

BEST PRACTICES IN A HAWAIIAN KINDERGARTEN: MAKING A CASE FOR *NĀ HONU MAULI OLA*

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Since 1987, developmentally appropriate practices, or the “DAP guidelines,” have been widely accepted as the best way to structure and administer early childhood educational programs. These “best practices,” however, were developed with mainstream, Western, White children in mind. This article examines the inconsistencies between the needs and learning styles of ethnically part-Hawaiian children in a Honolulu kindergarten class and the DAP guidelines. The *Nā Honua Mauli Ola* (NHMO) guidelines, recently developed by Hawaiian educators, offer another set of best practices and are used to reexamine the teaching methods and classroom interactions with the same kindergarten class. This study describes the benefits and appropriateness of applying the NHMO guidelines in the context of educating young Native Hawaiian learners.

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In 2002, the Native Hawaiian Education Council, in partnership with Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, released a document titled *Nā Honua Mauli Ola: Hawai'i Guidelines for Culturally Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments* (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002). This slender volume describes 16 features essential to the creation of educational contexts that are culturally appropriate for Native Hawaiians and details the ways in which these features can serve as guidelines for learners, educators, schools and institutions, families, and communities.

Developed in consultation with the Native Hawaiian Education Island Councils, the Nā Honua Mauli Ola (NHMO) guidelines are grounded in “the belief that continued learning and practicing of the Hawaiian language and culture is a fundamental prerequisite for nurturing culturally healthy and responsive citizens and contributes to the growth and harmony of the community” (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 11). The NHMO guidelines provide a framework that can be used with learners of all ages in any learning environment—homes, schools, churches, community groups and organizations, and so on—dedicated to building “an educational foundation that embraces the learning of the Hawaiian language, culture, history, and tradition” (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 12). Intended to be a living document that can be adapted to community needs, the NHMO guidelines ultimately seek to promote a healthy and responsive learning community.

The NHMO guidelines are straightforward and explicit. The document offers a detailed and descriptive list of the expected outcomes for learners, educators, schools and institutions, families, and communities when each of the 16 guidelines is enacted. Focusing on practical application, the NHMO guidelines are compatible with the Hawai'i Content and Performance Standards and are modeled after the Alaska Native Knowledge Network's *Guidelines for Respecting Cultural Knowledge* (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2000).

The NHMO guidelines may be met with some resistance because they are a departure from the frameworks and guidelines currently in use in many educational contexts in Hawai'i. Most public schools use curricula, pedagogical strategies, achievement benchmarks, and assessment methods aligned with the frameworks and guidelines used throughout the field of education in the continental United States. These frameworks and guidelines—such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards or the National Association for the Education of Young

Children’s guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices—are widely influential: Their contents are generally characterized by the term *best practices*. And it makes sense to think that educators working in Hawaiian school contexts would want to use these best practices with their students.

But are these mainstream educational frameworks and guidelines really the best practices for Hawaiian children? In this article we explore this important question. To do so a case study is presented depicting a 15-minute slice of life in a kindergarten classroom in Honolulu. We interpret aspects of the teacher’s practice from two different perspectives. First we interpret the teacher’s practices using *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This influential document, commonly known as the “DAP guidelines,” was developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and published in 1987 and revised in 1997 as a reaction to efforts to expand traditional academic instruction in early childhood classrooms. The emphasis is on active learner exploration, individual needs, and age-appropriate play, and the guidelines are based on Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivist theory. The DAP guidelines set the standard for quality educational experiences for young children.

We then interpret the teacher’s practices using the NHMO guidelines, a standard for exemplary practices for Hawaiian learners. This process of interpretation and reinterpretation illustrates the gap between the mainstream use of “best practices” in a classroom and the unique and particular needs of Hawaiian children, their families, and their communities. This case study adds to ongoing research in the field of education by exploring the alignment between a child’s home and classroom environments.

WHAT MAKES PRACTICES “APPROPRIATE?”

The DAP guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices and the Native Hawaiian Education Council’s NHMO guidelines are similar documents in many respects. Both draw on a significant, established body of knowledge and are intended to guide educational decision making. Both reflect the values, beliefs, attitudes, and goals of the contexts in which and for which they were created, and both

exist to ensure that appropriate experiences will be made available to learners in those contexts. However, these two documents reveal a very different understanding of the term *appropriate*.

