

A photograph of two young girls sitting together and reading a book. The girl on the left is wearing a light blue t-shirt with a floral design and dark blue pants. The girl on the right is wearing a pink t-shirt with a purple floral pattern and blue pants. They are both looking down at the book they are holding. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

THE UTAH SPECIAL EDUCATOR

April 2004 • VOL. 24 NO. 5

What Works for Students!

No Assumptions, No Excuses! See page 12

What Works for Students at Risk of Academic Failure?

Abstract

Educators focusing on the correlation between poverty indices and academic achievement often assume a causal relationship. Such assumptions must be questioned. This case study of educational change in a poverty-impacted, Native American community suggests that educational, not economic, variables should provide the focus. A number of effective educational variables are identified and exemplified along with results of the interventions.

What Works for Students At Risk of Academic Failure?

The Challenge for Utah

Utah's 2003 *Economic Report to the Governor* (The Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, 2003) contained the following conclusion.

Utah currently ranks in the middle tier in student performance on standardized tests. Increasing minority populations, which have greater prevalence of low income, lower levels of parental education, and English language challenges will bring Utah's test scores below average unless educators can succeed in bridging the achievement gaps for minorities. (p. 178)

The "middle tier" classification may be an overstatement. Compared to other states, the Utah trends in achievement may be more "down" than "up." Additionally, compared to other states, we are "below average" in addressing the gap between white and minority populations. In 2001, Utah was listed in the lowest 15 percent of states that were not "closing the achievement gap." Utah was listed along with states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and West Virginia (Brennan, 2001). This ranking has not changed (Lynn, 2003). The projections raise concerns because of the combination of increasing minority populations with a state history of ineffectiveness in addressing the instructional needs of minority students.

These Are Not All Our Children

Federal mandates for Reading First require research-validated programs. This requirement recognizes a common problem. Most Utah Core reading program adoptions do not emphasize the findings from the research on the prevention of reading failure. Many adoptions are described as "balanced literacy" programs. What preventive value is a "balanced literacy" program if 90 percent of students failing reading lack early effective instruction in decoding skills (Lyon, 2000)? Marketing a program as a balance between whole language and phonics may emphasize political compromise rather than validation by scientifically based research.

Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis (1998) noted: The biggest challenge of all may be to confront the bias that these are not all our children. How many times have we heard the comment, "But these approaches work only for learning disabled (LD), at-risk (Title 1), or English-as-a-Second-Language



(ESL) students." Conceptually, sound and empirically-based instructional approaches work for all children. However, some children will need more opportunity to practice what they are taught.

The notion that ESL, special education, and other learners require reading programs matched to their federal classifications has no support in the research. Clearly, some learners are more vulnerable to instruction that lacks an emphasis on their needs.

Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis (1998) further stated: Teachers of regular education and teachers of special education, Title 1, and ESL need to unite forces and work toward **preventing** reading difficulties. Reading skills fall on a continuum where categorical slices are made in the distribution for the purpose of identification for special services is arbitrary. Reading problems after age 8 are refractory to treatment. The time to assist children is **before** they accumulate sufficient failure to qualify for special services or retention.

Cibecue: A Case Study in Prevention

Goals and Priorities

Cibecue is a White Mountain Apache community located high in the mountains of Eastern Arizona. While many Native American communities struggle to preserve their language, 98 percent of Cibecue's students enter school fluent in their White Mountain Apache language. For all practical purposes, this Apache language has no written form. With Spanish and English, the skill of phonemic awareness will generalize across both written languages. No such generalizations are possible with the White Mountain Apache language and English.

Community unemployment in Cibecue exceeds 70 percent, and teenage suicide rate is among the highest in the nation. This is one of the most poverty-impacted communities in the nation. Until recently, this school of 300 students was consistently listed as the lowest performing school in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

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At the invitation of the BIA, the Cibecue Community School Project was initiated as a collaborative effort between the school; Cache School District, Logan, Utah; and Utah State University.

The following three goals were set:

1. Select, implement, and evaluate a program to prevent and treat academic failure.



2. Conduct an initial trial in the Cibecue Community School, and, if successful, export it to other Fort Apache Agency schools.
3. Conduct program review, selection, and initial staff development in the latter half of 2001-2002, and begin implementation in 2002-2003 school year.

