

Cultural Implications for Navajo Students' Learning Styles and Effective Teaching Methods

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Introduction

The Navajo reservation is the largest in the United States—25,000 square miles of land in the Southwest (the approximate size of West Virginia) which is held in trust by the United States government. The Navajos form a nation of proud people who call themselves the DINE (the people). Because of the geographic size of the reservation and their isolation, a considerable portion of their tradition, life style, and language remain visible among the nearly quarter of a million Navajos.

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In spite of the large land base and considerable income from land leases and mining activities, the Navajos' economic position is among the worst in the Southwest. In many respects the reservation and its population are comparable to a developing country and must depend upon financial and technical assistance from federal resources (D. L. Miller, personal communication, July 6, 1994). Because the Navajo reservation extends into three different states (Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah) with numerous counties, the educational system is confusing and diverse. A multiplicity of school systems operative on the Navajo reservation include public schools, private schools, tribal contract schools, and federal schools (both day schools and boarding schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a unit of the Department of the Interior).

Since the beginning of the reservation system, Navajos have been under increasing pressure to assimilate into the Anglo culture. Navajo culture must fold into, blend into another dominant culture and accept its language, values, and standards. This is the historical process of colonization of native peoples by more powerful and technological superior forces. Each culture has its own unique form of social institutions, of which the socialization of its young is a primary force. The education of Navajos within their traditional culture was markedly different than that of the Anglo educational systems which became a powerful force in the assimilation of Navajos into Anglo culture. For example, for generations Navajos have learned from their grandparents through stories and family interactions and practices. Navajo children did not ask questions, made no eye contact, and were not tested to see if they had understood (M. Beno, personal communication, July 25 1994). This tradition is in conflict with current educational practices in which students are encouraged to learn by trial and error. The purpose of this article is to examine several cultural conflicts regarding education encountered by Navajo students on the reservation and potentially effective teaching methods to be used in resolving these conflicts in Navajo Reservation schools.

Native American Education in Public Schools

Historically, Native American children have been schooled in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, public schools, and mission schools. Many were placed in boarding schools far from their families. The federal policy towards Indian education traditionally viewed Indians as uncivilized and attempted to integrate American Indians into the mainstream of American culture via the American school system (Reyhner, 1981). The forced imposition of Western culture on

Native Americans is based on a concept referred to as assimilation. Forced assimilation can result in psychological conflicts as individuals desert many of their cultural values in order to accept those of Western society (M. Beno, personal communication, July 25, 1994). Forced assimilation has been identified as a leading factor for poor achievement, high dropout rates, alcoholism, and other disturbing indicators among Native American youth (Castillo, 1988). It is alarming that in Arizona public schools, Native American students obtained the lowest achievement test scores among all ethnic minority students (Bishop, 1992).

Table 1
Arizona Public Schools Achievement Test Scores, 1990-91 (Bishop, 1991)

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Ethnicity												
White	NA	58	55	57	59	58	59	53	65	63	62	NA
Asian	NA	53	54	57	57	60	61	46	64	55	54	NA
Black	NA	33	29	34	36	35	40	33	38	33	33	NA
Hispanic	NA	32	30	32	35	36	39	27	38	36	35	NA
Native American	NA	22	23	27	30	30	35	17	29	27	29	NA

Table 1 graphically displays the state of Native American education in Arizona. In 11th grade, Native American students are rated at 29 on a scale of 100 while Whites rated at 62.

In addition to the assimilation process, researchers have identified several other variables which affect the academic achievement of Native American youth. Swisher and Deyhle (1989) found that racial segregation, cultural disintegration, joblessness, and poverty were reasons for low achievement. Rhodes (1988a) observed that academic failure may be the result of teaching strategies that are in conflict with traditional Native American values. Poor performance of Native American students in schools may be related to a school culture that is different and often conflicting with the Native culture, which causes academic failure (Freark, 1982).

