Making School Relevant for At-Risk Students: The Waiʻanae High School Hawaiian Studies Program

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The Waiʻanae High School Hawaiian Studies Program (HSP) is a community-based, culturally contextualized program for students at a high school serving a predominantly Native Hawaiian and low-income community. The program has been successful in promoting retention, motivation, civic responsibility, and a sense of belonging among students. The curriculum is built around weekly community field work with teachers and community mentors. This article describes 4 core elements of the HSP: (a) the contextualization of instruction within students’ home and school backgrounds; (b) the joint productive activity between teachers, students, and community mentors; (c) the “detracking” of students; and (d) the teaming and looping of teachers.

In this article, I describe a program that can be used as a model of education for students who are at risk for educational failure. The Hawaiian Studies Program (HSP) at Waiʻanae High School is a demonstration site of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE, 2002). CREDE is a national research center devoted to understanding how to best educate students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. CREDE chose the HSP as a demonstration site because it exemplifies principles for effective pedagogy articulated by CREDE researchers (CREDE, 2002; Yamauchi, 2002). In this article, I describe the program and distill its core elements so that educators working with other at-risk students can initiate similar programs. These core elements are (a) the contextualization of
instruction within students’ home and school backgrounds; (b) the joint productive activity between teachers, students, and community mentors; (c) the “detracking” of students; and (d) the teaming and looping of teachers.

NATIVE HAWAIIANS\(^1\) AND EDUCATION

There are many indicators that Native Hawaiian students have not been well-served by public education. Hawaiians are among the lowest scoring ethnic groups in the state on standardized achievement tests (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 1994; Takenaka, 1995). Hawaiians are also underrepresented in higher education and overrepresented in special education. For example, although Hawaiians make up approximately 20% of the state population (Kanaiaupuni & Melahn, 2001), they comprise only 8.6% of students at the main campus of the University of Hawai‘i (University of Hawai‘i Institutional Research Office, 2002). There are many possible reasons why Hawaiian students do not fare well in public schools. One possibility is that students’ school experiences are different from their experiences in their home communities. For example, the expectations teachers have for student behaviors and interactions may not match what is familiar in students’ home environments (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). Teachers may not be familiar with Hawaiian students’ cultural backgrounds, as Hawaiians account for only 8% of the state’s public educators (Benham & Heck, 1998).

Educational programs that have attempted to be more culturally compatible with Hawaiian youth have reported some success. For example, the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) restructured classroom interactions to be consistent with the participation structures common to many Hawaiian students’ home environments. KEEP teachers organized classroom discussions that allowed multiple students to speak at the same time, which is similar to informal discussions in students’ homes (Au, 1980; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Engaging in such a participation structure increased students’ academic motivation and achievement. Another example comes from Papahana Kāiapuni, the Hawaiian language immersion program. Most Kāiapuni educators are of Hawaiian ancestry, and many teachers have tried to incorporate pedagogy that is more consistent with Hawaiian values and culture (Yamauchi & Wilhelm, 2001). They report that their students are more receptive and motivated in such a setting (Yamauchi, Ceppi, & Lau-Smith, 2000).

Hawaiian students may also find that the school curriculum is not relevant to their experiences. Although state law mandates that all students learn about Hawaiian culture and history, a recent analysis (Kaomea, 2000) of the Hawaiian Studies curriculum indicated that Hawaiians are typically depicted as an ancient

\(^{1}\text{In this article, I refer to Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian people as Native Hawaiian or Hawaiian.}\)
people who no longer exist. Perhaps because Hawaiian studies textbooks are rarely written by Hawaiian authors, the view of Hawaiians and their culture is often presented from the perspective of tourists or colonizers.

