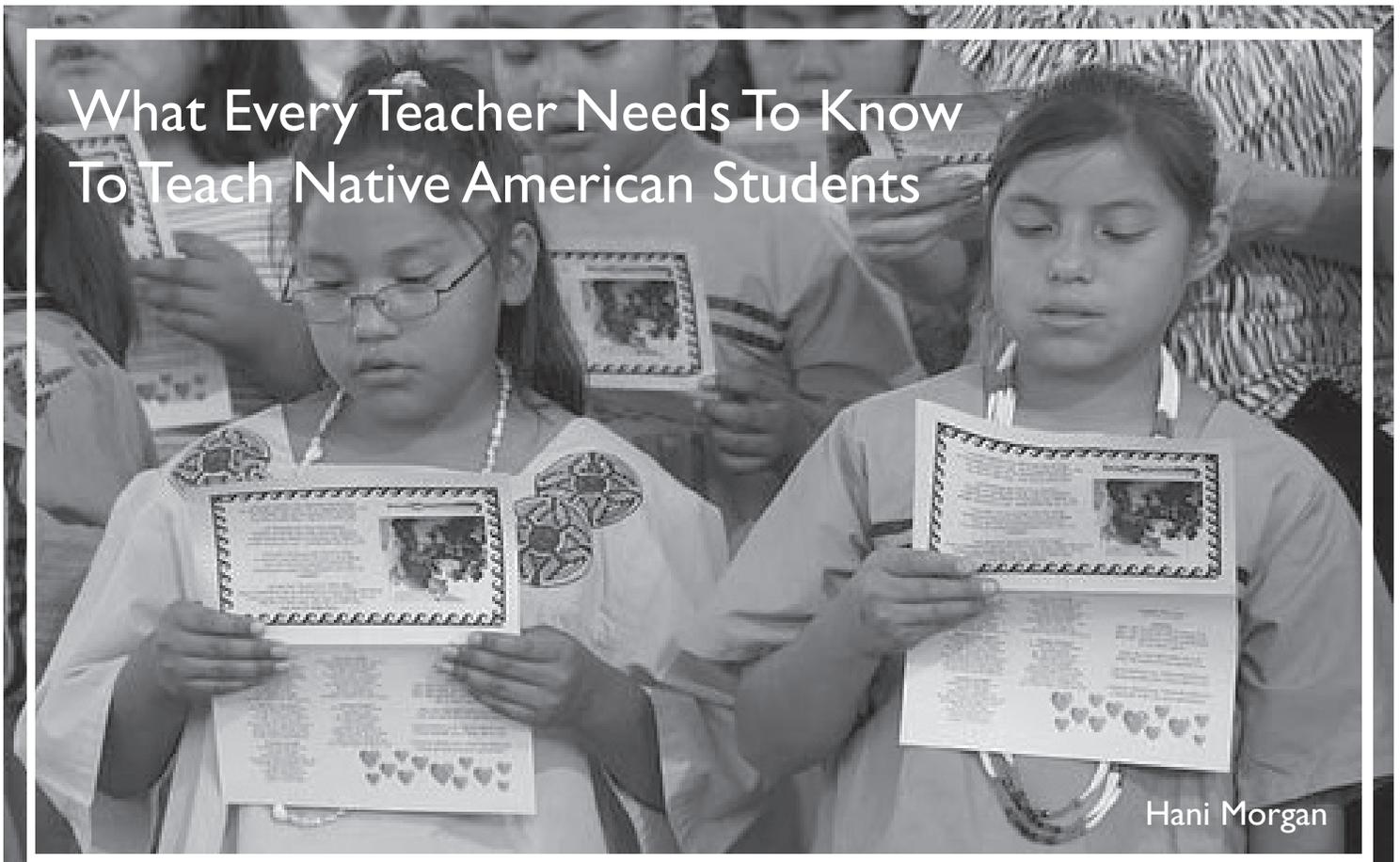


# What Every Teacher Needs To Know To Teach Native American Students



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## Introduction

Many Native American students have problems in traditional American schools, and the dropout rate of Native American students indicates this (Lomawaima, 1995; Rhodes, 1988). Researchers often point out that one reason students may encounter difficulties in school has to do with a school district's neglect for the learning style or culture of a given group (Pewewardy, 2008; Rhodes, 1988; Swisher, 1991).

Lomawaima (1995) explains that numerous researchers hypothesized that discontinuities between teachers and students will hinder student performance in school. These discontinuities could involve learning and communication styles as well as a curriculum which is not culturally relevant. Swisher (1991) explains that research suggests that traditional classroom environments often interfere with the way Native American children learn.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the culture and learning styles of Native

American students and to offer educational practices that will likely aid this group of students to work to their potential.

## Dangers of Stereotyping

Swisher (1991) points out that many people do not recognize that Native American children are unique and differ greatly from each other, even within one community. Although Native Americans can differ greatly from each other like members of any other racial group and research does not indicate that there is a unique Native American way of learning, careful attention to common differences between Native American and mainstream students is important. Teachers need to understand the way Native American students are likely to perceive the world if they are seriously interested in improving the education of this group.