After nearly 50 years of experience with forcing Navajo children to assimilate into the majority culture and the use of diverse educational styles, types of schools, and different state standards, the overall performance of Navajo students remains substandard. In general, according to Anglo educational standards and goals, Navajo children are doing poorly. The Navajo educational system faces many inherent problems: language barrier, divergent cultural

values, parental doubts and confusion, poverty, lack of adequately funded schools, lack of trained Navajo teachers, and remote geographic access to schools. All these problems are based on the colonization process and on forced assimilation by the majority culture (D. L. Miller, personal communication, July 6, 1994).

Based upon existing research, seven factors in pedagogy have been identified as being related to the diminished performance of Navajo students. These seven factors are: (a) differences in learning and thinking processes (Rhodes, 1988b; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989); (b) cultural values (Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Tharp, 1989); (c) student response time (Rhodes, 1988b; Tharp, 1989); (d) student motivation (Cajete, 1988; Rhodes, 1988a); (e) holistic and visual approaches (Philips, 1972; Tharp, 1989), (f) adaptation of modes of instruction (Central Consolidated School District No. 22, 1986; Tharp, 1989); and (g) value conflicts in special education (Joe, 1980; Murphy, 1974; O'Connell, 1985).

Factors of Diminished Performance Among Navajo Students

Differences in Learning and Thinking Processes

The Navajo learning process has these components: observation, thinking, understanding, feeling, and acting. These components are in contrast to those used by Anglo learning styles, which can be characterized as observing, thinking, clarifying, and understanding. Anglos learn through the trial-and-error method. Navajos, by contrast, generally learn all they can before they act and therefore expect success without failure. Anglos learn from their failures, while Navajos' failures set back their learning process (Rhodes, 1988a).

Navajo learning styles stress observation as an important mode of learning. Many examples (Rhodes, 1988b; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989) illustrate that Navajo children repeatedly observe an activity, then cognitively rehearse the performance until they are certain they can do the task well, and only then undertake its performance. While observing essential steps in learning, Brewer (1977) stated that "learning through public mistakes was not and is not a method of learning which Indians value" (p.32). Many Navajo children believe that impressions formed by looking and observing are lasting impressions.

Navajo students are taught to avoid talking too much in the presence of older people or challenging them verbally (Central Consolidated School District No. 22, 1986). Before entering the formal school environment children learn to learn through early socialization experiences. Navajo culture affects styles of learning; for example, "an individual should not attempt an action unless he knows how

to do it; and if he does not know, then he should watch until he has understood" (Swisher & Deyhle, 1989, p.3).

Cultural Values

Navajos practice their culture, beliefs, and values in every facet of their lives. Navajo students are sensitive about their beliefs. Deyhle (1983) and Tharp (1989) have suggested that when instruction is compatible with local cultural patterns, improvements in learning can be expected. The polarity between Navajo and Anglo cultural values is so great that the teaching of Anglo values to a child reared in a traditional Navajo home can have a shocking effect. It takes more than a course in silverwork or Navajo history to answer a child's question: "Who am I?" Tharp (1989) suggested that the most effective classrooms for children from different cultures will be discernibly different and specific to these cultures. The task of education is to make teaching, learning, and performance compatible with the social structures in which Navajo students are most productive, engaged, and likely to learn.

Students should be given the opportunity to learn the values and customs of their people, especially as they are stressed in the Navajo oral tradition. Through their education, students can understand, appreciate, and respect the wisdom that has been passed down to them from the ancient people, so they may in turn pass it on to their children (D. L. Miller, personal communication, July 6, 1994). Today Navajo controlled schools place a high priority on the teaching of tribal culture. Development of native teachers is also an important trend on the Navajo reservation, helping to build a cultural consensus for Navajo children. Joe (1980) interviewed Navajo teachers who told of the difficulties and frustrations involved in teaching Navajo children in the public school system on the reservation.

