

Perspectives of Region XI Head Start Federal, Research, and Program Partners in Carrying out a National Study of American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Children, Families, and Programs

Michelle Sarche,¹ Lizabeth M. Malone,² Laura Hoard,³ Jessica Barnes-Najor,⁴ Ann Cameron,⁵ Jerry West,⁶ Meryl Barofsky,³ and The AIAN FACES Workgroup

Highlights

- AIAN Head Start programs have not been represented in any of the research on Head Start to date.
- Without data, Head Start policy and practice decisions are not fully informed.
- Research with AIAN communities must be informed by community priorities and protocols for research.
- Four stakeholder groups, including AIAN Head Start leaders, formed a Workgroup to address this gap.
- Each group's knowledge and expertise was critical to the study's success.

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Abstract The American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (AIAN FACES) 2015 was the first national study of children served by Region XI Head Start programs, which are those operated by federally recognized AIAN tribes. Until 2015, Region XI programs had not been included in national studies of Head Start children's experiences and development, leaving them without this critical source of data to inform policy and practice as is available to other Head Start regions. To address this gap, four

groups of stakeholders gathered to plan for a study that put the needs of Region XI Head Start at the forefront, was informed by the historical context of research with AIAN communities, and was guided by community psychology and community-based and tribal participatory approaches. Engaged partnership is a common practice in research with AIAN communities, but rarely on a national scale across diverse communities. The study's success speaks to the success of the unique national partnership between the Region XI Head Start, research, and federal stakeholders who formed the AIAN FACES Workgroup. This first-person account documents the perspective of each group as they undertook this seminal effort and reviews connections with, and lessons learned for, the broader field of community psychology.

[†]The views expressed in the article do not necessarily represent the views of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) or the United States government.

[‡]AIAN FACES Workgroup members are listed in Appendix 1.

✉ Michelle Sarche
michelle.sarche@cuanschutz.edu

¹ Colorado School of Public Health, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Aurora, CO, USA

² Mathematica, Washington, DC, USA

³ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, Washington, DC, USA

⁴ University Outreach and Engagement, Office for Public Engagement and Scholarship, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

⁵ Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, Sault Ste. Marie, MI, USA

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Introduction

Head Start is a federally funded program to promote school readiness among children facing economic disadvantage by providing educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to children and their families through grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies and federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native

(AIAN or Native)¹ tribes (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2018). Head Start supports children's cognitive and social-emotional development. It places special emphasis on the reading and mathematics skills children need to be successful in elementary school and beyond and, for AIAN programs in particular, an emphasis also on the Native language and cultural practices foundational to children's development (Barnes-Najor et al., 2020; Kalifeh, Cohen-Vogel, & Grass, 2011; Sarche, Dobrec, Barnes-Najor, Cameron, & Verdugo, 2020; US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2016). Since 1965 Head Start has served over 34 million children with lasting positive impacts on their development (US DHHS & ACF, 2010). Considering Head Start's scale and impact, its national significance cannot be overstated (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

Head Start grants are administered in 12 regions across the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. territories. Regions I–X are defined geographically, while Regions XI and XII are defined by the populations they serve—children and families from AIAN and migrant and seasonal worker communities, respectively. Region XI programs are funded by grants to federally recognized tribes or consortia of tribes. There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States (National Congress of State Legislatures, 2020). In the 2018–19 program year, there were 145 Region XI Head Start grants. These programs serve nearly 20,000 AIAN and non-AIAN preschool children and their families and include approximately half of all AIAN children in Head Start nationally (Head Start Program Information Report, 2018–19²). Region XI programs are unique with respect to the communities and contexts in which they are situated. They are operated by federally recognized tribes who, as sovereign nations, maintain a government-to-government relationship with the federal government, advocating to ensure the needs of their constituents are met (US DHSS, 2016). They also operate within uniquely resourced and challenged communities (Sarche, Tafoya, Croy, & Hill, 2016). They draw on rich Native language and cultural resources and a dedicated workforce to support children's development (Sarche, Dobrec, Barnes-Najor, Cameron, & Verdugo, 2020). At the same time, Region XI serves children and families who experience enormous health and economic disparities in communities that are vastly under-resourced with respect to the structural underpinnings of

child and family well-being (Sarche & Spicer, 2008; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018).

Since 1997, the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) has been a major source of nationally representative information about Head Start (e.g., Aikens, Kopack Klein, Knas, Reid, Mraz Esposito et al., 2017; Kopack Klein et al., 2018; Tarullo, West, Aikens, & Hulsey, 2008), providing the Office of Head Start (OHS), other federal stakeholders, local programs, and the public with information about the needs and experiences of children and families and children's skills, abilities, and school readiness. These data have been critical for guiding Head Start policy and practice, responding to federal program requirements, informing the Head Start community about areas for continuous quality improvement, and directing training and technical assistance efforts (Kopack Klein et al., 2018).

Despite FACES' importance, Region XI programs have historically not been included. This is yet another example of "the asterisk nation," which refers to the fact that AIAN populations are often omitted in national studies, their place held only by an asterisk to indicate missing data (National Congress of American Indians, n.d.). Given the significance of this data gap, Region XI Head Start directors, researchers, and federal staff have long advocated for a study that would yield nationally representative data to inform Region XI policy and practice (Marks & Graham, 2004b; Marks, Moyer, Roche, & Graham, 2003). Over many years, these groups have carried out the groundwork necessary to prepare for a study that is consonant with tribal beliefs, practices, and protocols for research and informed by community psychology, the ideals of which are especially important for research with Native communities (Malone et al., 2018; O'Keefe & Hartmann, 2019; Wendt et al., 2019). This groundwork has been essential given the unique context for research with AIAN communities who have been harmed by past research, and as a result, are mistrusting (Chung-Do et al., 2019; Pacheco et al., 2013; Parker, Pearson, Donald, & Fisher, 2019). In response, tribes have exerted sovereignty over research while researchers have embraced community-based (CBPR) and tribal participatory (TPR) approaches as the *sine qua non* of research with AIAN communities (Collins et al., 2018; Fisher & Ball, 2003; Gittelsohn et al., 2020; O'Keefe & Hartmann, 2019). Following these approaches, researchers and communities collaborate to define the study goals, build theoretical models, choose culturally and contextually meaningful measures, align methods with the community's policies, protocols, and preferences, interpret results and share them in ways that are accessible to the community, and secure permission from the appropriate authority/ies. In so doing, the likelihood of community benefit is increased while the likelihood of harm is decreased (Fisher & Ball, 2003; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

¹ A key to the acronyms used in this paper is included in Table 1, following the references.

