

Reading First, Literacy, and American Indian/Alaska Native Students

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The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and its Reading First provisions are an attempt to close the academic achievement gap between mainstream Americans and American Indian/Alaska Native and other ethnic minority groups who have a history of below average academic achievement. This article gives evidence that despite its laudable goals, there are serious flaws in NCLB's approach because it overlooks the role of poverty, motivation, and cultural differences that are major contributors to the achievement gap and because its Reading First provisions have strayed from the "balanced approach" recommended in the National Reading Panel's report, leading to an overemphasis on phonics approaches to reading instruction. Based on this analysis, recommendations for reauthorization are offered.

Academic success is not based solely on a particular curriculum or teaching methodology that may have shown success in scientific studies of relatively large groups of students. Educational programs that work with mainstream students may not work with other students with different cultural backgrounds. In his April 30, 2004 Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, President George W. Bush recognized "the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students" (Bush, 2004), noting in his remarks on signing the Order that, "Reading is the new civil right" (The White House, 2004). The question addressed in this article is whether the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is genuinely addressing the unique needs of Native students or whether it is continuing the long history of failed federal one-size-fits-all, assimilationist educational policies.

We proceed on the assumption that educators and politicians (including George W. Bush) want to further the literacy and language development of Native children. However, some in the "English Only" movement who are promoting state and federal constitutional amendments to make English the official language want to restrict that development to English, as was done throughout most of the history of American Indian education in the United States. Others want to promote English plus bilingual education that recognizes and values Native

languages and cultures (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). The English-only emphasis of NCLB can be clearly seen in the change of the name under NCLB of the U.S. Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs to the Office of English Language Acquisition and the subsequent loss of program and funding support for bilingual education programs. After the passage of the original Bilingual Education Act in 1968, many reservation school districts took advantage of Title VII bilingual program funding to make available linguistically and culturally sensitive education for their students. These funds are no longer available for teaching tribal languages.

Much of the history of education for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians from colonial times to the present has been one of English-only and forced assimilation. This push for assimilation often included forcibly removing children from their parents for years at a time, replacing their Native religion with Christianity, and replacing their Native language with English. While sometimes successful in its aims, forced assimilation often created resistance, destroyed families, and left Indian school graduates lost between two cultures (Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

Government-commissioned studies of Indian education have uniformly found that assimilationist education was damaging to Native children and their communities. From the Meriam Report (Meriam et al., 1928) to the Kennedy Report (U.S. Senate, 1969), to the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force Report (1991), federally sponsored Indian education has been castigated for its failure to recognize and value Native cultural and linguistic heritage. In his 2001 review of research on Indian education, Demmert concluded that,

a school curriculum that promotes the language and culture of the community or tribe served — adopted in partnership with that community — holds significant promise for improving academic performance of Native children. This finding has been reported in both policy studies and research and evaluation studies for many years. (2001, p. 9)

A literature review specifically examining research on reading instruction concluded that,

current research suggests that the relatively low level of academic success among American Indian elementary and secondary school students, as a group, is largely the result of discontinuities between the cultures and language of these students' homes and the communities and the language and culture of mainstream classrooms. American Indian students also tend to perceive academic success as offering few extrinsic rewards, and they are likely to view learning much of what is necessary to succeed academically (such as the standard language and the standard behavior practices of the school) as detrimental to their own language, culture, and identity. (St. Charles & Costantino, 2000, p. 57)

No Child Left Behind Act

The passage of the NCLB Act in 2001 has directed the nation's attention to the academic performance of ethnic minority school children, including American Indian and Alaska Native children. NCLB's purported goal is to eliminate the achievement gap between ethnic minorities and White mainstream students; its provisions requiring schools to disaggregate achievement data so that failures to improve the performance of minority groups cannot be masked by schoolwide averages are admirable. NCLB also speaks to cultural sensitivity in its Title VII "Statement of Policy," declaring:

It is the policy of the United States to fulfill the Federal Government's unique and continuing trust relationship with and responsibility to the Indian people for the education of Indian children. The Federal Government will continue to work with local educational agencies, ensuring that programs that serve Indian children are of the highest quality and provide for not only the basic elementary and secondary educational needs, but also the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of these children. (NCLB, Title VII, Sec. 7101)

