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Native Hawaiian Education: Talking Story with Three Hawaiian Educators

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Ola na iwi *The bones live*

A Native Hawaiian 'olelo no'eau (wise saying) which speak of respect for our elders and for the continuation of our cultural ways

Ola na oiwi. Our bones live. Our people live. We live through our action, thoughts and dreams. This 'olelo no'eau is a poetic way to begin this discussion of Hawaiian Education. We begin first by saying that we exist as one of the many distinct peoples of Oceania who came to these islands in the middle of the Pacific thousands of years ago. We were wayfarers, travelers and adventurers who left our ancient homelands for a better world, for a visit to relatives, for a new home. We have survived 2,000+ years of invasion, droughts, warfare and plagues. We currently exist in one of the most expensive places to live on the planet with a finite list of resources. We are island people, 20% of the Hawai'i State population of over one million, who exist at the bottom of all positive health and socio-economic statistics. It is a predictable picture of colonial oppression and decimation that began from the mooring of Cook's ships in Kealakekua Bay in 1778, and when the first organized missionary party landed in 1820.

Our history parallels the plight of many Native peoples and although we are indeed distinct, the imprint of oppression and power is a shared phenomenon throughout North America.

One morning, three Hawaiian educators sat down for a discussion between meetings and classes. Dr. David Kekaulike Sing, the Director of Na Pua No'eau, the Center for Gifted and Talented Native Hawaiian Children has been a creative, strong, and enduring force who has helped shape Hawaiian Education for the past 25 years. He was one of the first Researcher/Educators who looked at Hawaiian culture, values and practices for cues to effective pedagogy, spirit and meaning. Dr. Alapa Hunter is the Assistant Director of Na Pua No'eau and our kupuna (elder) who keeps the spirit of aloha (love and compassion) alive in this movement. She is an example for how best to act with regard to Hawaiian spiritual essence and how it links to all that we do in teaching and learning. Dr. Manu Aluli Meyer is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at the University of Hawai'i in Hilo. She works with future teachers on issues of culture, engaging pedagogy, and liberation theory.

We offer this now, in verbal form because it best describes the *how* of cultural epistemology, a fundamental belief we all feel must be prioritized back into our process **and** product of what Education is for our people. We decided to do this in this format because the written word, although succinct and clear, would not have been possible as a group. This "talking-story" session is how we as Hawaiians best approach an issue. It includes all our voices and the nuance of group energy, group *mana*. It is hoped that the readers will feel themselves present in the fourth chair. Here is what we talked about in David's office one cool morning in Hilo, Hawai'i:

David: Let's begin with the question: "What **do** we want our kids to acquire in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes?" I think this is the beginning point to describe Hawaiian Education. If we were to define that for ourselves as Hawaiians, it may not be the kinds of things we find in regular Education, and therefore what gets measured is not what we have understood as the priorities for how we would describe ourselves as "intelligent." We may, instead, measure the way our students respect us, by the way they're able to do certain kinds of protocol, by the way they're able to do things. I always ask the question to parents, and this is one that really gets people thinking: "What would you want your grandchild to know?" "What do you think we should be teaching them?" It becomes a personal question....

Alapa: It's your own beliefs.

David: So, when you're working with your kids or grandchildren, you're trying to mold that person to what you think is best, regardless of what school is defining for you. So, maybe that's where the interpretation of what Hawaiian education is. It should be coming from our own people and so we begin there. It's about knowing what our beliefs are about the skills, abilities, morality, talents, and information they need to have as part of being a Hawaiian.

Manu: That's it! That's an epistemological point. What do we believe about priorities of knowledge and what do we want our kids to know is fundamentally a philosophical discussion set in a Hawaiian mind, culture, and context. So now, what makes that question important today as we think about Hawaiian

education's past, present and future? What are we doing to answer that key question?

Alapa: You know, when I look at how our families have been treated, it tells me that we're not caring enough for each other, so one of the things, as a grand parent, I want my kids to be able to say: "I need to take care of my family" and find ways that will help the family grow and be strengthened. Too often what I see today is that everybody is out for their own self rather than for the family. What's going to help us grow together? It's good to have individual strengths, but how is that going to help a family?