THE HAWAIIAN STUDIES PROGRAM
AND WAI’ANAЕ HIGH SCHOOL

The HSP at Wai‘anae High School was developed as a culturally relevant and community-based program for Hawaiian students. Located on the western coast of the island of O‘ahu, Wai‘anae High School serves a rural community with the largest population of Native Hawaiians in the world (over 55% of its 35,000 residents claim Hawaiian ancestry). The school also serves a large number of low-income families and has the largest population of special education students in the state. In the 2000–2001 school year, 65% of all Wai‘anae High School students received free or reduced-price lunches, and 21% of the students qualified for special education services (Wai‘anae High School, 2001).

The HSP is open to all Wai‘anae High School students in Grades 10 through 12. HSP students take at least one half of their courses in the program but also participate in additional non-HSP classes. The HSP curriculum includes social studies, science (biology, chemistry, and environmental science), and English. The program is organized around themes of archaeology, health, native plant restoration, and Hawaiian navigation.

Student Outcomes

The HSP promotes positive academic development. For example, students’ grades improve the longer they remain in the program (Carroll, 1999). Compared to students in the high school at large, HSP students also have better attendance, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions of higher education or training (Carroll, 1999; RMC Research Corporation, 2002). A recent external evaluation of the program suggests a number of other significant differences between HSP students and a comparison group of non-HSP peers (RMC Research Corporation, 2002). The evaluators found that HSP students think more about career and postsecondary education after graduation and more strongly believe that they will graduate from such an institution. They also agree more that school is stimulating and fun.

The evaluators also found that HSP students feel more connected to their school and community (RMC Research Corporation, 2002). Compared to others, HSP students believe they contribute to their school and are valued by both adults and other students. HSP students also have more school pride and care more about academic issues. Regarding their local community, HSP students also report more
positive perceptions of their roles in the community and express more interest in and knowledge of the Hawaiian culture and the local environment and politics.

Students’ depth of scientific knowledge is evident in their winning high school competitions and presenting at regional and national science conferences. Prior to HSP students entering the State Science Fair in 1999, students at Wai’anae High School had not entered the competition in 16 years. The first year that HSP students entered, they became the state winners. In 2002, a HSP student won the district science fair competition in behavioral sciences. In 2001 and 2002, teams of students also won another statewide science competition to create models of a watershed. In the 2001–2002 school year, HSP students were invited to present their work at four national and regional water quality conferences.

Early Program Development

The HSP began as a collaboration between two Wai’anae High School teachers and a nonprofit community organization, Ka’ala Farm. One of the goals of Ka’ala Farm is to teach Hawaiian values and culture. Many of Ka’ala’s outreach activities are provided through their community learning center, which is located at a lo’i kalo (taro farm). Independent of each other, the two Wai’anae High School teachers, Linda Gallano and Lei Aken, had been bringing their students to the community center so that their students could apply what they were learning in school to a community context. Linda taught Hawaiian language, and Lei was the agriculture teacher. The director of the community learning center, Eric Enos, began talking to the teachers about working to develop a more integrated high school curriculum that included community field work and emphasized Hawaiian values, knowledge, and concepts. Ka’ala Farm acquired a federal grant that provided funds for curriculum development and planning. The first group of 39 HSP students enrolled in the program in fall 1996.

CONTEXTUALIZED INSTRUCTION

The most prominent of the HSP’s core elements is its contextualized instruction. Contextualization refers to the integration of academic concepts with students’ home, community, and educational experiences (CREDE, 2002; Tharp et al., 2000). Compared to learning outside the classroom, school learning often involves the presentation of abstract ideas that are separated from the contexts in which they are later applied (Engeström, 1991; Scribner & Cole, 1973). When teachers contextualize instruction, students become motivated because what they are learning is more meaningful and relevant to their lives outside of school (CREDE, 2002; Tharp et al., 2000). Prior experience also provides a framework to which abstract concepts are tied, so that these ideas are better understood and remembered. In the
following sections, I discuss three ways that instruction in the HSP is contextualized within the experiences of students and their community. These include (a) the development of community field work, (b) partnerships with community organizations, and (c) the integration of field and coursework.

