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CREATING CULTURES OF SCHOOLING: HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE KEEP/ROUGH ROCK COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Hawai'i's Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) was established in 1970 as an applied research and development effort charged with the mission of discovering, developing and disseminating ways of more effectively educating native Hawaiian children in public school settings, where, as a group, they were not faring well educationally. By 1981, KEEP had developed a set of educational practices and strategies which seemed to be effective for Hawaiian children. These practices and strategies were designed to be compatible with Hawaiian child culture. However, there was lively debate concerning to what extent they were *specific* to Hawaiian culture, and to what extent they constituted "just good education" and could be utilized in the same form with other populations, with similar results. To address the issues surrounding this debate, KEEP began looking for an opportunity to work with another population of children, culturally distinct from Hawaiians, but facing similar educational problems. A combination of systematic searching and serendipitous events brought together KEEP and Rough Rock Demonstration School, a community-run school on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona, and an agreement was reached to collaborate toward a combination of mutual aims and separate, but complimentary, goals. The most intensive part of that collaboration took the form of a semester's joint work at Rough Rock by three KEEP staff members and two Rough Rock faculty members. This team tried out KEEP strategies and practices in one third grade classroom, and recorded and tried to respond to what happened there. This article discusses the history of the collaboration, the practical and theoretical concerns it attempted to address, and what may have been learned about process and product in minority education from the KEEP/Rough Rock experiment.

Introduction

Hawai'i's Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) and Rough Rock Demonstration School (now Rough Rock Community School), located in the northeastern comer of the Navajo reservation in Arizona, first began to discuss collaboration in 1982. At that time, KEEP had been in existence for 12 years, having been established in 1970 by Kamehameha Schools Bishop Estate, a private educational trust founded in 1887 under the will of Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop, the last heir of the royal Hawaiian Kamehameha family. She left her inherited family lands in trust for the educational benefit of native Hawaiian children. Just prior to 1970, most of the income from her estate was being used to operate a private school, located in Honolulu, which had the goal of educating leaders for the Hawaiian community. In practice, this meant that the schools were mostly serving the academically gifted, who also tended to be children from economically better-off families. In the late 1960s, as the Estate's income was increasing, the Estate trustees began looking for ways to extend the Estate's benefits more widely—including to Hawaiian children attending public schools, where, as a group, they were not faring well educationally. As one result of this outreach impetus, KEEP was established. It was to be an applied research and development effort, with the mission of discovering, developing and disseminating ways of more effectively educating native Hawaiian children in public school settings.

An ethnographic base for KEEP was provided by the work of the Hawaiian Community Research Project (HCRP) (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974; Gallimore & Howard, 1968; Howard, 1974), carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the auspices of the Bishop Museum (founded by Charles Reed Bishop, Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop's husband). The HCRP was the first large scale, systematic attempt to study and describe contemporary Hawaiian culture. Among other results, it produced a number of hypotheses concerning differences between Hawaiian child culture and the institutional culture of the school which might be contributing to the fact that the public schools were not serving children of Hawaiian ancestry and culture very effectively (Gallimore, Boggs, Jordan, 1974). However, specifying the what and the why of some of the things that were *not* working well in the education of Hawaiian children, while useful, did not automatically tell practitioners or researchers what kind of program and practice *would* work well for this population of children. Another step in the research and development process was needed. KEEP was designed as an effort to take this next step. KEEP's first ten years of work were carried out in a small laboratory school, where population, initial program and other parameters were shaped to be as similar as possible to those of public schools in areas with high Hawaiian populations and low achievement levels. The hope was that by observing Hawaiian children and their teachers carefully in this setting and then gradually and systematically introducing research- and experience-based changes, educational strategies and practices could be developed that would enable better academic outcomes for the children.

