

“Respect and Encourage the Individual”: Learning among the Lumbee

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Native Americans have very different views about learning and teaching than other population groups in the United States. Their children learn to respect individuals and to encourage the talents of each individual. They learn that they have individual purposes within their communities—their family, clan, tribe, and nation.



In the early 1900s, Native Americans could not attend schools for whites or schools for blacks. Some who wanted a formal education went away to private boarding schools, where the first step to learning was to deny their native traditions, customs, and beliefs. Some, however, chose to attend one of the new state-funded "Indian" schools like the Croatan Normal School in Robeson County [pictured here] or the New Bethel Indian School in Sampson County. After many name changes and a move, the Croatan Normal School evolved into Pembroke State University and later the University of North Carolina at Pembroke—the first four-year college for Native Americans in the United States.

Native Americans agree that formal education is necessary because it provides skills that are needed to get jobs. But most Native Americans also agree that today's non-Indian schools take the Indian identity away from their children, and that they separate Native American children from their Indian communities and cultures.

Traditional Native American learning
Many Native Americans believe that modern American schools do not give individuals a sense of purpose in the world: Children are separated by age. They are not respected as unique individuals. They are told what to learn and when to learn it. They are more inclined to believe in one great body of knowledge and skills that everyone should learn.

On the other hand, traditional Native American education presents knowledge as part of a unified whole: It allows children to take control over their own learning and, in fact, makes them responsible for

that learning. It allows them to believe that no one person knows everything, and that the knowledge of each person contributes to the knowledge of the entire community. Children are taught through informal learning—through example, storytelling, and observation.

In traditional Native American learning, community elders and grandparents are responsible for raising and educating children. They work to discover the gifts and talents of each child and then encourage each child to use those gifts and talents. The Lumbee of

Robeson County have traditionally emphasized a strong grandparent-grandchild relationship in order to educate and to assist their young in becoming productive citizens.

Traditional learning and the North Carolina Lumbee

The Lumbee have been farmers in and around Robeson County for over two hundred years. They have their own distinct culture, language, and tradition. Traditionally, most Lumbee children have been raised on family farms by their extended families.

Among the Lumbee, grandparents play a key part in a child's overall development. Grandparents are often responsible for taking care of children while their parents are at work and are therefore able to spend a lot of time with them. This traditional relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren is very important to the tribal society of the Lumbee because it allows elderly members to feel needed, while children are treated with love and acceptance.

The grandparents usually allow children to start making their own decisions when they are between five and ten years old. Lumbee children are also allowed to make their own mistakes. The grandparents do this so that children will learn to take responsibility for their actions early in life.

Today's system of modern American education directly opposes these traditional ways. Lumbee parents prefer for their children to be raised and educated in a close-knit family where they are loved and treated as individuals.

Throughout the last two decades, an awareness of the traditional grandparent-grandchild relationship among the Lumbee has once again become increasingly popular. The Lumbee want to restore that relationship to their society because it allows their children to learn by traditional and informal ways—observing, imitating, and practicing. Those ways allow the children to use the advice of their elders to learn their place in their community; to know the importance of spirituality, service, culture, tradition, and history; and to be adventurous, explorative, and investigative, as well as to accept responsibility for their actions.