Laura, a new Navajo teacher, said she had to change some of her teaching methods; "Lessons have to be shown—instead of just explaining them verbally—and each child has to be taught individually. All this is different—we also do more teaching in Navajo" (Joe, 1980, p. 185). Sally, another Navajo teacher, stated:

Sometimes I get so frustrated, if the students don't respond in English, I try teaching them in Navajo and when it goes right I feel good. I think it is tremendous then because these Navajo children must learn to operate in the Navajo as well as the Anglo world—It isn't easy—a Navajo child who must learn the ways of the Anglo always has problems—so when one of our kids here gets the things we are teaching, it's a big thing. (Joe, 1980, p. 193)

Anglo teachers frequently mentioned the language barrier as interfering with

their relationship with the Navajo parents. "I want to be able to talk and learn more about what parents think, worry about, or want, but since I can't speak or understand the Navajo language, I just try to guess what some of their concerns might be" (Joe, 1980, p. 208), said one of the Anglo teachers.

Navajo children do not value individual competition, especially when one individual appears to be better than another. Swisher and Deyhle (1989) stated that "the humility of an individual is something to be respected and preserved" (p.8).

Student Response Time

Navajo students often hesitate before responding to direct questions or commands. They need time to translate from English into their language, synthesize the information, formulate an answer, realize the implications of the answer, translate that back into English, and then respond. Researchers indicated that the time needed between question and answer can be as much as 40 to 90 seconds for Navajo students (Rhodes, 1988b).

Unfortunately, an elongated response time may lead Anglo teachers to do learning activities for Navajo students rather than wait for them to do activities at their own cultural pace. Students soon learn that Anglo teachers are impatient, and that if they wait a little longer, the teacher will do the work for them. Rhodes (1988b) indicated that non-Navajo teachers typically completed the task for students instead of waiting long enough for the students to go through their natural learning process.

Tharp (1989) discussed wait-time in two different situations. Wait-time 1 is the amount of time given by teachers for students to respond to questioning; wait-time 2 is the amount of time following students' response before the teacher again speaks. He investigated differences in wait-time between an Anglo and a Navajo teacher of the same Navajo third-grade students. The Navajo teacher had a considerably longer wait-time 2 than did the Anglo teacher. What was perceived by the Anglo teacher as a completed response was often intended by the child only as a pause, which the Anglo teacher interrupted. Therefore, teachers of Navajo students should slow down and wait for the students' own response time. Many reasons account for the need for elongated response time. For example, a Navajo boy described English in this manner: "a language with so many words for the same things you were never through learning them" (Tharp, 1988, p. 165). The process of translating back and forth requires additional time. "The educator who is teaching English to a child is at the same time teaching the child the cultural values of the English-speaking society" (Joe, 1980, p. 171). This completed learning needs additional response time.

Student Motivation

Lack of achievement by Navajo students may also be caused by motivational and attitudinal factors. Cajete (1988) states that conflicts between home and school regarding the purpose and importance of school are evident when instructions delivered to students are more structured, linear, less group-oriented, and more geared towards individual achievement than is the case in Navajo culture. Navajo students are motivated when their learning styles are encouraged and appreciated by auditory learning of stories, by observation, and by experiential learning (Rhodes, 1988a). A teacher's role is important for the initial motivation of Navajo students in school. The teacher must understand and appreciate that Navajo students bring cultural knowledge, values, language, and pride to school. These form the foundation for creating motivational tools and facilitating active learning for Navajo students. For example, Rhodes (1988b) stated that Indian students accept new material quickly and easily if it is presented in a more global manner. To motivate and enhance the Navajo students' learning, the instructional approach should be holistic and visual.

Holistic and Visual Approaches

Navajo children often like to hear or read a story through to the end before starting a discussion. Philips (1972) stated that in community storytelling, Native American children are expected to listen quietly to long stories. Listening to an entire text allows visual representation of the story's structural form. The ability of third-graders to think in terms of holistic form and their preferences for circular and other holistic diagrams of story structure, were repeatedly demonstrated in Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Navajo classrooms (Tharp, 1989). In general, Navajo children approach tasks visually by careful observation of things in their natural settings. For example, Navajos have exceptional abilities to perceive wholeness of a task or object and to be aware of how various parts fit into that wholeness, as is obvious in their work in art, crafts, and sports (Rhodes, 1988a).