Community Field Work

Instruction in the HSP centers around weekly field work at local sites that is supervised by community professionals. Every Thursday, the students and their teachers spend the day participating in these community projects. For example, in archaeology, students work with professional archaeologists to map the cultural sites of the Wai‘anae Valley and to participate in excavation projects. The maps and reports resulting from students’ archaeological activities have been used to oppose commercial development of the valley. This documentation has been included in the state record, and students have provided testimony to their neighborhood and land use boards.

Field work in environmental science focuses on issues of water rights and water quality testing of the local stream system. Students and their teachers, in cooperation with state and county environmental scientists, conduct chemical and other tests of the local stream environment. They are investigating why certain native fish and plants have disappeared and under what conditions it might be possible for such species to be reintroduced. A long-standing community concern in Wai‘anae has been the diversion of water from the local stream system to the local water supply. After presenting the results of their stream studies to governmental officials, the students were enlisted to conduct further studies that will help to determine whether more water should be returned to the valley.

The field work examples are related to contextualized instruction because academic concepts and skills are presented within a context that is familiar to students. While conducting field work in native plant reforestation, students learn about concepts such as the ecosystem, genetic diversity, and biological adaptation. Through their archaeological field work, students participate in measurement and excavation of sites, which requires them to solve problems using mathematical and spatial understandings. In environmental science, students learn about scientific concepts of biology and chemistry through participation in studies of their own community. They learn how their efforts to reestablish native flora and fauna are similar to environmental activism in other parts of the world and about the influences of global economics and politics on local affairs.

The field work promotes learning about what is valued in a particular community because it is a means by which community members can actively participate in

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2Wai‘anae High School operates on a block schedule. Three of the HSP classes are scheduled sequentially so that the field work does not interfere with other courses.
the educational process. For example, the archaeological and environmental field work is consistent with the traditional Hawaiian value *mlama i ka ‘ina* (taking care of the land). While engaged in the field work, the community mentors talk about this value. A shared sense of the concept develops and is connected to other academic concepts, such as environmental justice and ecology. In the process, students learn about community values and knowledge, as well as more traditional “school” concepts and values. Teachers benefit because they may not come from the community or may not have the expertise of community mentors. Likewise, community mentors benefit by having students and teachers work on their projects. Many of the community mentors also note that it is satisfying to work with youth, to teach them about their community, and to influence their development.

**Community Partnerships**

Contextualization is also fostered in the HSP through extensive partnerships with community agencies. The HSP has developed partnerships with more than 12 community organizations, including the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, a nonprofit organization devoted to assisting Hawaiian children and their communities; the University of Hawai‘i; the State Department of Land and Natural Resources; the City and County Department of Environmental Services; the Wai‘anae Coast Comprehensive Health Center; the governmental agency that oversees the water supply; and the community access cable television station. These partnerships developed through contacts made by the HSP teachers and Ka‘ala Farm, the organization that helped initiate the program. Some of the partnerships developed because of students’ interests.

Representatives from the community partnerships meet at least once a year for program evaluation and planning. The partners discuss their roles and how to improve the program and students’ educational experiences. Most community mentors volunteer their time to mentor students. A number of agencies also provide funding for transportation, curriculum development, and materials. These partnerships provide contextualization for the program because they are means for community mentors to provide feedback regarding what students should be learning and how academic concepts can be applied outside of school. Partners also provide information regarding postsecondary education and jobs. For example, at the planning sessions, partners discuss educational and career guidance that can be provided to students in their areas.

**Integration of Field Work and Courses**

In addition to connections between students’ community and academic experiences, contextualization also occurs when academic concepts are related to other educational experiences (CREDE, 2002; Tharp et al., 2000). Teachers
contextualize instruction for their students when they explain how new information is related to what was previously learned. Therefore, another way that contextualization occurs in the HSP is by teachers making connections between students’ field work and courses. For example, in social studies, archaeological field work is integrated with the learning of history. The teacher, Mike Rooney, talks about the kinds of artifacts students have been finding at their site and relates this to archaeological evidence regarding whether the first Hawaiians drifted from Polynesia or purposefully navigated to the islands. The students read various perspectives on this issue and prepare a debate. In English class, students write about their field experiences and other HSP activities as part of a student portfolio.

