

Effective Teaching Strategies for Engaging Native American Students

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by

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Introduction

Recent statistical data from South Dakota and Montana reveal the dropout rate among Native American students is high and the high school graduation rate for Native American youth is the lowest among various minorities (OPI, Dropout Data, 2003). Achievement test scores for Native American students are low in both states, as well. It is important that schools and teachers attempt to find ways to improve this situation. In this study, teachers in two South Dakota schools that had a significant number of Native American students, along with a group of K-12 teachers from Montana, were surveyed in an attempt to determine what strategies those teachers had found to be most successful. Teachers were also asked what aspects of the Native American culture had significant impact on classroom interactions. The results of the survey were compared to recommendations specified in two textbooks for pre-service and in-service teachers. The authors of those textbooks had not focused specifically on South Dakota or Montana Native Americans, however.

Background

The two most frequently mentioned reasons given by students for dropping out of school were teachers' attitudes and lack of self-esteem (Gilliland 1999). To be successful in teaching Native American students Gilliland indicated that it was critical that teachers find ways to raise students' self-esteem. He went on to list several ways of building self-esteem, including having an accepting classroom climate, expecting every student to succeed, emphasizing strengths, giving students respect, including Native American

literature, art, culture, values and activities in the curriculum, and giving students pride in their people and heritage.

One of the challenges facing Native American students is the historical effect of education on assimilation and resulting loss of culture (Gilliland, 1999). Cleary and Peacock (1998) identified other challenges facing Native American students. One of those challenges was the manifestation of oppression including racism. Racism included institutionalized racism, overt and covert racism. Another manifestation of oppression was that of communities in trouble and the problems that resulted. The effects of peer pressure on culture, was another challenge identified by Cleary and Peacock. Cleary and Peacock recommended that teachers help students “walk in two worlds” by making sure that students are first grounded in Native American culture. Cleary and Peacock also stated that those Native American students who are grounded first, in American Indian culture, are more likely to do better in school than those who are not. Native American students, who are first grounded in their American Indian culture, exhibit fewer at-risk behaviors such as academic difficulty and social, emotional, and psychological problems.

Gilliland (1999) described cultural influences on students’ educational experiences. One influence was that of a people-centered, group centered culture. Cooperation and sharing are important Native American values and these can have an impact on students in mainstream schools. The extended family is also important in Native American culture and this may have an impact on a student’s school experience. Other cultural values which may influence a child’s behavior and teacher attitudes include significance of silence and concise expression, the avoidance of direct eye contact as a sign of respect, lack of pressure from time, and a sense of humor. Gilliland

also stated that spirituality and health, maintaining balance in an individual's life, is also important in Native American culture. Many Native American students hold deep respect for ceremonies which may affect their educational experience also.

In addition to the cultural influences mentioned above, Cleary and Peacock stated that Native American students often do not like to be "put on the spot" or receive public praise. In traditional culture, it was not appropriate for an individual to stand out. Some American Indian children do not like to be "spotlighted," even in a positive way. Drawing attention to oneself was not appropriate in traditional culture. The authors emphasized that teachers need to be aware of this and make an effort to provide positive reinforcement or recognition in a one-on-one situation to maximize the effects (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). The authors also stressed that differences may be found in individuals who are more "traditional" than those who are less "traditional" and more assimilated. Mainstream incentives such as grades and post-secondary education may not appeal to Native American students in the same way as non-Native American students.

According to Gilliland (1999), it is important for teachers to inspire students to achieve at their full potential. He pointed out several techniques that teachers can use to inspire high achievement. The first suggestion was accepting humor and making school fun. In addition, using positive reinforcement, emphasizing strengths, helping students set goals and developing a plan to reach those goals, challenging students, and reinforcing effort were recommended.

Gilliland (1999) also recommended that teachers get to know the culture and values of their students as well as their students' background of experience and community needs. Teachers should become part of the community. It is important for

teachers to get to know the parents and to recognize the importance of elders and ceremonial people in the community.

