Therefore, based on their language ideologies, a community will make decisions about the language(s) children will acquire first and what language(s) they should learn in.

Seeking alternatives in New Mexico--Jemez Pueblo's planning effort

Indigenous communities in New Mexico have been especially engaged in seeking alternatives to the usual early education programs, which leaders recognize as having been one of the factors in the language shift that has taken place over the past three decades. New Mexico is known as a leader in Indigenous language revitalization and maintenance efforts. For the last three decades, the majority of the New Mexican Indigenous communities have been deeply involved in grassroots language planning, aided in part by its strong centralized tribal governments, and the strength of tribal life in its Pueblo communities. The state is home to a part of the Navajo Nation, four Apache Nations and the 19 Rio Grande Pueblos. In addition to the Apache and Navajo languages, New Mexico has three distinct Pueblo language families: Keresan (or Keres), Kiowa-Tanoan, and Zuni.

One community, Jemez Pueblo has recently embarked on the design of an alternative to existing preschool programs that its young children to attend. Speakers of Towa, one of two language isolates in New Mexico (the other is Zuni), Jemez people are rich in language, culture, and community. According to a 2006 community-wide language assessment survey, 80% of the on-reservation Jemez tribal members speak Towa and the majority of Jemez children learn Towa as their first language. Although these children

have been exposed to English in the homes and wider community and have a receptive understanding of English, many enter Head Start as Towa speakers. The Jemez leadership recognizes the importance of inclusion of their culture and language in their children's education. A critical part of the Jemez comprehensive educational plan is the creation of quality education opportunities that value the Towa language as an essential resource for academic achievement in English. This is reflected in their education mission:

[The mission of the Jemez Department of Education is] to continue strengthening, respecting and encouraging our traditional language and culture while building on the unique talents of each individual, to develop well-educated knowledgeable, healthy and competent leaders for a stronger and healthier community. "Wisdom of the Past, Courage for the Future." (Department of Education, Jemez Pueblo, n.d.)

Jemez, like many other Indigenous communities nationwide, welcomed the establishment of Head Start Programs in the late 1960s. At this time, the Towa language and cultural life was vibrant and somewhat insulated from the influence of English. Consequently, at the time Head Start was established in Jemez, nearly all Jemez tribal members, young and old, were strong speakers of Towa and spoke English as a second language, which was learned and used during the time they attended the K-12 schools that served the community. Jemez children were raised in Towa as their primary language with limited to no exposure to English until they went to school. Consequently, all Head Start teaching occurred in English and followed the nationwide Head Start curriculum, which emphasized preparation for English literacy.

Today Towa remains the community language, but external cultural influences, particularly that of English, have begun to make significant inroads in the community. There have been recent reports of the increasing use of English in the homes and a gradual increase in the number of Jemez children entering Head Start with English as their primary language. What this indicates is that a shift taking place in the communication patterns in the home. Fortunately, the Jemez leadership is aware of this incipient Towa to English shift and has directed its attention to developing community-wide initiatives to ensure that Towa remains the community language. Knowing how important it is for their children to learn English, but how crucial it is for them to continue speaking and developing their Towa skills, the Pueblo's leadership has embarked on transforming its education system to incorporate Towa and Jemez culture in all of its schools, including its early childhood and Head Start programs.

Jemez's efforts to transform the community's early childhood and Head Start programs involve the development of an all Towa learning environment in which the curriculum and activities are based on Jemez perspectives and understanding of children and how they best learn. Similar to Cochiti children, Jemez children, from birth into early childhood, experience rich intellectual, social and cultural interactions with many caretaker-teachers, interactions that serve as a foundation for their linguistic and cognitive development and their future learning. In addition to curricular design, and the planning of the classroom environment and activities, Jemez is emphasizing the professional development of its early childhood and Head Start program teachers, all of whom are native speakers of Towa, had spent their childhood years in the Jemez community, and knew its traditions. The goal is to prepare high quality teachers who will be able to support the children's learning through the creation of rich Towa environments.

To accomplish all this requires self-study--the people want to be quite clear about its beliefs and practices in teaching and learning, and about its socialization practices. Jemez is currently engaged in a research project that aims to identify from a traditional Jemez perspective, the beliefs, values, and practices the people follow as they socialize their children and teach them what they need to learn in homes and community settings, beginning in the earliest years of children's lives.