JOINT PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY

The second core element of the HSP is its promotion of joint productive activity (JPA), which refers to teachers and students engaging in activities that result in products, either tangible or intangible (CREDE, 2002; Tharp et al., 2000). Tangible products include concept webs, reports, and videotaped presentations. Intangible products include participants coming to a common understanding of a concept or a means of organizing an activity. JPA derives from sociocultural theory, which suggests that people appropriate the values, beliefs, and behaviors of those with whom they engage in frequent and meaningful activity (Tharp et al., 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, JPA goes beyond cooperative learning in that it requires teachers to be actively involved in collaboration with their students, not merely the organizers of student activity (Tharp et al., 2000).

Student Portfolios

An example of JPA in the HSP is the development of student portfolios. All students are required to assemble a portfolio that demonstrates how they are meeting program objectives. Although the portfolios are organized in their English classes, other teachers and community mentors are involved because students are encouraged to consult with them when determining what to include. In addition, students formally present their portfolios at the end of the year to teachers and community members. At these portfolio conferences, representatives from higher education, government, and business are invited as “mock interviewers.” The students present their portfolios to the interviewers and engage in a mock job interview. Teachers and the interviewers observe the sessions and provide feedback to students regarding their portfolios and presentations.
Senior Mastery Projects

In Grade 12, all HSP students are required to produce a culminating project that is based on their work in the program. The projects are advised by a teacher and a community mentor who is an expert in the area. Examples of senior mastery projects include a videotape about the HSP to recruit students for the following year, the development of Hawaiian studies curriculum to teach elementary school students, and archaeological research and reports. Although the social studies teacher assists students in developing the final report of their projects in his class, the project is also developed during students’ field work and during meetings after school hours, in collaboration with other HSP teachers and community mentors. All projects involve three phases of activity: research, analysis and writing, and presentation. During each of these phases, teachers and community mentors meet with the students to provide feedback and other assistance.

Community Inclusion

Although JPA is typically described as activity between teachers and students (CREDE, 2002; Tharp et al., 2000), the HSP is exemplary in its inclusion of community mentors. Examples of products that have resulted from JPA with community mentors are the many maps, reports, and presentations from students’ field work. With assistance from teachers and community mentors, students produced winning science fair projects based on their field work in archaeology and environmental science. Groups working at the community health center created pamphlets outlining the nutritional contents of fast food available in their community. In all of these contexts, the teachers, students, and community mentors work together in small groups toward a common goal. Such activity settings are conducive to conversations about the task at hand and its relevance to other concepts, academic and otherwise. These conversations are genuine. Students are questioning, analyzing, and contributing to solutions. It is through these conversations that much of the learning takes place.

DETRACKING

A third core element of the HSP is its detracking of students, as the program enrolls students from diverse academic backgrounds. The first group of HSP students included the senior class valedictorian; special education students; and “fifth-year seniors,” those who repeated a grade in high school, were over 18 years old, and therefore, required permission to return to school for a 5th year. Currently, some students are in special education, whereas others are honors students. Research indicates that tracking students by achievement or ability is related to those in the
lowest tracks receiving the worst instruction, the least exposure to conceptual and other academic knowledge, and the lowest expectations for academic performance (Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Creating programs that are designed to serve a range of achievement groups increases the likelihood that there will be high standards for all students.

