

# Culturally Responsive Education

## What is Culturally Responsive Education?

Culture is an important factor in many aspects of education. Geneva Gay, one of the progenitors of culturally responsive teaching, defines it as

"using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students."

Gay highlights the importance of culture in education:

culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment. Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn. As Pai, Adler, and Shadiow (2006) explain, "There is no escaping the fact that education is a sociocultural process."

Hence, a critical examination of the role of culture in human life is indispensable to the understanding and control of educative processes. George and Louise Spindler (1994) extend and further clarify this principle:

Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. They perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preconception. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural backgrounds that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself. Together students and teachers construct, mostly without being conscious of doing it, an environment of meanings enacted in individual and group behaviors, of conflict and accommodation, rejection and acceptance, alienation and withdrawal.



When used effectively, culturally responsive pedagogy has the ability to help students build **intellective capacity**...the increased power the brain creates to process complex information more effectively. Neuroscience tells us that culture plays a critical role in this process. (Hammond, 2014)



What we 'know' is intimately tied up with how we conceptualize the world and who we understand ourselves to be in it (Moya, 2006).

Culturally responsive education involves an awareness of the dissonance between the culture of an educational institution and the cultures of its students. Of this, Gay notes:

The cultures of schools and different ethnic groups are not always completely synchronized. These discontinuities can interfere with students' academic achievement, in part because how some ethnically and culturally diverse individuals customarily engage in intellectual processing, self-presentation, and task performance is different from the processes used in school. Demonstrating knowledge and skills may be constrained as much by structural and procedural inconsistencies (Au, 1980a; Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1985; Holliday, 1985; Spindler, 1987; Spring, 1995) as by lack of intellectual ability. Therefore, teachers need to understand different cultural intersections and incompatibilities, minimize the tensions, and bridge the gaps among different cultural systems. Congruency between how the educational process is ordered and delivered, and the cultural frames of reference of diverse students, will improve school achievement for students of color.

## Research Findings

When implemented in schools, culturally responsive education shows positive results for Indigenous students; some studies note positive effects for non-Indigenous students as well.

In a study of 40 Hawaiian language immersion and culture-based (HLCB) educators, Schonleber (2007) identified 10 specific and well-defined teaching practices considered by many HLCB educators as culturally congruent and linked to increased academic self-efficacy, resiliency and cultural pride; teachers attributed these changes to their implementation of culturally responsive education.

These strategies included hands-on learning, place-based education, and teaching based on observation of students. The strategies were clearly related to Hawaiian axiologies such as responsibility to community and stewardship of the environment. Schonleber reports:

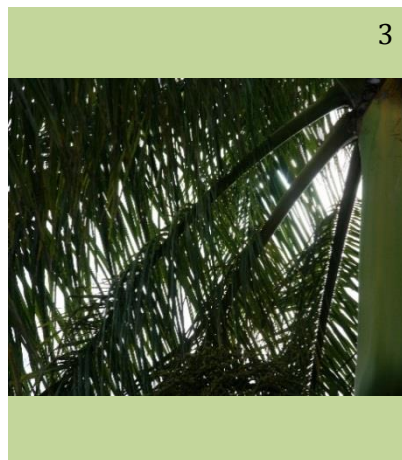
These strategies are connected to values and beliefs that are important to many Hawaiians, including the values of humility and patience as personal qualities, the value of harmony in relationships, and the belief that individuals have a responsibility to the community, the family, and the land. These values and beliefs were related to a worldview in which all things are interconnected, children have a kind of divine power participants described as mana, and the earth is to be cared for and respected as a living entity, "an elder sibling" (p. 240).

"Outcomes suggest that training in culturally congruent teaching strategies should be ongoing and systematic and that incorporating place-based curricula in public school settings could possibly increase the academic self-efficacy of Hawaiian students (Schonleber, 2007, p. 239)."

Takayama (2008) performed a comparative analysis of academic achievement data from various school types in Hawai'i – conventional public schools, western-focused charters and Hawaiian Language & Culture-Based (HLCB) schools and concluded: HLCB school types may make a significant difference in the academic achievement of Hawaiian students; non-Hawaiian students also showed positive effects; there are no academic losses in Hawaiian-focused charters and Hawaiian language immersion schools for students of Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian ethnicities.