The KEEP research and development effort which evolved in the next few years was informed by a number of basic principles and strategies, which were key to the way that process worked, and which later also informed the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration (Jordan, 1985; Jordan & Tharp, 1979; Tharp, 1981; Tharp & Gallimore, 1979; Tharp, Jordan, Speidel, Au, Klein, Calkins, Sloat, & Gallimore, 1984).

The first and most basic of these was the determination that the main locus of change efforts would be the institution of schooling. While it was recognized that school "success" or "failure" is a product of what students, teachers and schools do together, KEEP's focus was not on trying to change students or their families, but on assisting schools and teachers to adapt and change.

Second, it was felt that program decisions made which were by consensus among workers who were drawing on information from a variety of theoretical and research perspectives would be more likely to be useful and usable ones than decisions made based on information from only one disciplinary perspective. Consequently, the KEEP research and development effort was, by design, a multidisciplinary one, involving educational practitioners along with researchers from a variety of professional backgrounds. Neo-Vygotskian concepts and terminology eventually came to be utilized for communicating across the disciplines.

Partly because of this variety of conceptual and theoretical orientations, program decisions were made using a strategy which required consensus among workers about *what* to do next, but not necessarily agreement about *why* the action was being taken.

KEEP was also guided by a strategy of least change; that is, it was assumed that the smaller the amount of change that needed to be made in schools or classrooms in order to make them work more effectively for Hawaiian youngsters, the more likely it was that the changes would actually be put into effect. The idea, therefore, was not to radically alter the educational scene, but to make the least amount of change which would still produce beneficial educational effects for Hawaiian children. This same strategy, along with the fact that the ultimate goal was to work in and with the public schools, also dictated an initial concentration not on curriculum content, which was, to some considerable extent, outside of the control of individual teachers and schools, but on the organization and execution of instruction. Also in accord with the strategy of least change, it was decided to begin work at the primary level; and both because it was the area in which primary grades Hawaiian children seemed to experience the greatest difficulty and because it is basic to success in later schooling, the area of reading and language arts was the one in which research and development efforts were first concentrated.

At the time that KEEP was established, very few Hawaiian children grew up speaking Hawaiian as a first language. (That circumstance is now changing.) Most spoke as their first code a dialect of English variously called Hawaiian Islands Dialect, Hawaiian Creole English, or simply Hawaiian English. Most children, as they grew up, also learned to be able to understand, and to a lesser degree, produce, Standard English, although most did not achieve the facility with Standard English of monolectal speakers. However, in 1970, the only language of instruction in the public schools was Standard English, and parents held the schools responsible for teaching their children the standard dialect. Hawaiian English was seen as a private code, suitable for use in informal situations and private life, but not appropriate for public and formal situations. Consequently, for both political and practical reasons, KEEP adopted a policy of teachers respectfully accepting and responding to students' speech in Hawaiian English, but themselves modeling Standard English and using Standard English as the language of instruction.

Initially, the KEEP lab school operated about as well for Hawaiian children as did public school classrooms, which is to say, not well at all. However, by 1982, some strategies and practices had been developed which seemed to work well for this population of children: the language arts program was producing much improved achievement for the children in the laboratory school; the program had been piloted successfully for two years by KEEP research and demonstration teachers working in two public school classrooms; and a small-scale dissemination effort in a public school was also going well. KEEP was on the verge of its next stage. It was felt that the program now had something to bring to a larger-scale partnership with the public schools, something which was worth sharing. (For a fuller account of KEEP's development, research and findings, see Tharp et al., 1984; also, Tharp & Gallimore, 1988.)

Is it Culture, or is it Just Good Education?

