

Hearing and Seeing: Principals' Perspectives and Observations Of an Indigenous Summer School Program

This research investigated a tribally sponsored remedial summer learning program on a large Native nation in the southern US. Focus groups explored principals' perspectives on fostering student success and the program's positive impact on the teachers. The program offered teachers the freedom and flexibility to teach according to their strengths and students' needs. Informal classroom observations from nineteen summer learning sites across the reservation supported the findings. A composite summer school schedule was created from a synthesis of observations and provided support for the principals' focus group responses. Through the remedial program, the tribe and its community partners advanced the Native nation's goal of improving education for all at-risk, early childhood students within the reservation.

Keywords: *Native American, remedial education, early childhood education, summer school, principals, focus groups*

The summer learning program, an annual 24-day school program in late May and June, was developed a decade ago by an Indigenous tribe. The goal was to help all students in the reservation in need of reading or math remediation, regardless of race. In the tribal reservation, over one-third of the students were Native American, as were about one-fourth of the summer learning program staff. Because the intervention program was envisioned, developed, funded, and fully supported by the tribe, it reflected tribal values and emphasized cultural relevancy. The primary investigators were also tribal members conducting research within their own tribe, which added an important layer of cultural sensitivity and understanding.

The large tribal reservation was in an area of Indian Country with a poverty rate of 19.1% which was 1.5 times higher than the national average of 12.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The intent of the remedial program was to offer a strategy to support academic performance with a long-term goal of breaking the cycle of poverty on the reservation. In another study (Vandell et al., 2022), findings revealed the importance of high-quality remedial or afterschool programs for low-income children to achieve success in school. Hernandez (2011) identified links between early childhood reading success and likelihood of graduating from high school and overcoming poverty. Other researchers (Scammacca et al., 2020) found educational achievement gaps between students from households with higher and lower incomes, and between white and minority students.

Given the socio-economic and demographic issues of children living in Indian County, and the tribe's decade-long intervention strategy for literacy and numeracy among at-risk early

childhood students, the researchers investigated success factors of the program as perceived by elementary principals directly involved with the summer learning program. Additionally, educators may be interested in the collective report of the numerous on-site observations of the summer learning program in action. Not surprising, there was strong reciprocal support between the principal focus group findings from 2022 and the site visit observations from 2021.

Methods

The primary investigator had been evaluating the SLP since 2019 and led formal data collection methods eliciting perspectives from summer learning program leaders employed by the tribe, and elementary school teachers and principals experienced with the summer learning program. In-depth interviews with past and present leaders occurred in 2020 and focus groups of SLP elementary teachers and principals occurred in 2022. All subjects were consented prior to conducting research, and the research protocols were reviewed and approved by the tribe's Institutional Review Board. A tribal IRB is similar to a university IRB but requires purposeful descriptions of the benefits to the tribe and its members, as well as ensuring tribal heritage is protected (National Institute of Justice, 2013).

Principal Focus Groups

This research explored principals' perspectives of the summer learning program. Fifteen elementary principals (eleven females; four males) participated in focus groups in May 2022. All had prior classroom teaching experience, ranging from a low of seven years to a high of 24 years. The average time serving as principal was 5.4 years, varying from a low of one year of experience to a high of 18 years. The participants were all employed by school districts inside the reservation and all of their schools were sites offering the 2022 summer learning program.

The researchers scheduled two separate focus groups: the first with eight principals (six females, two males) and the second with seven principals (five females, two males). The same questions, centering on success factors, were asked of both cohorts. The primary research question was *why is the summer learning program successful?* Each one-hour focus group was recorded, transcribed, and verified by research assistants before being reviewed and analyzed by the research investigators.

Summer Learning Program Site Visits

In addition to focus groups in 2022, the investigators, as employees of the tribal research department, engaged in informal classroom observations in 2021 at 19 summer learning program sites in the rural tribal reservation. Several days were required to visit the sites, as the entire reservation spanned thousands of square miles and the site visits were intentionally selected from each quadrant. The tribal researchers were not familiar with any of the schools, or the personnel visited. Efforts were made to visit a cross section of large and small schools in the reservation.