The DAP guidelines describe three sets of factors that a teacher must take into consideration when planning appropriate lessons and activities for the children in her class. First, activities must be *age appropriate*. Knowledge about the typical contours of child development and learning helps a teacher select activities and experiences that will be safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and challenging for children at a particular age or grade level (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Teachers intending to provide appropriate educational opportunities for their young students realize that many activities that might be engaging for three-year-old children are unlikely to be productive learning experiences for six-year-olds, and they make their instructional decisions accordingly.

Second, activities must be *individually appropriate*. Knowledge about the strengths, interests, and needs of each child in the class helps a teacher plan activities that will be relevant for the specific, particular individuals in his or her care (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). An activity might be age appropriate for six-year-olds in general but too difficult, too easy, or simply irrelevant for a particular six-year-old. Variations in development are inevitable in any given group, and the younger children are, the greater the variability. A teacher must be aware of the unique constellation of skills, capabilities, desires, and limitations embodied by each child in his or her class to create appropriate educational experiences.

Finally, activities must be *culturally appropriate*. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of the children's home communities allows a teacher to develop activities and teaching techniques that are meaningful, relevant, and respectful to his or her students (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). An activity could be age appropriate and individually appropriate for a particular child, but if it is not aligned with the child's cultural practices and/or the goals of the child's family, the child may not benefit from participation in that activity.

The understanding of appropriateness informing the DAP guidelines is grounded in the science of developmental psychology. In this view, young children are seen as qualitatively different from older children, adolescents, and adults and are thought to have specific needs in common with their agemates. In addition, each child is perceived as a unique individual with a particular set of needs arising from

his or her own personal interests, skills, desires, and experiences. Attending and responding to these varied needs is the cornerstone of appropriate early childhood education as represented in the DAP guidelines.

From the perspective of the NHMO guidelines in contrast, neither the age of the learners nor each learner's individual personality or needs is a primary consideration in determining appropriateness. In alignment with Hawaiian culture, the weight of emphasis tips in favor of the group rather than the individual. Educational activities, experiences, and materials are considered to be appropriate if they are culturally healthy and responsive and good for the group. Practices that lead to the perpetuation of Hawaiian heritage, traditions, language, and cultural knowledge and practices that forge bonds between past, present, and future and that sustain the family and community as a whole are key features of the definition of appropriateness according to NHMO guidelines.

At their core, the NHMO guidelines grew out of discussions among educators and elders in the Hawaiian community who are deeply concerned with the integrity of culturally based education regardless of the medium in which it is delivered. Is it authentic Hawaiian culture that is being transmitted or merely the more decorative aspects of it, even when taught in Hawaiian?

Through months and years of discussions, retreats, and conversations entirely in Hawaiian, the group summarized its conclusions with a philosophical statement titled, "Ke Kumu Honua Maui Ola: Foundations of Cultural Identity." Within conversations about the transmission of Hawaiian culture, participants tackled a controversial and potentially divisive question: "What is 'Hawaiian?'"

The *mauli* is the life force or cultural spirit of a person that is fed through three areas on the body which, at some time during our lives, physically connect us to others when we operate in any of several honua or environments. Literally, *Ke Kumu Honua Maui Ola* may be translated as "The foundation of contextually grounded living life force." All of its components derive from traditional metaphors and authentic ways of being as taught by Hawaiian families, and elders, in particular.

The *mauli ola* or living life force is exhibited and fostered through a sense of spirituality, behavior and actions, language, and tradition-based knowledge. Nurturing our mauli supports the cultural base from which one grows to serve the family, community, and others. The development and renewal of each individual's mauli and *mana* or personal power should be honored and respected at all times.

The *honua* are the environments that foster our connections to the people and places that anchor our cultural identity. The honua is the place where the mauli is maintained and nurtured. There are three honua that we experience during our lifetime—family, community, and global/universal.

The body contains three *piko* or umbilical cords: the spiritual connection found at the head; the inherited/family connection found at the navel; and the creative/inventive connection found below the navel at the *ma'i* [or genitalia]. Maintaining our connections enables us to continue our legacy and further develop it for future generations. Our sense of spirituality, family, place, and legacy are maintained and perpetuated through these connections (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2000, p. 5).