The following four program selection criteria were set and met:

1. The reading, math, and science programs must meet federal definitions for "scientifically based research programs."
2. The program must be supportive and respectful of community priorities, including language priorities, cultural priorities, and community involvement in the instructional process.
3. The programs must have reliable, valid, ongoing, curriculum-embedded assessments that will:
 - a. allow instructional leaders and teachers to make immediate instructional adjustments for all learners, and
 - b. provide ongoing progress information to students, parents, and community leaders.
4. The programs must produce the evidence of effectiveness required by tribal, agency, and federal accountability requirements.

Implementing the Academic Programs

In keeping with federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements, the selected programs address reading, math, and, to a lesser extent, science. Clearly, the gateway skill for prevention of failure is reading. The Year 1 priority was K-2 reading, and stressed preventive, systematic, early reading instruction in kindergarten.

The instructional priorities recognize the reality that selecting a research-based program was only 50 percent of the answer. The remaining 50 percent rested with the quality of the implementation. All the selected programs placed a major emphasis on:

- Increasing the quality and quantity of academic instructional time to ensure the prevention of failure. Those most at risk received additional instructional time focused on specific skill deficits. For those classified as "severely at risk," the regular instructional time could be doubled in the needed skill areas.
- Providing highly competent, small-group tutoring instruction. Dynamic, homogeneous, small-group instruction was the major instructional delivery system.
- Developing and supporting instructional teams in which the technical competence of paraeducators was emphasized and increased, along with their roles as contributing members of the instructional team.

All the paraeducators were White Mountain Apache community members. These paraeducators, many of them parents, provided a strong classroom link

with the community's language and cultural priorities. These paraeducators were encouraged to make adaptations consistent with their cultural and language priorities.

Results

Annual achievement accountability assessments are conducted by external BIA Agency teams or assessment personnel from the Arizona State Education Agency (SEA). Following is a summary of the assessment data for the end of the first year of full implementation.

1. The three kindergarten, full-day classroom averages were: 85.4 percentile on reading and 75.8 percentile on math. The instrument was the Brigance Inventory of Basic Skills. This finding was consistent with the more informal curriculum-embedded assessments indicating that all students went into Grade 1 at, or above, grade level.
2. For Grade 1, this was the first time a formal standardized test, the Stanford 9, was used. Informal assessments indicated that most students had entered Grade 1 well below grade level. For Year 1, the Stanford 9 data at the end of Grade 1 provided average scores at the 42.1 percentile for reading, and the 26.6 percentile for math. Math instruction is the Year 2 priority.
3. As a more global measure, the BIA summarizes available data and provides a national ranking among all BIA schools. For the Cibecue Community School the BIA listing for the 2001 academic year was zero percentile, the lowest in the BIA. For the 2002 academic year it was zero percentile, the lowest in the agency. For the 2003 academic year, the end of the first year of the study, the ranking was the 35th percentile for reading and the 30th percentile for math.
4. Present curriculum-embedded assessments indicate that the present Grade 1 students will enter Grade 2 as they entered Grade 1-at, or well above, grade level. Referrals for special education services involving reading failure in the first two grades were almost non-existent in a school that, at one time, had 30 percent of students receiving special education services.

Conclusions

1. *Causal variables.* Assigning poverty and related socioeconomic variables, the causal role in academic failure should be questioned. This approach has two major problems. First, this approach distracts those who should focus on variables we can change; namely, those variables involving the quality of instruction. Second, we blame the victims, not the instructional service characteristics. This blame assignment is not humane, professional, or valid. The Cibecue experience is not an isolated example (Lyon, 2000). If such immediate success can be achieved (even in one site), then questions must be asked about the instructional practices in other unsuccessful sites. Socioeconomic variables are important to the quality of life. Such variables are, however, instructionally irrelevant if they are not variables educators can easily change. We must accept responsibility for the variables we manage and not be distracted or blame what we cannot change.
2. *Community response.* At the National Meeting of the Office of Indian Education Programs in November 2003, Cibecue Community School members made the following concluding observation to their progress report on Year 1. ■

*We had a vision, and we had hope.
We have promise and an ever-growing reality.
There are solutions within our reach.
Are all the problems solved? No.
Are all the solutions easy? No.
Are the solutions growing clearer? Yes.
Are the solutions exotic and expensive? No.
Are the solutions consistent with our community priorities? Yes
Is there the brightening light of increased competence
and increased self-esteem in the eyes of our children? YES!*

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the instructional leaders, teachers, and paraeducators at Cibecue Community School and Cache School District, Logan, UT. **Author's Note:** For information on the reading, math, and science programs used in this project, E-mail your inquiries to: read@cc.usu.edu or call (435) 797-3718. References available upon request from the Utah Personnel Development Center.