The project, which is entitled, "Becoming Jemez: The Early Childhood of Jemez Children,ⁱⁱⁱ" uses Photovoice (photos and audio recordings) and focus groups to document the "authentic daily experiences" of Jemez children. In this participatory action research method, community members--parents and grandparents of Jemez Head Start children--used digital cameras to document what Jemez adults believe their children should learn, the approaches and methods by which children are taught, the settings and occasions in which teaching occurs, and the persons who do the teaching. The parents and grandparents who served as photographers also documented Jemez child rearing practices and captured people's beliefs about children and the roles adults play in ensuring that children learn these essential elements of



what it means to be Jemez, as illustrated by the following remarks drawn from comments made during a focus group meeting.^{iv}

We have been talking about the language, the song, the dance, all that plays an important part in being Jemez. (Children) should learn all these things at an early age... [As their first teachers (parents)] it is critical to tell the young children about the ways of life, about how to be Jemez.^v

Guided and inspired by the photographs, Jemez people can tell their own stories and comment on the early childhood experiences of contemporary Jemez children. Ultimately, this information can then be used to develop a culturally relevant and linguistically rich age-appropriate early learning experience for Jemez children.

Jemez Pueblo's early childhood initiative demonstrates its recognition that quality early education and education programs are ones that promote and incorporate the Indigenous community's language and culture. These are vital considerations for ensuring that the cognitive and linguistic development children are provided during the early years of life will serve as foundations for learning in throughout their lives, whether in their own community or in the larger society. However, to ensure these initiatives are as successful as possible community leaders also recognize the mounting pressure from the society to follow the standards and guidelines that have been adopted for quality early childhood education, and need to provide their children the experiences and skills children should have when they leave preschool, and enter the K-12 school system.

Are there methods of teaching and learning in early education that will enable children to learn what they must learn in order to succeed in the

society's schools, but are not in conflict with the community's curriculum or methods of socializing children? Educators and community leaders in several Pueblo communities have, in addition to documenting their cultural practices and beliefs regarding teaching and learning, studied the transformative models of education that other Indigenous communities around the world have developed, most notably, the educational systems of New Zealand's Maori people, and that of the Hawaiian people in this country.

Transformative Models of Indigenous Early Education Programs

Models of early education programs that have found ways to deal with the inherently conflicting goals of families and Indigenous communities and schools invariably turn to New Zealand's Te Kohanga Reo, and Hawaii's 'Aha Punana Leo, both of which have resolved the conflict in highly creative ways.

The Maori language was in danger of being lost in 1982 when New Zealand's Maori people began their planning of their highly successful childhood center where Maori speaking elders cared for infants and young children. In addition to the major focus of Indigenous language renewal through language immersion, was the question of how to develop a preschool that reflected the beliefs about and goals for children, child rearing philosophy and pedagogical approaches or teaching styles that were consistent with the Maori way of rearing children.

A major question Maori elders considered in their planning process had to do with the kind of environment they should create in the preschool classroom, and what types of activities would be appropriate, given the people's beliefs and values. For example, Farquhar and Laws (1991) writes that for Maoris, value is placed on people and interactions rather than on things such as expensive equipment and learning materials, and from the Pakeha (non-Maori) perspective, the preschool environment might appear to be restricted and poorly equipped. A fundamental component of the philosophy and curriculum was the "whanau," the traditional family which consists of the parents, grandparents, relative and others as the central teachers and socializers of Maori children. Connected with the whanau concept were values and principles of how one should relate to others and care for children (Harrison, 2009).

The curriculum however, not only emphasized the socialization of Maori children for participation in the Indigenous community, it also prepared them for school, which Maori children would be attending when they were school age. That meant, of course, working on English in addition to Maori. The graduates of the language nests made the transition to the public school system easily enough--the problem the Maori leaders

discovered at that point was not in the children's preparation for school, but in the school's lack of preparation for the children. After a short time in the public schools, the children were beginning to lose their Maori skills. Maori leaders eventually decided they would have to establish bilingual programs in the public schools to protect the children's hard-won Indigenous language skills from erosion and loss.

