

## The Need for Indian Education Reform

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This chapter describes briefly how the goal of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 to improve education has not been met and that NCLB and more recent national efforts to improve education do not address the need for language development, culture/language integration, acknowledging Native ways of knowing, and addressing basic needs for social, emotional, and economic security that studies by the National Research Council (2000) and others have called for.

It is encouraging that more and more individuals, groups, tribes, and government officials are recognizing the need for major change in Indian education. Most of the time, however, the focus of recommendations for change is on the facets of the system that have least to do with improving instruction, such things as who should be in charge, where the power should physically be located, and so forth. With these kinds of changes, Indian children will still be left behind. Until the areas of appropriate curriculum and instruction become the topic of discussion and investigation, academic achievement of Indian children will not improve.

The *State of Education for Native Students* report by the Education Trust (2013) indicates that the academic achievement of Native children showed no improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act from 2005 to 2011 according to results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and only 18% of fourth grade Native students in the United States scored at the proficient and advanced levels in reading achievement. Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) students scored the lowest of all Indian groups identified, including their counterparts in state public schools. BIE students scored lower than students in major urban school districts other than Detroit.

The Kids Count report, *Race for Results: Building a Path to Opportunity for all Children*, by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) rates American children's success based on 12 indicators including reading and math proficiency, high school graduation, teen birthrates, employment prospects, family income/education, and neighborhood poverty levels. On a scale of 1 to 1000, white children rated 704, Latino children 404, American Indian children 387, New Mexico Indian children 293, Arizona Indian children 282, North Dakota Indian children 280 and South Dakota Indian children 185, the lowest score for any group in any state.

After many years of NCLB, the results for Indian children speak for themselves. Schools were strictly regulated and trained in terms of the requirements of the law governing instruction for poor children, which included the use of an instructional approach that is opposite of the research recommendations for improving Indian student learning. Schools were (and still are) required to utilize reading and math programs that are deemed "scientifically research-based."

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## ***Honoring Our Elders***

Under NCLB, these programs were based on a “Direct Instruction,” deficit approach developed in the 1960s when there was often a belief that children of color were not as intelligent as white children and could not draw conclusions on their own (See e.g., Valdés, 1996, pp. 16-18 for a discussion of this issue). Teachers were to follow the NCLB programs with “fidelity” and to read the program scripts, not allowing the teachers freedom to respond to the specific needs of their students.

The programs utilized under NCLB did not allow for recognizing and addressing learning styles, and they included instructional strategies that were generally not compatible with the learning styles of Indian students. Elementary science and social studies classes were removed from the curriculum in favor of “drill and kill” math and reading instruction for most of the day for memorizing lower order skills with student “seat time,” where students had no movement or hands-on learning activities. Schools with Indian children often utilized professional development providers that did not know about Indian people, Indian education, or about how Indian students learn best, and, in fact, discouraged the use of anything cultural in instruction.

Children living in poverty across this country have not done well under NCLB. What is described above is contrary to what is known about teaching and learning, but like sailors on a sinking ship, we run to the other end of the boat. In this case, we run from an incessant focus on lower order skills to a focus on higher order skills. Higher order skills are very important and are very needed in the Indian world, but the following must also be taken into consideration:

### **The need for language development**

Indian children, in general, are not proficient in either Standard English or their Native languages. Over the many years of standardized testing, their subtest scores in vocabulary and comprehension have always been the lowest. Instruction under NCLB focused on phonics, and vocabulary and comprehension were not stressed or even allowed until the third grade, thus inhibiting language development. A new requirement by the U.S. Department of Education for an emphasis on language development will help, but great damage has been done as a result of federal policy. Federal policy has almost wiped out our Native languages with only 2% of young Navajo children speaking their language fluently. Research has shown that language development in one language helps the acquisition of a second language. The federal government and other policy makers must assist in the restoration of our languages and acknowledge that restoring Native languages will assist in English language development.

### **The need for culture/language integration**

The requirement for the use of commercial, “scientifically research-based” programs made instruction for Indian students more irrelevant than ever. Teachers had to follow the programs with “fidelity” (and many still are), which meant that they read program scripts and weren’t allowed to include any local examples or content that might help to make concepts more understandable. Examples of

how Indian people, past and present, have utilized science and math will make instruction more meaningful. Information on Indian history tied to American history and world history will make that study more important. Indian literature will motivate Indian students to read, write, and think critically. Students will better learn science, social studies, math, and language arts. These things, taught through Native languages, would be powerful. The federal government and others must support the inclusion of culture and languages in our schools and realize that doing so will increase general academic achievement (see e.g., Reyhner, 2015; Reyhner, Martin, Lockard & Gilbert, 2013).

