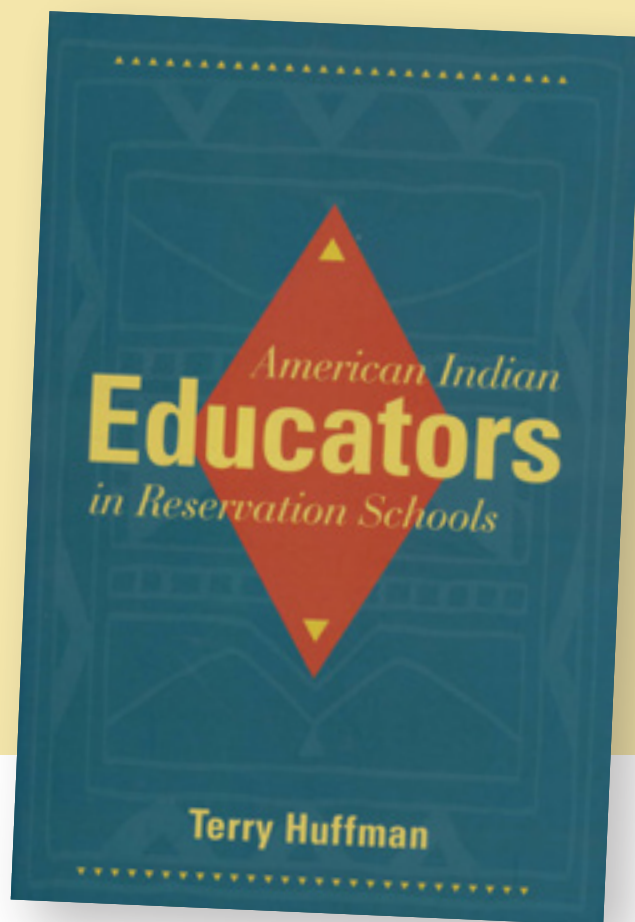


American Indian Educators Speak Out on Indian Education

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An American Indian school principal interviewed by Terry Huffman lamented:

No Child Left Behind has changed teaching so much. I mean, assessment is the drive and it's like we are forgetting the child.... We are leaving the child behind because we have forgotten teaching styles and, like I said, the language and the culture. That has all been put on the back burner when they should actually be up front. (Huffman, 2013, p. 95)

Huffman notes this principal's view of NCLB reflects the view of most of his interviewees. Her views also reflected the findings of the National Indian Education Association's 2005 study, *Preliminary Report on No Child Left Behind in Indian Country*. This study found that federal government's effort through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to improve the education of ethnic minorities in the U.S. was deeply flawed, and its focus on English language skills and math led to the slighting of the teaching of pretty much everything else, including tribal cultures.

Terry Huffman's 2013 study, *American Indian Educators in Reservation Schools*, summarizes the results of interviews with 21 American Indian educators (14 teachers and 7 principals) on five reservations in South Dakota and Montana with an average of 18 years experience. Half had attended tribal colleges and he found that 12 were affinitive educators, most interested with personal relations with students, and 9 were facilitative educators, most interested in effective instruction, with both types

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supporting the teaching of tribal cultures. This book is a follow-up to his *American Indian Higher Educational Experiences: Cultural Visions and Personal Journeys* (Huffman, 2008) that also found Indian educators highlighting the importance of Indian cultures and languages.

The academic achievement issues faced by many American Indians and other students does not end with teachers and what goes on in their classrooms, which have been the focus of most recent educational reforms. “Virtually all the challenges identified” by the educational leaders Huffman interviewed “were related to larger social issues in the community,” including poverty (Huffman, 2013, p. 74). In fact increased pressures on teachers to raise student achievement, including threats of job termination, has aggravated a longstanding problems of teacher morale and turnover and made teaching a less attractive profession. Teacher shortages are being noted today not only on Indian reservations, but nationwide.

Huffman’s interviews and comprehensive review of the literature on Indian education highlight the historical use “of formal education ... as a weapon in the assault on indigenous cultures,” leading to a “general disregard for education” and “persistence indifference on reservations

toward education” by some Indians (2013, pp. 27, 69 & 115). In fact, “A few participants describe another peculiar, albeit disconcerting, tendency for some families to actively discourage the academic success of their children” (2013, p. 61). Indian schools can be places for becoming white (Peshkin, 1997), leading to “academic apathy” (Huffman, 2013, p. 65) and “formal education being “used as a weapon in the assault on indigenous cultures” and indigenous identities (Huffman, 2013, p. 115). Too often schooling separates Indian children from their parents and heritage rather than strengthening Indian communities and helping students build strong positive identities.

Huffman found the educators who participated in his study “generally regard a strong cultural identity reinforced by culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum as important to the success of students” (2013, p. 140), which supports his transculturation theory that a strong sense of Native identity helps Native people to be academically successful. As Huffman writes, “Transculturation theory rests on the fundamental assertion that a strong cultural identity promotes effective participation in mainstream institutions” (2013, p. 159).

References

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About the Author

Jon Reyhner teaches at Northern Arizona University (NAU). He has written extensively on Indigenous education and language revitalization, including co-authoring *Language and Literacy Teaching for Indigenous Education and American Indian Education: A History*. He maintains a Teaching Indigenous Languages website at <http://nau.edu/til> with links to full text on-line copies of his ten co-edited books on language revitalization and culture-based education published by NAU. His newest book is *Teaching Indigenous Students: Honoring Place, Community, and Culture* published by the University of Oklahoma Press.