At most schools, the tribal researchers visited multiple elementary classrooms and observed a wide variety of topics in action, including math, sight words, reading, science research, student presentations, games, Native American cultural activities, and PE. Within a day following the completion of every site visit, the primary investigators recorded their individual observations

and impressions on a standardized form. After all site visits were completed, the tribal researchers met to examine their notes and discuss overall impressions.

Findings

Principal Focus Groups

A thematic analysis of the data revealed several key concepts emerging from the focus groups. The principals identified teacher autonomy and small class sizes as important keys to success. Specifically, they mentioned the following concepts: freedom in instruction, tribal trust in teachers' expertise, teachers not required to teach to standards, teachers developed their own curriculum, teachers taught according to their strengths, teachers tried new teaching techniques (an incubator of new ideas), teachers devoted quality time to students because of 1:10 ratio, and teachers offered individualized instruction to meet students' needs.

During the focus groups, the elementary principals described their views on why the summer learning program was successful. The principals believed their teaching staff was empowered to be their best, helping students in all areas of their lives. The following quote sums up two frequently occurring themes emerging from the principal focus groups: flexibility and freedom.

In the quote, the principal expressed appreciation for the tribe's support and confidence in the school personnel—to know and do what was best for students.

Female principal for 8 years, Focus Group 2: I think a big part of the summer learning program supporting us is allowing us the *flexibility* and the *freedom* and trusting us in our crafts and our teachers' crafts to know what kids do or don't need. We have the flexibility to add courses or books. I wish the state department of education would trust us enough to do those things, too. It's very nice how the [tribe] says, 'Here are the supplies you need. Here are the things that you need. We set up a platform for you. Now you go and do what you do best and take these kids and help them where they need it—academically, socially, and emotionally.' They trust us to do our jobs and not to micromanage us, and it's successful.

Many principals during the focus groups attributed instructional flexibility or individualized instruction to small class sizes. The following principal quotes from both focus groups explain what the participants believed to be the keys to success of the summer learning program. Whether novice or veteran principals, their comments revealed an appreciation for the tribe's vision of the summer learning program and the tangible ways teachers made a difference for their students.

Female principal for two years, Focus Group 1: When you have that smaller class size it allows time to do so much more individualized instruction. I'm rocking IEP for every student in that short period of time. I mean, it really is each student because she [the teacher] learns that student and she can teach to that student during that time.

Male principal for 18 years, Focus Group 1: You're focusing on those ten kids that you're working with, not a classroom of 24 or 25, and you're able to try new ideas in a regular classroom. You're not saying, 'I've got this test at the end of the year. I've got to make sure I get these covered and make sure all these kids are where they need to be.' So it seems like there's more freedom.

Male principal for four years, Focus Group 1: During the school year, we had some big class sizes. Teachers often tell me things during summer school like, ‘I feel I am truly getting to teach now.’ During the school year it was, ‘Hey, I’m just trying to stay above water. Well, now I’ve got these small groups and I’m really able to teach.’ Teachers are a lot more enthusiastic when it comes to their work each day, because they feel like they’re truly accomplishing something.

Female principal for 11 years, Focus Group 1: Teachers get to experiment with different methodology, different practices, whether it’s the same grade level or different grade levels. And they’re able to do things with that smaller class size that they wouldn’t otherwise do. When I walk by a classroom, I see fun, engaging activities. I see teachers down on the floor more, I see more manipulatives out. With the larger class sizes, it was more about management. This is more about engagement and hands-on learning.

Male principal for three years, Focus Group 2: I’ve noticed that teachers use the smaller class sizes as a trial and error. During the regular school year, they use a lot of the techniques and activities they tried during summer school when it wasn’t as intense.

Female principal for 20 years, Focus Group 2: It also gives teachers an opportunity to try things they probably wouldn’t try with a larger group of students. You typically don’t have your top tier students at the summer program. And so now, suddenly, these kids get to move into that role that they don’t typically get to have. And so, it’s been really good for them.

