Where Can We Collectively Be That Is Greater Than Where We Are Now?

Maenette K. P. Benham

"For many native and indigenous peoples, the place of school is contested terrain; it is a place of conflict, struggle, and negotiation over content, values, instructional strategies, and measures of accountability. If we look at who is doing educational research that is informing decision making about schools, we must ask, 'Where is the native voice?' We have a charge, a calling, to voice the native perspective that will define the future progress of native people. . . . Within the last decade, in the field of educational research, there has been much more scholarly activity focused on the educative dilemmas that confront native people. More importantly, the work is being generated and shared by people of native blood, who are passionate about who they are as native people."

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My name is Maenette Kapa'eahiokalani Padeken Ah Nee-Benham. My mother is from this *moku* (district), Ko'olauloa, the *ahupua'a* (land division) of Ka'a'awa. My father is from Pāpā, South Kona, Big Island of Hawai'i. I ask *Akua* (God) for a little bit of wisdom from my grandparents and *kūpuna* (ancestors) so that I can share with you my thoughts—to speak from both my heart and mind—in a way that moves your spirit.

Introduction

Much of my work these last 11 years has been focused on educational issues (kindergarten through postsecondary) in native/indigenous settings. In particular, I would describe my work as focusing on three themes: (a) the impact of educational policies and practices on native and indigenous children and youths, (b) alternative frames of organizational leadership that support collective and community action around schooling, and (c) the study of culturally responsible approaches to learning and leading.

In my work with native scholars, school communities, children, families, and elders, I have learned that across our unique communities there is a genuine concern for educating, preparing, and socializing the next generation. What is also common across these settings is that native peoples have had to struggle to gain entry into nonindigenous educational systems, and nonindigenous educational institutions have failed to provide culturally sensitive educational programs. For many native and indigenous peoples, the place of school is contested terrain; it is a place of conflict, struggle, and negotiation over content, values, instructional strategies, measures of accountability, and so on. Over time, the powerful influence of a dominant culture that values domination, hierarchical structures, competition, materialism and capital accumulation, and the individual over the community—values that have been reproduced in our school organization—has led to complex tensions that have served historically to marginalize native and indigenous communities.

When I began my work, in 1990, to better understand the systems and principles that frame how and what we learn that determine our life choices, there were precious few native scholars, much less Native Hawaiian scholars, sitting at the

educational research table. When I moved to Michigan State University in 1992, I remember my conversation with a prominent educational scholar who said to me, "So, why do you want to study native issues? You'll never become a star if you focus on that topic." I was reminded of a poem written by Audre Lorde, a feminist author and poet, titled "A Litany for Survival," in which she writes:

> And when we speak we are afraid
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> our words will not be heard
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> nor welcomed
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> but when we are silent
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> we are still afraid
>
> so it is better to speak
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> remembering
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> we were never meant to survive.

Nearly 11 years later I can remember that fall day clearly because it was at that moment that my advocacy for native ways of knowing and doing began. As many of us know, with the arrival of Euro/Western ideology, many native peoples have suffered the trauma of assimilation, cultural deprivation, and genocide. Despite this shock, we have survived, holding tenaciously to distinct traditions and languages. Yet, we are still at risk. There are many factors that have created, sustained, and explained why we are still at risk and underserved, but in education I believe it is because it is the tendency among researchers and scholars to define native people from perspectives and interests that have dismissed or romanticized them.

For example, in our schools, a nonnative teacher might view native children as academically disinterested and inept, and a nonnative counselor might focus on issues of poverty and family distress. Similarly, in the educational research arena, I review scholarly articles that claim to study multiculturalism, but the only

cultural groups represented are Latino, White, and Black. I talk with researchers who are interested in rural schooling but who have no idea that there are schools on the Indian reservations. And, despite the first-rate work by Kathryn Au, Alice Kawakami, Margaret Maaka, Manu Meyer, Lois Yamauchi, and others, I still have to teach Hawaiian Studies 101 to nationally and internationally respected authors! (No, I will not dance the hula at your next party!) If we look at who is doing educational research that is informing decision making about schools, we must ask, "Where is the native voice?" We have a charge, a calling, to do the good work, to voice the native perspective that will define the future progress of native people.