Students also benefit from detracking because it exposes them to peers who may be different from themselves (Tharp et al., 2000). Interactions with those who come from different backgrounds provides students with an opportunity to gain new perspectives and understandings. Without intervention to promote students’ interacting with many different kinds of people, youths tend to group themselves by ethnicity, achievement, and social class (Epstein, 1989; Nickerson & Prawat, 1981; Tharp et al., 2000). The landscape of the typical American high school at lunchtime is evidence that students, when left to themselves, will congregate among those who are most like them in these regards. Teachers can work toward educational excellence by having students work with many different peers across divisions of gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic classes.

TEAMING AND LOOPING

The fourth core element of the HSP is its teaming and looping of teachers to create a smaller learning environment. With a total enrollment of over 2,000 students, Wai‘anae High School is a large rural school. Research on school size indicates that there are many advantages to students attending smaller schools. Compared to peers in larger schools, students who attend small schools achieve more, are safer, are less likely to drop out, and are more likely to have parents who are more involved in their education (Raywid, 1999). However, likely for reasons of efficiency, many American high schools continue to be larger than optimal, as 70% of all high schools enroll over 1,000 students (Cotton, 1996; Schoenlein, 2001).

Teaming

Teaming refers to a small group of teachers working with a subsection of the student population (Trimble & Miller, 1998). Middle schools often use teaming by grade level (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; National Middle School Association, 1995). For example, a group of educators who teach different subjects (e.g., English, social studies, science, and mathematics) form a team and only work with students in a particular grade level. Teams often meet to integrate curriculum across their courses and to discuss the progress of specific students. Therefore, teaming promotes a more contextualized education by connecting courses across the curriculum. It is also a way to create a smaller learning environment in a large school because students get to know a smaller group of
teachers and peers (Schoenlein, 2001). Although it is more typical of teaming for students to take all of their classes from a particular group of teachers, in the HSP, students take three or four of their six courses from HSP teachers. The HSP teachers meet weekly to discuss student progress and to engage in joint planning and professional development. To engage in these discussions, the teachers are released from two of their non-HSP courses through a grant acquired by a university partner. Prior to receiving the grant, the teachers met during lunch time.

Looping

Looping involves teachers moving with their students to the next grade level (Black, 2000; Little & Dacus, 1999). The advantages of looping include the development of more stable and caring teacher–student relationships (Reynolds, Barnhart, & Martin, 1999), the creation of a family atmosphere (Simel, 1998), and improvements in student participation and achievement (Black, 2000). When children remain with the same teachers, students are already familiar with their teachers’ routines and expectations, so there is more time to focus on subject-matter learning. This extra time is particularly beneficial for low-performing students, as looping provides more time for teachers to bring students up to grade-level standards (Reynolds et al., 1999; Simel, 1998).

In the HSP, four teachers teach 60 to 80 students, who remain with them for 2 years. Although the numbers of sophomores who elect to enroll in the HSP is increasing, most HSP students enter as juniors and remain for their senior year. Therefore, for at least 2 consecutive years, students have the same teachers and peers for the majority of their coursework. Ceppi (2000) found that when asked what they appreciate most about the program, many HSP students describe the feeling of ‘ohana (family) among students and their teachers. The youth feel that there are others who know and care about them. They develop a sense of identity as HSP students and a connection to the HSP community of teachers, students, and community partners. There is a sense of camaraderie, as students support each other both academically and socially.

CONCLUSION

The HSP at Wai‘anae High School is a program that has been recognized by CREDE for its responsiveness to at-risk students. Students in the program are actively engaged in activities that challenge them to think analytically about concepts that are meaningful to their own lives and communities. Although the program is housed in a large public high school, there is a sense of community among program teachers and students. Students and teachers identify with the program and are supported by its network. Educators from other communities who are in-
interested in designing a similar program should focus on four core elements: (a) the contextualization of instruction, (b) an emphasis on JPA, (c) the detracking of students, and (d) the teaming and looping of teachers. Although one of the strengths of the HSP is its contextualization of education within local Hawaiian values, issues, and knowledge, the core elements can be applied to many other settings when designing effective education for students from diverse backgrounds.

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