However, a crucial question had arisen which could affect the direction of future efforts: To what degree were the educational practices and strategies that had been developed by KEEP *culturally specific?* One of the conceptual underpinnings for the work done to that point, and the basis for one of the chief hypotheses about the success KEEP had so far experienced was the idea of cultural, compatibility (Jordan, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1992; Jordan & Tharp, 1979). Among the multidisciplinary staff, there were many different ideas about what were likely to be crucial factors to attend to in developing better education for Hawaiian children. The anthropologists on the staff were convinced from the work of the HCRP and from ongoing classroom observations, as well as from the developing literature in educational anthropology, of the likelihood that culture played an important role in the way that schools and Hawaiian students worked together to produce success or failure (Erickson, 1993); and gradually the concept of cultural compatibility in education had evolved. Culturally compatible education involves not trying to make schools and classrooms isomorphic with home culture, but rather using knowledge of students' cultures to inform the selection and adaptation of educational practices that are likely to elicit behavioral and cognitive repertoires appropriate to school goals and avoid eliciting those that are not. This implies that the process of producing cultural compatibility may build upon certain aspects of students' cultures, shape or extend some others, avoid others, and ignore still others. The product of this process is not an attempt to imitate natal culture or peer culture, but a version of school culture, shaped to be compatible with the students' home and peer cultures in ways that have desired educational effects.

The idea behind the cultural specificity hypothesis was that the version of the culture of the classroom that was being produced by KEEP was one that was both teacher- and Hawaiian child-friendly—that it was compatible with both the institutional culture of schooling and the culture of Hawaiian children—and that this compatibility with Hawaiian child culture contributed to its greater degree of success with Hawaiian children. A corollary to this idea was that some of what KEEP was doing was probably also to some degree *specific* to Hawaiian children. If this was the case, then not everything that worked well for Hawaiian children could be expected to work in the same ways for another population. Indeed, the cultural specificity hypothesis would indicate that not everything that worked well in one school with a particular population of Hawaiian children could necessarily be expected to work in the same ways with another population of Hawaiian children living in another locality and coming from a somewhat different background.

However, there was a strong alternate hypothesis current both among some KEEP staff and among some outside observers. This was that whatever success KEEP had enjoyed was because what KEEP was practicing and promoting in its classrooms was "just good education" or "just good teaching," and that such good education or good teaching was based on principles of teaching and learning which applied universally and were largely culture-free—that recognizing and adapting to the culture of the children had little if anything to do with the success of KEEP. According to this view, then, good educational practices and teaching strategies that were developed with and for one population of children should work equally well for other populations, whatever their cultural backgrounds.

In 1981, KEEP began to look for a way to test the cultural hypothesis. To do so, it needed an opportunity to work with a population that was clearly culturally different from Hawaiian children, but who experienced similar problems with the standard culture of the school. For the former, it seemed necessary to look outside of Hawai'i. For the latter, it seemed likely that another indigenous minority group would be the most likely candidate. In 1982, through a series of serendipitous circumstances, contact was made with Rough Rock Demonstration School.

Setting up the Collaboration

Rough Rock School opened in 1966, and in 1982 had been operating for 16 years as a community-controlled Demonstration

School developing bilingual/bicultural education for its population of Navajo children. In 1982, the Elementary School principal and faculty were pursuing their own active course of program and staff development. They were also struggling, as KEEP was, with the issue of low academic achievement levels among their students. After some interchange between KEEP and Rough Rock, the Rough Rock principal and faculty decided that they were interested in exchanging information and experience with KEEP, and that they would have a particular interest in KEEP's reading/language arts program. Rough Rock was, at the time, using a highly scripted reading program and wanted to explore the more open-ended and responsive approach being used by KEEP.

For KEEP, Rough Rock appeared to be a good place to attempt a test of the cultural hypothesis. Rough Rock students experienced academic difficulty similar in degree to that experienced by KEEP's Hawaiian students. However, as a school located in the heart of the Navajo reservation, Rough Rock served a population of Navajo children that was both relatively culturally homogeneous and clearly culturally distinct from native Hawaiians.