While I have been laboring from mid-Michigan on these conundrums, I have noticed that within the last decade, in the field of educational research, there has been much more scholarly activity focused on the educative dilemmas that confront native people. More importantly, the work is being generated and shared by people of native blood, who are passionate about who they are as native people.

That said, however, inquiry on teaching and learning, policy and practice, and organizational leadership and change (to name a few areas in education) focused on Native Hawaiian education is still in its infancy. There are challenging puzzles that we as scholars and advocates must think deeply about, and with the rigor of our disciplinary expertise we must work diligently to craft and conduct relevant research that is useful and that can help us address this question: *Where can we collectively be that is greater than where we are now?*

There are many educational topics that should interest us. I will try to capture my ideas in three key themes: first, knowledge and cultural literacy; second, accountability and value; and third, alliances and market forces. I discuss each of these in turn.

Knowledge and Cultural Literacy

In this first area, knowledge and cultural literacy, there are at least three interconnected topics that are making some headway in current educational research: (a) indigenous knowledge generation, language, and cultural literacy; (b) intercultural or cross-cultural knowledge; and (c) digital literacy.

Across the globe, indigenous peoples are demanding their right to control their own knowledge for many reasons, but in particular, because it is no longer tolerable that native youths must forfeit their cultural heritage to participate and to succeed in contemporary, Euro/Western-framed institutions. This effort to advocate for native control of the foundations of learning and teaching includes the following: (a) legal action to recognize the legitimacy of native knowledge (the Native American Languages Act of 1990 is an example); (b) active collection and recording of oral traditions, knowledge, and languages by cultural experts; and (c) vigorous work by scholars, community elders, and cultural experts to locate diverse ways to make their native knowledge relevant and "living" in the 21st century.

More educative work by dedicated scholars and educators is needed in all three of these areas. Also needed are complex studies that link our native ways of knowing with the sciences in ways that affect how we teach and what we teach, and that lead us to better understand the influence of culture-based education on the academic performance of Native Hawaiian children and youths. We need to learn from, and continue to build on, the large body of work produced by Alice Kawakami and the students and colleagues she has mentored. We can also learn much more from the work of other native scholars, for example, from Western Washington, William Demmert and John Towner; from Santa Clara Pueblo, Gregory Cajete (author of *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*); and others.

Building on the work of Lois Yamauchi and Kathy Au, we must conduct rigorous research that examines pedagogies that impact teaching and learning practices, and that builds cultural and multiple language literacy and strong comprehension skills. We need also to study carefully cooperative teaching methods, language instruction, interdisciplinary strategies, multicultural and culture-specific learning models, noncompetitive assessment strategies, visual and spatial literacy, and so on. And, as educational leaders in our communities, we can learn from (engage in dialogue) with other indigenous scholars, for example, Karen Swisher, a Standing Rock Sioux; Donna Dehyle at the University of Utah; Jerry Lipka, whose work focuses on Yup'ik Eskimo communities; and emerging scholars like Linda Skinner and Tara Jean Yazzie.

At the same time, we need more educative dialogue that has aesthetic value and contributes significantly to the cultural and spiritual sustenance of what it means to be Hawaiian. For example, there is need for more study on indigenous language revitalization and its implications for teaching and learning as well as student

achievement. We can look to the work of such researchers as Manu Meyer, David Sing, Davianna McGregor, Gina Cantoni (editor of *Stabilizing Indian Languages*), Estrada Vasquez (work on tribal language/culture and greater student success), and Lois Wong Filmore (work with Yup'ik communities in Alaska and the Pueblos in New Mexico).

As these areas of potential research clearly illuminate, the value of exploring and writing about our native/indigenous knowledge base is that it not only defines our uniqueness but also helps to ground our relations to others. A large part of what we are learning is that culturally responsible pedagogy requires that (a) students engage with political and economic riddles, and (b) students examine the historical and sociocultural complications of their local geography and its interrelationships with both the national and global venue. Hence, it is a focus on intercultural learning, which integrates culture, cognition, and experience in a way that acknowledges the importance of respect for cultural diversity.

