

CIBECUE: The Teachers' Perspective

Editor's note: The following article is in response to numerous requests for additional information regarding last month's feature article ("What Works for Students At Risk of Academic Failure," April 2004, p. 12) by Alan Hofmeister. Readers wanted to know more details about how the Cibecue teachers, paraprofessionals and parents were trained to teach reading, details about the curriculum used, and the professional preparation of the trainers involved. Editors of the Utah Special Educator interviewed the lead teacher trainers from Cache School District: Patty Willis and Becky Wadsworth.

I understand that you teach in Cache School District, in what capacity?

Patty:

At the time we were providing training to Cibecue, I was teaching first grade half days and working as a Literacy Facilitator half days.

Becky:

I function as the Title I Director and previously taught first grade for 12 years.

What was your involvement in the Cibecue case study?

Becky & Patty:

After the Project Director (Alan Hofmeister) met with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) representatives and developed a literacy plan, we traveled to Cibecue to provide on-site professional development training for *Reading for All Learners (RALP)* and *Reading Mastery* for both teachers and paraeducators. Several of the lead teachers and administrators from Cibecue also visited Cache classrooms as a part of the planning experience. They were particularly interested in the extensive training and support given to paraeducators as important members of the instructional team. They were also very interested in the small group instructional practices.

Prior to this project, what was your professional preparation, background or experience in teaching reading to minority students, particularly American Indians?

Our experience with teaching reading to minority students included the following: 1) We both had ESL endorsements, 2) We had worked with a few minority students in our classrooms, and 3) We each taught several Native American students. As you can see, we were not and are not multi-cultural experts! However, RALP had been researched and tested with several thousand students from diverse backgrounds, languages and cultures.

I understand that most children, professionals and parents you worked with spoke Apache as their first language. Do either of you speak/understand Apache? If not, did this present any problems or challenges?

Everyone in the school spoke fluent English. Some of the teachers spoke Apache as did most of the support staff. We were impressed with the fact that

most of the adults and students were fluent in two languages and placed a priority on maintaining their Apache language.

We did not find our inability to speak or understand Apache a problem. That could also be a reflection of the warm hospitality and support that we received.

I have heard that Apache and English phonemes are very dissimilar. Did this present special challenges when teaching phonics? Did you have to do anything differently than you would for children you teach in Cache?

Teaching phonics to the Apache children was not that different than teaching phonics to the children within our own district. This was likely influenced by the fact that the Apache children spoke English in the classroom when we were present.

I sometimes hear from teachers that parents of ELL children are either not supportive, or are difficult to involve with their children's formal education. Did you find this to be true?

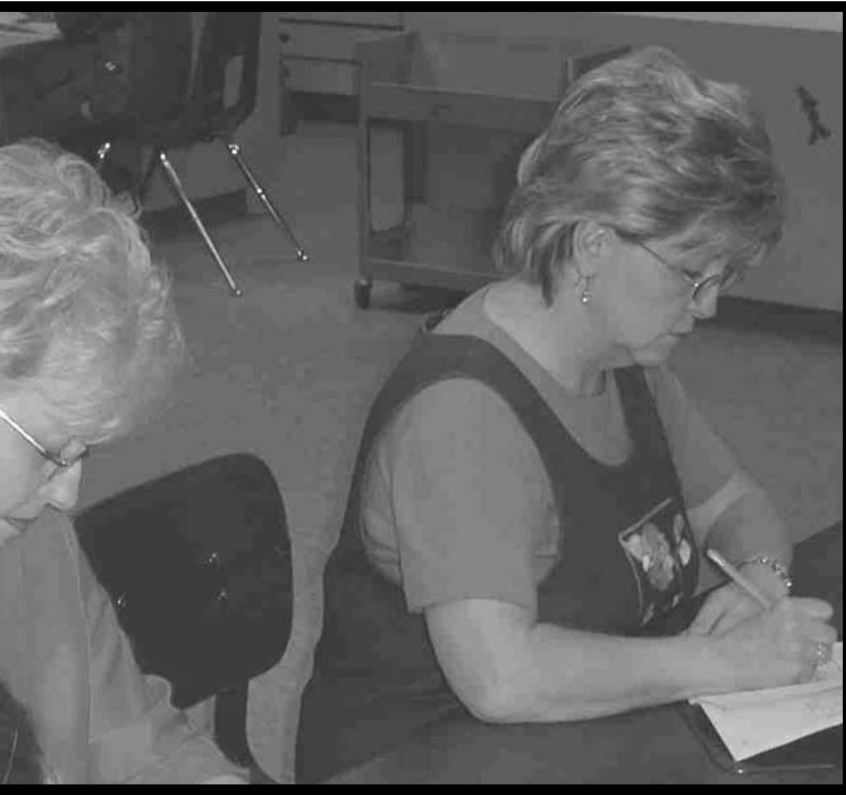
When we first arrived, some of the school staff expressed frustration with a perceived lack of parental support for the existing reading instruction practices. During the training, the school staff and principal searched for options to increase parent involvement and support.

