

Closing the Achievement Gap: What Matters Most for American Indian Students

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Over the years, I have visited dozens of schools in the southwest that serve significant populations of American Indian students. In fact, I was the principal of one of those schools for 22 years. As it was then and still remains, I find that most of these schools are desperately trying to improve the overall achievement of their students, particularly in the areas of reading and writing. My visits to these schools have led me to believe that the problem faced by most, while not easily fixed, is a lack of a solid understanding of how to teach reading and writing. As a result of the lack of this foundation, most schools adopt basal textbook programs, which dictate the parameters of these schools' literacy programs. However, basal programs are tools of the teaching trade and are only as effective as the teachers who implement them.

I don't mean to suggest that local educators are not making the decisions to adopt these programs; rather, I mean, that the decisions to adopt a particular program are seldom based on a clear understanding or grounding of what the

school staff has identified as essential for the teaching of literacy for their American Indian students. Try asking the question yourself. Ask a teacher of American Indian students to explain the focus of their school's approach to literacy and quite probably you will hear, "We use *Happy Trails*," or "We use *Hear Our Voices*." While both of these names are fictitious, my point is, that many schools adopt basal textbook programs in hopes that the programs themselves will

eliminate underachievement. And why shouldn't school administrators and teachers believe this, because for almost two decades now, educators have been sold the idea that fidelity to "research-based" programs is the answer to underachievement. This is ironic because no research existed then or now to suggest that maintaining fidelity to a core reading program will provide effective reading lessons.

Examining the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results from 2011 assessment and comparing them to earlier assessments, it is interesting to note that under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a time of extreme pressure to adopt "research-based" basal reading programs that the achievement gap between native and non-native students has not lessened. Therefore, I argue that the basal programs are not the answer. Basal reading textbooks can be one important tool in a teacher's toolbox, but they should not be dictating what should be taught in American Indian classrooms. On the other hand, I assert that teachers are the solution when our teachers are sensitive to



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local cultures and communities and are well grounded in reading theory and pedagogy.

Nationwide, publishing companies that produce basal textbooks and scripted literacy programs hold much more sway on daily practice than do actual research activities. During the NCLB decade, publishers promoted their programs by associating their approaches as being “researched-based” when in fact, these programs are merely “evidence-based,” which means that they are organized with the current research, usually including at most a few American Indian students. The basal programs themselves are not research-based. In this new decade of the Common Core State Standards or what I’ll refer to as the Core, many publishers now tout their materials with brightly colored stickers as being aligned to the “Common Core.” The message to schools and to teachers is clear: This product will teach the Core.

Further making basal programs and scripted programs more attractive, is the fact that schools nationwide are in a footrace on a short course but up a steep mountain.

With the advent of the Core, so much has been changed in such a short time, and our nation’s schools are faced with helping their students to achieve new, more demanding learning benchmarks. To compound this seismic shift in curricula and pedagogy, even if the publishers wish to help teach the Core effectively, right now, much of that curriculum materials just aren’t ready.

I appreciate the fact that millions of dollars are invested by publishing companies to develop each basal series, and I believe that textbook companies have attempted to develop useful products that offend no one and include everyone. Unfortunately, once adopted, fidelity to the implementation of these basal programs has replaced the

development of effective teachers as our end goal. However, no research has been done that shows that maintaining fidelity to a core reading program will provide effective reading lessons. In other words, fidelity to a flawed program is not a virtue. The bottom line is that there is just no way to create good schools without good teachers.

Those who have worked to improve education over the last several decades have learned that school reform cannot be “teacher-proofed.” School administrators are misplacing their primary emphasis and resources on the adoption of commercially produced basal textbook materials, when effective and efficient teachers are the answer. We must develop teachers as strategic and critical decision makers, who know their communities, their children, the literacy curriculum and who possess effective pedagogical skills.

Research has long identified the expertise of the teacher as the critical factor in the quality of reading lessons offered. We know that the actual curriculum an average child learns, in the same course and in the same school, varies **tremendously** from teacher to teacher; what the students learn depends on what teacher they have. TheodoreSizer (1990, p. xii) once warned us that if we tell a teacher how to do everything and if we deny that teacher the freedom to act on his or her wisdom then we relegate faculty to a position of simple place-holders, not wise people and as a consequence, we **will create third-rate schools.**

More than 40 years ago, Peters and Waterman (1982) informed us that the hallmark of any successful organization is a shared sense among its members about what they are trying to accomplish. Effective teachers have a strong sense of efficacy, or the expectation that their efforts will result

in valued outcomes. Ralph Tyler (Ridings, 1981) chided that we remember that the teacher is the one working with students when he insisted that it is the teacher who should decide what is important to learn in a particular situation.

A well-developed, strategically implemented, long-term professional development plan that empowers teachers to be critical decision makers is the answer to improving the achievement of native students. However, studies have shown that the typical reading specialist had less educational preparation in their field than did other specialists working in U.S. schools. Most U.S. schools, then, employ few teachers who know much about reading development or how to facilitate the acquisition of English language skills. As a result, commercially developed basal programs have stepped in to fill this void. I believe that this stance is the major obstacle to school improvement efforts. Schools must examine the underpinning of their literacy programs. Teachers need become more grounded. Only then will we begin to address the underachievement of our native students. ★

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Sigmund A. Boloz was named the National Distinguished Principal from Arizona (1997) Dr. Boloz is also known as a poet and writer, having produced eleven books of poetry and published over 400 pieces and articles in over 80 different journals and books. In 2010, Dr. Boloz was inducted into the Arizona Rural Schools Education Hall of Fame and in 2012, he was the recipient of the Arizona Reading Association's Celebrate Literacy Award, an annual state-wide honor recognizing an adult who has made a positive impact in the literacy lives of children. He currently teaches at Northern Arizona University in the College of Education. His e-mail address is Sig.Boloz@nau.edu.

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