

# Between the Lions<sup>®</sup>

## American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative

Final Narrative Report  
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## Executive Summary

The BETWEEN THE LIONS American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative was developed to increase the early English language literacy skills of American Indian children in New Mexico Head Start centers using the award-winning PBS children's literacy series BETWEEN THE LIONS along with related resources that were adapted specifically for a variety of American Indian communities. The project was developed with extensive input from participating American Indian Head Start educators to ensure that the materials and approach were culturally relevant and appropriate.

During the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years, 48 classrooms in 11 Tribal Head Start programs participated in this literacy initiative. Specifically, the initiative:

- Provided all classrooms with a set of 16 edited BETWEEN THE LIONS episodes on DVD, a DVD player, companion print materials, children's books, and additional related resources.
- Conducted training for Head Start teachers and aides prior to project implementation.
- Provided follow-up workshops and met with sites regularly to help them carry out the project effectively.
- Assessed the effectiveness of the intervention through a research study.

The research study was conducted by Dr. Deborah Linebarger, Assistant Professor, Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Overall, the research

shows that the project made a significant difference in the English language literacy skills of American Indian children in the participating Head Start programs. Students made significant gains in oral vocabulary, letter knowledge, and two key measures of phonemic awareness: sound awareness and blending. In addition, the number of children at-risk for reading failure decreased from 39% to 12%, and the number of children scoring above average in key literacy measures increased from 23% to 64%. On average, children typically gain 15% more skills from fall to spring; children participating in this initiative gained 25% more skills from fall to spring.

Future goals for the project include the continued use of the BETWEEN THE LIONS materials at the participating tribal Head Start centers, expanded use in New Mexico, rollout of the project to other states with large American Indian populations, and expanding the curriculum materials from 16 to 32 lessons.

Some of the key factors for the project's success include the strength of the BETWEEN THE LIONS materials, inclusion of a parent component, early involvement of tribal directors and teachers, alignment with Head Start outcomes, and the high education levels of directors and teachers. Recommendations for future projects include allowing for a longer timeline, including tribal representatives in the development of materials provided to tribes, gaining familiarity with tribes' customs and communication styles, and maintaining communication with participating sites during implementation.

## Background

BETWEEN THE LIONS, the award-winning PBS children’s series, is the only program currently airing on PBS, network, or cable television created specifically to help children learn to read. The series premiered in April 2000 and airs daily on PBS stations around the country. To date, there are 90 half-hour episodes, all focused on building children’s love of reading and improving key literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. BETWEEN THE LIONS was created with reading experts from around the country, and every character and segment of the show draws on scientific research about how children learn to read. The series is produced by WGBH—the public TV station in Boston, along with Sirius Thinking, Ltd. in New York, and Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

The American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative grew out of the commitment shared by the producers of BETWEEN THE LIONS to expand our efforts beyond broadcast, to reach children most at risk for reading failure. Based on the very encouraging research conducted in 2000 by Dr. Deborah Linebarger, showing that children who watched just 16 episodes made significant gains in their reading skills, compared with their peers who didn’t watch any of the programs, we saw an opportunity to further extend the series’ impact with resources for teachers in preschool and K-1 classrooms.

We chose Mississippi as the original site for this initiative, given the state’s consistently low reading scores. We worked closely with two communities:

- Indianola, in the Delta region, with a low-income, primarily African American population
- Pearl River, one of seven communities of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

The Mississippi project is described more fully in reports previously provided to the U.S. Department of Education, and available on the BETWEEN THE LIONS Web site ([pbskids.org/lions](http://pbskids.org/lions)).