Based on his study, Takayama posits the following:

- Non-Hawaiian students who may feel alienated by Western education systems may benefit from more relevant and applied learning environments as offered through HLCB schools.
- Culture-based education seems to parallel the principles of best practices while delivering instruction in culturally relevant and specific ways (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Takayama, 2009; Ledward & Takayama, 2008).
- HLCB schools are more effective than conventional public schools at moving students out of the Well Below proficiency status for reading at all grade levels and for mathematics in higher grade levels.
- HLCB schools are role models of educational reforms and racial integration that meet the needs of diverse students and increase the movement toward academic proficiency (pp. 271-272).



This research supports the notion that “Congruency between how the educational process is ordered and delivered, and the cultural frames of reference of diverse students, will improve school achievement for students of color” (Gay, 2010, Culture Counts section, para.9).

Hawaiian educators Shawn Malia Kana'iaupuni and Keiki K. C. Kawai'ae'a (2008) define the pedagogy used in Hawaiian culture-based schools as follows:

Culture based education is the grounding of instruction and student learning in the values, norms, knowledge, beliefs, practices, experiences, places, and language that are the foundation of a culture, in this case Hawaiian indigenous culture. It may include teaching the traditions and practices of a particular culture, but it is not restricted to these skills and knowledge. More important, culture-based education refers to teaching and learning that are grounded in a cultural worldview, from whose lens are taught the skills, knowledge, content, and values that students need in our modern, global society (p. 71).

They highlight these critical skills for culturally responsive teachers:

To understand the impact of culture-based education, we must be able to articulate and understand the approaches and philosophies used by indigenous educators. To be able to promote, share, and develop culturally responsive educational strategies, learning approaches, and systems that presumably benefit all children, especially indigenous children (A journey toward a Hawaiian indigenous educational framework, p. 69).

## Indigenous Learning Theory

A leading US educator and advocate of culturally responsive education for native Americans, Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs), presents an Indigenous Learning Theory that can serve as the foundation for educators. This Indigenous Learning Theory is based on Native Hawaiian and Native American cultures and other information and can "help teachers employ dialogic and Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning" (p.79).

Indigenous Learning Theory is about cultivating cognition and consciousness via spiritual awareness and reflection on lived experience. They direct us toward realizing that human awareness is a part of life's web. They connect us to smaller and larger elements in the universe (Four Arrows, 2013, p. 65)



When applied to education, Indigenous Learning Theory

weaves the empirical and the symbolic, nature and culture, self and community, power and love into a unified and unique vision of the world. It sees rituals, ceremonies, rights [sic] of passage, places and family histories and connections as integral and vital to the learning experience (Four Arrows, 2013, p. 65).

### Indigenous Pedagogy

In a review of studies done in Indigenous schools in the United States, including Native Hawaiian, Navaho, Blackfeet, Y'upik, and Ojibwe language schools, Demmert, Grissmer, and Towner (2006) offer this characterization of Indigenous pedagogy:

Pedagogy that stresses traditional cultural characteristics and adult-child interactions as the starting place for education (mores that are currently practiced in the community and that may differ from community to community). Pedagogy in which teaching strategies are congruent with the traditional culture as well as contemporary ways of knowing and learning (opportunities to observe, opportunities to practice, and opportunities to demonstrate skills) (p. 10).

### Pedagogies and Procedures Checklist

Four Arrows also offers a list of pedagogies and procedures which can "help teachers employ dialogic and Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning". He notes that when teachers are careful to integrate these elements into their practice, Indigenous ways of learning emerge (pp. 79-80):

1. field experience
2. cooperative learning
3. intrinsic motivation
4. student ownership of subject matter
5. critical reflection
6. intuitive work
7. visualizations and dream work
8. honoring student pace
9. using song and music
10. honoring place
11. using natural world as teacher
12. involving community
13. doing activism and serving others
14. remembering that everything is connected/related
15. using humor whenever possible
16. employing wellness/fitness considerations
17. using peer teaching
18. allowing for observation rather than participation
19. using storytelling prolifically and interactively that is related to the student's world
20. being aware of sustainability issues in the class, school and home environment

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