Defining Quality: New Insights for Training Practitioners

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Quality early childhood care and education has long been a focus for the field in the United States, but only more recently have instructors working with Native American families begun to question if there is more to quality than national standards of group size, staff ratios, and training. The author describes a journey that began with the Indigenous ECD Symposium in Victoria, British Columbia to examine more closely what quality may mean to Native families in the US.

In late February and early March 2006 I participated in the International Perspectives on Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Development Forum at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. As a result of my participation, I began to question myself and my personal perspective on quality in Native American early childhood programs. After the presentations and having had the privilege of working for several days with early childhood practitioners representing Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Canada's First Nations, and the Investigating Quality Project at the University of Victoria, I realized that I did not know or understand what *quality* really meant. As an early childhood instructor, for years I have been telling my students that quality is based on "three essential factors": (a) the teacher-child ratio; (b) the total size of the group or class; and (c) the education, experience, and training of the staff (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p. 42). Now when I rethink these indicators, I realize that there is much more to quality than this and that these "essential" factors may not be what is most important in the communities where I work. The recognized national perspective may not match Native philosophies.

When I began to research quality in Native American programs, I was dismayed at how difficult a task it was. The proceedings of the Rural Early Childhood Forum on American Indian and Alaska Native Early Learning, held in July 2005 in Little Rock, Arkansas, reported, "The most overwhelming result of the forum was the consistent identification of the lack of research in all areas of American Indian and Alaska Native early care and education" (Schafft, Faircloth, & Thompson, 2006, p. 8). It was noted in the proceedings that there is a need for culturally sensitive research and that current practices must respect Native traditions and policies. In reflecting on my personal journey in early childhood education and care, I

can see that my understanding of quality has evolved over time increasingly to include community input and cultural relevance.

Head Start

My career in early childhood education began as the parent of a child enrolled in the White Mountain Apache Head Start Program on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Northeastern Arizona. Growing up on the reservation near McNary and Whiteriver, Arizona, I had dreamed of becoming an elementary teacher. By 1973 I had given up that dream. I was living with my husband and children in the Phoenix area and striving for an accounting degree. We returned home to the reservation for the summer of 1973 while my husband worked as a clerk for the tribal attorney. In the fall we decided to remain on the reservation and not return to Phoenix.

I remember being disgruntled that my daughter Rachel would not be able to attend kindergarten as the public school district did not then have kindergarten. We were referred to the White Mountain Apache Head Start Program, which operated a half-day, five-day, school year-length program for 5-year-olds. My husband and I knew nothing about Head Start because the program had started since we moved away from the reservation. My knowledge of preschool was based on a faint memory of observing a preschool teacher walking with a long stick and yelling at children as they walked in line to the cafeteria for lunch. I did not want that type of preschool experience for my children.

Rachel loved Head Start. Soon after the school year began, my husband and I attended the first Head Start parent meeting. Only four new parents attended in addition to the outgoing officers. He and I were both elected to office in the Parent Policy Council. I volunteered in the classroom, which I found fulfilling as a stay-at-home mom who missed working outside the home. Soon I hired a local neighbor girl to watch my toddler while I was out doing Parent Policy Council business. My husband and I attended statewide Indian Head Start parent trainings. At one such training on parent involvement, Winona Sample, a renowned consultant in tribal early childhood, asked, "What can you do to help your program?" I replied, "Oh, I couldn't do anything, I am just a parent." She responded by lecturing me about parents as first teachers. This concept was strange to me, having grown up in communities where parents were not actively involved in their children's education. Schools taught children. Parents were observers. It was as if children belonged to the schools.

In the spring of 1974 the Parent Policy Council began recruiting to fill the position of a Head Start teacher who had left our program. I asked my sitter, who was on a break from university, to apply, and she countered, "You apply for the job. I'll watch the kids." And so on April 1, 1974 I formally began my career in early childhood education.