² The Program Information Report provides data on the services, staff, children, and families served by Head Start programs across the country. All grantees and delegates must submit an annual report for Head Start programs.

Table 1 Acronym Key

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
AIAN	American Indian/Alaska Native
CBPR	Community-based Participatory Research
CCE	Community Consultation and Engagement
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
FACES	Family and Child Experiences Survey
HSRC	Head Start Research Center
NIHSDA	National Indian Head Start Directors Association
OHS	Office of Head Start
OPRE	Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
TPR	Tribal Participatory Research
TRC	Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

In this first-person account, Region XI Head Start directors, researchers affiliated with the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC), researchers from Mathematica, and federal staff from ACF share their perspectives on the deliberate steps taken to prepare for AIAN FACES and to apply lessons learned from community psychology, CBPR, and TPR on a national, multi-community scale as has rarely been done in research with sovereign tribal nations. The study was carried out for the first time during the 2015-2016 program year with 21 programs randomly selected from the 144 Region XI Head Start programs operating at the time and

with the necessary approvals from the relevant authority in each of these 21 federally recognized tribal communities (Bernstein et al., 2018). As of this writing, a follow-up during the 2019-2020 program year has concluded, having benefited from the policies, procedures, and protocols developed in 2015 for this unique population of children, families, programs, and communities. Before turning to the first-person accounts, we provide a brief description of the AIAN FACES Workgroup, which provided the formal structure by which the authors gathered as representatives of their respective stakeholder groups.

The AIAN FACES Workgroup

The AIAN FACES Workgroup (Figure 1) was formed in 2013 to prepare for the 2015 study. It is ongoing and comprised of ACF federal staff from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and OHS, child development researchers with long-standing AIAN community partnerships, Region XI Head Start directors and leaders, and researchers with the contracted study team. In planning for the 2015 study, Workgroup members advised on the design of AIAN FACES such that the needs of



Figure 1 AIAN FACES Workgroup Stakeholder Group Members.

Region XI Head Start children, families, programs, and communities were at the forefront.

Workgroup members advised on two sets of tasks to accomplish this goal: 1) designing the study methods and selecting study measures; and 2) developing an approach to carrying out the study in a way that honored diverse AIAN community protocols for research and was informed by best practices for research with AIAN communities. The Workgroup divided into 2 “working groups” to tackle these respective tasks—the “Methods Working Group” and the “Community Consultation and Engagement (CCE) Working Group” (Malone et al., 2018). Methods Working Group members advised on constructs to measure to achieve the study’s goals and the measures by which to capture those constructs. In choosing measures, Methods Working Group members advised whether study measures would *align* with, be *adapted* from, or *added* to those used in FACES in Regions I-X. While careful consideration of measure selection, adaptation, and creation is common in research with AIAN populations (Walls, Whitesell, Barlow, & Sarche, 2019)—especially given the dearth of extant culturally or contextually aligned measures—the Methods group faced the unique challenge of applying these considerations to a tribally diverse national sample and applying a multi-tribal cultural lens (difficult considering the immense cultural diversity across tribes). The diverse tribal backgrounds of Methods Working Group members were therefore critical for identifying measures that would be appropriate for this multi-tribal national context. CCE Working Group members, on the other hand, guided the development of a culturally and contextually attuned approach to implementation at all study phases, but especially in the period from recruitment of programs to collection of data. Ensuring a culturally and contextually aligned approach in research with AIAN communities is not unique (Beals, Manson, Mitchell, Spicer, & the AI-SUPERPPF Team, 2003). Unique here, however, was the effort to do so for a very tribally diverse sample. To this end, CCE members worked together to accomplish three tasks. First, CCE members helped engage Region XI Head Start and community leaders nationally to obtain guidance and support for the study that would reflect broad, cross-tribal national priorities. Second, CCE members assisted in the recruitment of individual Region XI programs following each program’s and tribe’s review and approval process for a single cross-site study protocol. Third, CCE members helped train data collectors on cultural protocols for participant recruitment and data collection that reflected general guidance across tribes and specific guidance for the individual communities in which they would be working.

The AIAN FACES study design that resulted from these efforts is detailed in the AIAN FACES user’s

manual (Malone et al., 2018). In brief, program and center director reports, teacher self-reports, teacher child reports, parent reports, child direct assessments, and classroom observations were gathered to provide a national picture of Region XI children’s strengths and needs, Native language and culture experiences, classroom experiences, home and family characteristics, and developmental progress over the Head Start year. Based on Workgroup member priorities, AIAN FACES retained many of the constructs and measures used in FACES (Regions I-X), but with careful consideration by the Methods Working Group for where to align fully and where to add and/or adapt. Retaining the FACES design and measures as the basis for AIAN FACES allows Region XI data to be considered in relation to Region I-X data and for the possibility of analyzing data to paint a nationally representative picture of Head Start across all regions.

Once in the field, the 2015 study achieved high individual response rates. Over 90% of directors, teachers, and children and over 80% of parents participated—yielding data on 1,049 children (Malone et al., 2018). Workgroup members have used these data to produce numerous reports (all available on the AIAN FACES website), conference and webinar presentations, a book chapter on the history and current context of Region XI (Sarche et al., 2020), and importantly, a dataset available for qualified researchers to conduct additional analyses to contribute further to understanding Region XI Head Start (ACF, 2016). This kind of success would not have been possible without the commitment and collaboration by AIAN FACES Workgroup members. We turn now to their first-person accounts to provide detail, from the vantage point of each of the four stakeholder groups, on the work done to pave the way.