After KEEP and Rough Rock had communicated for some time and KEEP staff had visited Rough Rock, an agreement was made to work together. The heart of the collaboration was to be a semester's joint work at the Rough Rock Elementary School. At the last minute, the agreement almost fell apart when Rough Rock's principal, who had been the chief architect of the collaboration for Rough Rock, decided to move to another school. It seemed for a while as if the whole effort might founder, but the Rough Rock faculty voted on the matter and decided to go ahead with the collaboration on their own, and a third grade teacher and her aide agreed to host the KEEP visitors in their classroom.

The decision was made to work with a third grade class, in part, because at that grade level, English was being used as the language of instruction for some parts of the school day, and teaching reading/language arts in English (along with Navajo literacy instruction) was compatible with the Rough Rock's overall bilingual focus and the usual structure of third grade instruction. Also, Rough Rock staff judged that at the third grade level, most of the children would understand English well enough to be able to deal with the non-Navajo-speaking KEEP staff members, with some facilitation and explication by the Navajo-speaking teacher and aide.

The plan that was agreed upon was that a team from KEEP (a research and demonstration teacher and an educational anthropologist, with liaison and consultation from the KEEP principal investigator, a psychologist) would work with the Rough Rock third grade teacher and aide in their classroom for a semester. They would attempt initially to install and operate the KEEP language arts program in the Rough Rock classroom using essentially the same program structure and the same instructional practices and strategies that seemed to work well for Hawaiian children. They would then observe and record what happened. The basic method of the study was to install the major elements of the KEEP language arts program in the Rough Rock classroom and then watch what the Navajo children did to it.

The KEEP/Rough Rock Experiment

In the fall of 1983, when the semester's joint work at Rough Rock began, the KEEP language arts program had three main structural features: (1) a small-group classroom organization, utilizing a system of learning centers; (2) comprehension-oriented, direct instruction reading lessons using particular sociolinguistic and cognitive patterns; and (3) a system for managing child behavior which built on standard contingency management to assist the teacher in presenting herself as a person who was both "tough and nice," these being key attributes of adults that Hawaiian children like and respect.

What happened when these elements were put in place in the Rough Rock classroom? On one level, all three elements seemed to transfer, in the sense that they all were operable. The center system was fully running by the third week of school. The KEEP teacher was able to get the children to participate enthusiastically in the reading lessons. For the most part, the KEEP teacher and the children seemed to get along together amicably and with a developing affection between them. The children were reasonably compliant and on-task, and were judged to be mostly well-behaved by all concerned. However, none of the elements transferred intact in the sense of functioning in the same way for the Navajo children as they did for Hawaiian children. All three elements clearly needed to be significantly changed if they were to serve Navajo children well. So, after about six weeks for working with the Hawaiian version of KEEP, the KEEP-Rough Rock team began the first steps in the process of attempting to modify the program to better fit the Navajo students.

To this enterprise, the KEEP side of the partnership brought ideas about and experience with the process of working toward cultural compatibility in classrooms, as well as some knowledge of the culture of Hawaiian children and of what worked for them, but very limited knowledge of Navajo children and their culture. The Rough Rock members of the team, who were themselves Navajo (as were all but one of the elementary school faculty), brought an intimate and deep knowledge of Navajo culture and Navajo children, but had less experience with the process of applying such knowledge to educational issues.

Centers in Hawai'i and Rough Rock

One example of what happened in this process can be seen in the case of the organization of the learning centers. The classroom organization used by KEEP in Hawai'i involved learning centers populated by small groups of children (ideally 4 to 6) (Jordan, 1984; Tharp et al., 1984). Grouping was heterogeneous as to reading level. Boys and girls were mixed in the centers. Children rotated from center to center according to individual schedules. They worked in the centers without direct teacher supervision and were responsible for completing tasks in which they had previously received direct instruction from the teacher. The children were allowed to talk with each other within the centers and peer assistance was encouraged.