Manu: Do you see this philosophy go into the policies in the things that you do here at Na Pua No'eau?

Alapa: Yes. One of our strengths is our belief that the family is important. This is seen in how we nurture the children, how we look forward to being with them and working with the whole 'ohana (family).

David: What's nice about having Alapa here is that, just by watching her, people will know how to behave, by her responses with staff, by her responses to students. They see the model that we should have the kids follow. So, it's not only talking about it; we're walking the talk. As far as family, I define my role as feeder. It's kinda built around cooking and cleaning in my family, but it's more than just the food. I make myself available in all the situations that will help them grow in the ways they should grow, and I think it's important to start defining your role. Sunday is 'ohana day and so we come together and the kids know that when they grow up and when they marry and have kids, Sunday is 'ohana day. We also have certain traditions we keep. So what I try to do is establish a sense of

what family should be defined as, so they have in their mind a memory or the model of what it could be. I become a feeder who feeds them.

Manu: Do you see this feeder as your role as the director of Na Pua No'eau? As someone who establishes rituals, leads by actions?

David: Yea, I guess so. I guess that's been the route that I've been going-- by not just doing stuff, but making a blueprint for people to use. We have something to build around, to shoot for so when challenges are there, the model is set up to deal with those challenges.

Manu: So, can you now go over what some of those "blue-print ideas" are with regard to Hawaiian Education? What are the main tenets of your model?

Alapa: One of the misconceptions that others have of Hawaiians, which I like to defuse at every possible point, is the fact that we're lazy and we don't do things on time. Eh! Don't give me a Hawaiian time comment because I know when I was young my grandparents were workers! They were up early and went to sleep late. They had a schedule that was always early. So, you cannot tell me "late" is Hawaiian, because that's not what I saw as a kid. I don't know where that came from.

Manu: Is it time for us to describe our own reality? That's what I get from what you just said because most of our teachers, most of what is printed, and most of what we read in textbooks has never been from a Hawaiian mind. So the idea of us describing our own reality is one way to paint a more accurate picture of who we are as Hawaiians.

Alapa: Sometimes I wonder, the media says we're lazy, but I wonder, by the time they (non-Hawaiians) get up, the Hawaiians pau (finished) with their work already! We didn't work under a hot sun.

David: Well, that's exactly it. I think it's how people perceive the behavior if they're outside of the culture. I remember when faculty used to notice that local students say nothing in class, so they used to say: "Oh, those students don't know the answer." But the students, they're just being reflective or nobody asked them the question yet. They're not going to be talking if nobody asked them the question. So, it's another culture interpreting your behavior. Our behaviors are being interpreted by the broader society in terms of how we think, how we behave and how we learn. These basic elements are what form Education.

Manu: That's it right there. We have known that but now we've put our finger on it by saying: "Yes, but we differ." This is how we differ: family matters, we have priorities of feeding in a physical and spiritual sense, utility matters; knowledge is always relationary. So, now you've actually developed a program and philosophy that is a tangible reflection of what we believe

David: Our program does reflect what we believe are aspects that promote how our kids behave, what our kids are motivated towards, and the environment in which they learn best. Until we are in control of being able to develop that and when it's in somebody else's hand, they're going to look at it from their perspective.

Manu: So, being able to shape the values, environment, and curriculum is a good starting point to define our own priorities of knowledge and thus education. What do you see happening when this is able to come about?

David: That's self determination. The whole issue of sovereignty is not that somebody doesn't want to be controlled by somebody else, it's just that when you are controlled by somebody else, they're telling you what to do and that's not the way you want to do it! So self-determination can happen if you have a government that supports multiple and diverse ways of doing things. In this society it's very difficult. Our model allows kids a broader way of learning. By seeing, by doing, by all the different ways that reinforce learning in a broader way. Whereas the Western approach is mostly abstract and that doesn't work for all people.

Manu: Some people would say that the abstract way is a "higher form of knowing" so that our job is to get them ready for the abstract.

Alapa: That's good too. Sometimes we have others focusing only on the abstract so that they forget the basic foundation of building and strengthening the person so that they can go there, because I want our kids to be able to think that way too. But don't forget where they come from. I want our students to feel strong and confident because once they feel confident of who they are, they will go out there. You have to know who you are as a Hawaiian.