**At Laguna Pueblo, the beating of a traditional drum marks the start of the "Noontime Thing," when Head Start students and teachers gather in the courtyard to celebrate the letter they're learning with BETWEEN THE LIONS. Here the children are getting ready to walk the letter "P" and to show the items they brought that day, such as pom-poms, posters, and pinwheels.**

Through our initial work with two communities in Mississippi, we learned four important lessons:

1. It is essential to focus attention on preschool literacy, because so many children enter kindergarten well behind their peers—in vocabulary, letter knowledge, and even such basic skills as knowing how to handle a book. When you start out so far behind, it is very, very difficult to catch up.
2. Preschool teachers often have little or no early childhood education or training in how to teach literacy. In fact, many are not even aware of the critical role they play in helping children become good readers once they enter kindergarten.
3. Preschool teachers need easy-to-use, sequenced materials that help them plan and carry out literacy activities.
4. Video-based materials should be shorter (10-15 minutes, vs. 30 minutes) for preschool audiences, and the content should be focused as much as possible on what they need to learn.

With all this in mind, we decided to create a project for American Indian children in New Mexico, because we saw a tremendous need based on national reading scores. (The most recent figures show that 58% of American Indian fifth grade students in New Mexico scored below proficient in reading, according to the New Mexico Public Education Department, 2005). We also saw New Mexico as an ideal site because it offered the opportunity to develop our materials with the input of many different American Indian tribes. We saw this as a pilot that, if successful, could then be offered to other American Indian Head Start programs.

We began to develop this idea in partnership with Pattie Howell of the American Indian Head Start Quality Improvement Center, which provided technical assistance to all American Indian Head Start programs. Our initial intention was that this organization would have primary responsibility for training, mentoring, and other ongoing assistance for the Head Start teachers and directors as they implemented the project. Ms. Howell and her staff organized a preliminary meeting in New Mexico with tribal Head Start directors in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where we first presented the project idea on December 9, 2002.

At this meeting, the project was greeted with much enthusiasm, because the directors saw its potential to improve their children's English language literacy skills, which they considered a high priority. They also expressed a strong interest in helping us shape the materials as well as the research study protocol and measures so that they would be culturally appropriate to each of the tribes.

In February 2003, staff from WGBH and the American Indian Head Start Quality Improvement Center conducted on-site follow-up meetings with several of the participants at the initial meeting, including directors and teachers from Acoma, Taos, San Felipe, and Five Sandoval (three separate tribal Head Start programs). Based on these conversations, we further developed the project idea. However, it soon became clear that the American Indian Head Start Quality Improvement Center was going to lose its funding as part of a federal reorganization of the Head Start technical assistance program, and would not be able to remain a partner in the project.

We sought out KNME, the public TV station for northern and central New Mexico, as a project partner, for several reasons:

- As a public TV station, KNME understood and shared the project’s goals, and had experience in using public television programs as the basis for outreach activities.
- KNME already had relationships with many of the tribes and Native American leaders in the state.
- The partnership provided a New Mexico-based fiscal agent.

## Participating Tribes

Twelve tribes initially agreed to participate in the project. After the first planning meeting, one tribe (Pueblo of Sandia) decided not to participate because it had too many other commitments and did not want to be involved in the research. Ten of the eleven tribes began the project during the first year of implementation, beginning in fall 2004. The project was delayed one year at the Navajo Head Start sites, because of the tribe’s lengthy process required for the IRB approval. A map showing the locations of the tribes is included in the Appendix.

| <b>Tribe</b>         | <b>Head Start Classrooms</b> | <b>Teachers/ Assistants</b> | <b>Children</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Mescalero Apache     | 6                            | 11                          | 100             |
| Navajo Nation        | 4                            | 8                           | 60              |
| Pueblo of Acoma      | 8                            | 16                          | 90              |
| Pueblo of Cochiti    | 1                            | 2                           | 20              |
| Pueblo of Isleta     | 5                            | 10                          | 90              |
| Pueblo of Laguna     | 8                            | 13                          | 140             |
| Pueblo of San Felipe | 6                            | 12                          | 95              |
| Pueblo of San Juan   | 5                            | 10                          | 70              |
| Pueblo of Santa Ana  | 1                            | 2                           | 20              |
| Pueblo of Taos       | 3                            | 6                           | 40              |
| Pueblo of Zia        | 1                            | 2                           | 20              |
| <b>TOTALS</b>        | <b>48</b>                    | <b>92</b>                   | <b>745</b>      |