This center system was designed, in part, to harness for academic purposes the strong tendency that Hawaiian children have to interact and to assist each other and their preference for and skill in working in groups independent of direct adult supervision. An assumption behind the system, completely justifiable in the case of the Hawaiian children KEEP had worked with, was that if one child got into difficulty, other children would offer help. In the Navajo case, none of this functioned as it was "supposed" to. In the first place, the level of peer assistance in the centers was low. The children tended to work on their own tasks and to pay little attention to center-mates in difficulty. Hawaiian children constantly scan their centers, looking both for potential help for themselves and for evidence that others need help. They seek the assistance of others when they are stumped, and they will offer or even demand to help if they think somebody else has gotten something wrong or doesn't know what to do. In contrast, the Navajo children largely ignored each other's progress, and if they were having trouble with a center task tended to tough it out alone.

This circumstance constituted a major problem. The entire KEEP classroom system depended on effective independent centers, which freed the teacher for the small group direct instruction reading lessons. Since the center activities were not closely monitored by the teacher, the children's main resources for assistance were their classmates. In the absence of peer assistance, a child who needed help in the centers would not learn. In the second place, the children often seemed uncomfortable in the centers. They became restless; they moved from one table to another; they pulled their chairs away from each other to either isolate themselves or form into groups of two. In sum, the centers were not running comfortably for the children, and they were not producing peer assistance. The Rough Rock children were acting on the center organization and producing a clear message that something needed to be changed if the centers were to function well for them.

The team members consulted together and with the rest of the Rough Rock elementary faculty. They reviewed the literature on Navajo culture and examined their stores of personal knowledge and experience. Clues were found in all of these sources, but it was the children themselves who finally pulled all the clues together for the team. After first giving the children clear and explicit permission to help each other, and then trying to instruct, cajole and finally train them to do so, with little success, the KEEP teacher one day took the children off into the office, sat them on the floor and said, "We really want you to work together. What can we do to help you do that?" The children told her quite explicitly, "Well, first we have to have smaller groups. We could work in pairs." The teacher said, "Is there a way you could work together as a larger group?" They said, "Then the girls could work together and the boys could work together." And that turned out to be the key: smaller groups of the same sex.

There is a separation of the sexes m Navajo culture, both in roles and for purposes of interaction. By puberty, this separation is very salient. And even in third grade, at the age of eight or nine, boys and girls are beginning to expect and be expected to operate in same sex groups. Boys of this age are cautioned not to "play" or "fool around" with their sisters or female members of their clan, and girls are told to stay away from their brothers or opposite-sex clan mates. This cultural feature does not exist in Hawaiian culture, and mixing the sexes in the centers was not problematic in Hawai'i. In fact, mixing boys and girls had some beneficial effects for Hawaiian children, since some Hawaiian girls are socialized to be especially nurturant toward other children and thus were especially good facilitators of peer assistance, and because the girls' peer group interactions tend to be less potentially disruptive than are those of the boys (D'Amato, 1986).

There is also a difference between Navajo and Hawaiian children's experiences that seems linked to the desirability of having smaller numbers of children in the Rough Rock centers. One of the KEEP team members' original predictions about what might happen in Rough Rock had been that Navajo and Hawaiian children might manage the center organization in similar ways because both Navajo and Hawaiian cultures are characterized by a high degree of child responsibility and, in particular, by sibling caregiving. Thus, it was thought, Navajo children might be inclined, like Hawaiian children, to respond with assistance to peers in need of help. However, Hawaiian child life is also characterized by peer companion groups, work and play groups of close-age peers, which may include fairly large numbers of children. In contrast, Navajo in the Rough Rock area generally lived in widely dispersed dwellings, and such peer companion groups did not seem to occur for them outside of the school setting. It was eventually concluded that Hawaiian children's readiness for joint work in groups of four, five or six children and their alertness to assist in the centers probably sprang less from sibling caregiving than from the peer companion groups. On the other hand, Navajo children traditionally take on *individual* responsibilities at very early ages; some of the children in the Rough Rock third grade class had begun sheepherding alone or with one other person as young as five. For the Rough Rock children, it is perhaps not surprising that smaller groups or dyads were more comfortable work settings.