My first few months as a Head Start teacher were challenging as I had not been trained to work in early childhood. I enjoyed teaching, but I never

felt qualified until I earned my CDA (Child Development Associate) credential. That summer I was informed that funds for Head Start Supplementary Training were available for anyone who wished to apply. I could not believe that for once in my life someone was willing to pay for my education! In the fall of 1974 I entered the CDA program in Northland Pioneer College (NPC). In May 1975 I participated in NPC's first graduation ceremony. The following spring I earned my CDA credential, the first awarded to staff from an Arizona tribal Head Start program.

At NPC I learned about early childhood concepts and best practices. I thought I knew what *quality* meant. Although I related quality to these concepts, I did try to incorporate Apache culture in my classroom. We had no formal curriculum, and we could do whatever we wished. The Hopi Head Start program had been touted because of the immense amount of cultural activities they included in their program. I wanted to do that type of teaching too. I found out early that it was difficult to find Native American resources. I recall continually looking for curriculum resources to use in the classroom. However, the Tribal Title VII program helped us to create "lap books" of some of the Apache legends. I had my children's Apache mothers and grandmothers make traditional camp clothes and cradle boards for the dolls in housekeeping. My husband and I made a trading post storefront that we used for dramatic play themes. The girls had camp dresses, and there were ribbon shirts for the boys for dressing up, along with cowboy boots, cowboy hats, and stick horses. We made frybread as part of our nutrition activities, visited the Fort Apache Museum, and took other local field trips on the reservation. Grandmothers came in to demonstrate beading and basketry.

Back then the Head Start program celebrated spring by hosting an all-Indian Rodeo, which included a children's parade and pow-wow. One year the parents' group decided they wanted their children to *crown dance* at the pow-wow. I supported their enthusiastic interest, but told them that as a non-Apache I would not be able to teach the children the dance steps or make the traditional clothing or dance props. It was amazing how far several fathers went to ensure that their children were ready by pow-wow time. The families took care of everything including making sure that the children were properly blessed before performing. What a proud moment it was when the five boys appeared to crown dance. They performed several times that year, including at the dedication of the newly constructed Head Start center, which brought 11 Head Start classrooms to one main location in Whiteriver.

In the fall of 1977, having earned my bachelor's degree in elementary education from Arizona State University (ASU) that August, I applied for the position of Head Start Program Director. I was hired in May 1978. During my tenure the Head Start program underwent many changes. Early on the Parent Policy Council instituted the requirement that every

Head Start classroom staff member would obtain his or her CDA credential within three years of their hiring date or resign. This was many years before the national Head Start mandate was instituted. We switched from serving 5-year-olds to 4-year-olds as the public school district added kindergarten reservation-wide. The tribal welfare program allowed me to interview prospective participants for on-the-job training. I would select Head Start parents, and they would enroll in the CDA courses through Northland Pioneer College. Then whenever we had staff openings, they would be hired because they were already trained. With additional financial assistance we were able to have three teaching staff in each of the 13 classrooms in the two Head Start centers. Administrative staff enrolled in CDA, and the Health Coordinator earned her credential by spending enough time in a classroom to be formally assessed. Parents and community members were also enrolled in CDA courses, and three received their CDA credentials. Both CDA and early childhood college courses were provided on site, which enabled program staff to work on their educational goals. ASU College of Social Work courses were available to Head Start staff, which helped to meet the needs of the children and families in the community. Through state funding we were able to hire our own social worker. We were funded for two therapy aides who helped carry out therapy plans for specialists who could not come often enough to work directly with the children with special needs for speech, physical, and occupational therapy. Staff and parents took full advantage of training and college courses and progressed up the career ladder. There was little staff turnover.

Parents' meetings focused on what was best for the children, and we developed and implemented our own curriculum. The tribal council created a Cultural Specialist position. This individual, an Apache Elder, developed cultural materials for each classroom and did presentations for the children and staff, for example, telling Apache legends. We were all pleased to include more culturally relevant material in the curriculum.