## Project Materials and Activities

We spent considerable time with directors, teachers, and cultural specialists from the tribal Head Start programs, getting their input on the content and approach for all the materials we provided. Representatives from the tribes helped shape the structure of the teaching materials and reviewed draft lesson plans. At the suggestion of the tribes, KNME and WGBH filmed several new video segments featuring American Indian children, so they would see kids like themselves in familiar landscapes reflected in the materials they viewed. The tribes also gave us significant input on the design of the research study and the measures that were used, again to make sure they were culturally sensitive. For example, they noted that:

- A typical drawing of a house is not what a house looks like in many of the reservations. So, a standardized measure might show that that child doesn't know the meaning of the word "house."
- Some tribes have prohibitions against children pointing to pictures of certain animals, so a child won't point to that picture even if it's the right answer.

The following materials were provided to each of the participating Head Start classrooms:

**Set of 3 DVDs:** WGBH edited 16 of the episodes from Seasons 1-4 of the broadcast series, to make the length and content most appropriate for a preschool audience. Shows were edited from 30 minutes to 10-15 minutes, and in some cases we changed the order of segments and the content of these edited shows. We also included "bonus tracks," featuring segments filmed in New Mexico as well as other show segments that reinforced or expanded the content covered in each edited episode. We established a viewing sequence for the episodes (something that isn't possible when children watch the shows on air). We created an easy-to-use menu structure, so that teachers could show an entire edited episode, and/or select specific stories, songs, or other segments for children to view. "Liner notes" for the DVDs listed all the segments and their length for each episode.



**DVD Player:** Each classroom was equipped with its own DVD player selected for reliability and ease of use. We provided instructions for each of the sites on how to set up and use the DVD player with the BETWEEN THE LIONS DVDs. In a few instances, the project also provided televisions for classrooms that did not have them.

**Classroom Notebook:** For each of the 16 edited episodes, we created an extensive lesson plan, organized by days of the week and typical activities (circle time, outdoor time) and centers (art, science, writing) in the Head Start classrooms. These lessons covered a minimum of one week, but included enough activities and extension ideas for two to three weeks. The lessons outlined the goals and all the materials needed, and noted how the activities linked to Head Start outcomes. They included an annotated list of additional recommended books for children, and a reproducible letter for parents. The lessons were organized in three spiral bound guides, corresponding to each of the DVDs. These were then packaged into a 3-ring binder, with additional background material and a plastic sleeve for storing the DVDs.



**Children's Books:** Each lesson featured two children's books, and a set of these core books were provided. A significant effort was made to include authentic American Indian stories, ideally set in the Southwest. We worked with librarians and teachers from the tribes to identify these books. In addition, we included a variety of popular and diverse children's books that best supported the themes and content introduced in each lesson.

**Classroom Bins of Materials:** To ensure that all participating classrooms had access to key materials necessary for the project, we provided classroom bins that included:

- multiple sets of magnetic letters
- alphabet chart
- 9 poem charts
- letter/picture cards
- flannel boards and flannel story characters
- 4 lion puppets
- BETWEEN THE LIONS word wall and word cards
- library cards

The large plastic bins were convenient for storing all the books and project materials. The only other materials necessary to carry out the project were common items found in nearly all Head Start classrooms, such as colored paper, scissors, glue, tape, etc.

### **Training and Ongoing Support**

An initial training for teachers, aides, and directors familiarized them with *BETWEEN THE LIONS* and the overall project goals, approach, and materials. The curriculum writer participated in these trainings, to provide background about how the materials were developed and organized. Activity stations were set up, so that teachers could get hands-on experience in sample recommended activities. Participants were also given information about the research study and how this would impact their sites. After the initial training, project staff followed up by phone and site visits to assess how well the project was implemented and to address any concerns raised by the teachers and directors. We also convened two meetings, in May and November 2005, with participating tribes so that teachers could share their experiences, ideas, and successes with each other.