Another preschool model for Indigenous children is that of the Hawaiian people's 'Aha Pūnana Leo (language nest gathering) program. The Hawaiian people who developed the Aha Punana Leo program in Hawaii followed a path that was similar to that taken by New Zealand's Maori people. It too began by clarifying for itself the cultural beliefs and values of the people, especially as related to the socialization of children. By the 1980s the Hawaiian language had few native speakers left, so the Hawaiians' program was a heroic effort to keep their language alive by teaching it to the children. The planners understood "that the future of the people rests in the strength of the children, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo embarked on creating Hawaiian language *honua*, environments in preschool settings" (Iokepa-Guerrero, 2008, p. 31). Modeled after the Māori Te Kōhanga Reo programs, the Hawaiian immersion preschools focused on strengthening the Hawaiian *mauli* (life force) through the exclusive use of the Hawaiian language. To do this required the creation of a learning context that resembled the homes of earlier generations of Hawaiians who learned Hawaiian as a primary language by living it and experiencing it through traditional home and communal activities and the extended family, the 'ohana (Wilson & Kamana, 2001). In the Hawaiian perspective, all members of the 'ohana and community play an important role in raising and teaching a child. The Hawaiian culture, including the beliefs, values and behaviors, served as the foundation for the 'Aha Pūnana Leo curriculum, program activities, classroom activities, and parent involvement. Therefore, embedding the family and environment in the planning of the school that the people describe as *Kula Kaiapuni Hawai'i* (Hawaiian surrounding environment school) was essential.

The eventual success of the Punana Leo program, like the Maori language nests, can be attributed to participation and support of the community--the society itself had to be shown what the programs could do before it offered any support at all. The children who participated in the program became fully proficient in the language, as well as full participants in the cultural life of their community. They also became fully engaged in the academic life of the school, and stayed in school through high school graduation and went on to college.

A Proposal for Planning Indigenous Early Education Programs

I have argued that Indigenous communities must be clear about their own cultural beliefs and practices in teaching and learning, and clear about ways in which mainstream educational policies and practices have conflicted with their own goals for their children. The next step is the identification of instructional approaches that will give children all they need to succeed in school--in other words, the habits of mind that promote learning and development in school, and the foundations for English literacy, the foundations for mathematics, an appetite for learning about ideas, nature, art, and music too. Indigenous educators from several New Mexico Pueblo communities--Acoma, Cochiti, and Santo Domingo have begun to look at various early education approaches, asking the following questions:

1. Will the approach allow the Indigenous language to be used and developed?
2. Will it build a strong foundation for life-long learning by developing essential cognitive, social, and learning skills that will allow children to function successfully in community and mainstream learning environments?
3. Are the modes of learning promoted congruent with the community's approaches to teaching and learning?
4. Are the behavioral expectations congruent with the community's beliefs about how children should behave and function in learning environments?
5. Are the human relationships and interactional practices consistent with those that are promoted in the community?
6. Are parents encouraged to play a continuing role in the education of their children?

They began by considering what it is in American school culture that tends to estrange Indigenous students. It was in trying to answer that question that eventually led them to consider the Montessori approach. The question we should ask is, why Montessori? This looked like a ball coming from left field! Montessori is criticized by many American early educators as being rigid and inflexible. Not only that, but how could an educational method that was designed by an Italian physician for the poor children in Italy be an appropriate choice for richly endowed Indigenous children? The Indigenous educators who were looking into various approaches to early education had considered all such objections. What they saw, when they looked closely, and especially when they visited some Montessori programs in New Mexico and California was this: the approach supports language development and academic learning in the most effective ways

possible. It addressed many problematic aspects of school practice and structure that make participation in instructional activities difficult for Pueblo children: Pueblo children acquire skills and knowledge holistically, and in the context of family and community activities they are engaged in. At school, the materials they work on are bits and pieces of information and skills, divided vertically by subjects, and horizontally by grade level, but not organized around meaningful activities they can relate to. The practices and approach favored by the school contradict and conflict with Pueblo epistemologies of teaching and learning: in the management of discipline, in participant structures, in scheduling and focus, in the management of instruction, and most of all, in the goals of education. In the Pueblo world, an educated person is one who is prepared to work for the support and betterment of the community, who is competent, responsible and respectful, and above all, is spiritually and culturally grounded. In the American school world, an educated person is fully prepared to work in the competitive work environment of the current economic world, and an independent participant in the society. Little wonder that Pueblo children sometimes feel at odds with the school environment. When the Pueblo educators looked into Montessori, they discovered that in structure, approach, goals, and philosophy, the approach matched well with the Indigenous approaches to learning in their own communities. They saw that learning is promoted through skillful mentoring and teaching just at the point when children are ready to learn. Teachers are constantly monitoring children's learning as they interact with peers and materials. The learning behaviors that are promoted are ones of cooperation, mutual support, and personal responsibility. Based on studies of child development, the approach is sufficiently flexible so that it can be adjusted to the cultural environment and practices of whatever community it serves. It was designed originally for the poor children of Rome, but in the United States, in large part because of the disdain in which it is held by the early education establishment, it is available primarily in private schools for the children of affluent families!