### **The need for acknowledging Native ways of knowing**

Many researchers, Native and non-Native, and Tribal elders have pointed out that Indian children often are global learners, needing to see the big picture first and then exploring the details, moving from whole to part. Under NCLB, instruction was part to whole. Indian children often exhibit reflective information processing, meaning that they have been taught, by example, to think before they respond. This trait was violated with the overemphasis on speed reading and the utilization of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test to determine growth. Indian children need, first and foremost, to be motivated to read. We have, in fact, made many of them hate reading. The federal government must recognize that one size truly does not fit all.

### **The need for addressing basic needs**

The *Kids Count* report outlines the disparities regarding meeting basic needs of Indian students that affect learning. Schools have been given little support in meeting the social, emotional, cultural and economic needs of their students. The government must acknowledge this as well.

Now, instruction, under the government's direction, must be "evidence-based," a change in terminology from "research-based." A document entitled *How People Learn* (2000) based on scientific research and published by the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council supports culturally appropriate teaching practices that utilize students' prior knowledge, ideas, beliefs, experience, interests, backgrounds, preferences, attitudes, skills, and use of language to help students learn new instructional content. Relevant knowledge and appropriate instruction help people organize information in ways that support their abilities to remember and engage in critical thinking. Furthermore, "the language that children bring to school involves a broad set of skills rooted in the early context of adult-child interactions" (National, 2000, p. 61). Teachers need to respect and utilize the language practices of their students because they provide the basis for further learning. The document supports teachers helping students with understanding by organizing their learning around big, main ideas of the subject area. Learning with understanding is more likely to promote transfer than simply memorizing information. Finally there must be connections between the school, community and students' home practices, and values. "School failure may be partly explained

## *Honoring Our Elders*

by the mismatch between what students have learned in their home cultures and what is required of them at school” (National, 2000, p. 72).

If this isn't sufficient “evidence” to support what should be done, the fact is that the deficit approach used under No Child Left Behind fails Indian students, and the data in that regard should provide sufficient “evidence” to warrant a major change in direction. It is hoped that those involved in planning to reform Indian education will not miss the opportunity to truly reform it and finally improve teaching and learning for our students.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Sandra J. Fox is a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation and also has roots at Cheyenne River. Her mother was one of the first Oglala women to acquire a four year college degree. Because her mother taught on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, Sandra grew up there and graduated from Mandaree High School in 1962. She and her husband, Dennis Fox, attended Dickinson State College in North Dakota where she majored in English education.

They started teaching at a public school but soon joined the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and taught at Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne River Reservation. When the opportunity arose for Indian people in education to attend major universities and earn graduate degrees, Sandra and her husband attended the Pennsylvania State University and were in the first Penn State group. Sandra received her doctor's degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in the teaching of reading.

After Penn State, Sandra worked at the Aberdeen Area Office and was a Title I monitor working with BIA schools in North and South Dakota and also serving as Language Arts specialist. From there she returned to Cheyenne River and taught reading at the Cheyenne-Eagle Butte School. Her husband was transferred to work in the BIA Central Office in Washington, DC., and Sandra went to work at Center One, one of the Indian Education Resource Centers of that time. It was there that Sandra's passion for integrating aspects of Tribal culture into the regular school curriculum was furthered. Her master's paper and doctoral dissertation had focused on utilizing Indian literature and teaching approaches recommended for Indian learners.

Sandra again entered the BIA system at the Washington office and coordinated a math and science program for teachers to assist them with integration of culture in those areas. She then coordinated a monitoring and evaluation program that brought Indian educators from inside and outside the BIA system to provide suggestions and support to BIA-funded schools as they sought to improve under the Effective Schools movement coordinated for them by the National Indian School Board Association. Sandra sees this effort as a time of real progress in Indian education in BIA schools. She received the NIEA Indian Educator of the Year award in 1998.

Sandra retired from the BIA, now BIE, in 1999, with her last assignment there being coordinator of Goals 2000, a program that trusted and empowered educators to determine changes needed in their schools. That effort was replaced by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Sandra has been a strong critic of the instructional approach under NCLB and has spoken and written about it. She is the author of many articles on Indian education and of two versions of the Creating Sacred Places Curriculum that promotes using Indian literature and aspects of culture to teach standards. Sandra has been doing consultant work since her retirement and continues to try to help improve Indian education. She received a Lifetime Achievement Award from NIEA in 2013.

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*Honoring Our Elders*