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ABSTRACT

This report describes Project Success Enrichment, a language arts program and designated a National Diffusion Network exemplary program that has proven successful with students of all ability levels program that has proven successful with students of all ability levels and cultural backgrounds, including American Indian students. Currently, this program is being used in various forms in 1,600 schools in 35 states and is "culture friendly," in that it encourages students to draw upon their own experiences, literature, and mentors as they combine written, oral, and artistic expression. In 1991, the Gallup-McKinley County School District combined Project Success Enrichment with another nationally validated program, Learning to Read through the Arts, to serve a student population that was 95 percent Navajo. Students had low test scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and over 75 percent were considered low-income. This program successfully used a developmental skills hierarchy to reinforce language arts and reading by combining them with art skills. After 1 year, students' pre- to postevaluations showed a statistically significant improvement. This program was successful because it encourages the use of spatial, kinesthetic, and visual skills that are known to be well-developed in American Indian students. Second, the program approaches the acquisition of grammar, spelling, and other basic skills from the standpoint of language use based on experience. Third, teachers employing this program were highly trained in methodology and strategies. (LP)

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the NDN exemplary Language Arts program developed and disseminated by Project Success Enrichment. It focuses on the program's flexibility in presenting its techniques and materials to students of all ability levels and cultural backgrounds, specifically emphasizing the success experienced by Native American students. The article explains why the program has been so successful, with both Native American and non-Indian student populations, from gifted through Special Education. It touches on the program's unique assessment and evaluation features, as well as its innovative method of instruction.

Key words:

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It was obvious to the teacher that Tery, one of the American Indian students in the fourth grade class, was processing more than the usual descriptive adjectives in comparative sentences. With increasing confidence, she shared her observations about the human condition—both Indian and non-Indian. One day, she came to the teacher clutching a large thesaurus. "I think I've got it figured out," she said. "This is why some people talk about so many things...they know all the words. If I had this," she hugged the book close and whispered at the awe of it, "I would have all the words in the world."

Tery's response to acquisition of an expanding word base is typical of the impact that the Project Success Enrichment's Language Arts program has had on Native American Indian students.

Although not specifically designed for culturally diverse populations, Project Success Enrichment has become increasingly important in this arena in the last several years as educators have scrambled to reverse dropout rates for ethnic and racial minorities by employing innovative, proven programs. American Indian students, who have the highest dropout rate of any group and are more likely to be labeled learning disabled, have been of special concern. (Reeves, 1989.)

Early major studies in American Indian Education (Meriam, 1912; Neugarten and Havighurst, 1955; Far West Lab, 1970; Fuchs and Havighurst, 1972; National Advisory Council on Indian Education, 1973) identified a conflict in the classroom between preparing the student to take a place in American society, and recognizing and supporting the student's primary culture. Indian students were recognized as intellectually equal to all other students,

but evidencing the same characteristics as other children of poverty in that they experience underachievement in tasks requiring verbal and written communication skills.

In the last twenty years, not a great deal has been added to this original assessment except that as educators have learned more about motivation, learning styles, integration of subject matter, hemispheric shifts, and cooperative learning strategies, and have applied these new (and renewed) technologies to the classroom, the rigidity of former instructional methodology has eased. The individual differences and learning modalities of the American Indian students are more likely now to be accommodated as a usual part of the overall instruction delivered to all students.

Interestingly enough, American Indian students, by virtue of certain tribal and cultural community practices such as cooperative decision making, group centered activities, and cross-age socialization, are often more advanced in these areas than their non-Indian counterparts. This has led to a marked increase in their achievement levels, according to Lee Little Soldier, College of Education, Texas Tech University. Modifications in the curriculum such as those mentioned above, "have increased the holding power of the schools."

Project Success Enrichment is a language arts program that has been a natural choice for those schools who want to apply the new technologies within a proven framework of success. It is being used in various forms in 1,600 schools in 35 states and is "culture friendly" in that it encourages students to draw upon their own experiences, literature, and mentors as they combine written, oral, and artistic expression. But it also overcomes what Jacobs (1989) calls the "potpourri problem" of sampling knowledge from various disciplines

without a scope and sequence, cognitive skills taxonomy, or evaluation plan. These elements are in place in Project Success Enrichment, which is why it has been part of the National Diffusion Network of exemplary programs since 1983.