Although it is important to consider the differences in learning style between people of different cultures, overgeneralizing can lead to some harmful effects. Swisher (1991) gives a very good example, indicating that it is not wise to assume that a particular group has a special style of learning. Her example points out that although Native American students are likely to be field-dependent, a study done

in 1990 concludes that Jicarilla Apache students had such great differences between each other that the researchers who conducted the study could not determine the students' tendencies. In addition, overgeneralizing can lead to stereotypic thinking and discriminatory practices.

## Misconceptions about Native Americans

Many Americans know little about Native Americans. Fleming (2006) argues that they could very well be one of the most misunderstood groups in the U.S. One of the reasons few Americans have accurate knowledge of Native Americans has to do with what teachers teach in formal schools. A good example of the way students are taught about Native Americans concerns what a typical American student knows about this group in the state of Montana, where many Native Americans live.

Starnes (2006) reveals that although students in Montana know a great deal about their own state, most would not be able to locate the seven Native American reservations in that state. She adds that students are likely to know about sovereign nations but not likely to know that in their own state sovereign tribal

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governments exist. One reason students are usually not taught about these topics, according to Starnes, is because those in power traditionally write history and typically only include their own viewpoints. Since textbook authors are not likely to be of Native American descent, the Native American view of American history is often missing in school textbooks.

Another reason explaining why there are many misconceptions about Native Americans has to do with the fact that they tend to be more isolated than other groups, and for this reason, knowledge about Native Americans that outsiders have is likely not to come from direct experience (Fleming, 2006). Even in states with high concentrations of Native Americans, most non-Native people know very little about this group, and based on what they do know they are likely to have negative attitudes towards Native Americans (Fleming, 2006).

Misconceptions about Native Americans can begin at a very young age when children are introduced to popular trade books. Research on books for young readers indicates that stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans still occur in books typically available in schools (Lindsay, 2003; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005). Some children's books on Native Americans do not show one tribe in the illustrations but mix aspects of different tribes together (Reese, 1999; Roberts et al., 2005). One book that was reviewed, for example, showed a totem pole made by the Northwest Indians next to a tipi used by the Plains Indians (Reese, 1999). Illustrations like these do not accurately reflect the differences among Native American people and promote erroneous and stereotypical ideas in children.

### **Learning Style**

More (1989) discusses that learning style describes the cognitive process students use to process information and mentions that researchers often use terms such as verbal/nonverbal and global/analytic to describe different kinds of learning styles. Various researchers identify the learning styles of Native Americans using different classifications, which include field-dependence/field-independence, perceptual strengths, reflectivity/impulsivity, behavior, role of the family, teacher/pupil relationships, and cooperation versus competition.

A person's learning style is determined by the way he/she consistently responds cognitively, affectively, and physiologically to a given stimulus. Native American students view the world the

way they do partly as a result of cultural values and early socialization experiences (Swisher, 1991).

Although it is dangerous to overgeneralize, research has shown that Native American students are likely to behave and react to teachers and teaching strategies in specific ways that are often different from mainstream students. In order to avoid stereotyping and overgeneralizing, teachers should observe students before assuming they will respond in certain ways that reflect anticipated cultural learning styles.

### **Values towards Humility and Harmony**

Many Native American communities value humility and harmony (Swisher, 1991). This can lead students from these communities to deliberately achieve less than Anglo students. Swisher (1991) explains that Native American students may underachieve to avoid appearing superior in order to not violate the traditional norms of their culture. Native American students are therefore not likely to perform tasks or problems that other students cannot perform well because they do not want to be viewed as superior or inferior as a result of their family's emphasis on the importance of unity, oneness, and cooperation.

In the Anglo culture possessions and property have different meaning than they do in many Native American communities. In Native American communities, possessions are important because they can be shared, while in the Anglo culture they are more likely to represent a person's individual social status or worth (Pewewardy, 2008). A person with more possessions is likely to be treated with distrust in a Native American community, and getting wealthy may even be viewed as undesirable.

### **Teaching by Demonstration and Observation**

Learning in traditional Native American cultures is based to a great extent on observation and is different from traditional learning approaches in U.S. schools (Bennett, 2007; More, 1989). In many classrooms today, teachers encourage students to solve problems and make mistakes. This is sometimes referred to as trial and error learning. One of the reasons Native American students are more visual and tend to learn from observation and demonstration has to do with the fact that this is the way they are usually taught at home by their parents or elders (Red Horse, 1980; Pewewardy, 2008).

More (1989) describes this type of

learning as "watch then do" or "listen then do." An example of this type of learning can be of a father modeling a skill to a child. Since learning this way emphasizes onserivation, Native American students perform best in classrooms that involve a great deal of visualization, especially mathematics classes offering many forms of visual learning opportunities (Pewewardy, 2008).