An example of their focus came when watching a training video we showed that depicted a blond-haired, blue-eyed mother and daughter reading together in their home. The principal suggested that we produce a video depicting an Apache parent and child. Al Hofmeister facilitated this by sending a professional videographer to Cibecue. One of the paraeducators, a parent, agreed to be featured with her son in the video. The introduction to the video featured the music of the culture and the scenic beauty of the area. The remainder of the video demonstrated proper ways to tutor with the RALP decodable readers at home. This video was a tremendous cultural tie between parental support and reading at home. It appears that community support may depend on the practices of the school more than the attitudes of the community. This was encouraging.

Was there a parent component to this project?

Yes. The program is most effective when children learn new skills through the books in class and then take the book home to practice with the family nightly.





Educators want to know more about the curriculum you used. What was it, and why was that particular curriculum chosen?

The basic reading curriculum used in the primary grades was *Reading for All Learners* and *Reading Mastery*. *Reading Mastery* materials were present and were being used at the school, but there was little evidence to suggest that teachers had received the training to implement the program effectively. Any research-based program has little value if the training and implementation is not well done. *Reading for All Learners* was presented to the BIA representatives as another option and was selected by the group and incorporated into the curriculum as both an instructional program and vehicle for monitoring progress across grades. Both programs are scientifically researched-based and suited for Native American students. They are also part of the federal Reading First approved programs for the BIA.

Describe the instructional conditions implemented for the reading intervention?

The first focus was to ensure the maximum amount of reading instruction was delivered in the most efficient manner. To accomplish this, special education services were scheduled so all students were in class during reading instruction, and supplemental special education services occurred outside of the classroom reading time.

Paraeducators and some special education personnel were then scheduled into each classroom so all children were instructed in small, homogeneous groups. This allowed the most at-risk students to be in the smallest groups, 1 to 3 students, and the more advanced students in somewhat larger groups of around five per group. Groups were taught by paraprofessionals and teachers with an expectation that the most at-risk learners received instruction from the teacher. The building principal provided extensive support for the staff. He met with every teacher at least once a month and reviewed the RALP progress monitoring data on every child. If a child was not making progress, the principal worked on changes and support to address the problem. For example, extra paraprofessional help came from the junior high to help with the morning reading instruction.

Did paraeducators provide the majority of the reading instruction? What was their background and role in teaching reading before this project?

The paraeducators instructed larger groups than the teachers and therefore provided the majority of the instruction. This was a change for the paraeducators, as they had previously been assigned to classrooms where they spent the majority of their time providing more individualized instruction. All the paraeducators were from the Apache community and were encouraged to make instructional adaptations consistent with their culture and language.

Briefly describe the program of training for the teachers and paraeducators. How was it structured, how long did it take?

Initially, the training provided the teachers and paraeducators did not occur together. Teacher training occurred over two and a half days. We wanted the teachers to receive the initial training to enhance their understanding and solicit their support. The teacher training began with an informal discussion of how both reading programs would work together and a brief demonstration of a lesson. We then assessed all children in kindergarten, first, and second grades the following day, so groupings were created with minimal teacher effort. That afternoon, formal training began with a discussion of the students' placements. Training proceeded with a program rationale, teaching demonstrations, peer practice, and assessment procedures. The following day we visited each classroom and taught a group of students, so teachers and paraeducators could observe teaching techniques and behavior management. This training format was both reinforcing and productive; students were placed in RALP and instructed in small groups in their classrooms. We did this so program implementation was not a time burden and teachers felt confident about successfully teaching the program.

Paraeducator training occurred one month later, prior to summer school, with demonstrations, peer practice, and one-on-one practice with students.

What did you learn that you were able to utilize in Cache District? Does quality reading instruction generalize between at-risk populations?

Our experience and positive results taught us that children are children regardless of their environmental circumstances, and they all need and deserve the best literacy instruction we as educators have to offer. We found that we cared for the children from the White Mountain Apache Reservation as much we care for the children in our district and therefore wanted no less for them.

What would you say to districts, schools, or teachers who are struggling to teach students at risk of academic failure?

As educators we need to keep a focus on literacy goals. This means that we monitor the academic progress of each child and use this data to immediately adjust instruction. The RALP assessment provides weekly data on each child's progress. If we allow ourselves to look at what we perceive as obstacles in our way, it is far more likely that we will fail to meet the needs of the children we are striving to support. An open mind, creative solutions linked to the data on each child's progress, and a united effort aligned with this data on student progress—these were key. ■

End note: How does your district/school reading program align with research-based, Reading First strategies and mandates? This article is another installment in an ongoing series on best practices for teaching reading. All issues of The Utah Special Educator will address each of the five essential reading components, one per issue, and highlight schools, programs and teachers that successfully apply these best practice criteria. A compilation of current and future articles in this reading series can be found at: www.updc.org/specialeducator/index.html