Originally, this extraordinary program was validated for gifted students, grades 4-6, as a "pull-out" program and it is still used in many gifted and talented programs in this manner. With the advent of "mainstreaming" and inclusionary practices, Project Success Enrichment was found to be successfully operational within a variety of organizational modes and grades (currently 2-8) as well.

In 1991, the Gallup-McKinley County School District combined Project Success Enrichment with another nationally validated program, Learning to Read Through the Arts (LTRTA), in an effort to meet the challenging needs of creative, visual learners. The elementary schools and individual Chapter I programs involved are comprised of a 95% Navajo student population, a building aggregate below the 45th NCE on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and a 75% or more low income index. Rather than teach catch-up skills, the Project Success Enrichment teachers use a developmental skills hierarchy to reinforce language arts and reading by combining them with art skills. The students move from awareness to acquisition of particular skills, then to mastery, application and finally sharing of those skills. According to Pat Stall, teacher and Chapter I Program Specialist, there is a strong emphasis on visual demonstration and organization by both student and teacher; also group decision making. "Visual images are strengths of many of our Native American students [and] the illustrations that accompany the writing projects [and] the visual depictions of literary analysis are especially successful," Stall writes in her program summary.

After one year in the PSE-LTRTA program, students' pre to post evaluations showed

a statistically significant level of growth. A spin-off program, entitled Arts Connect, which serves Native American Indian students, has now been funded by The Innovation for Education category of the U.S. Department of Education. (1992-1994)

There seems to be several reasons why PSE is successful with American Indian students. First, it employs a spatial, kinesthetic, visual organization of group-generated core knowledge from which students employ their self expression. The spatial abilities of American Indian students are known to be more well developed than their sequencing skills. (McShane & Plas, 1982; Diessner & Walker, 1986)

Second, the program is language-based. It approaches the acquisition of grammar, spelling and other basic skills from the standpoint of language use based on experience. Language is enhanced by a sensory component that utilizes art, movement, discussions and rhythmic patterns in the highly motivating process of expressing "self." Students link their learning activities with who they are, how they think, and what they care about. (Oldfather, 1993; McEachern, 1990)

Third, teachers employing Project Success Enrichment are highly trained in its methodology and strategies, and they apply their own particular strengths and aptitudes to the details of the format. Teachers who are excited by high levels of interaction between students will appreciate the structure of this innovative program. Project Success Enrichment is flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, utilizes humor, and empowers students to achieve high standards. These characteristics have long been associated with successful educators of American Indian students. (Northwest Lab, 1983; Cajete, 1988)

Finally, Project Success Enrichment has proven year after year, through its unique internal and external evaluation process, that students are increasing their language

communication abilities. The National Diffusion Network monitors the statistical analysis of the findings from one report period to the next. These are published and available. School districts and others who purchase the curriculum and training are assured of positive expectations and attitudes of participants.

The evaluation procedures are ongoing, both for classrooms and individual students. In fact, students are taught how to measure what they do against a criteria of excellence that they have helped to develop themselves. For highly affective American Indian students who would rather help than compete, as well as make wise decisions based on sound reasoning rather than meld with a definition perceived as arbitrary, this is indeed a motivation to participate. (George, 1987)

How important is it to have all the words in the world at your command? If you are poor, if you are different, if there is more to you than anyone asks, if you feel things that you cannot express...then words are everything. Words are power.

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About the author...

Karlene George has been engaged in identifying and working with talented and gifted American Indian children for more than two decades. She has served as teacher, administrator, and consultant for Native American educational programs throughout the country. She has been a trainer and presenter at various educational conferences nationally and internationally. She is the author of a book entitled, *Guide to Understanding Gifted American Indian Students*.

At present, she is a curriculum developer and trainer for the National Diffusion Network program, Project Success Enrichment, which has been designated an exemplary program by the United States Department of Education.

Ms. George lives on the Port Madison Indian Reservation in Washington State, where she and her husband are involved in local educational programs.