

# A Community-Based Indian Curriculum Development Program

Joe Coburn

*In the Pacific Northwest, Indian children are using curriculum materials that reflect their cultural heritage. Involved in the program are the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, the National Institute of Education, and community people from twelve Indian reservations.*

Community people from twelve Indian reservations in the Pacific Northwest are working cooperatively to produce primary-grade language arts materials. Considering that each tribe has its own language heritage and unique culture, it was not surprising that many educators

this program has initially prepared more than one hundred thirty separate pieces of material including texts of legends and stories, activity units, and teachers' manuals—all developed by tribal committees with the assistance of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

The need which resulted in the program was recognized first by the Indian people themselves. Through their own studies they found that reservation children consistently scored lower than any other identifiable group on standardized achievement tests, averaging about two grade levels lower than the national average; and the dropout rate was estimated at near 70 percent. In fact, some reservations in the Pacific Northwest had gone more than four years without having a single tribal student graduate from a high school anywhere.

It was the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon, that first decided that something had to be done. They initiated a feasibility study through their local school

doubted very much whether it could be done. Some of their initial concerns were the difficulties of using lay people as curriculum planners, writers, and illustrators. Other concerns centered around the idea of the consortium itself, which required work across tribal and cultural lines.

But it is working. And so far



*A teacher tests locally developed instructional materials with children on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.*

*Blackfeet Indian boy (right) is very proud of one of the Blackfeet booklets he has just colored. Photo: Joe Fisher.*



district in Madras with the assistance of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the Regional U.S. Office of Education. The survey, which was conducted throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana, disclosed that educators and Indian people alike would support wholeheartedly a reading and language development program for Indian students, based not only on

Policy Board, early in the project, made sound decisions regarding both the roles of the Laboratory and the community. For example, Indian community involvement was paramount—a decision with which the Laboratory administration and NIE concurred. The policies also required tribal council approval of the project before any reservation or local school system could participate. Local committees were to be chosen by each tribe, but coordinated through a planning council for each of the three regions roughly equivalent to cultural groups: Plains tribes, Plateau groups, and Coastal Indians. Another policy stated that all materials developed were to reflect the true culture of the tribe that produced it and had to be authenticated by the tribal members through their councils.

Because of the program's evolving nature, the Policy Board also dealt with other issues as they came up in order to protect the interests of the Indian communities and their children. For example, the Board and the Laboratory were able to procure a copyright waiver from the federal government giving the individual tribes copyright ownership of the materials they produced. This is the first time such permission has been granted, and the Policy Board's action has been instrumental in getting similar waivers for other cultural groups.

Throughout the program-development process, the Laboratory staff provided training and technical assistance in the production of materials, field testing, and revisions where necessary. The role of the staff has been a demanding one from the start, requiring almost constant travel throughout the Northwest, meetings with the developers of the twelve cooperating reservations, coordination of all activities with governmental



*Members of the Fort Hall Reservation community develop supplementary reading and language arts materials. Photo: Keith Neilson.*

the best that is known about reading, but also on materials that would interest Indian children and reflect their cultural heritage.

As a result of this study, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians passed a resolution endorsing such an effort and formally requested the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory for assistance as a neutral coordinating agency that could lend expert technical assistance to the program. The program was funded for a five-year period by the National Institute of Education and began in the spring of 1972.

The key to the success of the intricate system of management and production has been the cross-reservation Policy Board, which also has representatives from the four state departments of education. The

agencies and the academic communities, and adherence to all the quality-control requirements set up for the program—all of this in harmony with local tribal priorities.

Although cultural interpretation has remained important to the Indian people, and they believe it will help their children relate better to school, they have never lost sight of the true objectives of the program, which are to:

- Expand student interest in language arts experiences;
- Increase student skill in language arts activities;
- Improve student feelings of confidence and success in communication skills.

The results of preliminary testing are encouraging. Both Indian and non-Indian children like the materials and the accompanying activities. Even withdrawn, shy children are becoming active participants in the classroom.

In addition, more than 200 reservation people have gained skills in the production of their own materials, based on their own heritage. Simultaneously, they have developed more positive attitudes toward the educational system as a result of grappling with some of the problems of teachers, and working side-by-side with them. They are also finding new respect from Indian educators who are impressed with the accomplishments. But best of all, the Indian parents are seeing their children using authentic materials, which reflect their culture. The children are, therefore, taking a keener interest in their education. And non-Indian parents and their children who live near the reservations and share classrooms with Indian children are improving their own communication with the Indian community.

The program is in its last year and has accomplished much of what it set out to do. At the present time, more than half of the materials are in their final, revised form, waiting for a publisher so that they can be made available to schools on the participating reservations and elsewhere.

Much planning, foresight, and initiative on the part of the Policy



*Children at Blackfeet Elementary School hold up materials they use in the Indian curriculum development program. Photo: Joe Fisher.*

Board, Laboratory administrative staff, and program-staff members, have resulted in a program that is truly responsive to the needs and aspirations of Indian communities.

These factors, combined with the neutral role played by the Laboratory, and encouragement from the National Institute of Education, have resulted in a program that now lists among its strongest supporters those educators who once were doubtful of its feasibility. *FL*



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