In May 2003 one of the authors watched these two different measures of appropriate practices colliding and coexisting in a classroom full of young part-Hawaiian children. Lisa Goldstein spent two weeks observing Mrs. Lyn Neill's kindergarten as part of a qualitative study exploring the ways in which kindergarten teachers balance the potentially contradictory goals of meeting the developmental needs of their students and guiding the students toward reaching predetermined academic benchmarks and standards. Mrs. Neill—an experienced and well-regarded kindergarten teacher at an elementary school on O'ahu—was recommended as a participant in this project because of her skill at helping learners reach their achievement benchmarks in child-centered ways. (The authors agree with this assessment of Mrs. Neill's teaching practice and believe that the following vignette accurately depicts the sensitivity and care she brings to her work.)

The kindergarteners sit at their tables, heads bent over worksheets and fingers clutching brightly colored crayons. They chat quietly to each other as they work on the task at hand, coloring in the outline of a carp on a worksheet that will later be cut and glued to form a Boys' Day kite. Mrs. Neill, wearing a flowered dress and a pointy origami hat, walks over to the CD player at the side of the room. "Let's listen to some music while we work," she suggests.

The music fills the sunny classroom and the children begin to sing along. Absorbed in their work and their song, the children barely notice the older woman in the corner of the classroom who has just begun to prepare their lunches. Grandma Mary, a beloved classroom volunteer, has set out 19 partitioned styrofoam trays on the table before her and is carefully doling out chicken, rice, macaroni salad, and apple slices, placing a small amount of each item on every tray. As Grandma Mary leaves the room to fetch the tray of milk cartons from the fridge, Mrs. Neill circulates around the room checking on the children's progress, hoping that most of the group will be done before it is time to sit down to lunch.

She stops beside one of the boys at Table 1 and bends down to look at his carp. Speaking in a nice, loud teacher voice, Mrs. Neill proclaims, "Look at how well Martin cut out all those little edges. . . . Martin, you are doing a really great job!" She checks in with the children at Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5, and then looks up the clock. It is 11:15. She exchanges a silent glance with Grandma Mary, who appears ready to serve the children their meal.

"It is time to stop your work and get ready for lunch," Mrs. Neill tells the class. "Please put away your materials and go wash your hands."

INTERPRETING AND REINTERPRETING PRACTICES: INDIVIDUAL CHOICES VERSUS COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP

From the perspective of the DAP guidelines, this seemingly peaceful and harmonious classroom scene is problematic in a number of ways. Immediately apparent is Mrs. Neill's decision to preselect a single activity and require all the children to complete that activity at the same time.

Giving children the opportunity to make choices about their educational experiences is a fundamental feature of developmentally appropriate practice. The belief at work here is that children are active meaning-makers who learn best when given the opportunity to self-regulate and to solve problems. When young children experience the process of deciding which activity to do, engaging in and completing the activity, and assessing their experience, they develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy. They improve their self-esteem and prepare themselves for future experiences of a more challenging nature. As the DAP guidelines state, "teachers promote initiative, prosocial behavior, perseverance, task orientation, and self-regulation by providing many engaging activities [and] encouraging individual choices" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 168).

Mrs. Neill's instructional decision making depicted in the vignette runs counter to the DAP guidelines because she selected the activity rather than allowing the children to make choices from a range of activities. The DAP guidelines explicitly characterize as inappropriate those educational experiences in which activities are chosen by the teacher rather than by the child. This includes situations in which "children have little or no opportunity to work on projects or activities of their own choosing or to use the materials creatively" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 164) and those that provide "few or no opportunities for children's choices" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 127). To create appropriate educational experiences for young children, the DAP guidelines recommend that teachers "provide opportunities for children to plan and select many of their own activities from among a variety of learning areas and projects" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 127) and strive to "stimulate and support children's engagement in play and child-chosen activities" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 128).

In a developmentally appropriate kindergarten setting, children would choose the activities in which they want to participate, and as a result the whole class would rarely be doing the same thing at the same time. The DAP guidelines make

this very clear. Descriptions of classrooms in which all of the children are working on the same task at the same time—such as those in which “teachers talk to the whole group or expect children all to do and presumably learn the same things at the same time without attention to their individual needs or differences” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 125) and in which “teachers use the same lesson and methods for all children without regard to differences in children’s prior experience, how individual children learn best, how much and what kinds of structure they need, and other individual characteristics” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 162)—are categorized under the heading “inappropriate practices.” In the DAP guidelines’ view, Mrs. Neill’s decision to have all of the students coloring their carp worksheets at the same time would be understood as an inappropriate practice.