However, the implementation of NCLB mandates has thwarted the goal of cultural sensitivity. Recent hearings held across the country by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) document the pressures educators face under the law to provide English-only instruction geared toward high-stakes tests. NCLB is "narrowing the broad public purposes of schools" with its emphasis on teaching and testing, reading and math at the expense of also teaching music, literature, art, history, and Native studies (Beaulieu et al., 2005, p. 6). NCLB's emphasis on high-stakes testing in a few academic areas draws attention away from improving the social, mental, and physical well-being of Native children. Testimony indicated that NCLB promotes a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum that makes it difficult for teachers to "connect education to the lives of students in their communities," with the result that schooling is "increasingly boring and disconnected from student lives" (Beaulieu et al., 2005, p. 6). Rather than reducing the achievement gap, NCLB has actually increased student dropout rates while driving teachers from the profession (Beaulieu et al., 2005, p. 6). An Arizona State University study funded by the U.S. Department of Education similarly documented NCLB-related pressures on new Native teachers to use "rigid prescribed" teaching methods and "canned" commercial curricula because school administrators are worried about their school being labeled "underperforming" under NCLB (Reyhner, 2006a).

While the disaggregation of school test scores required by NCLB has forced school districts to examine how well they serve their ethnic minority students, it also may penalize them because it does not take into account that so-called failing schools are more likely to be serving low-income families — a demographic with massive negative implications for school achievement — and children who are English language learners (ELLs) or who speak a "non-standard" dialect of English. Further, under NCLB "it's plainly bizarre that many

schools display strong growth in achievement — responding to state accountability pressure in spades — but then are stigmatized as failing by the federal government” (Novak & Fuller, 2003, p. 10). A “value-added” or “growth model” approach to accountability that “tracks the progress of individual students over time” would be a more logical way to evaluate teachers and schools rather than NCLB’s use of arbitrary cutoff scores and inclusion of test scores of students who may have just transferred from a different school (Doran, 2003, p. 57).

One of the most damaging aspects of the testing provisions called for in NCLB is that students can be retained in grade for not reaching arbitrary proficiency levels. As was found in the review of dropout research for the U.S. Department of Education’s Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, retention in grade leads to higher dropout rates (Reyhner, 1992). Texas, which was among the pioneers in the testing provisions required by NCLB, now has the highest school dropout rate in the nation (Spencer, 2004).

The National Reading Panel and Reading First

NCLB has been especially detrimental to Indian students with regard to its Reading First provisions. Reading First requires states to show “how the State educational agency will assist local educational agencies in identifying instructional materials, programs, strategies, and approaches, based on scientifically based reading research, including early intervention and reading remediation materials, programs, and approaches” (NCLB, 2001, p. 123). This requirement is based on the congressionally mandated report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) issued in 2000. The NRP did not examine research that specifically addressed American Indians and ignored problems involving students who speak non-standard dialects of English as do many American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children.

Another glaring omission in the NRPs research review was of the lack of attention to the influence of motivation on academic success. The importance of student interest and engagement is highlighted in the 2006 report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives on High School Dropouts*, which found that the major reason for dropping out given by almost half of high school dropouts was that their classes were boring; over two-thirds said they were not motivated to work hard in school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Conversely, studies of effective primary classrooms have found them to be “massively motivating” with teachers who are “exceptionally skilled at matching their teaching to the needs of individual students” (Allington, 2002, p. 78).

Research by Peshkin (1997) and Ogbu (2003) supports the importance of student motivation and engagement (see also Cleary, this issue). Peshkin’s study of an Indian high school in New Mexico noted ambivalence toward schooling among both students and their families, while Ogbu found a similar “academic disengagement” among Black students and their families in an affluent Ohio suburb. Ethnic minorities with highly positive attitudes toward schooling, such as some Asian Americans, on average perform well in school, while students with

ambivalent or oppositional feelings (because school is viewed as a place for cultural assimilation and “acting white” [Fordham & Ogbu, 1986]) historically have performed poorly. Schools serving Native students with strong bilingual and bicultural programs have had considerable success overcoming negative attitudes produced by assimilationist, English-only schooling (Research Agenda, 2003; Reyhner, 2001b). In addition, it is still a troubling fact that school failure and success are attributed to genetically- (and racially-) based intelligence (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

Overall, the NRP was very selective in the choice of studies it examined, excluding all non-experimental studies such as correlational and ethnographic studies of students actually learning to read in classrooms (Allington, 2002). In her minority report, Joanne Yatvin (2000), the only member of the panel who had actually taught beginning reading in a classroom, concluded that the NRP had inadequate time to complete its work and that “from the beginning, the Panel chose to conceptualize and review the field narrowly, in accordance with the philosophical orientation and research interest of the majority of its members” (p. 1). The NRP “did not touch on early learning and home support for literacy, matters which many experts believe are the critical determinates of schools’ success or failure” (Yatvin, 2000, p. 2).

