Executive Summary of the Report on Tribal Language Revitalization in Head Start and Early Head Start

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Head Start (OHS) has long supported the cultural and linguistic diversity of the families and children in its programs. This commitment includes support for language revitalization in tribal programs. In early 2015, OHS commissioned a project to learn directly about the efforts underway in the field, and the findings are presented in this report. Under a National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness contract, visits were made to 17 tribal Head Start or Early Head Start (HS/EHS) programs. Visits also were made to four other early childhood programs that are considered leaders in language revitalization with young children. The programs were selected to ensure diverse representation of geographic region, community language situation, language goals, resources and teaching methods. Tribal leaders, elders, program staff, parents and community members provided information during the visits. Academicians, researchers and other experts were consulted, along with participants at conferences and workshops. The information in this report is drawn from these visits and contacts, unless otherwise indicated by references to published materials or websites.

BACKGROUND

OHS has developed numerous resources to support Native language and teaching, including the *Head Start Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Resource Catalogue, Volume 2*, and *Making It Work!* (MIW!), a tool to connect culture, language and curriculum. In general, the materials are designed for preschool settings, though some can be adapted for infants and toddlers. The *OHS Tribal Language Report 2012* highlighted a misperception among some tribal programs that the integration of tribal language and culture was inconsistent with the *Head Start Program Performance Standards*. In an effort to clarify this issue, OHS then issued an Information Memorandum (IM), *Native Language Preservation, Revitalization, Restoration, and Maintenance in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs: ACF-IM-HS-15-02*, affirming its ongoing support for tribal language revitalization. In addition, OHS has conducted a series of conference sessions and tribal consultations on language revitalization and compliance with OHS standards. Federal legislation also supports Native American language teaching in public schools.

This report addresses the context of language in tribal communities. The traditional language may be endangered in some communities, meaning that it is not spoken widely and eventually may cease to be spoken at all. Written records may help revive some languages; in other tribes, there may be adult speakers, but children are no longer learning the language. All of these situations pose challenges for tribes. When a community decides to try to stop or reverse these processes to ensure that future generations will speak their heritage language, this effort is referred to as language revitalization. Families often do not know the tribal language and therefore, children do not hear it spoken at home, which is a different situation than in families where a home language is spoken regularly. The endangered status of tribal languages can be traced to U.S. government policies and practices that focused on assimilation of Native American people. Many children were forced to attend boarding schools where speaking the tribal language was prohibited and considered "backward." Intergenerational ties also were severed between adult speakers and young children.

Many young parents who had been through the boarding schools believed their children's success depended on their speaking only English in the family. They also held negative perceptions about their tribal language. These views sometimes resulted in a tribe's having few speakers and in a community's disconnection from its heritage and culture. Because of this history and the associated feelings of shame, anger and fear, language revitalization can be complex and challenging, but it also can help heal historical trauma. Children and adults report feeling more complete or connected through their language work. Research also indicates that when children are exposed to the tribal language in school, there are academic gains and improved physical and mental health.

This report notes that multilingualism has been the norm throughout much of the world, including tribal communities in North America. Research indicates cognitive and other benefits of exposure to more than one language. However, some believe that a tribal language is harder to learn than English or is not as "good" as English. These are myths. In fact, programs report that children learn their tribal language quickly and with pride, including Native children with special needs. They also report that children learning their tribal language continue to develop strong English skills. Staff and parents need to understand the course of child language development and recognize that children may initially show uneven progress in two languages. They also need to know that young children learn language by hearing and using it in the course of everyday life. Didactic, lesson-based approaches for older students are inappropriate for young learners.

PREPARING FOR TRIBAL LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

Many tribal programs and communities report that they are unsure where to start with their language revitalization efforts. Participants in the project had a number of suggestions and affirmed that there is no one right answer. The planning process can be thought of as a series of questions that lead to discussion and decision making.

- *Who to involve?* Community involvement and strong leadership are essential.

- *What are your resources and challenges?* Information about the status of your language; teaching resources; and about community perceptions, attitudes and interest is useful. For example, it is important to know if people still speak the language, if early childhood teachers need to learn the language, if other language efforts are under way in the community and if funding and training resources are available. Challenges may include staff turnover, poor relationships among stakeholders and long distances between and among communities.

- *What are your goals?* Programs state that goal setting at the outset is critical because it enables development of strategies that lead to success. Goals vary, based on family and community input. There may be an overarching community goal for the language as well as specific goals for young children. Programs advise focusing on specific goals for children, which may range from fluency to knowing basic greetings. A series of questions can help programs identify their goals and steps to reach them.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

A specific strategy or multiple strategies for achieving each language goal include these elements.

- *Timeline.* For both long-term and short-term goals, a timeline helps set realistic expectations.

- *Language teachers.* Staff may need to be identified or developed. They need to have knowledge and skills in the tribal language, language teaching and child development. Most programs must provide education and training to the language teachers; depending on the language model implemented and the goals for the children, teachers' skill levels may vary, as well as their daily schedule. OHS does not require early childhood training if the language teacher is working with two qualified classroom staff.

- *Skill building.* Professional development, training and mentorship are key strategies. A professional development plan for staff is key to improving the quality of instruction and increasing language fluency in the program and community. Ongoing training for staff, volunteers and families builds confidence and promotes

language usage throughout the community. Mentoring from other programs within and outside the tribal community can provide guidance and support.