I loved being Program Director. Unfortunately, in December 1986 I left my position due to a divorce. I immediately went to work at the Western Navajo Head Start Agency in Tuba City, Arizona as Assistant Director of Components. This Head Start program served over 700 children and had a staff of over 100. Although I was not in charge of the educational staff, I worked with the Assistant Director of Education to endorse staff enrollment in the CDA program at Northland Pioneer College. The Navajo Nation Parent Policy Council passed a resolution at the central level requiring the CDA credential for teaching staff. I enjoyed providing training to staff and parents on the Head Start performance standards and other related topics. I also taught NPC courses to Head Start staff and parents on the Navajo and Hopi reservations. I remember vividly the time a student told me that she had decided while in high school to work in early

childhood education. Before then I had not encountered anyone who had purposely chosen early childhood as a career.

In April 1988 I learned that I would need to reconsider working at the Navajo Head Start Agency due to the enforcement of a Navajo—and Native American—hiring policy. I had enjoyed working with this program and felt that it had been beneficial to learn another tribe's culture and organizational style. Working in such a large organization gave me a new perspective on program operation and allowed me to appreciate the benefits of having been fairly autonomous in my previous position.

Northland Pioneer College

I applied for the position of Early Childhood Program Chair at Northland Pioneer College and with my previous associate faculty experience was hired to begin in August 1988. My duties included coordinating early childhood training and courses over a 22,000-square-mile area encompassing rural Navajo and Apache counties. Because of the vastness of the Navajo Nation, the ECD program also served early childhood settings in Coconino and Yavapai counties and across state lines into New Mexico and Utah. Three tribes lie within the college's service area: Navajo, Hopi, and White Mountain Apache.

The ECD program at the college grew tremendously as early educators and caregivers were recruited and offered scholarships from a variety of sources. The on-site delivery method met, and continues to meet, the needs of those enrolled in early childhood education courses by alleviating transportation and financial costs. ECD and CDA instructors still travel to the individual child care centers, daycare centers, family child care homes, Head Start centers, and the like to deliver the courses. Whenever possible Native American instructors are sought to work in the Native American communities. As mentors they can observe the caregivers/providers as they work with the children, and they can demonstrate appropriate techniques spontaneously. The ECD students prefer this type of delivery system to clustered on-campus courses.

Since coming to NPC, my early childhood experience has broadened. I have worked with many types of early childhood programs and settings both on and off reservations. I have also mentored for Prescott College in its early childhood bachelor's and master's degree programs. In fall 2006 I taught a multicultural child development course for Northern Arizona University on their interactive televised video (ITV) system, reaching students working on their bachelor's degrees on all three reservations.

Based on my experiences in the field and through my own education, I still believe that professional development is the key to providing quality services to young children and their families. I remain committed to ensuring that such development activities are available in the northeastern portion of our state, including the wide variety of tribal early childhood settings.

With the commitment of improving professional development in our service area in mind, I was excited and eager to have Northland Pioneer College become a part of the Arizona System Ready/Child Ready Project funded by the United States Department of Education and administered through ASU. This collaborative effort of several community colleges and the Readiness Board of the Governor's Office allowed 300 early educators/providers throughout the state to participate in credit-bearing early childhood courses. The goal of the project was to weave together a more integrated system of early childhood initiatives, with collaboration from community colleges and agencies in Arizona, to provide professional development opportunities for teachers who serve children in high-need communities. There was a need for strategies that affect policies for funding early childhood teacher education, establishing core knowledge/competences for early childhood teaching, emphasizing outreach and access to professional development opportunities in high-need areas, and articulating with colleges and universities.

Through the course of the project, NPC had 80 participants, with 71 considered as having completed their coursework. All but five of the participants were representatives of the three tribal Nations; these included family child care providers, daycare providers, Head Start teaching staff, public preschool staff, and parents. The learning community model allowed participants the opportunity to complete basic skill or college-level courses in English and mathematics as well as corresponding courses about the children they worked with (Literacy and the Young Child and Numeracy in Early Childhood). A one-week summer institute focusing on the social-emotional development of young children was held at the White Mountain Apache Tribal Sunrise Resort. A group of mainly Hispanic students from another community college in the southern part of Arizona participated with our students in the Sunrise Summer Institute, which allowed for a sharing of cultural values and ideas. Institute presenters included a wide representation of ASU early childhood professors, state officials, and well-known Arizona early childhood consultants. The participants were exposed to some of the best professional early educators in the state.