The questions that the NRP chose to address in its research review had a phonics orientation to reading instruction. The NRP concluded that “phonics instruction produces the biggest impact on growth in reading when it begins in kindergarten or 1st grade before children have learned to read independently” but it “failed to exert a significant impact on the reading performance of low-achieving readers in 2nd through 6th grades” (NRP, 2000, pp. 2-93-94). The NRP also noted that

it is important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. Phonics instruction is never a total reading program.... Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached.” (p. 2-97)

The NRP found that researchers had not paid attention to motivational factors for both students and teachers and that there was “common agreement that fluency develops from reading practice” (p. 3-1).

This emphasis on a “balanced approach” to teaching reading in the full NRP report was lost in both the official published report summary and in implementation of NCLB’s Reading First provisions (Garan, 2002). Educational psychologist Gerald Coles made a point-by-point rebuttal to the NRP’s emphasis on phonics, calling it

harmful because it falsely holds out the promise of a simple, “magic bullet” solution to the literacy failure of millions of children, especially those who are poor, while at the same time discouraging social policy attention to forces both in and out of schools that influence literacy outcomes. (2000, p. xvii)

Allington (2002) points out there is a glaring lack of scientific evidence to show that students who do well with phonics in the primary grades transition in the upper elementary grades into fluent readers with good reading comprehension.

Further, while NCLB is providing a billion dollars a year for Reading First programs to implement “scientifically-based” reading instruction in schools, *Washington Post* reporter Michael Grunwald noted five years after NCLB’s passage “an accumulating mound of evidence from reports, interviews and program documents suggests that Reading First has had little to do with science or rigor. Instead, the billions have gone to what is effectively a pilot project for untested programs with friends in high places” (Grunwald, 2006, p. B1). The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Inspector General found that the application package for Reading First grants “obscured the requirements of the [NCLB] statute” and that Reading First proposal reviewers were not adequately screened for conflicts of interest (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 2). After a five-hour investigative hearing on conflicts of interest in the funding of Reading First grants, Representative George Miller, chairman of the House Education Committee, declared that the administration of the program “sounds like a criminal enterprise to me” (quoted in Paley, 2007).

The research-backed Success for All and Reading Recovery programs were systematically excluded from Reading First funding in favor of programs with less research backing from large commercial publishers (Grunwald, 2006). But even Success for All, with all its research backing, has been tried and dropped by schools in Indian Country and elsewhere (Pogrow, 2000; Reyhner, 2001a). Ironically, when the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse released its report on beginning reading intervention programs on August 13, 2007, of 24 programs with some research backing, only Reading Recovery was found to have positive or potentially positive effects in all areas reviewed: alphabetics, fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007) and “none of the most popular commercial reading programs on the market had sufficiently rigorous studies to be included in the review by the clearinghouse” (Manzo, 2007). Again, however, the research that was reviewed did not focus on Native students. The Clearinghouse listed 129 programs that lacked scientific evidence to support their efficacy, including Direct Instruction/DISTAR, Direct Instruction/SRA, Hooked on Phonics, and Saxon Phonics. Of the six programs that the Bureau of Indian Affairs’s Office of Indian Education Programs lists on its Web site as meeting Reading First Grant criteria, only Success for All meets any of the Clearinghouse’s criteria.²

What Needs To Be Done

Helping students learn to read better should focus on four key areas. First, there need to be efforts to involve family members in reading to preschool children and demonstrating by their actions that they embrace literacy as an important part of life (Anderson et al., 1985). Second, except for the few students who enter kindergarten already knowing how to read, schools need a strong program of

beginning reading instruction that teaches the alphabet, promotes phonemic awareness, promotes the application of phonic rules that have broad utility and that fit students' dialect of English, and teaches high frequency sight words that do not follow common phonic rules. Teachers need to make sure through language experience or other instruction that the words students are asked to read/decode are in their oral vocabulary. Third, students need frequent opportunities, in and out of school, to read interesting books reflecting their own experiential/cultural background as well as mainstream "classic" and contemporary works of children's literature in order to get the practice they need to become fluent readers (Krashen, 2004). Fourth, teachers need ongoing professional development to help them tailor their teaching to individual student needs (Allington, 2002). It is critical that the process of teaching reading does not take the joy out of reading by making reading instruction a matter of completing worksheets and decoding stories that students cannot relate to and/or find boring.