Manu: Because of the shift in American politics, race-specific programs that foster a strong identity are under attack because of the fear that we promote race consciousness at the exclusion of others. Of course, that argument is always offered by non-Hawaiians. I bring it up now because it is coming up more and more often in my Student Teacher classes. An all-Black school with Afro-centric

curriculum is more controversial than your average American classroom with a Euro-centric context simply because it is not mainstream and could potentially question the status quo. When Hawaiians begin to start defining our own beliefs about knowledge and thus shape our own schools, I believe they will re-define what Hawaiian Education can be. Can you imagine if we got to define history, literature, movement, art, and music? Being pro-Hawaiian is not anti-Haole (White). I find it always fascinating that defining who we are is now becoming more and more political.

David: Basically, what we're trying to do is address a problem that society in general hasn't been able to address. We provide a venue of programs that fully optimize the talents and abilities of our population. Here's a population that society has not been able to promote to do higher level kinds of things; well here's a program that comes along that does that. It's not a matter of fostering Hawaiians to just be together but of trying to allow society to be better at addressing the needs of all of us. That's a nice way to put it.

Manu: That runs contrary to the whole thrust that we all have to assimilate to one culture, one way of thinking.

David: True, but this has nothing to do with one way. This has to do with the whole educational opportunities, and equal educational opportunities.

Manu: Is Hawaiian education just a stepping stone to get our kids to acting, thinking and being effective in a competitive environment?

Alapa: I'd like for our kids to go to college and achieve there, but to have a Hawaiian who works on the farm and contributes to his community in whatever way--that's

an educated Hawaiian to me. He's helping. I'm happy that way too. That's what I want, somebody out there, helping and sharing.

David: The key to it is being able to define for themselves and being able to provide them an opportunity to make choices about what they want to do and what is their destiny in life. Part of being Hawaiian is being connected to your community and part of education is what is it that you do that can help contribute to your family and community? If it's being a medical doctor then that's what you do.

Alapa: And you have the talent and you have the ability... go for it!

David: So, basically, if we have a community and we have an 'ohana and, in the past, it's always been Western people have to come out to service us as doctors, as lawyers, as teachers. That's not what our self-determination is all about. Our group is about sending our people to go and get educated or having our people do these things for our own people, and that's what Hawaiian education is like. It's having a connection to who we are and being inspired to give back, wherever that role is. We as Hawaiians have all kinds of kuleana (responsibilities), so Hawaiian education is more of a realization that we have the capabilities to provide for ourselves.

Manu: So, then, educating the individual is within the philosophy of inter-dependence and connection.

David: It's just like a team sport. The whole team is playing but each individual has to develop their talent and have their kuleana. So, we work on individual development for the betterment of the whole.

Manu: So, what is unique about the individual development of Native Hawaiians?

Alapa: One of the greatest strengths of our people is people skills. A lot of other groups could learn that from us.

Manu: Yes, this is what I have experienced! The idea of aloha has been put forth as a healing idea for the planet. I have been told that Hawaiians will be major ambassadors to help heal the world. I love how aloha and intelligence are linked in this idea by Olana A'i: "Aloha is the intelligence with which we meet life." There is something there. Aloha is indeed a healing act.

David: Well, there are other aspects that enhance their abilities. One is the na'au (gut) to get a sense of things. It's the intuitive, the Westerners call it. We feel, we can tell, we can tell something. That's a real added bonus.

Manu: I think everyone has these skills but we prioritize and respect it.

David: I think also that there's the strong commitment to that connectiveness. It's more than being connected, it's kind of embedded in Hawaiians that 'ohana, that family and community, is the driving force to one's destiny. Not for yourself, but what you give back to the community. So, a lot of times Hawaiian kids cannot get into this Career Development idea until you tell them about what it is they're going to give back to their community. So, once they know that they're going off to work on their development, but it is not for themselves, but to serve others.... then they feel okay.

Alapa: That's a very good point. Then they feel good about going and doing it.

