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## The Winnebago Educare Program: Be Strong and Educate My Children

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# The Winnebago Educare Program: Be Strong and Educate My Children

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## **Introduction**

The Winnebago Indian Reservation lies in the northern half of Thurston County in northeastern Nebraska. The largest community on the Reservation is the Village of Winnebago. Located on the eastern side of the Reservation, Winnebago is home to most Winnebago tribal members and accounts for almost thirty percent of the Reservation's resident population. At present, approximately 2,600 people live on the Reservation. Based on demographic modeling, the Reservation population is expected to increase from its year 1990 level of 2,377 to 5,050 in year 2040, due in large part to the high birth rate and relatively youthful composition of the Native American habitants. There are 2,600 residents whose primary racial composition represents Native Americans at 90.6% of the population. The per capita income is \$6,317; about 43.7% of families and 48.6% of the population were below the poverty line, including 55.6% of those under the age of 18 and 33.3% of those aged 65 or over (Winnebago Tribal Council).

## **American Indian Policy and Educational Practices**

Historically, American Indian education policies have been a weapon of isolation and assimilation used by the United States government to destroy tribal identity, power, resources, and Native culture as a whole. The boarding school era began in 1860 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first boarding school and continued until federal boarding schools were closed in the 1980's. Generations of Native children were denied access to their language, culture, traditions, family structures, and obligations while being retaught and assimilated into western culture that valued material wealth, nuclear families, and Christianity. During the 1960's, organized Native leadership began fighting against assimilationist policies and cultural genocide. A new era emerged with Native people fighting for their rights to maintain tribal language, culture and spiritual practices.

In essence, western education models have been instruments of U.S. assimilationist policy for Native children. Education models incorporating both Native culture and western academics are a fairly recent phenomenon and there is little research on the subject. However, it is generally recognized by tribal people as a beginning and the most effective way to educate Native youth. Tribes continue to affirm their cultural identity and reclaim educational practices according to a culturally affirming model and best practices within the constraints of U.S. policy and state regulations. Today, tribes continue the battle to advance their

communities in the era of Self-Determination through education and economic development.

### **Theoretical and Model Construct Considerations**

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart contributes substantial and ground-breaking research on historical trauma and its factors related to post traumatic stress disorder as a result of United States' policies toward the extinction of Native peoples... "Historical trauma is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group trauma experiences" (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2004, p. 7). Yellow Horse Brave Heart's scholarship is critical and encompasses the 'socio-cultural' lens mentioned earlier.

Lorraine Gutierrez (1990) has written extensively on the model of empowerment. The definition of empowerment includes several principles; one of these principles describes empowerment as a process that leads to an increase in personal, interpersonal or political power so that life situations improve. Gutierrez states that there are four psychological changes that are critical to moving individuals forward. Two of Gutierrez' concepts have important relevance to the Winnebago tribe and their relationship to the Educare system: developing a group consciousness and awareness of how political structures impact experience as well as assuming personal responsibility for change. Both concepts relate well to plans currently underway for the Winnebago-Educare program.

A relatively new concept called "Collective Impact" (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2011) refers to a group of committed people whose backgrounds are diverse, but are dedicated to solving a complex social problem together. The aim is to coordinate efforts around a clearly defined goal. This is a significant shift from the current paradigm of "isolated impact," because the underlying premise of Collective Impact is that no single organization can create large-scale, lasting social change alone. There are five conditions that, together, lead to meaningful results; a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and having a backbone organization.

With regard to the Winnebago-Educare program efforts, the collective impact model is very useful. There are the school systems in Winnebago, the Headstart and childcare programs, Little Priest Tribal College, the Winnebago Tribal leadership and the Buffett Early Childhood Foundation, who are all very concerned about the future of Winnebago children. Their effort is concerted and directive: improve the educational platform for children so that when they enter the WPS or Saint Augustine School system, they are well prepared to succeed. Thus, utilizing the

'collective impact' approach to support Winnebago children aligns well with the concepts' premises as well as being culturally syntonic (Seeley, 2006) with the values of the Winnebago people.