Educators need to realize that commercial reading programs commonly used in schools tend to be one-size-fits-all approaches targeted toward a "standard" dialect of English and a White, middle-class knowledge of the world that American Indian and other ethnic minority students often do not share. Without adaptation or supplementation by teachers, these programs can turn off American Indian and other students to reading because the vocabulary and stories do not relate to their lives (see also Cleary, this issue).

For students who do not come to school speaking English or are dominant in their Native language, schools need a bilingual program that develops their Native language proficiency and includes English-as-a-second language instruction to promote English speaking and reading proficiency. For Native students who are not fluent speakers of their tribal language, Native language revitalization programs have helped students strengthen their traditional values and build a strong positive sense of identity (Reyhner, 2005, 2006b). Where possible, a reading program that teaches students to read in their Native language while also learning English can lead to increased English language reading skills (Francis & Reyhner, 2002).

Despite the stated aim of the NCLB legislation to improve the academic performance of all children, there are signs that the implementation of the Act may be increasing dropout rates, and this needs to be closely monitored. One of the easiest ways to raise school test scores, which teachers and schools are under intense pressure to do, is to have the lowest scoring students drop out (or more accurately, be "pushed out") of school or be retained in the grade prior to the one targeted by a high-stakes test (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). With regard to the Reading First provisions, there is anecdotal evidence that approaches in the 1970s that claimed the backing of scientific research and focused on teaching isolated reading "skills" are gaining renewed popularity. Students are being asked to pronounce lists of words from commercial reading programs that include many words that have no meaning for them. Bureau of Indian Education test scores

show Indian students performing worst on subtests of comprehension and vocabulary but performing better in phonics. As Sweet (2004, p. 36) points out, it is “estimated that for most children, about 100 hours of reading instruction that is solidly based on the findings of research, is sufficient” to teach students to read. The phonics instruction called for by Reading First needs to be contextualized using language that students use in meaningful ways rather than word lists and decodable texts comprised of words chosen for their sounds rather than their meaning.

In our conversations with teachers and reading experts, we are finding that Reading First tends to promote whole-class instruction that assumes that all students are at the same level, and that a lot of time is being spent on teaching phonics using workbooks, to the detriment of students reading for meaning. It is a disconcerting irony that the same mistaken approach was used over a century ago with American Indian students who were required to sound out reading passages “perfectly” with no idea of the meaning of what they were reading (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). A research review by August, Goldenberg, and Rueda (2006) notes that “studies suggest that American Indian and Native Hawaiian children benefit from explicit phonics instruction...when it occurs in the context of meaningful material” (p. 34).

Efforts that have involved teaching students English and academic subjects *in addition* rather than as a *replacement* to their Native language and culture have had success in improving the academic performance of Indigenous students in the United States and other countries. In Hawai’i, a pre-K through university immersion program has been developed in the past two decades patterned after a similar effort by the Māori in New Zealand. The Hawaiian immersion schools do not introduce English in the classroom until the fifth grade, but the students come to school speaking English and use it outside of school. Students learn mathematics and other academic subjects and the use of computers in the Hawaiian language (Stiles, 1997). Another culturally sensitive biliteracy program that provided success for Indian students was the Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program (McCarty & Dick, 2003; McCarty, 2002; Dick, Estell, & McCarty, 1994).

Reauthorizing NCLB

In light of the problems with NCLB implementation thus far, three areas should be addressed in the reauthorization: (1) targeted research, (2) value-added/growth model measures of achievement, and (3) full funding.

More Targeted Research

Using research-based educational approaches and disaggregating test scores by ethnic group makes a lot of sense. However, the research reviewed by the National Reading Panel was not focused on American Indian children and may not apply to them. The federal government should support research that focuses on American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians rather than assuming

that general research findings taken from studies of Whites, Blacks and/or Hispanics are equally applicable to Native American students. *In other words, it is not just the test scores that need to be “disaggregated” by ethnic group, it is also the research.* When research is seriously lacking, as it is with American Indian and Alaska Native students, the legislation should support educational research specifically focusing on those groups, including longitudinal research that tracks students in culturally-appropriate education programs.