### **Roles of Partner Organizations**

**KNME-TV**, the public television station for northern and central New Mexico, served as the fiscal agent for the federal grant, and was primarily responsible for overseeing local implementation, including training and ongoing support. The station hired a full-time Project Coordinator and a full-time Administrative Assistant to conduct site visits and coordinate all logistics for project meetings. KNME was also responsible for providing stipends and DVD players to all sites, and distributing the materials created by WGBH. The staff worked closely with WGBH to facilitate meetings, conduct training workshops, and develop all materials and activities. KNME was also responsible for coordinating local promotion.

**WGBH Boston**, a public television station and co-producer of *BETWEEN THE LIONS*, was responsible for overseeing all project-related materials and activities. WGBH worked closely with the tribes and KNME to develop and produce all the materials and to develop and conduct the trainings for all sites. WGBH facilitated project meetings, and was responsible for national promotion. WGBH also served as the primary liaison for the evaluation component conducted by Dr. Deborah Linebarger, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.



## Key Project Results

The research findings are detailed in a separate report. Overall, the research shows that the project made a significant difference in the English language literacy skills of American Indian children in the participating Head Start programs. Some highlights from the research study:

Oral language and vocabulary improved significantly:

- Typically, 5½ year old children score 26.9 on this measure, growing at .44 words/month.
- Children from high poverty typically score 19.01, growing at .36 words/month.
- After using *BETWEEN THE LIONS*, the children scored 29.94, and gained 1.84 words every 3 lessons (approx 1 month).

The ability to name letters also improved significantly:

- On average, the children began the project knowing about 6 letters.
- By the end, they knew about 19 letters.

For phonemic awareness, a key predictor of later reading ability, the children's scores also increased significantly as a direct result of the intervention on two key measures, sound awareness and blending.

After participating in this literacy initiative, as measured by the Get Ready to Read screening tool:

- The number of children at-risk for reading failure decreased from 39% to 12%.
- The number of children scoring above average in key literacy measures increased from 23% to 64%.
- On average, children typically gain 15% more skills from fall to spring; children participating in this initiative gained 25% more skills from fall to spring, and their scores are predictive of reading success by 2nd grade.

In several follow-up meetings with the tribal Head Start directors and teachers, we heard high praise for the quality and impact of the project. Many noted that their children's scores on the National Reporting System (NRS) measures increased significantly, particularly in letter recognition, and they attribute this growth to their participation in the project. In Taos Head Start, the participating children who then entered kindergarten began reading by the middle of that year—which the kindergarten teacher had not seen happen before. (This happened even sooner the following year.) The kindergarten students also ranked fourth in the nation on a literacy assessment administered to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.

Teachers also noted that children began using more expressive language, with a noticeably larger vocabulary. The project also increased the amount and level of conversation between parents and children, and between parents and teachers, about what was taught in the classroom with *BETWEEN THE LIONS*. Teachers reported that their children enjoy watching the shows and reading the related books, and they ask to continue this activity during free blocks.

In May 2006, we were invited to testify about our work before a recent hearing on Indian education held by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. (The written testimony submitted to the Committee is included in the Appendix.) The project was hailed as an innovative way to address the very troubling statistics showing that American Indians score below every ethnic group in reading skills, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered in 4th and 8th grade. As a result of this testimony, we have been in discussions with staff from Sen. Murkowski's office about how we might expand this project to Alaska.

Also in May, this project was the focus of a one-hour radio program, *Native America Calling*, broadcast nationwide from the local NPR station, KUNM in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Participants on the show included Beth Kirsch, series producer for *BETWEEN THE LIONS* and the WGBH Project Director, Ruth Kie, director of the Laguna Pueblo Head Start program, and Clarice Jones, a teacher at the center.



**Children at Laguna Pueblo wear the lion masks they made as part of their *BETWEEN THE LIONS* dramatic play activities.**