Let me explain by sharing an experience. Recently I had lunch with a new colleague who is well educated and well traveled, and I believed at the time, astute and sensitive to many social, political, and cultural issues. But as we began to talk, what I heard were racial and cultural explanations that did not reflect the ideals of cultural diversity. I heard "color barriers are imaginary," "too much is given to minorities," and "differences between cultural groups are attributable to effort, values, and ability." This familiar point of view exemplifies the naiveté of the conservative ideology and illuminates, for myself, at least three key issues that we must address in our educative discourse around cultural and racial equity. First, even though there is legislation that mandates educative processes to address discrimination, there is very little resourcing behind it, so there are no real learning opportunities for teachers to truly understand the powerful dimensions and complexities of culture. Second, the complex dimensions of diversity have historically been kept out of the classroom—culture clash happens in our streets—however, racism and bigotry are very much institutionalized in our schools. We need to learn to name discrimination, to understand what causes it in our particular settings, and to know how to remedy it. Third, the value of cross-cultural learning and respect in the school setting must not be lost in all the current talk of equity, excellence, and accountability.

We must be vigilant because the sort of thinking I heard from my colleague, when left unchecked, takes on a life of its own, gaining status and carrying the social

currency required to define the vernacular of educational and social policy. For this reason we must incorporate intercultural learning into what we do, to build communities of learning for our children and youths and their families that teach respect for all humans and a responsibility for the greater circle of life. One of my mentors, Dr. Henrietta Mann, a Cheyenne elder and currently the Endowed Chair in Native American Studies at Montana State University, reminds us all that "the pain of one is the pain of all, and the honor of one is the honor of all."

While it is essential that we focus our research work on culture-based education and intercultural learning, I would be remiss if I did not touch briefly on the need to study digital literacy and its interrelations with native education. There is a tremendous amount of work going on in our schools mandating the use of computer technology. Much of this is happening so quickly that it is tough to get your hands around, much less sustain any considerable amount of thought on, one particular activity. Technology is ubiquitous—it is everywhere—and it is creating extraordinary digital divides. It is not as simple as those who have the hardware and software and those who have not. The divide is deepening because now we are looking also at the elements of speed and access, what knowledge and information count, and who knows how to use the information.

This is complicated by differences in school-based attitudes between "just in time" versus "just in case" technology. That is, either the technology is portable and available as a learning tool when it is needed or it sits somewhere just in case someone needs it. This creates serious learning gaps. With the demassification of information—the digitizing of information and making it available instantly to everyone—comes the responsibility to learn how to use this technology to deliver "just in time" information that enhances learning and teaching. At the same time, we need to take care that this process does not depersonalize and dehumanize/"deculture" the learning journey. We must consider the ways in which our technological literacy has, in fact, altered many of our foundational pedagogical beliefs.

Technology is presenting us with a whole new set of questions about the teaching and learning process, leading some researchers to explore a new way of thinking that is being called dialectical dialogue—teaching and learning that is interactive and constructive occurring in a virtual realm. We have a lot to learn from the Jasper Project and the Logo Project as we frame culturally appropriate and forward-looking learning environments for our children and youths.

Accountability and Value

One way to measure the success of any educative program is by its rate of dissemination into the actual work of schools, that is, its integration into teaching and learning activities. For example, the survival of many culture-based education programs—that they were even imagined, created, and sustained in the face of low expectations and disapproval—is reason enough to celebrate. But measuring the success of culture-based programs (or any educative program) by this simple, yet important factor is not enough in this challenging era where the legitimacy of the work that we do in schools is being scrutinized. Now, we can choose to be defiant—the "they are doing this to us" stance; or we can choose to be complacent—the "this too shall pass" attitude; or we can choose to be proactive, defining accountability measures that genuinely respond to such questions as, "How are these programs making a difference?" "What is the value of what we do and to whom?" and "How can we get better?"

Many educational leaders and scholars have chosen to be proactive. There are outstanding scholars whose work speaks to designing multidimensional approaches to assessing the work and outcomes of our schools, who look to building strong bridges between state and federal standards and the accountability measures of our own cultural core, and who are working to include the participation of teachers and students in the essential work of evaluation and assessment.