During the final semesters, NPC participants also received one-on-one mentoring at their work sites, which resulted in the development of goals related to the Arizona Early Learning Standards and professional portfolios. Using grant funds, participants were allowed to enroll in additional college-level courses to complete general education requirements leading toward Certificates of Applied Science, Associate of Applied Science degrees, and the CDA credential. Many of the NPC participants have now gained their CDA credentials and earned two-year degrees. Others are still working toward completing their educational goals. Following the completion of the Arizona System Ready/Child Ready grant,

NPC continues to support early childhood students by paying the CDA credential fees ($325 per person) for 18 ECD students and by providing 25 tuition scholarships. Most of the applicants for these two financial opportunities were former grant participants. I believe that in addition to the staff efficacy that resulted from the grant, the participants have become motivated to achieve their educational goals.

Native Education

During my presentation at the International Perspectives on Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Development Forum at the University of Victoria, I spoke broadly about the Native American programs of which I was aware and gave statistical data from Head Start, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Child Care Bureau and the US Census Bureau (Endfield, 2006a). I said that for the American Indian and Alaska Native,

- education was traditionally conducted at home within family units and villages and was derived from the customs of the different clans;
- children were educated for tribal life by their elders, family members, and peers; and
- story telling, working with adults, and participating in ceremonies and puberty rites were essential to cultural education. (Spring, 2001, cited in Endfield, 2006a, p. 46)

With the introduction of European cultures, AI/AN children were exposed to cultures very different from their own. But as I (Endfield, 2006b) presented in my paper at the Rural Early Childhood Forum,

> AI/AN cultures and languages have experienced some revitalization, as well as renewed acceptance and respect so that children are receiving culturally and developmentally appropriate educational services from different federally, grant and tribally supported programs. (p. 46)

In the US and Alaska, many types of programs serve American and Alaskan Native children. The following types of programs are available in northeastern Arizona: Head Start; Early Head Start; Child Development Fund (Tribal Child Care); FACE programs; Baby FACE programs; Child Find programs; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Hopi Diabetes/Tobacco Program; and Family Providers.

Examples of professional development opportunities available for AI/AN programs within our service area include:

- T/TA funding available for tribal Head Start grantees for preservice, inservice, CDA, and college-level courses.
- Regional conferences provided by the Southwest Consortium of Indian Head Start Programs.
- Tribal Child Care and Development (CCDF) programs may use 10% of their funding for increasing program quality.
- TRI-TAC, a consultant for tribal child care programs, provides semiannual new administrator trainings and cluster workshops in addition to their annual Tribal Child Care Conference.

- National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA) provides training conferences at rotating locations.
- CCDF regions also provide annual conferences.
- White Mountain Apache Child Care Program requires all selected eligible parents to attend a one-day workshop, Orientation to Child Care, as part of their enrollment process.
- White Mountain Apache Child Care Program provides monthly workshops for its care providers on a variety of early childhood topics.

Investigating Quality in Native American Early Education

The process of brainstorming and refining our thoughts on quality during the Victoria forum caused me to question my own practices as well as what my students and others in Native American early childhood settings believed about quality for young children's education and care. With these questions in mind, I designed a survey for tribal program administrators, program staff, and parents on what they considered to be quality in tribal programs. I distributed the survey at the National Tribal Child Care Conference held in Washington, DC in August 2006. The results were interesting and not what I had anticipated.

Quality in Native American Early Childhood Survey

My survey asked the following questions.

1. What do you think are the most important professional qualities that a person working with young Native American children should have? Please list at least four or five qualities and rank them in order of priority.
2. What do you think are the most important personal qualities that a person working with young Native American children should have? Please list at least four or five qualities and rank them in order of priority.
3. What do you think are the most beneficial ways for early caregivers, educators and/or providers to become qualified to work with young Native American children? Why?
4. List four types of experiences that help providers to become knowledgeable about young children and their development and explain why they are important.
5. In what ways are the educational systems in your community responding to the educational and training needs of individuals working with young children? What suggestions do you have regarding the provision of such training and education?
6. Please make any comments or suggestions on what you consider to be quality indicators for childcare programs for young Native American children.