### **Field-Dependence/ Field-Independence**

Pewewardy (2008) explains that a review of literature indicates that Native American students are likely to be field-dependent. Irvine and York (1995) discuss that field-dependent students prefer to work together instead of in isolation, but that all individuals may show signs of field-dependent and field-independent behaviors at different times. Field-dependent students are highly visual and intuitive (Pewewardy, 2008).

Field-dependent students also look to authority figures for guidance and have difficulty perceiving themselves as separate from their environment (Irvine & York, 1995; Pewewardy, 2008). Students who are field-dependent are also holistic and perceive things in relation to the whole. Many minority groups are likely to be field-dependent, and Clarkson (1983) suggests that women tend to fall in this category as well.

Field-independent students are likely to be detached, goal oriented, competitive, analytical, and logical (Irvine & York, 1995; Pewewardy, 2008). It is easy for these students to break the whole and understand that its parts can be added together to form the whole again. Field-independent students typically tend to be non-minority students, and it is believed that they are field-independent in part because the Anglo culture greatly values personal autonomy and formal organization (Pewewardy, 2008; Strauss, 1993).

### **Responding to Questions**

Although More (1989) refers to a study that found no significant differences between Native American students and non-Native students concerning the waiting time a student typically uses to respond to a question, Pewewardy (2008) explains that Native American students tend to reflect more than mainstream students. Reflective students take more time than other students as they gather more evidence before offering an answer.

Once again, there is a connection between this behavior and the culture of Native Americans. In traditional Native American

homes, there is strong emphasis on performing an activity correctly. As a result, Native American students may not attempt to answer unfamiliar questions for fear of not performing well. Teachers who do not understand these values and resulting attitudes towards trial and error may perceive Native American students as lacking interest and motivation (Pewewardy, 2008).

### Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is a form of instruction that affirms the backgrounds of the students, considers their cultures as strengths, and reflects and utilizes students' learning styles (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). The traditional American school curriculum is often criticized for alienating minority students by not including their cultural contributions or respecting their culture fairly or accurately.

When teaching Native American students, Swisher (1991) first recommends that teachers develop an accurate understanding of their students' preferred ways of learning. It is important for teachers to use teaching styles that match the learning styles of students. (Lippitt, 1993; Swisher, 1991). Teachers should not ignore activities that do not reflect students' preferred ways of learning, because it is beneficial to students to understand cultural values that are different from their own (Pewewardy, 2008).

However, when Native American students are introduced to learning experiences they have previously avoided, a teacher should include easier tasks and expose the students to these new approaches slowly in order to allow the students to use what is familiar to help them become successful in participating in the new skill (Pewewardy, 2008; Swisher, 1991).

Pewewardy (2008) mentions that respecting the culture of Native Americans in school should be relatively easy in the near future for several reasons. First, since the population of elderly Americans is projected to increase in the next century, the Native American norm of respect for elders should become increasingly desirable. Secondly, the increasing concern about global warming and the environment should lead people to greater appreciation for the Native American ideal of having respect for nature. Finally, as the world becomes more global and different cultures continue to mix and interact, the need to accept people the way they are will be more important than ever.

In addition, teachers must realize that the traditional American curriculum has not represented Native Americans well and that all students need to learn ac-

curate aspects of Native American people and their culture, beginning in the primary grades. Banks (2009) offers activities at various grade levels to teach the accurate cultural traditions and history of Native Americans. In the primary grades, Banks suggests using the concept of cultural traditions to teach all students about some of the traditions of Native Americans which are in many ways similar to those of mainstream U.S. society. In high school, Banks suggests that students explore the way American Indians were conquered, forced to assimilate, and to give up many aspects of their culture.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that in order to teach Native Americans in a way that reflects their culture, teachers must realize that Native American students are often taught differently at home than are mainstream students, but that Native American children can also differ greatly from each other. In general, Native American students tend to be field-dependent, reflective, visual, and cooperative. They may have difficulty with the traditional teaching styles of U.S. schools because teachers often teach according to mainstream values that do not correspond with the values of minority students.

In order for Native American students to reach their potential in school, it is recommended that teachers understand those students' preferred ways of learning. Once this understanding is gained, teachers can introduce easy tasks to teach Native American students skills they have likely avoided previously or have failed to acquire. This will help Native American students to use what is familiar to them to allow them to become successful in participating in a new skill.

In addition, teachers must remember that the traditional curriculum has often neglected or portrayed Native Americans negatively (Bennett, 2007). Many commonly used textbooks, for example, have been criticized for depicting Native American culture as uncivilized and savage (Grant & Tate, 1995). If ethnic minority groups such as Native Americans are going to have positive experiences in school, it is important for their culture to be included and portrayed in a fair way (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009).

### Note

The photograph accompanying this article is from a new learning center in Arizona that offers Native American students more educational opportunities. Photo by J. D. Long-Garcia, copyright 2009 *The Catholic Sun Newspaper*, used with permission.

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