First Person Account by Federal Staff from the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Star, and Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation: Meryl Barofsky and Laura Hoard with recognition of the key leadership contributions of Mary Bruce Webb, Anne Bergen, Aleta Meyer, and Maria Woolverton from OPRE and Robert Bialas (retired), WJ Strickland (retired), and Cecelia (Angie) Godfrey (retired) from OHS

In order to carry out AIAN FACES 2015 at the federal level, three things needed to occur over many years—capacity building, extensive stakeholder engagement, and ensuring adequate planning to carry out this complex work. We reflect here on how OPRE, the federal funding office for the study, in close collaboration with OHS, was able to set the stage. OPRE, within ACF, in the DHHS,

conducts applied research in service of ACF programmatic partners such as OHS. While OPRE has some discretion on research conducted with federal funds, topics are influenced by program office needs and congressional mandates. In 1998, Congress determined, as part of Head Start's reauthorization, that DHHS should conduct a national study to determine the impact of Head Start on the children it serves. However, the legislation stated that "Head Start programs operated by Tribal Organizations" were to be excluded, along with any agencies that "specifically target special populations" (p. 8, Puma et al., 2001). This framing, along with the historical abuses of research in Native communities, concern about appropriate measures, and the diversity of Native communities put plans for a national study of Region XI Head Start on hold. However, we recognized that foundational methodological work and extensive partnership building with Region XI Head Start programs and communities were necessary to prepare for a possible future study.

Planning and Capacity Building

Over more than ten years, OPRE funded a number of foundational projects to inform future research. Because of community concerns around research and the need to engage actively with Native communities, we first funded a series of projects to both develop and validate measures with AIAN populations and to build the capacity of researchers working in Native communities. This work began with a project in 2002, which reviewed existing information and explored Region XI research needs (Marks & Graham, 2004a). The goal was to develop a responsive research agenda. The project included consultation with a panel of experts, review of the literature, and listening sessions with Native leaders, elders, community representatives, and parents and staff from 18 Region XI Head Start programs.

OPRE next funded the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center (AIAN HSRC) in 2005 to provide leadership and offer support in the development and facilitation of community-based research, and to strengthen the ability and build capacity of researchers to conduct model research projects in collaboration with Region XI Head Start program staff and community members. As part of this work, researchers, Head Start directors, and federal staff from OHS and OPRE worked to develop pilot research projects in collaboration with Region XI Head Start staff and communities. One of the projects was to pilot methods and measures from FACES with four Region XI programs. Among the most important contributions of this work was to provide OPRE with the understanding that relationship building in AIAN research was one of the most significant steps in moving research with AIAN communities forward.

The Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) was funded in 2011 with resources from OHS, the Tribal Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting program, and the Office of Child Care. Within the TRC, Communities of Learning (small workgroups of researchers, Region XI Head Start directors, tribal home visiting directors, tribal child care administrators, and federal staff) focused on research projects, from the initial plans for analysis to co-authoring papers. A Community of Learning was focused on a qualitative analysis of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System measure, building on work done within the AIAN HSRC (Barnes-Najor et al., 2020). This Community of Learning provided insight on the methodological challenges surrounding this measure. In the meantime, the Head Start Health Managers Study, which surveyed Head Start staff in all Regions, including Region XI, about the landscape of health programs and services provided was underway. While the inclusion of Region XI in this study was a start, it did not provide OHS and Head Start programs with needed information on children, families, classrooms, and programs overall.

Elsewhere in ACF, the Children's Bureau created the *Roadmap for Co-Creating Collaborative & Effective Evaluation to Improve Tribal Child Welfare Programs* (Tribal Evaluation Workgroup, 2013). The *Roadmap* is "a tool that can be used to create a shared vision for the future of tribal child welfare evaluation and provide a common language for tribal communities and evaluators as they improve evaluation practice," (p. 1) and OPRE began using it to guide our research with AIAN communities. Many of the principles discussed in the *Roadmap* were followed in the planning and execution of AIAN FACES.

Stakeholder Engagement

We knew that the capacity building efforts were a start, but that there was no way we could do a study like AIAN FACES (i.e., national in scope with diverse, sovereign tribal nations) without significant involvement and buy-in from many stakeholders. The stakeholder engagement, as exemplified in the TRC Community of Learning, was a starting place and the *Roadmap* work taught us that there were many more stakeholders than we had identified before. Additionally, our research and program partners told us, in no uncertain terms, that our traditional way of engaging stakeholders in our research projects (i.e., checking in periodically) was not the way to conduct a national study of Region XI Head Start. Rather, we needed to engage our stakeholders in all aspects of the study, and if we were not prepared to do that, we would not have the buy-in of the community. Therefore, we began to set the stage for a CBPR and TPR-informed model. While this type of engagement is typical in CBPR and TPR, it is not

typical for OPRE research due to some constraints in how we fund studies (e.g., time limits on contracts). Therefore, we had to think creatively on how to incorporate this relationship building and engagement within the constraints of our funding mechanisms.

In planning for the study, we decided to collaborate continually with Region XI Head Start directors and researchers through long-term consulting agreements with members of the AIAN FACES Workgroup. Initially, this included time for several in-person meetings and monthly phone calls. However, as the project proceeded, Workgroup member consultations occurred multiple times a month to complete tasks and provide input on every aspect of the study. This also included partnerships in presenting the study design and, eventually, the study results to a variety of audiences, including webinars to Head Start programs nationwide, presentations at the DHHS Secretary's Tribal Advisory Council and ACF Tribal Advisory Council meetings, briefing the National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) Board and membership, and presentations at several research conferences. This level of partnership required a substantial financial commitment on our federal team's part to cover the Workgroup's necessary time on the project.

Cost Considerations

CBPR and TPR require time for engagement with stakeholders, including with Workgroup members. Additionally, when working with Region XI Head Start, we knew we would have additional and necessary tribal review and approval in all communities before data collection could begin. We also knew that data collectors would require cross-cultural training, including on the history of research in AIAN communities and appropriate engagement with AIAN communities, in addition to added training for observational measures. Based on what we learned through the foundational activities outlined, we decided that in order to do the study in the right way, we would need to fund all of this work.

