



The Role of Tribal Child Care Programs Serving Children Birth to Age Five

Linda Mayo Willis and Carolyn Pope Edwards
Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies



Statement of the Problem

This national study, the first of its kind, examines efforts by tribal child care programs located on American Indian reservations to preserve culture and language and implement child care quality improvement systems. A qualitative design was used to learn about tribal child care directors' beliefs regarding the preservation and promotion of continuity of cultural education as implemented in the tribal child care program.

The study:

- Examined tribal child care directors' perceptions of the cultural role their particular program plays in the tribal community
- Explored the unique aspects of the tribal customs of child rearing and early childhood educational practices within each community
- Examined ways that quality strategies are used to support optimal child development outcomes



Relevant Background

A rich diversity of languages, traditions and heritage exist in the American Indian Tribal child care programs. The programs vary greatly in size, locality and population.

The Child Care Bureau serves approximately 18,300 American Indian/Alaska Native families and 32,851 children.

Quality implementation is the role of the child care center director.

Understanding differences in child rearing and child behaviors stemming from different cultures and parenting styles supports the advancement of the culturally competent work of early childhood researchers and practitioners. As American Indian tribes continue efforts to preserve and promote cultural education, it is helpful to know how programs have dealt with such issues.

Primary Research Questions

The *grand tour questions* were, first, do tribal child care directors perceive a role for child care services inside American Indian reservations in preserving cultural integrity and promoting cultural continuity, and if so, what is that role? Second, do directors believe that the processes of preserving cultural integrity and promoting cultural continuity are enhanced or impeded by statewide child care quality improvement strategies, and if so, how?

Hypothesis 1. Directors' tribal enrollment will relate to promotion of cultural education.

Hypothesis 2. More experienced directors are expected to have more elaborated responses relative to less experienced directors about actions they can take to promote cultural education and continuity that involve wider networks such as other child care programs and community, state, and national initiatives.

Hypothesis 3. experienced directors will be more knowledgeable than less experienced directors about actions to promote child care quality that extend over a longer time period and reach beyond their own center.



Methods and Participants

The study employs a multiple case study design

- Sixteen American Indian program directors were all members of different tribes
- Site visits were conducted to participating tribal child care facilities.
- 32 semi-structured interview questions elicited the directors' views.
- Directors represented sites located in diverse geographic regions across the country.
- Participant selection reflected variation in leadership experience, tribal affiliation, and different stages in their professional careers.

Key Findings

- Tribal child care programs play an important role in facilitating cultural continuity and education for young children living in American Indian reservation communities. Tribal language and cultural knowledge are core elements of the early childhood curriculum.

- Participants viewed their advocacy efforts addressing the needs of the children, families, and staff as a primary role of their work. Advocacy efforts were focused on local, state, and national issues.

- Supportive, mentoring relationships with other tribal child care directors, tribal council members, and early childhood management team members were cited as critical elements for on-the-job success

- Program quality was enhanced in a variety of tribal and site specific ways including on-site technical assistance, access to higher educational opportunities, and attendance at professional conferences.



Analytic Plan

Data collection strategies included site visits, audio taping of interviews, verbatim transcriptions, digital photographs of environments, artifacts, and supporting documents, and ample opportunities for participants to revisit, revise, rewrite their answers.

Triangulation was provided from data collected from 16 participants purposely sampled to vary in their geographic region, administrative experience, and tribal affiliation.

Significance of the Study

This study is the first to examine the views of American Indian tribal child care directors regarding the interface between child care quality enhancement and native language and cultural education.

- Sheds light on the current state of cultural education and continuity efforts in tribal child care.

- Reveals that directors require years of experience to accrue the knowledge, expertise, and felt competence to implement cultural continuity and quality improvement systems.

- Highlights strategies that directors use to develop strong linkages for collaboration.

- Reveals that quality improvement must take place in tribally specific ways.



Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Child Care Bureau through the Child Care Research Scholar Grant program

