Culture as framework versus ingredient in early childhood education.

*Language and Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood Education*

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This article discusses the importance of culturally relevant early childhood programs, using the Native Hawaiian culture as an example. It is argued that the education needs to be based on cultural values. The goals and impacts of such a program are discussed, and a program that uses Hawaiian culture as its framework is introduced.

**Effects of Mainstream vs. Culturally Relevant Education Programs**

Traditional early childhood programs often adopt assumptions that there is one right way to educate a child, regardless of the child’s cultural background. However, research has shown that native Hawaiian students in public schools participating in mainstream programs show significantly lower reading and math scores, and lower rates of college graduation, than students of other groups. Basing education on cultural context would be an effective way to address this issue. Simply including Hawaiian culture as an additional subject area is not enough; Hawaiian culture needs to be the framework for the entire educational program. Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge and Western knowledge can both be presented to students within this framework.

Students who attended schools that immersed them in Hawaiian culture were motivated to learn the language, not ashamed of their Hawaiian heritage, and less alienated from school. The use of Hawaiian cultural customs at home also had a positive impact on children’s development: they scored higher in the areas of vocabulary, social skills, and language skills. However, most of the research in this area has been conducted in elementary and secondary schools, with very little being conducted at the early childhood level.

**Goals**

The goal of a program that is culturally responsive is to increase school success for children of diverse backgrounds. When children are assessed solely according to mainstream content and standards, differences are often labeled as deficits. Connecting mainstream content and standards to what children already understand increases success and decreases the likelihood of being labeled as “deficient.”

**Keiki Steps**

Early childhood programs are often center-based and do not encourage parent participation. This is in direct contrast to how young native Hawaiian children are traditionally taught. Grandparents or other family members usually care for the children and pass on traditional knowledge. One program that has been very successful within the traditional Hawaiian culture is Keiki Steps. It is a parent (or other family member) participation program usually held in or near an elementary school. Parents stay with the child for the duration of the entire program and actively participate in teaching them.

**Education within the Traditional Hawaiian Culture**

The foundation of traditional Hawaiian values gives insight on how to design a more culturally relevant and effective program. In this culture, children are chosen for tasks based on their own individual strengths. Children learn within the actual context in which an activity takes place, rather than in a classroom. Children are allowed to mature at their own rate and are not subjected to inappropriate expectations. Programs such as NCLB are in direct contrast to this because they assume children mature at the same rate and in the same order. Children learn by observing their elders in action, and new skills were taught based on what the student could already do. The *Tena* system is used and children move on to more challenging tasks only when they are ready, and if they fail they are simply given more time to properly learn the task. The *Tena* system yields high success rates because children are chosen for particular tasks based on intrinsic strengths and personal readiness.

**Conclusion**

Children of diverse cultural background are entitled to and benefit from culturally responsive early childhood education programs. These programs must treat culture as the cornerstone and not simply an ingredient in the delivery of services. This requires reconsidering the suppositions behind early childhood programs that serve indigenous groups.

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