Survey Results

I received 57 responses from representatives of 16 tribal groups. The respondents' length of service in early childhood ranged from one month to 24 years, with the average being 7.9 years.

Some of the respondents had difficulty distinguishing professional from personal qualities; this created similarities in survey findings for the first two questions. The top professional qualities were identified as knowledge of the Native American community (28); patience (13); early childhood background (12); education (11); experience (8); and good communication skills, including knowing the Native language (8). The prioritized personal qualities included familiarity with Native American customs/lifestyles (20); communication skills (19); patience (16); love of children (13); understanding (11); and education (7). Also mentioned were the importance of sensitivity and being open to learning the culture.

In response to Question 3—what the respondents thought were the most beneficial ways for early caregivers/educators to become qualified to work with young Native American children—education was listed 31 times and experience 15 times. One respondent stated, "Become familiar or be knowledgeable of Native American community: language, culture. Be flexible and open to Native American practices; familiar with family dynamics of the communities. Utilize everyday experiences to relate to culture, not one hour weekly." Another suggested, "College course work should have a strong emphasis on the cultural content of children's lives, coupled with an effective classroom practice with guidance from qualified instructors and cultural leaders: native teachers, elders, etc." Another mentioned mentoring by grandmothers, Elders, and staff.

Question 4—listing the types of experiences that help providers to become knowledgeable about young children and their development—had the following results: mentoring, training, and workshops were the highest rated (27), followed closely by formal educational experiences such as courses (26) and actual experience (21). Other experiences mentioned were networking and reading on the subject.

In response to Question 5 regarding how the education systems in their communities were responding to the educational and training needs of individuals working with young children, most of the responses centered on the provision of classes and training sessions, use of community colleges near local communities, and networking. The need for funding was also mentioned. It is evident from the replies to this question from the various tribal Nations that not all early childhood programs are located near a postsecondary educational system in their community.

Question 6 had the fewest responses (12), which was disappointing. It asked for comments or suggestions on what respondents considered quality indicators for child care programs for young Native American children. The responses included "Teaching culture of own tribe and other

tribes"; "huge cultural component with language immersion and parental involvement"; and "welcoming environments."

National Indicators of Quality

In sharp contrast to the responses to my survey, experts at the National Institute for Education Research (Education Writers Association, 2004) identify 10 aspects of a quality preschool experience as follows.

- There are positive relationships between teachers and children.
- The room is well-equipped with sufficient materials and toys.
- Communication occurs throughout the day, with mutual listening, talking/responding, and encouragement to use reasoning and problem-solving.
- Opportunities for art, music/movement, science, math, block play, sand, water and dramatic play are provided daily.
- There are materials and activities to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.
- Parents are encouraged to be involved in all aspects of the program.
- Adult-child ratios do not exceed guidelines set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
- Group sizes are small.
- Teachers and staff are qualified and compensated accordingly.
- All staff are supervised and evaluated and have opportunities for professional growth. (p. 4)

Comparing these indicators with my survey responses gives less than a 50% match. Clearly in regard to Indigenous early education, *quality* goes beyond these indicators. According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997), editors of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, NAEYC believes that,

> all high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs will have certain attributes in common. A high quality early childhood program is one that provides a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, intellectual and language development of each child while being sensitive to the needs and preferences of families. Many factors influence the quality of an early childhood program, including … the extent to which knowledge about how children develop and learn is applied in program practices. (p. 8)

Although NAEYC's definition is more applicable to Indigenous early education than are those based solely on group size, teacher-child ratios, and teacher development, it fails to address specifically the crucial importance of culture and language to Indigenous children and their communities.

New Insights for Training Practitioners

During the Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Development Forum at the University of Victoria, we discussed the Generative Curriculum Model (Ball & Pence, 1999; Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood, & Opekokew, 1993) and the "five secrets of success" of the First Nations Partnership Programs (Ball & Pence, 2001, 2006). These secrets, based on co-constructed and

co-delivered programs with diverse First Nations beginning in 1990, are as follows.