Understanding these dynamics and knowing that Pueblo children's early education includes a rich socialization process based on oral child rearing practices and patterns, it was essential that this be incorporated and embraced within the Montessori teaching philosophy and pedagogy for their school. This hybrid approach emphasizes observation and support of the natural development of children's learning, which are compatible and reflective of the Pueblo pedagogical approaches and belief about how children learn. One form of learning, for instance, is when Pueblo children, learn through engaged observation of activities. The child is considered an active participant in these activities even though he or she may not be doing anything but watching, listening, and making sense of things. Learning occurs through direct and indirect social interactions with more knowledgeable others (i.e., parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and secondary teachers such as secular leaders). In this form of learning children engage in a great deal of learning through observation of others: they watch, listen, and internalize the cultural and social events and interactions occurring between adults and with children. As a young mother remarked in an interview, "they just pick up everything around them." Similarly, the Montessori philosophy recognizes that young children are literally absorbing the life around them.

At present, a Pueblo Montessori school is still in the planning stages. The primary goal of this school is to teach preschool age Pueblo children in their Indigenous languages using the Montessori approach. All teachers will be certified in Montessori, including an English speaking elementary school teacher who will add the English dimension to the program to insure that the children are well prepared to handle an all English

curriculum when they must. The planning process has been an arduous one for the community leaders and the educators who have been engaged in research, training, fund raising and negotiation with the leadership in the community, and the state agency for permits to operate as a school. They will soon be visiting Hawai'i to learn what they can from the founders and leaders at the 'Aha Punana Leo school.

Conclusion

Crucial, in the eyes of Indigenous parents and families is that their “[c]hildren need the kind of early-education experiences, in a language they understand, that turn them into enthusiastic and independent learners. They need experiences that build on the linguistic and intellectual resources they already have,” (Wong Fillmore, 1991b). Moreover, their children need quality time to be socialized in the values, beliefs and practices that will enable them to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of their cultural homes and communities. In the end, efforts to find more appropriate and effective ways to educate our children without diminishing them linguistically or culturally depend on collaborations between communities and educators. Indigenous families and communities recognize that the continued survival of their native languages and ways of life depend on finding ways to circumvent the loss of language and culture that result from educational programs that do not respect or value the resources children bring from home. Therefore, in whatever ways possible early childhood educators should encourage and support Indigenous parents’, families’ and communities’ efforts to ensure that their children acquire their Indigenous languages and cultures by identifying, embracing and incorporating Indigenous perspectives on how children learn in early childhood programs and classrooms. This unity will not only enrich the early learning experiences of children but will contribute to the sustainability of a community’s language and culture. This investment and commitment is what is needed to ensure that every Indigenous child is ready for school, and equally important, prepared, ready, and willing to follow the footsteps of their cultural caretakers-teachers.

References

Dalmia, S. & Snell, L. Protect our kids from preschool. *The Wall Street Journal Online*, August 22, 2008. Accessed on March 27, 2010. http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB121936615766562189.html