My work in several tribal schools, K–12 and postsecondary, has helped me to think more proactively about accountability. A metaphor that fits is the ripple effect in a pond representing a multilayered approach to accountability and assessment. Each layer or ripple asks the questions:

1. Accountable to whom?
2. If this element is truly valued, how do those involved learn to meet the particular goals?
3. How are the data codified?
4. How is what we are doing and learning interconnected with the other ripples or layers in the pond as well as relevant to other ripples in other ponds?

With each layer, the school, in this case, becomes accountable to larger and larger clusters of communities. For example:

1. At the core of our ripple effect we might begin with the school mission and ask the questions: What does the mission statement mean and is it relevant? How does it define our collective organizational identity and our individual passions and expertise? How does it drive policy and practice? In what ways can we see/measure the achievement of this mission?

2. At the next layer, we would focus on the classroom—on student learning, instructional strategies, content knowledge, and so on. Here is where the rubber hits the road: We need to ensure that there are multiple support networks about learning so we can respond intelligently to questions like: What is the student learning (cognitively, affectively, and culturally)? Can they demonstrate what they are learning? How does this meet the school's mission? To what extent do the process and the outcomes meet state, national, and global expectations and standards? Here is where we need to learn how to use multiple data sources—demographics, perceptual data, student learning, both normative and criterion referenced, and school process data—to meet both external accountability measures and internal developmental needs.

3. This would lead us to the next layer, where we would examine the school itself. We might ask such questions as: What is the climate of the school and how does it foster engaged learning? Here we would look at such variables as enrollment, retention, graduation, matriculation to postsecondary education, and so on. We would also examine the school's cultural norms, teacher efficacy, and leadership development. And we might study how the school's mission is (or is not) integrated into the daily work of those involved in the schooling process.

4. Finally, at the next layer we would study the nestedness of school and community relationships. Unfortunately, most educational institutions either ignore this layer (because they do not know how

> to look at it) or create meaningless platitudes to avoid really working at being accountable to the communities that they serve. Here we would ask such questions as: How is the school engaged with the community to help strengthen social, economical, political, and cultural capital? How is the school working with its communities to create a sense of hope and willingness to take responsibility to create meaningful change?

The key to our success in this accountability-driven policy world is to learn more about how to actively hold ourselves accountable, to acknowledge our strengths, to indicate our weaknesses, and to generate proposals for change. The data we collect must be balanced from at least three perspectives: (a) the numeric counts and its inferences, (b) the narrative story that puts a face on the quantitative results and adds depth to understanding, and (c) the cultural–historical and political–social contexts that add sophistication and meaning to what we do and why. I am truly persuaded that this is true. The following are several studies by scholars who are laying a strong foundation for the work that is yet to come:

1. Laurie McCubbin's study on educational resilience leads me to ask: How might our understanding of students who succeed despite the presence of adverse situations bring about new ways of thinking and improving education for students at risk for academic failure?

2. Katherine Tibbetts's work assessing student performance and implications for postsecondary education should lead us to further examine the impact of our educational programs on student attitudes toward learning and graduation. What does this mean for college matriculation?

3. Margaret Maaka's work with Pamela Lipka and Kathryn Au examines student-centered approaches and research on teacher education for the Hawaiian community.

Thinking about accountability, in this manner, reminds me of the Greek parable of the Fox and Hedgehog: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." There are many ways in which this little parable might be interpreted. I suggest that we cannot be either the fox or the hedgehog—we must embrace both the simplistic and constant drive of the hedgehog and the cunning complexity and diversity of the fox. In essence, the dynamics of such an approach to this age of accountability will lead to insightful study, meaningful work, and perhaps even a climate where educational institutions have the courage to tell the truth, communicate it, and face it.

Alliances and Market Forces

My third theme focuses on alliances and market forces, and the importance of these two ideas in the policy and practice inquiry. I will begin by going out on a limb—as many academics often do—and say that I believe there is an "absence of meaning" in education today. As educational institutions get drawn deeper into the minutiae of policies and regulations, there is growing grief and deepening cynicism among teachers, students, families, and administrators about the learning enterprise. Over the last 11 years I have been in urban, suburban, and rural schools across the 48 contiguous states, each one proclaiming a vision, mission, and set of guiding principles or values. In some cases these principles clearly define the work of the school, its relationships with the communities it serves, and the passion of its teachers. But in many more cases, the well-meaning guiding principles are little known, much less practiced. So, there is an absence of meaning.