Teachers need to build trust in their students by demonstrating that they can be trusted (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). Besides being fair and consistent, the authors recommended that teachers get to know their students on a personal level. In addition, teachers should encourage parental support and involvement.

Cleary and Peacock (1998) identified several cultural differences that affect the educational experience of Native American students. Striving for harmony and balance in life—the interdependence of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being—was important and that individuals often experience dissonance when the harmony and balance was disrupted. This dissonance resulted in negative attitudes toward, and negative experiences in, school.

Gilliland (1999) stated that students need to see the connection between what they're learning in school and what they need to know to be a valuable member of their tribe and community (page 15). Since Native Americans have often viewed school as another attempt by the mainstream society to force them to assimilate, this strategy may be especially important for Native American students.

The authors also pointed out that in traditional culture not looking a person directly in the eye was a sign of respect, but that many teachers expected their students to look them in the eye. Silence was a positive characteristic also. It was important that people watch and observe before they acted, and performing in front of others before you were “ready” was not a good thing. It was not appropriate to show off, “pound your own drum” in traditional culture. Individuals often do not like to be put on the spot, even in a

positive way. Group awards are often more acceptable than awards earned through individual competition. Issues of time, the concept of family and the importance of extended family, spirituality, and the fact that mainstream incentives (grades, getting into college, etc.) may not be as effective with Native American students, were also mentioned by Cleary and Peacock.

In the following section, survey results are addressed in alignment with the findings of Gilliland, Cleary, and Peacock. As you will notice, most of the statements are very similar to the findings of the authors.

Survey Results

In this survey, South Dakota and Montana teachers were asked several questions regarding effective strategies for engaging their Native American students. Descriptive data in the form of personal responses are reported for each survey question asked. All responses are in reaction to observations and interactions the teachers have had with Native American students.

Cultural Differences that Affect Educational Experiences

The South Dakota teachers indicated that values, beliefs, economic issues, past biases from parents and/or grandparents regarding education, and the background/home life of students coming into school were important differences that affect the educational experiences of their students. One teacher added that some of these are a reflection of “culture of poor” more than culture of race. Some teachers indicated that students were often reluctant to speak up in class or to ask for help, and others indicated that praise given in private was often more effective than praise given in class.

The Montana teachers responding to the survey listed several differences that affected the educational experience. Those responses included:

- What cultural differences don't affect the educational experience?
- Students from different cultures have widely different assumptions of their roles as students and what they expect of their teachers.
- Patterns of language use.
- Motivation and priorities are not the same.
- Common ground must be found for learning to be genuine.
- All differences can affect the classroom.
- Everything potentially affects the educational experience.
- Everything, but in my school mostly the language and the value system.

Challenges Faced by Native American Students

Teachers were asked to list challenges faced by Native American students. The pressure of assimilation and the pressure to fit in somewhere, the challenge of bias and prejudiced thinking, past biases from parents and/or grandparents regarding education, the background and home life of students, a "culture of poor" rather than culture of race, and depression, anger, and prejudice were identified by teachers in South Dakota.

Montana teachers surveyed identified the following challenges: the legacy of oppression, cultural misunderstandings, problems of language, maintaining their cultural traditions and pride in their individuality while needing to assimilate, the mental challenge of not selling out your own culture, and being accepted and feeling comfortable in both worlds.