Mrs. Neill’s use of a closed ended worksheet is also out of step with the DAP guidelines. The DAP guidelines encourage teachers to plan active, open-ended, child-centered experiences and to avoid worksheets and other simple forms of seatwork that “provide no real challenge for the children” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 124) and that fail to engage “children’s problem-solving or other higher-order thinking skills” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 126). Children learn best when their “teachers plan and prepare a learning environment that fosters children’s initiative, active exploration of materials and sustained engagement” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 125). By contrast, the DAP guidelines point out that there is little opportunity for growth and learning when teachers plan an activity—as did Mrs. Neill—in which they present information “to the whole group and assign paper-and-pencil practice exercises or worksheets to be completed by children working individually at their desks” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 165).

In addition to being explicitly grounded in an understanding of children as active meaning-makers who learn best through hands-on interaction with engaging materials and through solving complex problems, the DAP guidelines focus on the individual rather than on the group. This emphasis on the individual makes the DAP guidelines problematic when used in cultural contexts in which family and community are the central units of analysis and functioning. We argue that Mrs. Neill’s decisions, made for a group of Hawaiian children, are not best understood when viewed through the White, Western lens of the DAP guidelines.

Unlike the DAP guidelines, the NHMO guidelines are grounded in a Hawaiian worldview that highlights the profound importance of connection with others. Community is a recurring topic in the NHMO guidelines' vision of culturally healthy and responsive learning environments. Educators are encouraged to "maintain practices that. . . perpetuate the success of the whole learning community" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 17), to "provide safe and supportive places to nurture the physical, mental/intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual health of the total community" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 18), to "engage in activities. . . with community members" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 18), and to "engage in experiences which *mālama* (care for) the entire learning community" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 20). The NHMO guidelines suggest that Hawaiian culture does not share mainstream White culture's abiding interest in individualism and individual experience and achievement.

When viewed through the lens of the NHMO guidelines, Mrs. Neill's decision making can be seen as completely appropriate. Educational experiences in which all the children in the class are working on the same task at the same time is a way for a teacher to "create and maintain a safe haven for learning in which all students are actively engaged and contributing members" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 36) and to "reinforce students' sense of cultural identity and place in the community" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 39). Working alongside classmates on a common task becomes a way for young children to prepare to "assume responsibility for their role in relation to the well-being of the cultural community" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 26) and to "continue to develop personal communication, participation, and collaboration skills" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 26). This is a very different perspective from that presented in the DAP guidelines.

Mrs. Neill's choice of materials—a carp worksheet to be colored, cut, and glued to form a Boys' Day kite—is similarly transformed into a developmentally appropriate activity when the lens of the DAP guidelines is replaced by the lens of the NHMO guidelines. Boys' Day is a Japanese celebration observed in Hawai'i that has meaning and significance for many of the children in Mrs. Neill's class. The carp kites were a way to provide the children with opportunities to "celebrate and participate in local traditions and cultural activities" (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 43).

In the whole group discussion that preceded the activity described in the vignette, Mrs. Neill displayed the kite that she hung in front of her home on Boys' Day in years past in honor of her son Hoku, now a grown man living on his own. Boys in the class whose families hung kites in their honor shared their stories as well. The questions raised by children whose families do not celebrate Boys' Day were a springboard for a conversation about the variety of cultures that blend together in different ways in the lives of ethnically mixed Hawaiian families. This discussion highlighted the importance of appreciating the diversity that characterizes the Hawaiian community. Mrs. Neill's artful use of culturally responsive teaching strategies connected the children to the curriculum, to their teacher, to their community, and to each other.

INTERPRETING AND REINTERPRETING PRACTICES: INDEPENDENCE OR CONNECTION?

The DAP guidelines also take a clear and strong stand against Grandma Mary's contributions to the children's experiences in Mrs. Neill's classroom. According to the DAP guidelines, the independent completion of self-help tasks provides young children with a sense of mastery and improves their self-esteem. To enhance children's growth and development, early childhood educators should maximize opportunities for children's independent accomplishment, "encouraging children to do what they are capable of doing for themselves" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 126). When teachers or other adults "do things for children that they could do for themselves" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 126), they are demonstrating inappropriate practices. By the DAP guidelines' standards, Grandma Mary would have better supported the children's growth and development by allowing them to prepare their own lunch trays, helping themselves to the foods they liked best.