AIAN FACES

The redesign of FACES (Regions I-X) in 2012 provided a perfect opportunity to plan for and execute the first AIAN FACES in 2015. Included in the redesign project was a plan for conducting a study with Region XI Head Start programs. Initially, the contract team suggested doing a pilot, but strong voices from the TRC convinced us that the pilot work that the AIAN HSRC had been doing for years was sufficient, and it was time to conduct a national study. Additionally, the TRC encouraged and then worked with us to convene the AIAN FACES Workgroup as partners in the study. In order

to get support from Region XI programs and communities, it was essential to have Region XI Head Start directors involved in all aspects of the study. We also realized that OPRE's usual way of doing business—that is, moving quickly from project start to research planning to data collection to analysis and reporting—did not allow for meaningful participation by the AIAN community. Our timing had to slow down to truly address what the Region XI Head Start directors were saying and how the research could be adjusted to reflect the needs of Region XI. This included sufficient time for Workgroup review of study protocols (from recruitment to data collection) and for community approval protocols (i.e., tribal IRB, tribal council approval, etc.). For example, for AIAN FACES 2015, we allowed 12 months to recruit communities, while in FACES with non-AIAN programs, recruitment was typically only three months.

In the end, AIAN FACES was successfully conducted for the first time in 2015. A strong partnership was built between OHS Region XI and OPRE, as well as with the TRC- and Mathematica-affiliated researchers and, most importantly, with Region XI Head Start directors and communities. This partnership is ongoing, and we worked together to build upon our prior work and make improvements for AIAN FACES 2019, for which data collection was just completed.

First Person Account by Researchers Affiliated with the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center: Jessica Barnes-Najor, Michelle Sarche, Monica Tsethlikai, Hiram E. Fitzgerald, and Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell

Together, we have partnered with AIAN communities for more than 20 years to carry out research to further our understanding of children's development in AIAN cultural and community contexts. We approach our research with humility, knowing that we are latecomers and often outsiders to the communities with whom we partner. We recognize that our contributions are small relative to the traditional knowledge and cultural wisdom about children's development that AIAN communities already possess. We are therefore humbled when our research is welcomed and the findings considered valuable for contributing additional knowledge about children's development.

The five of us have been involved in the work of the TRC since it began in 2005 as the AIAN HSRC. Since that time, the foundational aim of our work has been to build the child development research base in relationship and partnership with AIAN communities. Throughout, this work has been guided by a Steering Committee that includes Region XI Head Start and other early care and education program directors and researchers. The Steering

Committee has been a central forum for ensuring that Native voices are at the forefront of TRC activities. To build relationships with AIAN Head Start programs, we have met in-person yearly since the TRC's inception until COVID-19 restrictions paused in-person gatherings. Steering Committee members were provided travel funds to attend, and we worked together to co-construct a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space that allowed for researchers and community partners to share their unique perspectives. Opportunities to connect with one another on a personal level were key to creating this kind of space. To that end, we have prioritized meals together, structured listening sessions for Steering Committee members to share their experiences, and small-group discussion sessions co-led by researchers and tribal program partners. Also important is our prioritization of tribal program and community voice throughout the research process—for example, by using Communities of Learning, as described above, as a space to set research priorities, co-construct study designs, collaborate on implementation, and co-lead dissemination of study findings. When our work began, FACES did not report findings for AIAN children. This was because the number of AIAN children included from Regions I-X was always too small (only about 1% of the entire FACES sample) to report their data separately and because FACES did not include *any* AIAN children from Region XI. It was unacceptable, in our view, that this study—intended to be “national” in scope—left out an entire population. Thus, we worked with our TRC Steering Committee to pilot FACES methods and measures with a small group of Region XI program partners. Our work with the Steering Committee included a review of instruments used in FACES, conversations about which, if any, of these instruments would be important in a study of Region XI, and a pilot study with Steering Committee member programs. We did this work without knowing whether a study of Region XI Head Start would ever be taken to scale. Nonetheless, we carried on, hoping our efforts would yield important data in their own right and would inform a future full-scale study should the opportunity present itself.

That opportunity arose in early 2013. During a TRC Steering Committee meeting, OPRE shared the news that the 2012 FACES redesign included resources for an AIAN focus. We were excited that the opportunity we hoped for had arrived; however, we were apprehensive about how cultural understanding would be addressed. Given our experience, we understood there were fundamentally different approaches to research with AIAN communities. As discussed by Wilson (2008), culturally grounded research requires a paradigm shift that embraces the centrality of relationships, which is not easy in the typical western science model. When embraced, however,

Indigenous and local knowledge become central in the creation of research, which in turn yields more meaningful and accurate information. Given the demands of this relationship-based approach in terms of time, resources, and mindset shifts, we were unsure what the response from federal and Mathematica research partners would be. All of us had served as advisors to other AIAN studies. We worried that our involvement in AIAN FACES might be “just another advisory board”—giving the appearance of cultural grounding and community engagement without doing the work it takes to carry out research in ways that truly honor AIAN perspectives and approaches. We, therefore, began the process wondering if our guidance and input would be taken to heart.

As we began planning for AIAN FACES, we felt it was important to do our part to create a safe space for honest and informed dialogue just as we had always done in our work at the TRC. At the start, we felt vulnerable in what we did not know, and we surmised that other groups felt similarly. As researchers, we deeply valued the perspective of our Region XI Head Start partners, which was based on first-hand, experientially based knowledge. By comparison, we worried that the knowledge *we* offered (e.g., of the research literature, research design) would be dry, abstract, or less relevant to the lived experience of children, families, and programs. Additionally, we knew that the needs of Region XI Head Start children, families, and programs were complex and immediate. The research we were discussing, however, would be limited in its ability to capture complexity and to address needs in immediate ways.