Challenges of Walking in Two Worlds

Those surveyed were asked how teachers could help students "walk in two worlds." The teachers in South Dakota identified several ways teachers could help. One was for schools to promote Dakota language classes and cultural events. Another suggestion was for teachers to be respectful to all students regardless of economic status and not to "snob" parents or "overdress." Teachers should stress to students the need of being good at something. Respondents indicated that it was important to teach units on Native American and White history. Teaching both heritages and helping students understand what "they're up against" was also mentioned. Teachers need to show

students that we're a "new generation" and that our approach is different than earlier schools which emphasized forced assimilation. Teachers should give students reasons for learning and relate that learning to the real world. Teachers can point out success stories and stress the importance of students doing their homework and "passing." Providing students with a variety of experiences and personalities was another recommendation. According to the teachers, students need a good level of pride in order to function in both worlds and that teachers need to help by fostering confidence in the students. Being proud of their Native American heritage was listed as being important. Another teacher indicated that it was important for teachers to point out role models, career paths and options. Honoring elders, attending events, showing respect for culture were also suggested. One teacher's response was "Have Native American friends." She went on to say that, although it may seem obvious, this was not always the case among faculty. Another suggestion was to remind students of similarities with others and to create pride in who they are. Programs such as Character Counts and Pillars should be connected to Native American beliefs in the medicine wheel. One teacher appeared to "downplay" the importance of "walking in two worlds" with the comment, "Why are they walking in two worlds?" Another teacher simply wrote, "Tell me."

Teachers from Montana listed similar suggestions. Knowing students as individuals; including Native American history and culture in the curriculum; valuing both worlds equally; "evidence her knowledge and respect for their traditions and heritage;" honest effort and example; enhance the positive aspect of having two cultures; integrate Native American culture in their classroom; being educated and respectful towards both cultures and the values they find important; promoting the development of

self-confidence; and acknowledging the unique position that American Indian students have in history.

Teacher as Learner

In this survey teachers were asked, “What and how have you learned from students that has helped you in teaching Native American students?” The number one response from teachers in South Dakota was “getting to know students, learning what they like to do, and building relationships.” The second most common response was having patience and showing respect. Other answers included the following:

- Don't make judgements.
- Allow enough wait time when asking students questions.
- It takes time for students to get to know you and to develop trust.
- Consider the students' home lives and the possible effect on homework.
- Don't single out students with compliments.
- Art activities and hands-on activities appeal to many students.
- Grades and motivation may be different for Native American students.
- Consider their possibly limited experiences and its effect on schoolwork.
- Use stories.
- Consider the time factor as it relates to culture.
- Students may be reluctant to participate in groups or to express opinions in front of the group.
- Work with students one-on-one.

Teachers in Montana responded to the question, “What and how and have you learned from students that has helped you in teaching Native American students?” with the following:

- By working with and observing students.
- Talking to parents.
- You reap what you sow.
- Become that trusted individual/be genuine and giving of yourself.
- Be comfortable in your own skin.
- Importance of precise language.
- Enjoy and benefit when working in groups.
- Approach each student with an open mind.
- Within all moments is an opportunity to learn.
- Teachers must set an example of humanity to earn respect of students.

Teaching Strategies

Teachers were asked to respond to the following question: “What teaching methods and means of interaction with students have worked for you?” South Dakota teachers indicated that one-on-one situations and small groups were effective. One teacher mentioned that the use of personal notes given to students was particularly effective. This seemed to correlate well with the literature. Other teachers mentioned that understanding Native American culture and beliefs and relating school to the Native American way of life was effective. Another teacher mentioned the importance of incorporating Native American culture into the curriculum. Some teachers mentioned the importance of having a sense of humor. An elementary music teacher said that showing Native American videos and singing Native American songs worked well for her. Other responses included:

- Showing concern.
- Being fair and sincere.
- Creating a positive environment.
- Showing students you care and getting to know students.
- Providing options or choices in assignments.
- Offering Dakota language classes and cultural events.
- Teaching units on Native American history and White history.
- Giving reasons for what students are learning and relating the learning to the real world.
- Teachers can point out success stories.
- Incorporate Native American culture.
- Get to know students.
- Be mother/grandmother figure to students.
- Understand Native American culture and their beliefs—relate school to Native American way of life.
- Be approachable; be visible.
- Show kindness, honesty, and openness.
- Treat Native American students like any other student in academic areas.
- Have a positive environment.
- Make students accountable and require them to do the work.