- **Language teaching.** Selecting a model of instruction for the early childhood setting based on your language goals for children is critical. Also, the language skills of staff and available time during the day are important considerations. The model you select will guide your teaching in the classroom and your language training for teachers.

  - *Models of instruction.* Three models are described in this report—**immersion**, **dual language** and **structured language lessons**—and the goals, key elements and teaching requirements of each model are presented. **Immersion** develops strong language skills and involves using the tribal language in a normal, conversational way. Teachers must be proficient. Use of English is avoided, and strategies can be put in place to guide children to use the tribal language. One immersion program for young children is the language nest, which is defined in the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006. In the **dual language model**, at least one teacher is fluent in the tribal language, and both the tribal language and English are used equally for instruction and communication. **Structured language lessons** involve short, developmentally appropriate lessons, usually several times a week. Children's language progress is slower, but this is a viable option when teachers are building their skills. Whatever model is implemented, programs emphasize the importance of using the language with children as much as possible.

  - *Supporting language learning for adult learners.* Many approaches are used in tribal communities. The Master-Apprentice method places fluent speakers, often elders, with younger apprentices, using only the tribal language in activities for at least 20 hours a week. The Internet can be used. Other approaches discussed briefly in this report are the Total Physical Response (TPR), Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) and Where are Your Keys (WAYK).

- **Assessment.** Assessing progress toward your language goals allows you to make changes and to celebrate your achievements. Ongoing assessment of children's language development through observation is appropriate, but language testing is not. Bilingual children need to be assessed in both languages. Other assessments of the program's progress (apart from the children's progress) may include assessing teachers' language skills to ensure that they are delivering high-quality input to the children; examining language attitudes and use in the community; and assessing family support and engagement. Some strategies used by project participants are listed in this report.

The programs used a variety of strategies to support language teaching and overcome challenges. The most important strategy, applicable to any model, is to use the tribal language as much as possible, even if you think you do not know much or if you make mistakes. Children need wide exposure to the language in many situations and in everyday conversations.

Common challenges to implementation include anxiety and shame, especially for adult learners who may feel historical trauma and also feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the language. Learners need to be reassured that it is normal and acceptable to make mistakes. Another challenge revolves around the use of dialects, and specifically which one(s) to use in programs. Most communities have responded with different solutions that affirm multiple dialects, as was done by their ancestors. Programs have encountered other challenges, such as: decision-making about teaching literacy in the tribal language and using technology; working with elders who are new to teaching; and supporting the solo efforts of a few individuals. Having a language plan and supportive leadership have helped programs meet these challenges.

The programs visited shared a number of their language teaching tips along with examples.

- *Create a culturally focused environment.* This approach strengthens language teaching and the learning environment in general. Cultural practices, art, stories and knowledge are woven into the curriculum, and children have an opportunity to interact with the tribal community outside of the classroom.

- *Build up to immersion.* These strategies allow programs to use the limited language skills of teachers while still following some of the principles of immersion. For example, teachers may use common phrases in routines, such as "Brush your teeth," and conduct familiar classroom activities with the children in the language.

- *Use games and songs.* These activities may be traditional or translated from English and often teach cultural values and knowledge.

- *Extend the language.* Programs have found a number of different ways to reinforce the language, including describing what the children are doing and playing fun, active games.

- *Show children the logic of the language.* Children's attention can be drawn to characteristics of the tribal language that are similar to and different from English in a developmentally appropriate way.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

There are many ways to support and promote your language, both while you are developing your strategy and after you begin to implement it. Programs mentioned these aspects that have helped them build support:

- **Leadership.** A leader's inspiration and advocacy contribute to the success of the program and to the ongoing commitment of the community.

- **Communication and education.** Regular communication about the effort is vital to support children's language development within and outside the early childhood program and to educate the community about language loss, revitalization and government support.

- **Increased access to language.** Expanding opportunities for children to hear the language and speak it means reaching out to local media; coordinating with language efforts in the schools; and creating a welcoming, active "culture of revitalization."

- **Collaboration.** Family engagement is a crucial part of revitalization. Families often want to learn the language alongside their children and help their children learn. Many programs have partnered with other tribes, schools, media, institutions of higher education and other organizations to support their revitalization efforts.

- **Sustainability and funding.** Finding resources to create and sustain a language revitalization effort can be challenging. Funds within existing HS/EHS budgets can be used to support a third person in the classroom and training linked to program goals. Other funding sources include federal agencies, private foundations and partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Tribal language revitalization is a complex and long-term process that can bring immense rewards to children, their families and communities. The report shares some of the experiences and recommendations of HS/EHS and other early childhood programs. This information, along with resources listed in Chapter VIII. Where to Get Help, can assist you in developing a plan that works for your program and community.

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COMMUNITIES AND PROGRAMS

Cherokee Nation
- Early Childhood Unit Head Start: Head Start and Early Head Start
- Cherokee Nation Immersion School

Cochiti Pueblo
- Keres Children's Learning Center

Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation
- Head Start Early Childhood
- Inchelium Immersion Childcare Program
- Hearts Gathered Waterfall Immersion School

Cook Inlet Native Head Start
- Early Head Start and Head Start

Grassroots Indigenous Multimedia
- Ojibwe/Dakota Immersion games and songs workshop

Hoopa Valley Tribe
- Early Head Start and Head Start

Jemez Pueblo
- Walatowa Head Start: Early Head Start and Head Start

Karuk Tribe
- Head Start