Adaptation of Modes of Instruction

Tharp (1989) states that cultural groups that do not emphasize verbal/analytic problem solving are handicapped in schools because teachers rely so heavily on analytic methods and verbal forms of instruction. Literacy itself is the central goal of Anglo schooling. In contrast, verbal, analytic methods of instruction have proven to be detrimental to many Navajo children. Navajo educators have repeatedly advocated visual and holistic methods for the teaching of literacy for

Navajo children.

Shiprock School District (1986) produced a guide for teachers of Navajo students which provides information about Navajo cultural beliefs that conflict with learning in the dominant society's educational system. The guide offers rationales for taboos and makes recommendations for providing appropriate learning situations and materials to accommodate culturally specific learning styles. For example, young students may interact with an older person. In this way, according to the guide:

Young inexperienced persons should not ask too many questions, especially of elder people. The belief is that it is disrespectful for a young person to try to take a short cut to obtain wisdom and knowledge from an elder person when it took the elder person a lifetime to gain his knowledge. (Shiprock School District, p. 26)

Navajos believe that young people mature through different stages. As they mature they become ready for various information and skills for survival; therefore, young people do not need to ask too many questions or try to learn things beyond their stage of life.

Traditional Navajo education was carried on by observation and actual experience with far less direct instruction and verbalization than is present in most schools today. Researchers (Philips, 1972; Rhodes, 1988b; Tharp, 1989) emphasize that instruction should be contextualized within the student's experience, previous knowledge, and home environment. A growing number of schools (Rock Point Community School, Rough Rock, and Pinon Public Schools) are integrating Navajo culture, art, rug weaving, and storytelling into their curriculum in order to maintain the Navajo culture and identity.

Navajo students learn best by watching and then trying quietly by themselves. They expect acceptance from the teachers but do not expect public praise. Non-Navajo teachers praise publicly and single out a student as a success or failure. For Navajo children, quiet praise for individuals works better than public praise, which may cause embarrassment and set the student apart from his peers and Navajo cultural mode.

Value Conflicts in Special Education

Since the introduction of the Education for Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), special education services for Navajo children have greatly improved. However, to qualify for special education services a child must first fail. For

Navajos, failure leads to frustration and anger, which in turn sets back their learning process. The cultural background of Navajo children is in conflict with the current educational system in that the majority of Navajo students do not like to stand out in the classroom and answer teachers' questions. Rhodes (1988b) states that individual students know if they are right without needing to prove it to others. If they are not right or are not sure they are right, they will not want to show their ignorance in front of others.

Navajo children work independently without assistance or response from teachers. Some school personnel interpret this behavior to mean that Navajo children are withdrawn and need special education. Yet, individuality and self-sufficiency among Navajo children is not surprising in the Navajo culture, where six-year-olds begin to herd sheep alone and far from home (Tharp, 1989).

Joe (1980) studied Navajo children with disabilities and found that the leading causes of disability were infectious diseases, congenital abnormalities, and trauma linked often to the poor socioeconomic circumstances in which so many Navajos live. The Navajo definition of disabilities depends to a large degree on whether disabled individuals can function in society and are able to live up to their expected roles. Disabilities which are not visible to the eye are the most difficult to explain. Navajos' explanations relate to the causes of illness, not the symptoms (Joe, 1980). For example, congenital abnormalities are traditionally associated with a parent's disregard for certain cultural taboos or violation of certain prenatal taboos (such as coming into contact with taboo animals—snakes, coyotes, and owls). Special education teachers need to understand taboos and witchcraft if they teach Navajo children with disabilities.

Some Navajo families with disabled children turn to culture-based treatments, as indicated in Table 2 (Joe, 1980).