- Use softer speaking tones.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Use hands-on activities.
- Provide options/choices.
- Provide individual, creative opportunities for students to showcase their talents.

Montana teachers listed the following:

- Hands-on projects, computers, games, experiential lessons, story telling.
- For reading and writing, one-on-one and tutorial, when parents work with the child, also.
- Long range projects (plays, videos, portfolios), students teaching components of lesson.
- Real-life projects (actually influence it).
- Hands-on lessons with performance assessment.
- Use of a variety of materials (computer, textbooks, video, transparencies...).
- Working one-on-one, avoiding groups of 5 or more.
- Small group projects.
- Use of music.
- Assertive discipline did not work, use trust and be an inspirational role model

All of these responses support the recommendations made by Gilliland, Cleary, and Peacock.

Specific Subject Area Teaching Strategies

Teachers were asked, “What strategies/activities in particular subject areas have been especially positive or beneficial for your students?” The number one response was incorporating art. Offering students choices in learning and the product demonstrating that learning was another suggestion. Teachers also mentioned using small groups with contests between the groups. One teacher described a storytelling unit they used at the beginning of the year. Students designed multimedia presentations in which they presented themselves, places, family, and friends. All students completed this project and were proud of their efforts. Post-project self-assessments showed how much fun the students had. The teacher stated that this unit worked well with both non-Indian and Indians students. Other responses included the following:

- Getting to know students.
- Providing study guides for tests.
- Allowing adequate time for make-up work.
- Assigning detention to students.
- Incorporating Native American facts and points of view.
- Using a game to teach a lesson.
- Using Native American literature in language arts.
- Connecting Spanish with influence of Native American heritage.
- Studying origin myths.
- Providing alternative readings and videos that presented Native American perspective.
- Students responded better to verbal instructions than to written instructions.
- Having students sing songs in Dakota (in K-3 music) provided a sense of validation for their language.
- Teaching students how to effectively use computers.
- Repetition strategies were effective.
- Using Around the World flashcards in math.
- Offer ability-specific assignments which also lent itself well to choices.
- In social studies talking about buffalo and other culturally-related topics was effective. Also, having dancers perform dances, utilizing Native American speakers, and playing powwow and/or flute music during the day were effective.
- Music, movement, and manipulatives worked well with fourth-graders.
- Showing sincere interest in drawings.
- Using hands-on activities.
- Learning about each other's culture.
- Use various learning/teaching strategies.

Montana teachers identified the following strategies as being particularly effective in various subject areas:

- History: examining and analyzing Native artifacts (in and out of the classroom), building model homes, primary sources of oral historians, videos, Native guest speakers, learning, listing and analyzing Native culture and contributions.
- English: field trips about Native Americans and others, fund raising for trips.
- Pairing art and literature, classroom concepts to the public acts for the community.
- Jeopardy games, CSI type investigations.
- French: Internet and computers, videos.
- Utilizing the multiple intelligences.
- Build background knowledge, making connections, modeling and slowly releasing the responsibility to students.
- Music: teaching students how to play an instrument.
- Language Arts: field trips, reading and writing poetry, listening exercises.

While many of these strategies would be effective with non-Indian students as well, it is important to note their particular benefit with Native American students. It also reinforces the idea that students share many similarities.

Motivational Incentives

When asked, “What incentives have you found to be particularly effective in motivating students?” many teachers mentioned various types of extrinsic rewards. However, one teacher stated that having a “personal relationship with each student creates an atmosphere of trust and encouragement that goes farther than any extrinsic motivation strategy (he/she) had ever tried...(students) will work hard to please you and have pride in themselves.” Other teachers had similar responses. One mentioned “respect, honor, and interaction in trustworthy situations.” Another mentioned a “This is for you approach,” spending time with the teacher. Another teacher pointed out “Showing interest in them and respect for cultures.”

