

2011

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Recommended Citation

McWilliams, M. Susan; Maldonado, Tami; and Szczepaniak, Paula, "Nurturing Urban Native American Families through Preschool Family Literacy Celebrations" (2011). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 57.

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Nurturing Urban Native American Families through Preschool Family Literacy Celebrations

Susan McWilliams, Tami Maldonado, and Paula Szczepaniak

Most Native Americans (NAs) live in urban settings [1]. Only half of indigenous ninth-grade students graduate with their non-native, same-age peers [2]. New and innovative approaches to teaching urban NAs to increase their graduation rates are urgently needed. One such innovative approach infuses cultural education into curriculum: young children from diverse Native Nations, many of whom have additional non-Native heritage, attend an experimental, urban Native Indian Centered Education (NICE) preschool in the Midwest. The preschool focuses on building and strengthening family literacy resources and developing family-school-community partnerships to strengthen literacy.

Community Partnerships

Native tradition holds to the value that it takes a village to raise a child, so we strive to include community in the program. Our many community partners share expertise and donate children's books. We have been honored to work with an internationally renowned glass artist who has provided families with the chance to represent their culture and redefine themselves through art. We also include NA storytellers and role models at family events to help inspire and strengthen our students and their families.

Story Celebrations

NA "literature" springs from the oral tradition of passing stories down through generations. With this rich history in mind, we place storytelling and reading at the heart of our program. Many parents initially express discomfort at the idea of reading with their children. As a result, our pre-K program's mission is, in part, to encourage and empower families to discover and celebrate the power of family reading. With the goal of helping all children become lifelong readers, we embed reading and other literacy activities into every family event. Monthly family fun afternoons, quarterly family nights, and special cultural events like our annual Harvest Celebration and year-end powwow all make room for reading and the fine art of storytelling [3]. We include formal story time during which parents and family members can watch, interact, and learn as we read and share engaging, high-quality children's literature. Our classroom lending library loans books to families on a weekly basis while the district NA office puts new books into the hands of our children for their home libraries many times during the year. The natural enthusiasm of the students helps erase inhibitions on the part of parents. Reading then becomes a mutually gratifying family experience.

Reflections

The number of families participating has more than doubled in three years. Parent involvement at school has increased. Parents have become better advocates for their children as they have moved on to kindergarten. Families are taking pride in the program by talking about it and encouraging others from the community to enroll their children. Families that move on still come back to visit.

References

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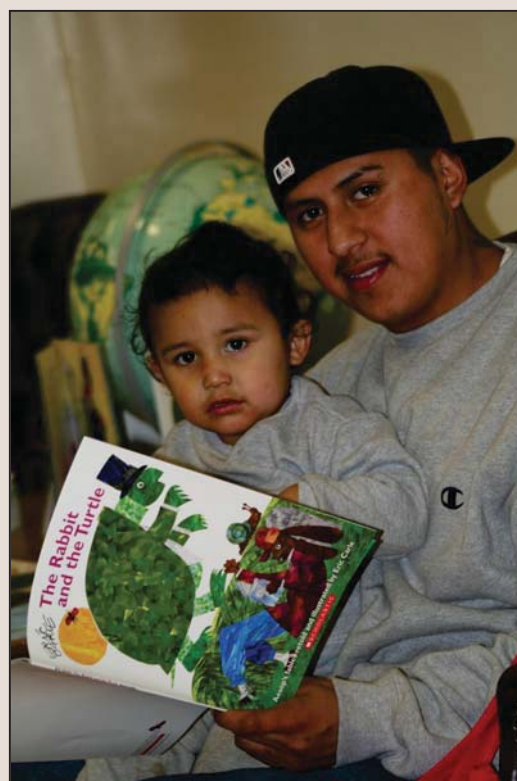


Figure 1. Reading with Dad at family night