The DAP guidelines, rooted in an individualistic Western worldview, encourage teachers to provide activities that allow children to develop their ability to function independently and without adult support. The NHMO guidelines, by contrast, encourage teachers to provide activities that lead in the opposite direction. Rather than helping children learn to function without connection to the adults in their lives, the NHMO guidelines emphasize repeatedly the importance of helping children forge strong intergenerational bonds.

The NHMO guidelines are extremely clear on the importance of *kūpuna* (elders) in creating culturally responsive learning environments. Learners should “interact with *kūpuna* in a loving and respectful way that demonstrates an appreciation of their role as culture bearers and educators in the community” (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 22), “acquire in-depth cultural knowledge through interaction with *kūpuna*” (p. 23), “spend as much time as possible with *kūpuna*” (p. 29), and “demonstrate caring for *kūpuna*” (p. 31), and teachers and schools should do whatever they can to “foster the ongoing participation of *kūpuna* in all aspects of the education process” (p. 47).

Mrs. Neill feels she is “blessed” to have Grandma Mary working as a volunteer in her classroom. Many of Mrs. Neill’s kindergarteners live far away from school and experience the uncomfortable sense of disequilibrium that can come from being five or six years old and away from home and family for up to 12 hours each day. Grandma Mary’s presence brings a special kind of warmth and caring to the classroom community, and the pleasure she takes in nurturing the children is readily apparent to everyone. “They tell her all their secrets,” Mrs. Neill reports. “Things that they would never tell me! They love her, really and truly. She is like a real grandma to them.”

Grandma Mary rarely addresses the whole class as a group. In fact, she listens a lot more than she talks. Her relationship with each child is unique and special, grounded in small moments of deep connection. Most of her time is spent doing tasks a classroom aide or another volunteer might see as mundane and tedious: cutting meat, toting milk, tidying up the classroom. But in serving the children their lunches, Grandma Mary is nourishing more than the children’s bodies. She is providing a kind of sustenance and comfort that is crucial to the children’s happiness, health, and development in the “mental/intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual” domains (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. 18).

The DAP guidelines dominate the field of early childhood education because the theoretical frameworks on which DAP are based—developmental psychology and child development—emerge from the scholarship of mainstream theorists and reflect the values, beliefs, and goals of mainstream culture. There is a seamless and invisible alignment among all the pieces of this puzzle that gives DAP wide-reaching privilege and power in the field. DAP is presented

as best practices for all children in all early learning environments when they simply are the best practices for White, Western, mainstream children (Kessler & Swadener, 1992).

When the DAP guidelines are applied in an educational context not populated by White, Western, mainstream children—such as Mrs. Neill’s kindergarten class—the seamless and invisible alignment disappears, and the disconnection between the children’s home culture and the culture of school is apparent.

RETHINKING BEST PRACTICES

The inconsistencies between the interpretation of Mrs. Neill’s practices informed by the DAP guidelines versus the NHMO guidelines illustrate the dangers of relying exclusively on standards, expectations, rubrics, or guidelines devised by those unfamiliar with Hawaiian children when creating or assessing educational experiences for them. Our observations suggest that for Hawaiian children to receive an education that is truly appropriate it might be necessary to shift the working definition of best practices from one grounded solely in mainstream frameworks to one grounded in—and responsive to—the children’s home culture.

African American scholars such as Lisa Delpit (1988) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) have asserted for more than a decade that the most effective means for preparing children from minority groups for success in mainstream U.S. culture is to teach them in ways that are culturally relevant. Although these scholars’ work focuses on African American learners, their notions of culturally relevant pedagogy are applicable to the Hawaiian educational context. Teaching young Hawaiian children using practices that are consistent with the goals and values of their home culture and that validate and affirm their lived experiences in families and communities will prepare them for academic success and allow them to fulfill their potential for achievement in school and beyond. Educational contexts rooted solely in the DAP guidelines cannot make the same claim.

Qualitative data gathered through observations of Mrs. Neill’s classroom in Honolulu suggest that perhaps DAP guidelines cannot stand alone as the ideal educational framework for young Native Hawaiian children. The NHMO guidelines serve as a framework that aligns with ways of knowing and learning that are

congruent with a child's home experiences and, presumably, better situates the child for educational success. Support for the adoption and use of the NHMO guidelines continues to grow in the Hawaiian community (Native Hawaiian Education Council, 2002, p. vii). Experiences in Mrs. Neill's classroom underscore the need for an updated set of developmentally and culturally appropriate practices for Hawaiian children.

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