Incentives that Montana teachers found to be particularly effective included the following:

- Student dependent; they must believe they have power and influence.
- Use of films, power point presentations, free writing and reading times, games such as Jeopardy, choice contests.
- Public recognition and choices.
- Freedom of choice in lessons, games, and friendly competition.
- Corresponding with students from other cultures.
- Letting them know I (teachers) have faith in their ability to achieve.
- Positive feedback, praise, giving choices, helping students make connections.
- A final performance (culminating activity).
- Providing a role model, help students form a vision.

According to traditional culture, individual public recognition was not viewed favorably so public recognition as an effective incentive was somewhat surprising. It could be

possible that some adoption of mainstream cultural values had taken place in some students.

Other Suggestions

The final question, “Are there any other suggestions you would give to new teachers?” showed many responses similar to the advice mentioned by Gilliland, Cleary, and Peacock. The responses from teachers in South Dakota included the following:

- Be an excellent listener.
- Be kind.
- Be real.
- Look for individual’s good points before negative.
- Accept differences.
- Enjoy the cultural mix—each brings a unique flavor to the classroom.
- Get to know students.
- Believe in students.
- Make them feel safe to be who they are.
- Use the “STAR” approach—Smile, Take a deep breath, and relax.
- Understand the issues faced by students.
- Don’t be intimidated—they are still kids wanting to be cared about.
- Have patience.
- Talk to parents about concerns and have a plan of action in mind beforehand.
- Ask for help from experienced teachers you respect.
- Find support in teachers you are comfortable with.
- Understand where students are coming from and relate to their background.
- Have high expectations—don’t underestimate what students can do. Treat them with respect, challenge them, and both the teacher and the student will have fun and get the job done.
- Don’t stop learning—if you aren’t reaching a student try to figure out how to “hook” them into the subject.
- Remember you are there for the students.
- It is disrespectful for students to look you in the eye (cultural view)
- Be flexible with lesson plans.
- Learn as much as possible about differentiated instruction.
- Learn as much as you can about discipline and classroom management.
- Children see you for who you are regardless of what you look like, whether your clothes are new or old, and no matter how beautiful your bulletin board is.
- Love children like your own.
- Respect parents as you would your own parents.
- Don’t be afraid to ask parents or a tribal elder for help with things such as cultural stories, artwork, dances, etc.
- Allow students to share and express their culture in as many ways as possible.

- Bring the community to your room—invite parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, etc. to join you.

Montana teachers suggested the following:

- Learn from your students, whoever they are, believe in them, maintain curiosity and enthusiasm for your subject, go the extra mile, utilize every available resource.
- Develop contingency plans for absent students, be willing to start with nothing, have a thick skin, you are a human being teaching other human beings.
- Never be afraid to admit you are wrong.
- Vary teaching methods, pay attention to student feedback, look at them.
- Have faith in yourself and your students.
- Be flexible, allow students to work in groups, hands-on activities, nobody is perfect, let their (students) personalities show in their work.
- Talk to your students.
- Have fun with your class all day, every day.

Although many of the suggestions are important for meeting the needs of all students, they seemed to be particularly important when working with Native American students and creating a successful educational experience for them. The suggestions in this survey, provided by educators from both South Dakota and Montana paralleled the recommendations by the authors, Gilliland, Cleary, and Peacock. This is important for pre-service and in-service teachers to see, in that theory and practice do match in this case.

Conclusion

Although a limited number of teachers in South Dakota and Montana were surveyed, results from this study suggest that getting to know students, having respect for Native American culture, integrating Native American history and culture into the curriculum, and helping students be proud of their heritage, were important factors when

teaching Native American students. It is recommended that both pre-service and in-service teachers of Native American students embrace this research and practice what both authors and educators have suggested in this article.

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EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR
ENGAGING NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

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