Female principal for eight years, Focus Group 2: We’re able to introduce them to other things like extra STEM classes and different types of music classes. We’re able to do gardening, which is a fun class students wouldn’t normally get to do in the regular school year. I mean, the teachers get to do what they want. They get to choose and have the availability to do that.

Female principal for five years, Focus Group 2: I have a lot of teachers that spend time picking out books and extra things that deal with the social-emotional side. During the regular school year, they don’t feel like they have time to focus on something like that. They feel like they do during the summer.

Site Visit Observations

Teacher autonomy or flexibility and freedom in teaching were also commonly observed during the site visits in 2021. A cross-site analysis revealed less structure than traditional school year classrooms, made possible in part by low teacher to student ratios of 1:10. Most of the observations revealed considerable student and teacher movements and interactions, hands-on activities, and students enjoying the program.

The primary purpose of the observations, however, was to synthesize the diverse activities occurring in the summer learning program. There were 50 summer learning program sites with multiple grade level classrooms, so an attempt to codify or create a standardized procedure of classroom activities was difficult. The result was an educated guess outlining a composite schedule, rather than a prescribed timetable. During the focus groups, principals indicated the academic portion of the curriculum was 60% reading and 40% math. The examples listed in the schedule were either observed firsthand by the tribal researchers or referenced by school principals or teachers in conversations occurring during the site visits. Table 1 is a description of the typical summer learning program schedule.

Activity	Examples	Description
Breakfast		
Reading	Paired reading activities	Partners taking turns reading aloud to each other while sitting beanbags or in tents
	Teacher instructing small groups	Small groups working while teacher rotates between groups
	Group discussions	Discussing elements of a story
	Reading theatre	Combining reading practice with performing, speaking
	Hands on activities	Playing sight word games with flyswatter or fishing pole; tossing balls; rhyming/rhythmic chants; phonics dance
Math and STEM	Manipulatives	Sorting M&Ms by color and quantity; creating geometric shapes with M&Ms
	Online research	Internet research on sea animals; reporting orally
	Independent calculations	Using erasable hand-held white boards
	Applied learning	Earning or counting money to buy from sweets store; science experiments
Lunch		
Playground		
Enrichment	Native arts and crafts	Creating corn husk dolls; making dioramas of traditional American Indian houses; beading
	Music	Singing along to brain break videos
	PE	Playing in bounce house or water games
	Tribal culture	Cooking; creating Trail of Tears timeline bulletin board; watching tribal dancers; learning tribe's terminology
	Field trips	Visiting American Indian cultural center or capitol building
	Outdoor activities	Playing stickball; fishing; collecting water samples; gardening, exploring wildlife in creeks
	Guest speakers	Learning about vocations like banker or first responder; learning from tribal leaders or Native American storyteller

Table 1. Typical Summer Learning Program Schedule

Commonalities Across Classrooms

Tribal researchers identified commonalities across many classrooms and sites they visited. Observed characteristics ranged from activities or instructional approaches to similar classroom environments. Overall, the impression was a sense of elevated levels of classroom energy—palpable excitement for teaching and learning. Five commonalities observed were hands on activities, a level playing field environment, a relaxed environment, small student to teacher ratio, and focus on fun.

Hands on Activities. Student engagement was consistently observed, mainly because the children were almost always learning with multiple modalities. Only once did the researcher observe a worksheet being used, and one other time, a lecture in progress, but all other

observations were of high energy or active learning. Manipulatives were used in math for counting, adding and subtracting, grouping, sorting, and ordering. Coins were used in the play store. Measuring cups and spoons were used in the cooking activity. Passive learning was rarely in evidence during the summer school program.

Level Playing field Environment. Students were invited to attend the program if they scored below the 40th percentile on normed reading and math tests. Therefore, the students were primarily among peers on similar academic levels. In this program, the concept of *meeting the needs of all children* worked well, because teachers were not trying to manage a wide range of learning abilities in a single classroom. The teacher had ten or fewer students, at similar grade levels, and all in need of remediation. Reticent students gained confidence with opportunities to raise their hands and be called upon to answer a question.