1. Because the communities viewed child care as a potential vehicle for social change and cultural transmission, the whole community participated in the program.
2. Program participants rediscovered their cultural heritage and became aware of specific cultural practices, attitudes, knowledge, and skills to be able to work effectively with children and families. Guidelines for culturally appropriate childcare practices emerged through dialogue, research, stories, and practical examples.
3. Students learned and studied in familiar community surroundings; thus, they were able to overcome the emotional stress they might otherwise encounter when confronted by negative stereotypes in mainstream early childhood education settings.
4. Students became role models in the community. Those who completed the program lived in the communities and became a source of information for community members.
5. The program benefited the wider community. New ways of learning led to positive changes in the students' own parenting skills which rippled through their families (Ball & Pence, 2001).

We noted during the forum that Indigenous peoples had all along been doing what the mainstream is only now discovering. As a group of early childhood practitioners, we developed the following guiding principles for our work.

- Broad core principles may be shared among communities, but flexibility is required to meet specific community needs.
- Communities need to be developed from the inside.
- Community members need to be consulted and involved in creating their own programs. People make the programs: language, culture, environment.
- There is a need to listen to communities and to be responsive.
- There needs to be room for "error" in order to gain experience, self-sufficiency, and sociocultural capital.
- There needs to be recognition of the wisdom of Elders as well as children, who are recognized as whole and competent.
- Programs must be child-centered.
- Children should be viewed in the context of their families and communities and empowered to find their voices.
- Culture is imperative for learning.
- The right stories need to be told about Indigenous peoples.
- Intercommunity relationship building is important.
- Access and education are needed for politicians and policymakers.

- Communities need to do their own research and use their own methodologies based on their culture, which will differ from one community to another.

In the Preservice Early Childhood Teacher Education subgroup of the forum, we developed an additional set of guiding principles, some of which include:

- Recognition and inclusion of the Elders and Indigenous ways of knowing.
- Do no harm to communities (i.e., no program taken from one community to another).
- Communities need to take the lead in developing their capacity-building plan and empowered to deliver.
- Activities should be undertaken in a co-constructive, collaborative way that ensures community voice.

We developed a schema in which Indigenous community organizations would decide how they wished the guiding principles to be integrated. It would be up to them to inform and request assistance from colleges and/or universities to meet their needs and to teach or present the principles. Both groups (community and university or college) would work with government agencies to secure appropriate assistance. Curriculum development would be the responsibility of the community where ideally learners in communities would be able to stay as close to their communities as possible.

Conclusion

From these experiences of learning more about quality in early childhood from Indigenous early educators, my teaching of postsecondary early childhood students will expand and change. No longer will I simply recite indicators of quality. Instead I will have the students create their own definitions of what quality means to them in their own community. I will encourage them to advocate for and if possible enhance their knowledge of their own cultural practices and language. I will share Ball and Pence's (2001) five secrets of success with our ECD college faculty with the intent to strengthen our early childhood training, resulting in improved child care services and educational experiences for young Native American children.

I still believe, as I stated in my presentation at the forum, that the following challenges need to be effected for quality to be developed in Native American early childhood programs.

- Sufficient funding to serve all children.
- Inclusion of cultural and traditional values.
- Expansion of programs.
- More programs in rural areas.
- Staff representation of children's cultural backgrounds.
- Implementation and continuation of Native languages.

- Worthy wages.
- Respect for the field (Endfield, 2006a).

This journey of reflection on my years of personal and professional experience in the field of early childhood education following my participation in the Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Development Forum last winter has resulted in my becoming more aware of what I have gained and what I still need to accomplish to meet the needs of the staff and children in the programs I serve.

I used to think of quality as a characteristic or trait related to meeting standards, whatever those were, that had been passed down by "the experts." I now believe that quality means more than "best practices." Outside sources must not dictate quality in Indigenous communities. The early childhood staff, parents, and community should determine their own definition of quality as it applies in their community based on established best practices as well as their own cultural experiences. Every child should be able to experience *quality* in a cultural context that is valued and respected. Communities must have a voice in what their children learn.

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