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Learning Styles of Native Americans

Research Paper

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Every student learns differently. There are guidelines on how to help students learn but they will all perceive the information in their own unique way. Native American students are really no different than Anglo American students. The difference comes down to their cultural background. Native Americans are big on learning in regards to nature and how the world works. They value the respect of others and how others think they are. They want to be thought of as respectful and not over stepping their bounds. They also are hands-on based when it comes to learning. They like to work in small groups and do not like to do anything unless they know it can be done right. Keep in mind that because most Native Americans like to learn this way doesn’t mean all Native Americans learn the same way. That would be like saying all mainstream students prefer to take notes and listen to lectures for every class.

Native Americans are very culturally based when it comes to how they learn. Sandra Stokes quotes H. Gilland saying, “Another Native American value is living in harmony with nature, recognizing that nature is the basic source of knowledge by teaching through observation of the stars, seasons, wind, animals, flora, and fauna.” (579). Native American culture is expected in the curriculum in order to successfully learn. Parents teach their children to be proud of who they are and to hold on to it. The children that succeed in school are usually the ones who have supportive parents. Sadly, there are a lot of families that are not involved and this results in poor attitudes towards education which leads to high dropout rates. Also, Native Americans today are showing less respect for their elders and that is one reason school has been put on the back burner for most students (Stokes 577).

In mainstream schools, students are expected to participate in class and answer questions when called upon and if they do not know the answer to simply say they do not know. It is not frowned upon when one does not know an answer. Native Americans highly value respect for others. They do not want to look better then anyone else so they stay humble. In the classroom they do not like to be the center of attention. They prefer to talk about things in small groups where no one is being put on the spot. It is easier that way for them to learn and not feel as if they are disrespecting anyone. If a Native American student was called to answer a question they will most likely not answer it just to avoid looking superior. This concept correlates with their view on cooperation, sharing, and unity. They like their possessions but do not feel the need to show off what they have or what they can do. So in the classroom, they do not want to boast their knowledge. Anglo Americans feel that their possessions show how well they are doing in life and show their social status. In the classroom, mainstream students feel a sense of pride when knowing information that others do not know. Native Americans take pride in their possessions but are willing to share whatever they have (Morgan 46). When doing group work, Native Americans work for the good of the group, not for his or her personal gain (Hale 87). Group work relates back to traditional Indian ways. The whole tribe would teach the children. They would sit around the campfire in a group and simply talk. In those talks they would teach them about how the world works and what to do in order to survive (Hale 85).

Native American children tend to learn from their parents. They observe everything their parents do and apply what they see once they feel they are ready. Same idea follows them into the classroom. Not only does a student not answer a question due to respect but also they will not answer unless they know they are 100% confident in their answer. They do not like to be too active until they know the skill can be done correctly. Mainstream American schools have the *trial and error* approach. They are expected to fail and that is not considered a negative thing. It is the way they were taught. Native Americans have the *observe, then do* approach. Most students will not attempt a task until they know it can be done correctly the first time. They will not answer a question unless they know it is right. They will not even answer if they think it might be right. Most students do not want to fail at anything. (Morgan 46).

In regards to learning material, textbooks are not used like they are in mainstream schools. If they do use textbooks, they are American textbooks. American textbooks tend to focus towards American styles. Loraine Hale states, “Not only are American textbooks largely inappropriate in cultural content for native students, they are also over-relied upon in most classrooms” (90). She goes on to explain that research shows when textbooks are not used in Native American classrooms, the students tend to do better in school. Native American classrooms are hands-on and activity based. They want to be able to think, touch, and see what they are learning about. Mathematics has more materials that can be manipulated, science has more lab work dealing with nature, and reading materials are Native American based. Most books in the Anglo American culture have the main character Caucasian or a minority in a majority of Caucasians. In mainstream schools, children are constantly being told to sit down and listen. Mainstream schools do have hands on approaches to learning, especially in the elementary age but not to the extreme that the Native American schools take. Native American schools have a hands-on and a freer flowing atmosphere throughout all the grades (Hale 86 & 90).

Overall, Native American students have a very different approach to how they learn. Every student learns in a different way but the Native Americans have found a culturally based approach that seems to work for them. The only thing missing is the drive to learn. Native Americans need a hands-on approach where they can think, touch, and see. They want to work in small groups that root them back to their ancestors sitting around a campfire discussing the world. They have a no fail policy. Their mindset is, “why would I answer if it is not correct?” They do have textbooks but they try to not rely on them. They feel that all the knowledge needed comes straight from nature. Native American learning would not be possible unless their culture is mixed in throughout the curriculum. It is what makes them who they are, if they did not have their culture, they could be lost.

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