The report of a national colloquium on improving academic performance among American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students published in 2006 in the *Journal of American Indian Education* (Vol. 45, issues 1 & 2) indicates the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate education for Native students, including their reading instruction. Promising programs include the K-12 Creating Sacred Places for Children curriculum (Fox, 2000, 2001a, 2001b) and the Window Rock Unified School District’s Navajo immersion program. The latter program introduces English in the second grade and reports test results that compare favorably with students in the district’s mainstream English language program (Johnson & Legatz, 2006; Johnson & Wilson, 2005). Another example of a promising program in need of further research is the Northwest Native American reading curriculum, a supplemental reading program developed with input from tribal experts that builds on the experiential and cultural backgrounds of Indian students and incorporates teaching strategies from both general research on reading and specific research focusing on Native students (Costantino & Hurtado, 2006). These and other innovative programs need longitudinal research tracking the academic and social gains made by students at least into college, as a means of supporting or rejecting anecdotal findings of lower dropout rates, positive identities, and greater academic success for Native students in culturally appropriate educational programs.

Value-Added/Growth-Model Measures of Educational Progress

Testing is not *a priori* bad. The need for replacing the current arbitrary proficiency levels adopted by NCLB with value-added/growth-model measures of student achievement has already been mentioned. Normed and criterion-referenced tests are not “evil” in and of themselves unless they are used to the exclusion of other more authentic measures of academic achievement, as tools for coercive assimilation, or for failing students and schools without regard to the larger social and economic conditions they face. The use of criterion-referenced tests that are carefully aligned with a school’s curricula and administered frequently enough so that low performing students can receive remediation can help close the achievement gap, as has been shown with Hawaiian and Navajo student populations (Reyhner, 1990; Rosier & Holm, 1980; Tharp, 1982). End-of-year tests now given in many states do not provide information to teachers in a timely manner so that students can be helped before they are failed. In addition, students in Native language revitalization programs should be initially tested in their tribal language.

Full Funding

In addition, a reauthorized NCLB needs to be fully funded. In 2003 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) noted, “the proposed 2004 budget...does not provide the necessary funding to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 throughout the United States, but especially in Indian Country” (p. 85). The Commission added that only 66 percent of Native students graduate from high school as compared to 75 percent of the general population, and found that,

[d]ropout rates among Native American students are high because, among other reasons, their civil rights and cultural identities are often at risk in the educational environment. Research shows that Native American students experience difficulty maintaining rapport with teachers and establishing relationships with other students; feelings of isolation; racist threats; and frequent suspension. (USCCR, 2003, p. 84)

For example, in the State of Washington, dropout rates for individual schools vary from 25 percent to 90 percent. The Commission noted that, “community responsibility for and ownership of schools are crucial for creating a positive learning environment that respects students’ civil and educational rights” (USCCR, 2003, p. 85). It concluded that,

as a group, Native American students are not afforded educational opportunities equal to other American students. They routinely face deteriorating school facilities, underpaid teachers, weak curricula, discriminatory treatment, and outdated learning tools. In addition, the cultural histories and practices of Native students are rarely incorporated in the learning environment. As a result, achievement gaps persist with Native American students scoring lower than any other racial/ethnic group in basic levels of reading, math, and history. Native American students are also less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to drop out in earlier grades. (USCCR, 2003, pp. 111-112)

Conclusions

The work of the National Indian Education Association and other organizations..., to gather information about how NCLB and its Reading First provisions are impacting Native students should be continued. Dr. Willard Gilbert, current president of the NIEA, has also called for improving and expanding NCLB’s Title VII provisions to “address the unique cultural and educational needs of Native children” and “provide support for instruction in Native American languages” (Gilbert, 2007, pp. 28, 30). The most comprehensive investigation of Indian education was the National Study conducted in the late 1960s. The outcomes of this study, reported in the book, *To Live on This Earth: American Indian Education* (Fuchs & Havighurst, 1972) indicated that while Indian parents were generally supportive of schooling for their children, Indian “community leaders were overwhelmingly in favor of the school doing something to help Indian students learn about their tribal culture” (p. 187).

More than 30 years later, this remains both a need and sound advice for Indian education policy and practice.

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Endnotes

¹Retrieved August 31, 2007 from <http://www.oiep.bia.edu/ReadingFirst/ReadingFirst.htm>

²California and Texas have required basal reading textbooks to have a very high percentage of decodable text (words that can be sounded out using phonics rules), even though there is no scientific evidence showing that students using these decodable texts learn to read better than students who do not use them (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 2002). Because of their large populations and statewide textbook adoption procedures, publishers tend to revise their textbooks sold in all the states to meet the specific demands of California and Texas.

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