As we felt vulnerable in the limitations of our knowledge and experience, we wondered if our Head Start partners felt the same with respect to their knowledge of and experience with research. Our willingness to know one another in authentic, personal, and meaningful ways, however, became an antidote to our feelings of vulnerability. The relationships among all Workgroup members were foundational to the safe space that allowed us to acknowledge and share what we did not know and what we needed others to teach us. Building upon our existing relationships and experiences within the Steering Committee, we structured our in-person time to include informal time together. We were also careful to work with our Head Start program partners to ensure their perspectives were heard throughout the process. If a community partner noted a concern or alternative perspective during a social or informal discussion, we encouraged the community partner to share the thought in our formal meetings. This facilitated bidirectional learning. The Head Start directors taught us about the real-world experiences and needs of children and families in Region XI Head Start. They provided critical insight about research measures—including,

for example, whether they should align with those used in FACES to facilitate direct comparisons between FACES and AIAN FACES, be adapted to better capture constructs as they manifest in AIAN communities, or be entirely new to capture constructs relevant to AIAN communities. They also advised on the alignment of the proposed study methods with AIAN community experiences and ways of knowing, and on priorities for the kinds of data that would be useful for local and national Region XI Head Start policy and practice. On the other hand, as researchers, we, along with our Mathematica partners, helped those without a background in research understand complex statistical and methodological concepts. This kind of bidirectional teaching allowed all sides to enter into conversations authentically and minimized the chances that anyone would feel excluded because they did not understand the underlying concepts central to our conversations.

Despite our relationships and the safe space we sought to create, there remained times that sharing perspectives was difficult. We often hear about the importance of “uncomfortable conversations” when addressing issues of power and privilege (Allan and Westwood, 2015). Our work was no exception. In our first meeting, we discussed the timeline for tribal research approvals. A member of the Mathematica team stated that approval would not take long based on experience with FACES in Regions I-X. When we and the Head Start directors shared that approval would take much longer in Region XI, the Mathematica team member suggested allowing for 3-4 months. At that moment, one of the directors whispered, “They aren’t getting it.” After a persistent discussion, a full year was agreed upon for program recruitment and tribal approvals. Experiences like this helped us realize that our perspectives were taken seriously and that the planning process would allow for the study to be informed by AIAN community priorities, perspectives, and protocols.

As the process unfolded, we felt mutual respect and admiration. Our federal and Mathematica partners were pragmatic in making the changes they could while maintaining alignment with FACES in Region I-X. For example, they added meaningful cultural assessment questions and made culture a significant part of the study. However, there were times that pragmatism resulted in unresolved differences. For example, Workgroup members cautioned that a particular measure would not work, but was used nonetheless to maintain alignment with FACES. Another unresolved difference arose in the process of hiring classroom observers. Although Workgroup members agreed on the importance of hiring observers with Region XI and/or AIAN experience, outreach to identify such observers within the study’s timeline was not successful. Instead, our timeline necessitated that observers already trained in

the study’s observation measures and who had experience working in other, non-AIAN, cross-cultural settings be hired. To prepare observers for work in AIAN classrooms, we worked closely with the Mathematica team to develop and deliver an AIAN cultural training. We urged that the issue remain a high priority for subsequent rounds of AIAN FACES. We were, therefore, pleased that AIAN FACES 2019 included the requisite time and processes to recruit and train individuals with experience in AIAN settings to be classroom observers.

We know conducting research in partnership is costly. However, the costs were outweighed by the fact that we, as a team, guided the development of the first national study of Region XI Head Start. We believe our success in gathering meaningful data was the result of partners working together, listening to each other, and respecting and valuing one another’s differences. We were excited to be a part of the 2019 study and to see how the work has deepened, particularly related to cultural grounding and alignment.

First Person Account by Region XI Head Start Program Leaders: Ann Cameron, Myrna Dingman, Mavany Verdugo, Teresa Smith, and Charmaine Lundy

We are all members of the TRC Steering Committee. Some of us joined the TRC after becoming involved in the AIAN FACES Workgroup, while others of us have been members since the TRC began in 2005. Many of us were invited to participate on the TRC Steering Committee due to our experience and tenure as Head Start administrators and our long-standing membership on the NIHSDA Board of Directors. Some of us have been involved in Region XI Head Start for as long as 30 years. Due to our involvement with Region XI Head Start, the TRC, and NIHSDA, we were invited to participate on the AIAN FACES Workgroup to help guide the first national study of Region XI Head Start in the capacity of program and community partners. For those of us already involved with the TRC, our involvement in AIAN FACES felt like a natural extension of our work together.

It has been our experience that all members of the Workgroup are very respectful of each other’s opinions and truly listen to our input as program and community partners. This has been important because we, as AIAN communities, have often been either excluded from or abused by research. Therefore, to be excluded from FACES seemed normal based on our other experiences. When we were first asked by our TRC research partners if we thought Region XI wanted to be a part of FACES, many of us initially reacted with, “Well, of course we are

excluded. We always are.” After further reflection, especially given our experience with the TRC showing the importance of being an active part of research, we began to question why we were not included. We began to question whether there was a way to use the kinds of data FACES had been gathering in Regions I-X to help inform policy and practice decisions about Region XI programs. After all, those data were already being used by policy-makers and politicians to make decisions for all of Head Start, even though we (Region XI) were not represented. By asking these types of questions of our NIHSDA Board, we began to form a collective response that it was not okay for our Region XI programs to be excluded any longer.

As program and community partners in AIAN FACES, we have had the opportunity to contribute to the study by offering our knowledge and experience working with AIAN communities. Region XI Head Start program partners like us have experience working with the local tribal governments and systems for conducting business. It is important to understand the unique context of each community and work within each accordingly. We have shared our knowledge and experiences to help develop a plan that would facilitate overcoming barriers and challenges in developing and implementing research methods for the study and data collection strategies within each unique community. In addition to participating in the overall AIAN FACES Workgroup, we have served on the Methods and CCE Working Groups that guided specific aspects of the study.

