

Diversity, Learning Style and Culture

Excerpted from article by *Pat Burke Guild*

Educators do not believe that all learners are the same. Yet visits to schools throughout the world might convince us otherwise. Too often, educators continue to treat all learners alike while paying lip service to the principle of diversity. Teachers know that students learn in different ways; the experience in the classroom confirms this every day. In addition, well-accepted theories and extensive research illustrate and document learning differences. Most educators can talk about learning differences, whether by the name of learning styles, cognitive styles, psychological type, or multiple intelligences. Learners bring their own individual approach, talents and interests to the learning situation. We also know that an individual learner's culture, family background, and socioeconomic level affect his or her learning. The context in which someone grows and develops has an important impact on learning. These beliefs, principles and theories have an important impact on the opportunities for success for every student in our schools.

Students who do not learn through whatever the current "best approach" happens to be are too often labeled "disabled" because their way of learning does not respond to that particular method. To further complicate the situation, the method becomes the identified deficit and the target for remediation. Remediating a deficit technique rather than teaching the desired skill through the student's strength is the norm in too many schools. The same pattern is evident in behavioral areas where, for example, an active, hands-on learner who does not have the opportunity to use that approach in a positive way in the classroom is described as lacking self-control and labeled disruptive or hyperactive. It disturbs many educators to see the tremendous increase in the number of students medicated for attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) without an examination of their learning styles.

Achievement Differences

The relationship of culture and learning style is also addressed in reference to student achievement. Most researchers believe that learning styles are neutral. All learning styles can be successful, but they also could become a stumbling block when overused or applied inappropriately. This concept explains the success or failure of different learning approaches with different tasks, especially as they relate to expectations in schools. There is evidence that students with specific learning style patterns (kinesthetic, field-dependent, sensing, extraversion) underachieve in school. Regardless of their cultural background, students who have these dominant learning style patterns have limited opportunities to use their style strengths in the classroom.

While relating culture, style, and achievement requires much more examination (Guild, McKinney, & Fouts, 1990; Myers, 1974/ 1980), serious inequity results if schools undervalue behaviors that certain cultures foster. Gardner (1991) advises that cultural practices yield "[children and adults who are characteristic of their own culture and who may appear dysfunctional in a culture that embraces a divergent or opposing set of assumptions]" (p. 53). This appearance of dysfunction affects the student's potential for successful achievement. Some students are caught in a no-win situation, unable to be true to their culture or meet school expectations. Irvine and York (1995) are blunt: "The cultures of students of color or their "way of life" are often incongruous with the expected middle-class cultural values, beliefs, and norms of schools. These cultural differences are major contributions to the school failure of students of color" (p. 489).

Source: New Horizons for Learning

Web address < <http://www.newhorizons.org> >

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