Table 2
Type of Culture-Based Treatment for Navajo Disabled Children (N=34)

Non-Western Treatment	N	%
Navajo Signs	8	24
Other Type of Healer	2	5
Native American Church	5	15
Not Traditional Treatment	19	56
Total	34	100

As can be seen, Navajo parents of children with disabilities relied on traditional ceremonies in 44% of the cases. Special education teachers need to be aware of these ceremonies and use them in their teaching. This involves knowing the child's family and traditional experiences within the Navajo culture.

O'Connell (1985) studied the child-rearing practices among Navajos and found that grandmothers are constantly consulted by their daughters on the problems of child-rearing. For instance, a health provider may identify an epileptic infant in need of medication and tell the caregiver that the child must be taken to the Indian Health Service facility for an examination and a prescription to control the seizures. In the meantime, the grandmother may be telling the young mother that the child's condition,

occurred because she viewed the blood of a dead animal during pregnancy.

The young mother will experience conflict between the two sources of information she is receiving. Given the strong influence of the maternal grandmother, however she may decide there is really nothing that can be done to help the child and, therefore, fail to get her child the needed medication. (O'Connell, 1985, p.4)

Navajo families' attitudes about child-rearing, disabilities, and education are different from those often seen in Anglo families. Social conformity is a highly valued behavior for Navajo children. O'Connell (1985) stated that,

When there is a handicapped child in the family, he/she is often hidden or sent off the reservation for services because the family may become ostracized within the community for raising a child who doesn't conform to the expected norms of that community. (p.4)

At present, public schools located on the Navajo Reservation provide special education services to students who have mild to moderate learning disabilities, mental retardation, and behavioral disorders. Similarly, students who have physical disabilities, speech/language impairments, or hearing impairments receive special education services. However, students who have severe and profound disabilities are sent off the reservation for education and related services (e.g., blind, deaf, and mental retardation) or placed in one of the three Navajo-controlled special schools.

Chinle Valley School for Exceptional Children provides special educational services to individuals with severe mental retardation in self-care skills, social behavior development, language development (both English and Navajo), prevocational training, and training in the Navajo tradition and culture. The Navajo Children's Rehabilitation Center located in Coyote Canyon, New Mexico, is designed to serve trainable retarded adolescents, 12 to 22 years of

age. Areas of emphasis include motor development, self-help skills, carpentry, weaving, leather craft, and bead work (Murphy, 1974). St. Michaels Association for Special Education, a nonprofit corporation located in St. Michaels, Arizona, is designed to serve children with mental, physical, visual, speech, or language impairments. In the St. Michaels school, parents and grandparents from the local community conduct weaving and silversmithing classes, as well as relating the Navajo legends to the children in their own language (Murphy, 1974).

Discussion and Conclusion

Since 1970, the federal government's policy toward Indian education has changed. Major attempts are being made to involve the parents of students in the educational system to allow greater local autonomy. Federal monies are available through Titles IV and VII for Native American parents to develop cultural and linguistic programs for their children (Ramasamy, 1992). The time has come to make use of these opportunities to meet the educational needs of the Navajo students in the present school setting. Tigges and Zastrow (1981) suggest that one of the important changes toward Native American education is for educators of Navajo students to assess the existing Anglo educational system to determine what they wish to delete or maintain in their own schools. By doing this, the Navajo tribe can benefit from its contact with the Anglo society and vice versa while maintaining strong cultural bases. The Navajo tribal government needs to design and implement an educational program to meet the reservation needs, focusing it upon the context of the Navajo culture, yet maintaining certain standards of objectivity and respect for the cultural sensitivity of the people. This can be achieved through cooperative work by community members, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and the tribal government.

The interaction of Navajo and Anglo cultures causes a special conflict between the school and home environments that Navajo children may encounter. To alleviate the conflict between values, the non-Navajo teacher must provide an atmosphere for growth, one that is based on openness, honesty, and consideration for the Navajo students' value system (Rhodes, 1988; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Tharp, 1989). A Navajo program which looks both forward and backward would use custom, tribal lore, and history to prepare for the future, which would integrate these most wanted forces to advance to the world of science and technology.

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