Participating in the Workgroup has meant that we spent a lot of time attending in-person meetings and conference calls with our research and federal partners. While time intensive, it has been important to spend the time together hearing each other’s perspectives so we could build trust with each other. As AIAN community members and as those who advocate for the needs of AIAN children, we have experienced AIAN community needs being disregarded and voices silenced. Our experiences, coupled with the history of stolen lands, broken treaties, boarding schools, and abusive research, make it difficult to trust in others, especially those in the federal government and research. Because of this general distrust, it was important to have our TRC research partners facilitate the AIAN FACES process. We had already built trust with the TRC research partners through our involvement with the TRC over the years. Early on in our involvement in the TRC, although we were confident in our abilities as directors and representatives of NIHSDA, some of us felt uncertain voicing our opinions in front of these accomplished researchers. Moreover, there were people from ACF who oversee the very programs we run—what if we mispeak? But soon, the people in the room became

“people” more than “titles” as we felt valued when we shared and could see that we needed each other’s contributions in order to make the process work. By the time we engaged with Mathematica researchers, after many years of working with TRC researchers, it was with only a few butterflies signaling our nervousness about what was to come. Mostly, we were filled with confidence and excitement at our opportunity to participate in this new endeavor.

With the coordination and involvement of our trusted TRC research partners, those of us who were distrustful felt safe and believed in what we were doing collectively so we could participate and observe how the federal and Mathematica research partners interacted with us and with our TRC research partners. Through this process, we saw the federal and Mathematica partners learn about our unique needs, advocate for those, and respond sensitively to our requests. In addition to our formal meeting times, the social times (meals shared, walks to/from meetings and meals, openings and closings of meetings where we held hands in circle and shared our feelings about the process) were important for breaking down walls, allowing us to get to know personal stories and to see each other on a more level playing field. This encouraged us to continue, and our group began to feel like a family. Over time, we carefully built trust between the parties so that everyone could be “on the same page” in understanding how to conduct this momentous work. We now have a network of community, federal, and research partners working on AIAN early childhood research collectively, and we have gained meaningful connections and trust in each other.

As Region XI Head Start directors, TRC Steering Committee members, and NIHSDA Board members, it has been thoroughly rewarding to contribute to the first national study of Region XI Head Start. Those of us who are NIHSDA Board members think about Region XI as a whole, not just our individual programs. The great disparity in early childhood research specific to AIAN populations is harmful for us all. Thus, we are thankful that we have the opportunity to advocate for the importance of obtaining data that will help demonstrate the needs and strengths of AIAN communities to guide and influence funding and policy decisions for the field of AIAN early childhood education. Our work together has allowed us to express our experiences and knowledge, and now we are a part of laying the foundation for a culturally sensitive, ethical way to gather information with the communities and people we serve. Moreover, we are honored to be a part of this network that is now capable of engaging in future research to fill the void. Ultimately, we hope that our work can be used to advocate for the early childhood education needs of AIAN communities and raise

awareness of our unique communities' strengths. This work must be continued. We do not want to ever be again in the position of being excluded because researchers, funders, and policy makers are unable to figure out how to conduct meaningful research with AIAN programs.

First Person Account by Researchers from the Mathematica Study Team: Jerry West, Lizabeth M. Malone, Sara Bernstein, Michael Cavanaugh, Annalee Kelly, Joseph Baker, and Barbara Lepidus Carlson

Mathematica was awarded the contract to design and conduct AIAN FACES. Having conducted FACES over many years, we had extensive experience working with Head Start programs, children, and families. But our experience designing and conducting research studies focused exclusively on AIAN populations was more limited. As members of the AIAN FACES Workgroup, we built partnerships with Region XI Head Start directors and researchers affiliated with the TRC to ensure that AIAN FACES was conducted using rigorous methods while giving centered attention to cultural factors necessary for ethical research with AIAN communities.

Early input from others is common in our experience. Mathematica often involves outside researchers and practitioners during the design stage of large-scale studies such as FACES. However, our interactions with the Workgroup involved every aspect of the study, were more frequent than other studies, and extended over the life of the study. These interactions relied on bidirectional learning; we were both teachers and students. As teachers, we provided the background knowledge and understanding necessary to support informed decisions by all members (who varied in their knowledge and experience with research). For example, when discussing different options for the sample, we explained key principles of sampling for a nationally representative study (where all programs are represented in estimates even if they are not selected for the sample). In our role as students, we learned a great deal about conducting research with AIAN communities. For example, we learned among other things to respect tribal sovereignty, different notions of time, and differences in communication styles. We learned the importance of building trust and relationships—not only with study participants—but with our partners in the study design and implementation phases. We are confident that the emphasis on building trust and relationships, the trainings Mathematica data collection staff received, and the instruments and procedures that were developed through this collaboration led to informed processes to positively impact participation rates.

In conducting AIAN FACES, we applied the lessons we learned from the Workgroup on trust and building and sustaining relationships. In keeping with best practices for working with AIAN communities, study staff were trained to work *with* AIAN communities (rather than *outside of them*) and sought ways to maintain relationships and create opportunities for transparency in communicating about the study. We began the process of recruiting Region XI programs by pairing a member of our recruitment staff with a Workgroup member to explain the study, answer their questions, and address any concerns. As we moved on to recruiting participants and gathering data, staff responsible for one set of activities (for example, recruiting programs) introduced the staff who would perform a subsequent set of activities (for example, sampling classrooms and children). Staff learned important and common forms of verbal and nonverbal communication in AIAN communities, which helped establish a reciprocal relationship and build trust. Staff were encouraged to take time to learn from their AIAN community counterparts and share information about themselves. Taking time to honor a basic cultural practice, such as introducing oneself before beginning activities, demonstrated our team's appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing and helped promote a relational approach of respectfully connecting to one another in research.

The success of the study depended on close collaboration between local communities and Head Start programs and Mathematica. With the help of other members of the CCE Working Group, we created the Agreement of Collaboration and Participation, which provided detailed information about what prospective programs were agreeing to and Mathematica's responsibilities. It was an essential step in establishing trust with tribal leaders and Head Start program directors. Out of respect for tribal sovereignty and approval processes, our project director presented the study in person to tribal leaders, governments, and communities. These presentations addressed concerns about the value of participating and issues of mistrust and highlighted the approach we intended to take to understand the strengths and needs of Region XI children and families.