### **Educare**

The Buffett Early Childhood Fund and the Ounce of Prevention Fund collaborated in 2003 to be responsive to the widening achievement gap, especially for children who live in poverty. The approach of the Educare Model includes four core strategies:

1. Intensive and ongoing implementation assistance and consultation;
2. Training and learning events;
3. Participation in a broader professional learning community across Educare Schools; and
4. Assistance in building Educare's role and impact as a platform for policy and systems change.

Since 2005, the Frank Porter Graham Development Institute (FPG) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has led the Educare Learning Network implementation study of the model (<http://www.educareomaha.com/results>). An evaluation was conducted in 2010-2011 of 12 Educare Schools from across the country which included more than 1,800 students. Data from these 12 programs show that the Educare model is working; more children are ready for school and have stronger academic skills, including a larger vocabulary. Christ and Wang (2010) suggest that children who have access to larger vocabularies "helps to advance educational equity which correlates with greater reading comprehension and general academic success" (p. 90).

The Educare model heavily relies upon the staff's training and education credentials with the intent that staff possess at the minimum, Associate Degrees. The desire is that Educare staff will attain higher educational degrees. Therefore, training Winnebago tribal members to educate the children in the Winnebago-Educare program is essential to the success of this endeavor. Role models who are Native and from the community offer the children great hope that someday, they too can be educators in their community which in turns enhances the Winnebago community economic development.

### **The Winnebago-Educare Program**

The promise of a brighter future for the Winnebago Tribe resides in a plan to educate Native children through a carefully planned program called Winnebago-Educare (WE). This educational program is the first of its' kind

to serve a Native American Indian Reservation. According to local resources from an early childhood education program at Winnebago, these discussions began five years ago. A partnership emerged led by the Winnebago Public Schools (WPS), the Winnebago Tribal Council, and the Buffett Early Childhood Foundation.

Data from the Headstart Program at Winnebago revealed that children were entering the public school system lagging nearly one and a half years behind other children. Headstart leaders were concerned about this statistic and were eager to understand what was happening with the children. More leaders became involved in the discussion including the Winnebago Public School, Saint Augustine Catholic School, the Winnebago Tribal Council, and Winnebago Tribal Chairman John Blackhawk. What emerged was a public resolution regarding WE. Tribal Chairman Blackhawk described the financial support that was provided by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux of Minnesota and the Winnebago Tribe's resources (which matched the support from the Buffett Early Childhood Foundation) helped greatly to acquire the financial foundation necessary to start this program. The transition to bring Headstart and Winnebago's childcare programs together was an initial idea and the opportunity to build upon the program and utilize strengths in the relationships are key to the success of the Winnebago-Educare Program. Tribal Chairman Blackhawk is also a member of the WPS which provided for a seamless connection between these diverse educational systems.

Interviews conducted with several leaders in the Winnebago community led to an insightful dialogue regarding the need for such an educational system to emerge (A. LaPointe, D. LaPointe, P. Larose, B. Mathers, & M. Cummings, personal communication, May 14, 2014). They described strengths inherent in diverse relationship perspectives. When I asked about the engagement of parents in children's education, one member immediately advised me that the role of grandparents picking up their grandchildren was something they had noticed occurring more frequently. When I asked what the age range for the parents was, the response was as young as 16 years old, with most parents being in the middle 20's. Grandparents' ages are very young as well, in their 40's. This particular issue could prove very interesting as WE family support workers engage with grandparents more frequently, and what programs can be planned that incorporate grandparents' roles in the family. The roles of elders in the Native community have always been revered therefore, any issue that comes forth from WE should be solidified by the wisdom of elders.

The WE program will be comprised of 36 staff and educators (12 classrooms-three teachers to each room) in early childhood education who will have completed Associate's, Bachelor's or Master's degrees. Currently, Master level teachers from the WPS district oversees the classrooms. Two teachers are currently completing the Bachelor degree in Education through the University of Nebraska-Kearney (the on-line program). The leaders' hopes are to create an educational pipeline toward the WE program. The tremendous assets of many educational institutions in the state of Nebraska could serve the WE program very well to achieve their goals of educating future early childhood teachers and staff.

