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Book shares native student insights

First nations children don't like to show off by answering their teacher's questions, research shows

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PRINCE RUPERT - First nations students are dramatically different learners than their non-native peers, and that difference is apparent from as young as six, a researcher from Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania has found.

Frederick White recently published his book, *Ancestral Language Acquisition Among Native Americans: A Study of a Haida Language Class*, after spending time researching a Grade 1 Skidegate elementary class.

During his time on the Queen Charlotte Islands, White observed 16 distinctive elements of first nations learning styles.

"I think that this information is important for the area because of the first nations population," said White. "Not just for the first nations teachers, but all the teachers because almost all of the teachers I know here would have some first nations students."

White also wanted to look specifically at how the Haida students learned when they were being taught their own language as a second language.

"There were some very important differences in terms of how they like to participate and how they like to learn," said White.

White is Haida, originally from Prince Rupert, and he says the subject is important to him because he had his own problems with the school system.

"I loved to learn, but some of the classroom settings were not conducive to my interests," said White. "I ended up quitting in Grade 9, went back, quit again in Grade 11 and ultimately got my GED when I was 26. I worked my way to my PhD."

He found that first nations students didn't necessarily give the teacher the authority that she was looking for. While it was frustrating for the teacher, most Haida students preferred to give their attention to other students in the class.

First nations students also tended to participate at their own discretion and resisted being called on in class.

"What's interesting is how they like to relate to the teacher," said White.

"Most often, instead of bidding for the teacher's attention, they prefer to go one-on-one to the teacher when it's quiet."

Often, the first nations students wouldn't offer to answer a question, even if he or she knew the answer, he said.

"It may be because they don't want to make their peers look bad by producing information that they may not have. In other words, it's inappropriate to look smarter than your peers," said White. "Those who want to display their knowledge are usually very interested in getting the teacher's attention. Most first nations don't do that. They do not compete in that way for the teacher's attention."

White also discovered that first nations students excelled when they were put into groups to work on assignments and tended to relate better to their peers than the teacher.

While it took non-native students a month to fit into a new classroom setting, it took the better part of the year for the Haida students to become acclimated to school.

White would like to bring his information to a professional development day because he says it would make a significant difference to the education experience for first nations students.

"I think it would change their classroom experience from the first grade and if it was kept up, you would see a lower dropout rate and a higher retention rate."

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