Our data collection staff had limited experience working with AIAN programs, children, and families. As a result, we modified our trainings to include intensive sessions devoted to building an awareness of how culture informs the way we perceive and interact with one another in our social worlds. Once again, underpinning the training was the importance of working collaboratively with AIAN community members and building trust. Key elements of the training included intergroup dialogues for trainees to discuss their experiences and uncertainties about unfamiliar cultures and communities, presentations

on the historical relationship between AIAN communities and the U.S. government, and the history of research in AIAN communities. Staff trained to conduct the child assessments watched video clips of AIAN children completing the study's assessment and, with the help of experienced Workgroup members, noted important cultural elements of behavior and best practices for working with AIAN children. Portions of the classroom observer training were held onsite at a Region XI Head Start program so staff could see and hear examples of Native language and culture in practice.

Our collaboration with AIAN FACES Workgroup members continued through the analysis and dissemination phase of the study. Together, we identified and prioritized topics and questions that would be of greatest interest to Region XI programs. Our team shared examples of the different types of products (e.g., research briefs and technical reports) for different audiences (for example, researchers, program staff, and tribal leaders). We discussed preliminary findings and reviewed draft products with other Workgroup members to ensure the findings were framed with the proper context (e.g., how the value of interdependence (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005) might be reflected in parents' reports of their family's economic well-being).

To support additional analyses by other researchers, AIAN FACES data are archived. Members of the Workgroup (directors in particular) identified this data archiving as a priority to ensure that the data could be used broadly with the appropriate protections. As standard practice, the restricted data files were designed to protect the identities and privacy of study participants. We worked with other members of the AIAN FACES Workgroup, the ACF Data Archive staff, and representatives from a tribal review board to enhance these protections and establish procedures for granting access to qualified researchers to address AIAN community concerns regarding the use of the data. For transparency, the Agreement of Collaboration and Participation, which all participating tribes agreed to, outlined data sharing plans and the establishment of a Data Committee (with AIAN representation) by ACF to oversee these plans (ACF, 2016).

The first-ever study of Region XI Head Start was a success as evidenced by the fact that we were able to recruit 21 randomly selected Region XI programs with their tribal community approval to participate, by the high rates of child (>90%), parent (>80%), and staff (>90%) participation, and by the numerous findings disseminated to Region XI programs and officials and AIAN communities. We nonetheless acknowledge there are areas for improvement as we now move forward with additional study cohorts. We must continue to address the concerns

of tribal council members, notably about the direct benefits of participation to their community and its members (e.g., by building Native capacity to conduct research and use data), the cultural competence and humility of data collection staff, and ongoing dialogue about data ownership and use when data represent multiple, as opposed to individual, AIAN communities. We have already made progress with the 2019 study currently underway: for example, by revisiting our approaches for field staff recruitment, we were successful in hiring AIAN field staff to conduct classroom observations. As we move toward dissemination of AIAN FACES 2019 findings, we continue to look for better ways of sharing findings and discussing the implications of the findings with tribal leaders and Region XI Head Start programs. In doing so, we hope to increase awareness of how participation in national studies such as AIAN FACES is beneficial, even if the benefits seem distal from immediate community-specific concerns. We are optimistic that the procedures we have put in place to address concerns about the use of data will be effective, but we will monitor this as the study continues with the current round in the 2019-2020 program year.

Discussion

AIAN FACES is the first national study of Region XI Head Start children, families, and programs, which are those operated by federally recognized AIAN tribes. The first-person accounts shared here are those of the four stakeholder groups that came together as members of the AIAN FACES Workgroup to plan for this study in ways that were inspired by community psychology, CBPR, and TPR approaches (Society for Community Research and Action, n.d., Fisher & Ball, 2003; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Much of the literature focuses on the application of these approaches within individual and specific community settings. However, the community that the AIAN FACES Workgroup endeavored to represent was national in scope—including the 21 culturally and contextually distinct individual tribal Head Start programs that participated in the study, the broader tribal communities under whose sovereign nation status these programs operated, and the whole of Region XI Head Start, which includes nearly 150 federally recognized tribally run programs. The accounts provide a close look at the path that led each stakeholder group to the table, and the perspectives and resources each brought to bear on this seminal effort. They demonstrate how community psychology, CBPR, and TPR approaches can be applied even when “community” is national in scope but united by a shared vision—which in our case, was a vision for the representation of

Region XI programs, children, families, and communities in the data on Head Start.

Reflecting on the work as a whole, we connect it here to the broader literature on community-engaged research with Native communities. Specifically, we highlight how four community psychology ideals were central to the Workgroup's success and how our work relates to extends that of others. Foremost, were the *collaborative relationships* built among Workgroup members and with the programs and communities invited to take part in the study. As so richly articulated by Rasmus et al., (2019), "CBPR begins with individuals willing to understand each other. CBPR is above all about relationships," (p. 8). In our case, given the national scope of our work, relationships were created across the divides of Workgroup members' diverse roles, geographies, and cultures. The resources dedicated to the project by the federal sponsor facilitated the transcendence of these divides. They allowed us to travel to be together in person so we could spend time getting to know one another. The relationships built during this time allowed us to both learn from, and teach, one another. In this process, our diverse perspectives were meaningfully united into a shared vision. The spirit with which Workgroup members entered this "third space" (i.e., a space that was not yours or mine alone, but a new amalgam of both; Rasmus et al., 2019) was foundational. The humility and integrity described as being critical to CBPR partnerships (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006) was integral to our ability to enter this space in a good way. For us, humility meant that each Workgroup member offered unique contributions from their respective role, geography, or culture while also learning from and embracing the contributions of others. As a collective, we gained the knowledge necessary to move this work forward with a shared, co-created vision. Over time, trust grew, as did deep respect and collegiality. This allowed Workgroup members to have honest dialogue and to show, and be shown, grace in moments of vulnerability. These experiences echo those of other successful tribal community partnerships (Julian, Smith II, & Hunt, 2017; Rasmus et al., 2019; Skewes et al., 2019).