- Farquhar, S. & Laws, K. (1991). *A preferred child care education service: The quality of Te Kohanga Reo*. Paper presented at the Early Childhood Convention, Dunedin, New Zealand, September 8-12.
- Harrison, B. (2009). Te Wharekura o Rakaumangamanga: the development of an Indigenous language immersion school. Total Immersion Education in New Zealand: Treaty Total Immersion School. Accessed on Marcy 27, 2011 <http://treatyschool.org/2009/total-immersion-education-in-new-zealand/>
http://www.ahapunaleo.org/eng/ohana/ohana_raising.html
- Jemez Pueblo (nd). *Mission Statement*. Department of Education, Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico.
- Linderman, F., *Plenty Coups: Chief of the Crows*. New Edition. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.
- Lokepa-Guerrero, N. (2008). Raising a child in the Punana Leo: Everyone (men and women) play an important role. *Exchange*, pp. 30-32, May/June.
- Nagel, D. (November 20, 2009). NCLB Had Mixed Impact on Achievement, Study Finds. The journal: Transforming education through technology. Retrieved February 21, 2010: <http://thejournal.com/Articles/2009/11/20/NCLB-Had-Mixed-Impact-on-Achievement-Study-Finds.aspx?Page=1>
- New Mexico State Children, Youth and Families Department, Department of Health & Public Education Department (December 2009-May 2010). *New Mexico early learning guidelines: birth through kindergarten*. Field Test.
- Niles, M.D., Byers, L., & Krueger, E.M. (2008). Best practice and evidence-based research in Indigenous early childhood intervention programs. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 30(1), pp. 108-125.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: how testing and choice are undermining education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Romero-Little, M.E., Shendo, K., & Sando, A. (2010, in progress). *Becoming Jemez: early childhood education of Jemez children*, Center for American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start, University of Colorado, Denver.

- Romero, M. E. (2003). Perpetuating the Cochiti way of life: Language socialization and language shift in a Pueblo community. Unpublished dissertation. University of California at Berkeley.
- Sando, J. S. (1992). *Pueblo nations: eight centuries of Pueblo Indian history*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers.
- Sando, J. S. (1998). *Pueblo profiles: Cultural identity through centuries of change*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers.
- Tobin, J. (2005). Quality in early childhood education: an anthropologist's perspective. *Early education and development*, 14 (4), 422-434.
- Schumacher, R., Hamm, K., Goldsetein, A., & Lombardi, J. (2006). *Starting off right: promoting child development from birth in state early care and education initiatives*. Center for Law and Social policy, Washington, DC. Retrieved on February 20, 2010 from http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications_states/files/0316.pdf
- Wilson, W.H., & Kamana, K. (2001). "Mai loko mai o ka 'i 'ini: Proceeding from a dream": The Aha Punana Leo connection in Hawaiian language revitalization. In L. Hinton & K. Hale (eds.), *The green book of language revitalization in practice* (pp. 147-176). San Diego Academic Press.
- Wong Fillmore, L. (1991a). "When Learning a Second Language Means Losing the First," (for the No-Cost Research Group), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, September, 1991. (Reprinted in the *Educator*, 6, 2, 1992,)
- Wong Fillmore, L. (1991b). A question for early-childhood programs: English first or families first? *Education Week*, June 19, 1991, pp. 32, 34.

ⁱ Quoted by Barney Old Coyote, Jr. (2002). Foreword, to Linderman, F., *Plenty Coups: Chief of the Crows*. New Edition. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.

ⁱⁱ From interviews conducted in Cochiti Pueblo see Romero, M. E. (2003). *Perpetuating the Cochiti way of life: Language socialization and language shift in*

a Pueblo community. Unpublished dissertation. University of California at Berkeley.

iii This research is funded by the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center at the University of Colorado Denver.

iv Participants in the focus groups were parents and grandparents of Walatowa Head Start children or Head Start-to-be children. Armed with digital cameras, they took the photos to answer the research questions. The text is their verbatim discussion on the significance of their photos. This discussion was digital audio recorded during the focus group meetings/interviews. The digital recordings were transcribed and returned to the participants who then critiqued their own text. A poster was created for each photo and its accompanying text. Kevin Shendo, Arlan Sando, and Lana Toya, all from Jemez Pueblo, worked on the Welcome poster and on the final editing and critiques of the posters.

v Romero-Little, M.E., Shendo, K., & Sando, A. (2010, in progress). *Becoming Jemez: early childhood education of Jemez children*, Center for American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start, University of Colorado, Denver.

Early childhood education (ECE) is an investment in the immediate health and well-being of young children and in their subsequent learning and development. In making programming decisions, planners should be conscious of the long-term outcomes of ECE programmes, of widely-encouraged ECE practices, and of the different options of centre-based and community-based ECE programmes. It is also important to be aware of the need for resource-mobilization to fund ECE services, and the planning involved in coordinating, advocating, and monitoring ECE services. Issues and Discussion. Long-term outcomes o