For Hawaiian children, groups of four to five students of mixed sex and ability produced manageable and useful patterns of peer interaction and assistance at centers. At Rough Rock, this arrangement made for discomfort and often wiped out academically useful interaction. After experimenting with a number of conditions, the best guess of the team at that point was that Navajo children would better help and interact in small groups of two to three students of the same sex, working at the same task; and before the end of the semester the team moved to begin reorganizing the classroom on that basis.

The team had similar experiences with the other features of the Hawaiian version of KEEP. All clearly needed to be adjusted and adapted to be more compatible with the culture of Rough Rock Navajo children before they would be maximally useful and effective for them. The team made some beginnings in developing a Navajo version of KEEP classroom culture during the semester of joint work. Essentially, the process in which the team members found themselves engaged involved taking a version of the culture of the school developed to be compatible with Hawaiian child culture and working to change it into a form that would be compatible with Navajo child culture—a different subculture, if you like, of the institutional culture of schooling.

After the semester of joint work was over, KEEP and Rough Rock staff continued working together, on a less intensive basis, for several years; and the Rough Rock staff, with some consultation from the KEEP research and demonstration teacher, continued with the development of their own program, their own version of the culture of the school. (For fuller discussion of the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration from the KEEP point of view, see Jordan, Tharp & Vogt, 1985, and Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1993.)

Reprise: Is it Culture, or is it Just Good Education?

What was learned from the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration and partnership? Different aspects of that question will be addressed by others in this issue. This article will only attempt to sum up what was learned from the semester of intensive joint work in the Rough Rock classroom, with a focus on the particular question with which KEEP originally approached the collaboration: "Is it culture or is it just good education?" Of course, one case cannot give a definitive answer to that question, but it did provide a solid piece of evidence. That evidence clearly came down on the side of the cultural hypothesis. That is, on the question of whether the fact that KEEP seemed to work well for Hawaiian children had something to do with cultural compatibility or was just a matter of universally applicable "good" educational practice, one would have to answer "yes" to both. There may well be such a thing as "bad educational practice," practices that don't work very well for any population; and there are probably, at some level, some universal principles of teaching and learning that hold true for all humans. However, the KEEP-Rough Rock work would seem to indicate that what version of good education—what subculture of the culture of the school-is going to be most effective will vary from group to group, from population to population, from locality to locality. Educational solutions developed in one place and for one population of students are not necessarily the best solutions for another population of children in another place.

Conclusions

There are at least two conclusions suggested by the experience of the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration. The first is that good education is education that, among other things, is adapted to the culture of the children being served. Good education is made better when cultural knowledge is used to inform the selection and development of educational practice. The second is the importance of "localized" educational development efforts. If children need to be educated in ways that are compatible with their cultures, then solutions to educational needs and problems need to be developed locally, with and for the different populations and communities that schools are trying to serve. This implies the importance of work being done at the level of school systems, school districts, individual schools, and even individual classrooms—of school- and classroom-based observation, adaptation and innovation, and local program and practice development. This is not to say that educational practitioners and researchers cannot learn from their colleagues in other places who are working with other groups of children, but rather that it is unwise to assume that educational programs and practices can be transferred intact and be expected necessarily to function in just the same ways for different populations of students.

Educational research sometimes has a tendency to focus on the "problem," rather than on the children. In addressing the failure of schools to effectively educate some populations of children, it is often assumed that if the presenting problem is similar, then solutions should be similar also. The KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration has provided evidence that this is not necessarily so. That assumption involves looking at only one part of the equation. It focuses on the problem, but does not consider that even when the problem appears to be the same, the children for whom solutions are needed may be quite different. And if that is the case, then the nature of the solutions to the "same" problem may not be the same-because it is in the children and their cultures that answers to many educational questions are to be found.

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