There are several programs in place to help incentivize students toward this goal including; Step-Up and Pathways which provide financial support to Native students to complete their education. The Little Priest Tribal College has a language requirement (Ho-Chunk) for graduation. There is a language program provided by the Winnebago tribe called "Renaissance" that four elders currently oversee. The use of technology and animations assist in teaching the Ho-Chunk language. The Winnebago Tribe is a recipient of a five-year U.S. Department of Education grant, the Early Language Initiative (ELI). The project will be integrated as a component of the Tribe's Educare of Winnebago pre-school initiative. "The goal of the Winnebago Early Language Initiative is to significantly improve school readiness and long-term academic success for 330 Winnebago children aged zero to five years over a five-year project period." One of the primary objectives in this grant includes increasing Ho-Chunk fluency for preschool students by 10 percent for each year of the project as measured by the Winnebago Renaissance Language program's Ho-Chunk Early Language Progress (HELP) assessment (Early Language Initiative-Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, July 2013, pp. 1-3).

The Educare curriculum will be customized with an infusion of traditional tribal culture in the form of interaction with elders, traditional stories, games, dances, traditional songs, and ceremonies. These enhancements will support the formation of strong tribal and clan identity and build self-worth. Tribal elders will interact regularly with preschoolers in the Educare Program in order to describe and demonstrate traditional Ho-Chunk life ways. They will provide both group interactions (story-telling, talking circle discussions, tribal history lessons, etc.) and one-on-one interactions with young children. They will lead spiritual and ceremonial programs; teach traditional dances and songs and art forms; and serve as regular, highly respected presence in the classrooms and in the daily lives of the Educare children and families.

The parent component that is part of each Educare program is also a large segment of the WE program. The children who are aged zero to three years will have the same teacher and one peer group for the parents so that trust will be built and can be reinforced. Winnebago-Educare will combine best practices with activities and curriculum that honor the local culture and traditions and teaching children in the native Ho-Chunk language in addition to English. A cultural resource room houses events, community college classes and after-school tutoring programs for K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students from the WPS. The WE program serves 191 children and their families and opened in March 2014.

Dr. Kweku Ocran is an early childhood education professor at the Little Priest Tribal College (LPTC) in Winnebago. Ocran's hope is train as many Native students as possible to meet the demand for teachers in the WE program. Ocran stated that the LPTC should serve as an educational pipeline for the WE program. Ocran is filled with enthusiasm regarding the WE program and advises his students, "This is only the beginning. Your motivation is key to the success of the Winnebago-Educare Program!" Ocran's vision for the WE program is taking root already; he taught a LPTC education student who completed her degree and joined the WE program in May 2014.

When I asked Tribal Chairman Blackhawk (J. Blackhawk, personal communication, May 28, 2014) what his vision was for the Winnebago people in the next 25 years, and with reference to the WE program, he stated there would be growth, spending funds wisely and a strong educational connection amongst all units in Winnebago, the Winnebago Public School system, Saint Augustine Schools, Little Tribal Priest College and the WE program. There would be fluent speakers in the Ho-Chunk language that would carry forth through the language, the customs, practices and traditions of the Winnebago that would in turn, empower the children for the future. The reinforced cultural patterns will be seen throughout the Ho-Chunk language maintenance, within both family and community systems. Chairman Blackhawk said, "We will do what is right for us, our plate will be full and it's a good thing."

### **Final Thoughts**

In summary, the Winnebago-Educare program has great potential to be a role model for other Native American early childhood education programs across the United States. The vision of collective leadership to provide an outstanding pathway for Winnebago children is to be admired. The Winnebago Tribe has never shown weakness when it comes to the future of their children. Resiliency and perseverance continues to thrive in the



lives of members today through self- determination. Chief Little Priest, the last true Winnebago War Chief, stated most accurately: “Be Strong and Educate My Children.” The union of the school systems, the Buffet Early Childhood Institute, and the Winnebago Tribe with their collaborative leadership will not allow educational failure to occur with the Winnebago children. Chief Little Priest’s call for action is a reality.

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