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Learning Styles

There are many different types of learning styles. Normally when one thinks of learning styles, they think of kinesthetic, audio, and visual. Audio is learning by sound, visual is learning by having something that the students can look at, and kinesthetic is a combination of the two. The learning styles begin to be more specific towards certain cultures. Learning styles are more specific toward culture because not only are students learning about math and science, but are also learning about their past in regards to their culture. Native American children tend to learn by observation, which is in itself a learning style, which can be related to visual. This is a very important concept for Native Americans. Part of this is because of their history in education with Europeans. People have been trying for many years to change the way Native Americans learn. When this occurs they lose a part of their culture because education is based off of culture. Some Native Americans have taken education into their own hands and are trying to preserve their ways through education and pass on their beliefs to their young ones.

One of the problems that Native Americans face with education is that they have high dropout rates. As Sandra Stokes says “Our schools have failed to nurture the intellectual development and academic performance of many Native children, as is evident in their high dropout rates” (Stokes, 577). A major contributing factor leading to dropouts is that schools today do not provide Native American students with the environment they need to learn. The education

system today is largely based on reading out of a text book, and then applying what you read to the real world. For many Native Americans this is not the case. Native American students “learn by observing someone perform a task; they then reflect upon their observation and practice it privately” (Stokes, 577). When the students feel they have mastered the skill, only then will they perform it publicly. Native American students get shoved into what today’s education system suites everyone, but in reality they end up leaving a lot of students behind. This is one of the reasons why Native American children get frustrated with school and dropout.

Another learning style that is not being addressed in school is a concept of unity. Native Americans “learn much more easily if they can see an overall picture, unity, and harmony in a situation before that picture broken or segmented into pieces or details (Stokes, 578-579). This means that teachers would have to present the main idea of their lesson first. Once this is accomplished, the teachers can go into greater detail about what the students are learning. Then students can focus all of their lessons on a central main idea or theme. This is called integrated curriculum. One way that some Native American schools have given their whole curriculum for all subjects a central theme is with the topic of Mother Earth. In order for this to be successful they needed “several broad topics that were identified to connect this focal point [Mother Earth]. Then each broad topic was fleshed out into narrower topics. In order to ensure the interconnectedness of all of the themes, there were transitions themes between the broader topics” (Stokes, 580). This helped many Native American students become successful in school. They were able to relate subject matter to their culture which helped them to better understand the material that was presented to them.

Lastly, a concept that Native Americans feel is being left out is respect. Native Americans feel that, “students did not show enough respect for their elders, one another, or their surroundings;

traditional values seemed to have been either deemphasized or eliminated from the public school curriculum” (Stokes, 579). Studies have shown that one of the reasons Native American students do not ask questions in class is because they do not want to offend their elders. They think this because asking a question would insult the teacher’s intelligence and ability to teach. Students are encouraged to speak and ask questions during class. When Native American children go home to their families, they begin to ask the elderly people in their lives question. This can be taken very offensively by people in their culture. Schools today interpret the concept of respect differently than Native Americans do. They teach that respect means saying nice things to your peers, honoring their beliefs, and using polite manors. According to Zarrillo, “Native Americans learn by observation...this is in stark contrast to European American children, whose caretakers spent a great deal of time talking to and with children. Native American children have learned not to respond quickly to questions because such a response is disrespectful” (Zarrillo, para. 8). The different interpretations of respect end up taking yet another aspect of Native American culture away.

Even though Native Americans have certain learning needs that need to be catered to, there are also many students from different cultural backgrounds that need help educationally as well. These needs often times tend to conflict. This was discovered when the Europeans were coming to America and tried to educate the Native Americans. The different learning styles clashed and academic accomplishments began to suffer. The same thing still happens today in the classroom. Communication skills are something that is often discussed because they are so diverse. For instance communication skills between one culture may be drastically different from that of another. European Americans have “rigid structure during a conversation, speak in less audible tones, use few gestures, and their speech is much slower” (Zarrillo, para. 6). Going back to students

asking questions, European teachers also have a very different mindset than Native Americans. European American teachers “and parents will expect students to ask questions and express personal opinions” (Zarrillo, para. 4). Teachers have a very difficult job trying to cater to all the needs of a wide variety of cultures. While the teachers try to accommodate for all the students, aspects of the culture can be left behind.

Learning styles can differ from culture to culture and within that person to person. This had made it difficult for Native Americans to preserve their culture in the public school system. Very crucial concepts such as respect has been lost for their younger generations because of the interpretations of it. The frustration of this has left some Native American students in despair and led them to drop out of high school. Such frustrations include: lack of observational learning and the unity of the curriculum. All of that being said, it is hard for teachers to meet all of these needs. It is their goal to accommodate for the whole student, but it is a difficult task. The reason for this is because there normally is not just Native Americans in a classroom, there is a wide variety of cultures. Cultural needs are just as important as mental and physical health. When education is tied to a student’s culture, they are even more able now to apply what they are learning to their daily life. This is important because when students are able to draw this connection in can make them more motivated in school and create less of a chance of the student dropping out. Meeting the needs of all of these is hard but necessary so that each child can get the best out of their education.