Second, the Workgroup engaged in *capacity building*. This was especially important in the beginning to ensure everyone had the knowledge and vocabulary necessary to engage in meaningful dialogue. Humility paved the way for Workgroup members to come together "with a spirit to understand the power and mutuality of both their gifts," (Rasmus et al., 2019, p. 2). Considerable time was dedicated to researchers teaching study design and statistics. Similarly, Head Start directors dedicated their time to sharing the lived experience of children and families and Native ways of knowing and being relevant for measurement selection, adaptation, and creation. It is here, in measurement selection, that Workgroup members had to work

especially hard to account for diverse tribal cultures in single study measures—and where we had to often return to our "North Star" of a study that was representative of Region XI *as a whole*. Workgroup members needed to be open to seeing things in new ways as described by Julian et al. (2017). They also had to be mindful of the power and privilege afforded to them by their pre-existing roles and areas of expertise (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). This allowed Workgroup members to remain vigilant to not use their power and privilege in ways that marginalized others, but rather, to offer their skills to the group as complementary, but not superior to, those of others.

Third, the Workgroup endeavored to bring an *ecological perspective* to bear. As Trickett (2009) describes, an ecological perspective directs "attention to the social and cultural contexts of communities and the community life of individuals" (p. 396) and asserts that "knowledge about the local community is prerequisite and prelude to decisions about what kinds of actions serve community goals and interests," (p. 397). Head Start director Workgroup members were essential in this regard. Many held leadership positions in Head Start nationally and/or had been directors for many years. As such, they possessed a national view of Region XI concerns and priorities, as well as a specific view of experiences within their own communities. This ecological grounding was critical at all phases of the study—including planning (e.g., helping identify study goals and measures), implementation (e.g., advising on protocols for recruitment and data collection), and, importantly, dissemination (e.g., helping contextualize findings). Placing research within the complexities and richness of present-day and historical context is especially critical for Native communities who have been harmed when research has failed to do that (Wendt et al., 2019). The Head Start directors were key in this regard.

Collaborative relationships, capacity building, and an ecological perspective made the fourth community psychology ideal we emphasize here, *empowerment*, possible. Native nations' status as "the asterisk nation" is not without consequence. When Native populations are missing or miscounted in national statistics, there are real-world consequences such as underfunding of needed programs or the development of policies that are misaligned with community experiences and priorities (Weinberg, 2020). The Workgroup was itself the culmination of years of advocacy and efforts by three of the stakeholder groups—federal staff, tribal early childhood researchers, and, most importantly, Region XI Head Start directors. In our work, directors represented the interests and priorities of their Native communities and tribally run Head Start programs. They had also been among the most vocal advocates for a national study of Region XI Head Start. By pursuing these community psychology ideals on a national scale, the

Workgroup brought a co-created vision for a national study of Region XI Head Start to life. This study resulted in data that can now be used by Region XI Head Start directors and tribal leaders to inform practice and advocate for policy and the allocation of resources. To support these efforts, the Workgroup is endeavoring to use the data to “tell the story” (Julian et al., 2019) of Head Start children, families and communities, in an appropriate, culturally sensitive, and accessible way (e.g., Kading, Gonzalez, Herman, Gonzalez, & Walls, 2019; Straits, deMaría, & Tafoya, 2019).

Empowerment was also at the forefront during the individual program and community study recruitment phase. The Agreement of Collaboration and Participation and the Data Committee were created by the Workgroup with empowerment specifically in mind. Reflecting the Workgroup’s attempt to translate TPR ideals to a national scale. The Agreement of Collaboration and Participation made the study goals and activities transparent so that programs and communities could make fully informed decisions about study participation. The Data Committee, on the other hand, includes tribal Head Start directors who have a strong say in who can access these nationally representative data and for what purpose as the data are now available to secondary users who can apply for access.

Conclusion

As we conclude, we pull forward some of the innovations that resulted from the Workgroup’s efforts that may be particularly relevant for others seeking to conduct a national study with diverse Native communities. We direct the reader to the AIAN FACES User’s Manual and the AIAN FACES study website to learn more about several of the documents and processes discussed. These resources include the cross-site Agreement of Collaboration and Participation that served as the written agreement and community-level “consent” for the study, the cross-cultural understanding training for data collection staff, a measure of Native language and culture in the classroom developed by Workgroup members, a restricted use dataset available for qualified secondary users, and a description of the AIAN FACES data committee which serves as the oversight body for the restricted use dataset.

The Workgroup continues to guide next steps as dissemination of findings for AIAN FACES 2015 are ongoing, and analysis of data and dissemination of findings for AIAN FACES 2019 are underway. Data across study cohorts promise to provide an evolving nationally representative picture of Region XI Head Start. Data will offer a roadmap for Region XI practitioners, OHS and other policymakers, and researchers to consider in their efforts to best meet the needs

of a population that has not, to this point, been included in any of the national studies of Head Start children and families. We believe the Workgroup can serve as a model for other national studies with Native communities. Though the investment of time and resources was substantial, the return on this investment is promising for future research in which AIAN communities play a lead role in designing, implementing, and disseminating findings for the benefit of Native communities nationally.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix 1

Administration for Children and Families (ACF) AIAN FACES 2015 Workgroup Members

Willow Abrahamson, Jessica Barnes-Najor, Meryl Barofsky, Collette Berg, Sara Bernstein, Robert Bialis, Patty Brown, Ann Cameron, Barbara Lepidus Carlson, Myrna Dingman, Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Lana Garcia, Cecelia (Angie) Godfrey, Jaclyn Haight, Laura Hoard, Kirstin (Hisatake) Nilles, Charmaine Lundy, Lizabeth M. Malone, Racquel Martinez, Laura McKechnie, Aleta Meyer, Mary Mueggenborg, Douglas Novins, Michelle Sarche, Sharon Singer, Teresa Smith, WJ Strickland, Monica Tsethlikai, Mavany Calac Verdugo, Jerry West, Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell, and Maria Woolverton