People in schools are feeling isolated, alone, and directionless. The soul of an educational organization—this center that gives our work value and meaning—falls apart because of many internal and external pressures, but lately those pressures are being translated into policies that seek to reengineer the instructional process to correct the perceived deficiencies and solve the problems created by the unprofessional attitude of teachers. Rarely have I seen a school system (much less particular governing regimes) recognize that the problem is not with "the teachers and the students and those poor families"; the problem is with how the

organization has defined and enacted its mission, which has legitimized a school leadership style, its school structure, and its culture to mean "good for me" and *not* "good for all," thereby depersonalizing the very human work that we do!

What we need are new ways to look at how we frame our school organizations. We must draw on the goodness of our cultural traditions, the diversity of our settings, the capacities of the people with and for whom we work to be able to see beyond our current structures and define sustainable, generous, and interdependent organizational models.

So, alliances—building meaningful relationships and strong, intelligent networks among everyone who is a part of the educative process—are essential to the heart and soul of our schools. In my work with schools and the communities that they serve, what I know is that what teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members most desire is a genuine understanding of what connects them and each other to the important work we call lifelong learning. Yes, we say, "It's for the children," "All children can learn," "It takes a whole village," on and on—but what does that really mean and what does it look like? What set of sacred core goals connect our passions and our expertise so that as individuals, as teams, and as an organization, we not only can answer the question "Where can we collectively be that is greater than where we are now?" but we can also collectively capture that dream, make it a real part of our work, and sustain it.

As educational leaders and scholars, you must have the courage to re-"vision" the way we do schooling. Alliances, in this case, are essential because they link us to other institutions that can help us to build our capital to support our continued learning, initiate partnerships that provide creative instructional support, and help us—as our Native American cousins would say—to plan forward seven generations.

Building alliances is also key to how we view and handle the impact of *market forces* on the work of schools. I am not the only scholar out there who has criticized market-oriented policies of creating inequitable schools divided on lines of race, class, gender, regionality, and language. It stands to reason that I would be carefully watching recent attention on the role of markets to increase the standard of teaching and the quality of learning, which has translated into the choice and charter movements. On the one hand, I am ready to write this innovation off as just another way that particular communities of people are using their market advantage to recruit and maintain their privileged status. On the other hand, there is still a

glaring gap between the top and the bottom. While there are slight increases in test results, differential attainment is clearly divided in terms of social groups defined by race/ethnicity, geography, and poverty. The strength of this statistical link cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the unevenness in the distribution of services and knowledge across schools and school systems is still problematic. I believe more study needs to be done here.

There are certainly many ways to approach this. For example, many of my colleagues are doing work to better understand to what extent choice and charter encourage alternative choices for the underserved and encourage schools to improve their delivery, thereby creating a more level playing field. In addition, they are asking the important questions: Is what is being done truly making a difference in the academic achievement of the students? Is what is being done truly making a difference in a student's self-esteem and cultural esteem? Is what is being done making a difference in the communities that the school serves?

I believe that market-driven policies implicate many elements of our lives in general, and the study of market forces in schooling raises serious issues of social justice and differential attainment. The message here is that we should not be distracted by market principles but be cognizant of them. Remember that not all school problems have educational solutions.

Final Thoughts

It is my hope that these three key themes—knowledge and cultural literacy, accountability and value, and alliances and market forces—might be helpful to your own journey. What I have learned in my short, yet intense, visit to "the house of intellect" is that doing work with and for native and indigenous communities is like running a marathon. There are times of trepidation because the task is so great that one can only hope to have the capacity to continue. But, at the end of the race or the end of the day, although I am tired, completion—the smile of just one child—has its own energy, and so I believe that I can wake the next day ready to run again.

I encourage you to continue your efforts to study and ensure that culturally relevant learning experiences validate our Native Hawaiian children's culture, language, and home life. And I also urge you to continue to find ways to support the learning and increased development and resources provided to teachers, to help them assist their students to understand how their school learning can contribute to their own quality of life and to the healthy life of their communities.

Keep this in mind: If it is not us, then who will do this and to what end? Let us be the ones to answer the question: Where can we collectively be that is greater than where we are now?

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About the Author

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