Relaxed Environment. The summer school program was informal in many regards. Teachers wore casual clothes daily, including jeans or shorts and school t-shirts. Brain breaks were often observed in classrooms and focused on physical activity rather than academics. In addition, there was little concern for teaching to state standards, since the teachers alone determined what the students needed during summer school. Teachers were given the freedom to team teach when desired and multiple instances of combined classrooms were observed, particularly during physical activity or games.

Small Student/Teacher Ratio. Based on observations, focus group findings, and other research endeavors concerning the summer school program, a class size limit of ten students was the most frequently noted reason for the success of the program. Classroom observations often revealed a student/teacher ratio of less than 10:1 which meant more individualized instruction and a slower learning pace, as well as expanded opportunities to develop students' reasoning and thinking skills. Teachers had greater opportunity to ask important follow-up questions or simply ask, 'Why?'

Focus on Fun. Classroom themes, elaborate decorations in hallways and classrooms, chants, songs, phonics dances, hands on activities, relaxed environments, and small class sizes resulted in a fun, energized summer school environment. Free breakfast, lunch, and snacks were provided so children maintained their energy throughout the day. With fewer students in the building, the summer learning program provided more opportunities for individual recognition through school-wide events and awards ceremonies focusing on academic growth rather than achievement. Principals organized school fun days at the program completion. This included inflatable party equipment, playground water games, or swimming.

Widespread Curriculum

During the observations in 2021, efforts were made to identify topics in the curriculum that had widespread usage in the summer learning program. As indicated by the quotes from the principal focus groups, there was not a standardized curriculum, although the summer learning program provided trade books for students to keep when the program ended. Teachers were offered teaching aids, like booklets, online resources, and materials if they chose to use them.

Because participation in the summer learning program was primarily for students in need of remediation, some curricular activities focused on revitalizing students' well-being or mental

health. Often observed were brain breaks or sing-along bops and movement-oriented videos to improve blood flow to students’ brains and reenergize them.

Focus group findings from 2022 supported classroom activities geared toward students’ well-being. Principals’ responses revealed they encouraged teaching methods that reduced anxieties associated with reading, math, and social engagement. Well-being activities, also known as positive psychology or positive emotions (Kern, 2022), were referred to as ‘mindfulness’ by principals. They believed an emphasis on mindfulness helped students stay focused and calm. They also supported enrichment activities involving tribal heritage and language, and Indigenous arts, crafts, outdoor activities, and other cultural events. Table 2 contains examples of recurring curricula, observed on many of the site visits.

Curriculum
Mindfulness
Focus on destressing
Calming breathing activities
Yoga
Culture and Native American Enrichment
Tribal heritage
Social dances, like raccoon dance
Trickster tales and stories
Stickball playing and equipment-making
Native American Language
Alphabet
Vocabulary
Audios and videos for pronunciation
Presentations by Native language First Speakers
Field Trips
Used as satisfactory attendance reward
Rotating Themes (four-year cycle)
Beach and ocean theme
Jungle and rainforest theme
Superhero theme (including community heroes, like tribal police or first responders)
Outdoor theme (including space, camping, or Native American heritage)
Library Time
Graphic novels popular with older readers
Grade level trade books given to students
Phonics, Reading, Math, and STEM

Table 2. Commonly Observed Curricula on Site Visits, 2021

Conclusion

Although tribally funded, the summer learning program was a joint effort between tribal employees and school educators. Because of educational and tribal sovereignty, the tribe was able to create a unique summer school model, independent of state standards or curriculum. Focused on tribal values of improving educational opportunities for Native children, and

ensuring a sustainable tribal people, culture, and heritage, the tribe and its community partners fulfilled the summer learning program's original vision of offering remedial education for all at-risk students, preK-3rd grade within the Native American reservation. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a cancellation of the summer learning program in 2020, but when it resumed in summer 2021, the tribe extended eligibility to PreK through 6th grade. In 2022, the eligibility dropped to PreK through 4th grade and remained this way in 2023.

Suggestions for future research include electronic surveys of principals to collect quantifiable data on success factors of similar remedial programs. Surveys to collect quantitative data from summer school teachers, both veteran and novice, and parents are opportunities for comparative analyses of summer school successes or recommended areas of improvement.

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