

# Government Policies Put American Indian Students at Risk

*Sandra Fox*



We should be increasingly concerned about the education of Native children in the United States in light of the recent report from the Education Trust (2013) emphasizing their low level of achievement. The State of Education for Native Students report highlights the fact that the academic achievement of Native children has not improved under the No Child Left Behind Act since 2005 according to results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 2011, only 18% of fourth grade Native students in the United States scored at the proficient and advanced levels in reading achievement.

Many Native educators and others believe that Native students' heightened knowledge of their languages and aspects of their past and present cultures can and will improve their academic achievement as well as help them socially and emotionally. The expansion of one language can help to expand the other. The use of Native literature can help to improve reading achievement. Knowledge of history and social structures of Native people can help students relate to social studies. Knowing how Native people, past and present, applied science in their lives can help to make science understandable (See e.g., Gilbert, 2011). These are the types of things from Native culture that Native children are not learning today in

most schools, and there are mixed messages regarding the policy on the inclusion of Native culture and languages in schools.

Native educators were pleased when President Obama's 2011 Executive Order 13592 stated that schools with Native children were to include Native culture and history. We were pleased to see an increased emphasis on preserving Native languages and on serving English language learners. At the same time, the National Indian Education Study (NIES, 2012) stated that students in Bureau of Indian Education schools were more knowledgeable of their Native cultures than other Native children (probably the result of living on reservations) and also reported that those same students were among the lowest scoring students on the NAEP test. The conclusion drawn by many, then, is that knowledge of culture equals low academic achievement. The purpose of providing this information in the NIES is questionable and objectionable. Professional development providers serving Native schools have used this information to justify discouraging cultural integration. It should also be noted that BIE schools have not been spending a lot of time teaching culture as might be inferred; they have been spending most of the day on reading and math following scripted commercial programs just like all of the other high-poverty

schools in this country. Further, the areas of social studies and science, the places where the integration of cultural information works best, have been deemphasized. In fact, the general consensus is that culture has been pushed out of Native schools by NCLB; therefore, knowledge of culture cannot be blamed for the lack of achievement (See e.g., NIEA, 2005).

A further complication is the continual use of the terms "not scientifically research-based" to discredit the use of any content or information brought to the classroom other than what is in the so called "research-based" scripted commercial, for-profit programs that Native schools have been forced to use with "fidelity." Obviously, "research-based" programs have not worked for many students (Berliner, 2013). But then the next justification for them is that Native schools did not implement them properly. We are now finding that most "research-based" programs do not have an adequate research base to determine their effectiveness.

The goal of having all U.S. children proficient or advanced in reading by the year 2014 will be far from being met. The deficit instructional philosophy of direct instruction under No Child Left Behind has not yielded expected results for poor children in America. It has not been the "silver bullet" that it was predicted to be.

We have seen the implementation of No Child Left Behind and research-based programs in Native schools with:

- A one-size-fits-all approach
- Direct instruction with drill and memorization, a low form of learning, the pedagogy of the poor
- A deficit philosophy with the belief that Native children need direct instruction because they cannot think for themselves
- A deficit philosophy with the belief that Native children need scripted programs developed by experts because the children have nothing in their culture that can serve as a basis for instruction
- A deficit philosophy with the belief that teachers of Indian children can't teach and therefore need fidelity to scripted programs
- Most of the day spent on lower order skills in reading and math
- Little or no attention to critical thinking and inquiry
- Less attention to comprehension
- Little or no attention to writing
- No emphasis on reading good literature to children
- No emphasis on differentiation with regard to student interests or learning styles
- No emphasis on providing strategies that will help English Language Learners

- No emphasis on providing instruction based upon research and recommendations specific to Native children
- Little science and social studies instruction
- Less attention to recess with an emphasis on "seat time"
- Less attention to hands-on activities and art
- No support for the inclusion of aspects of culture that could help teach standards
- No emphasis on meeting the social and emotional needs of the children

It is not difficult to see why the percentage of Native children who are proficient and advanced in reading has not increased. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and other tests have and are including more critical thinking content and Native students are not receiving that kind of instruction. The new emphasis on the Common Core Standards in reading will definitely help to move away from the deficit approach and the emphasis on lower order skills as they focus on critical thinking, deeper comprehension and writing.

It would appear that it might be a good idea to learn from experts in Native education and research and recommendations specific to Native children. They would suggest the following:

- Have high expectations for Native children. They need to learn to think critically and solve problems to address issues in their lives and issues such as tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Many Indian children have reflective information processing. They prefer to think things through rather than be told.

- Tie instruction to student lives to make it more interesting, meaningful and useful. Support the inclusion of aspects of past and present tribal culture that can help teach standards. Bilingual, multicultural and English Language Learner philosophies should be utilized.
- Differentiate instruction based upon student abilities, achievement, learning styles, interests and backgrounds. Learn what the research says about Native learning styles and effective pedagogy for Native students. Research and recommendations for teaching Native children are opposite of what No Child Left Behind has been promoting.
- Address students' social and emotional needs. Inclusion of their languages and cultures would address some of these needs.
- Provide teacher training in all of the above areas.

The No Child Left Behind Act has truly left Native children behind. Further, some of the concerns fall into the area of depriving children of their civil and human rights, for example as outlined in the United Nations' 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. At this time, with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington, we would not think we would have to be voicing such concerns. ★

Dr. Sandra Fox (Oglala Lakota) is an Indian education consultant focusing on reading instruction and cultural integration. She is the author of the *Creating Sacred Places for Children Curriculum* published by the National Indian School Boards Association.

## References

- Berliner, David C. (2013). Educational Research: The Hardest Science of All. *Educational Researcher*, 31(8), 18–20.
- Education Trust. (2013). *The State of Education for Native Students*. Retrieved from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/publication/the-state-of-education-for-native-students>
- Gilbert, Willard Sakiestewa. (2011). Developing Culturally Based Science Curriculum in Native American Classrooms. In J. Reyhner, W.S. Gilbert & L. Lockard (eds.), *Honoring Our Heritage: Culturally Appropriate Approaches for Teaching Indigenous Students*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University. Retrieved from <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/HOH>
- NIEA—National Indian Education Association. 2005. *Preliminary Report on No Child Left Behind in Indian Country*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.niea.org/data/files/policy/nieanclbpublication.pdf>
- NIES—National Indian Education Study 2011. (2012). Washington, D.C. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012466>