David: It's not so much what they're going to accomplish, but what is their destiny?
What is it that they're called to do? I think that's a major component that is missing in Career Development for Hawaiians.

Alapa: Like the idea of koho'ia. Choice/no choice.

David: I always talk to kids at Super High Day about this, koho'ia--destiny. You can talk to them of talent, you can talk to them about where they can go and what they can do, but when you talk to them about destiny, eh, you're here for some reason.... It's all spiritual, the na'au, it's all part of the question: "What is it I'm suppose to be doing?" It's your inner most self that seeks that question; that doesn't come from people. It comes from a deeper connection to spirit and our people.

Alapa: And they gotta realize that. I always have this feeling of my kupuna (elders). I can't see them but I know they're there. I know. I know they're there. That's what makes me move. That's how I was able to focus, because they were there.

David: That's the other part, of being part of your past. Of being part of what is guided by your kupuna who have come before you. To know that you're only a continuation of that is a powerful part that you don't hear on the mainland. They don't talk about who you're related to or where you're from.

Alapa: You notice that about us? Whenever we get together we always ask each other: "Oh, where you from? Who your family?" We have to connect. We all do that as Hawaiians. Connection.

Manu: So, place matters. It's also part of what we want our children to know.

David: Right, your from there, that's your family. I made the connection, now we can eat, talk story.

Alapa: Now we can share the poi bowl.

Manu: It's some kind of way to connect into another's life so that we are no longer strangers. There's something about creating that relationship that is also tied to aloha and our inter-personal intelligence traits.

David: Wouldn't education be wonderful if those kinds of protocols became part of the classroom? Where you get connected, where you acknowledge the na'au, where you acknowledge the family so that you're not leaving yourself at home. That's what I grew up with; my mom saying: "Leave your Hawaiianess at home." School was separate. Real life was at home. But if you brought who you are and what you represent into the school setting, then school would be more meaningful to you. That's why Na Imiloa (Hawaiian Culture-based High School project) is so meaningful because they're dealing with your talent, they're dealing with ho'ala hou (self-awakening), they're dealing with history, with culture and then all of a sudden, it's part of who they are! I guess that's the key to what's wrong and what's right about Education.

Manu: You just put a light on where we're going. To develop meaning with our kids. To help them find the purpose of their lives, develop meaningful relationships...

Alapa: We see kids that come from the mainland to Summer Institute and you see those lights go on. Oh! I belong in who I am and then they know they're going to go back and they may feel they're out in left field in Florida but when they came home, they learned who they are, they feel good, they can go back. They can do it. So, you see those connections; they help.

David: Well, our parents have been through a real missionary school situation. The "savage" was beaten out of our Hawaiians and education made us "civilized" and provided us with skills that the White man had. We're beyond that point now. In the 60's and 70's we were still trapped into vocational education because we were good with our hands. I think at this point we're seen as being equal in many ways, but education in the general sense hasn't changed, it's just that our people are climbing this ladder that's higher for our people than for other people. What we're trying to do is to make the ladder equal so our kids are progressing and going further than they ever had, but it's still not an educational type of situation that we want our kids to be in because we have lawyers who come back and say: "I don't know myself." This wouldn't happen if you were connected. So in order for our kids not to be that way, we've got to make them feel good about being an attorney, to be connected, to be whatever they want to be, to make sure they get funneled back to their community and family, but to also make sure they know who they are and why they're doing this. That's Hawaiian education.

Manu: We used to think that when we're dancing hula, making rope out of hau or carving stones for ulumaika--that was doing "Hawaiian things." But now I've come to understand because of place, family and purpose, all the things I do are "Hawaiian." I listen to opera with a Hawaiian mind. I greet people in a Hawaiian

way. I am Hawaiian. I don't simply do Hawaiian things. I can be a Hawaiian looking at law and allow that to educate me further.

David: That's right, exactly. That's a view point that you have and we have, but many people don't have that. We have to get to that stage.

Alapa: And still feel good about whatever we're doing. And make them realize that we can be a pono (spiritually correct) lawyer because you know who you are; you know those things that you think are important and right for our people.

Manu: There are priorities for Hawaiians. I must malama 'aina (take care of the lands); I must malama 'ohana (take care of family). These are intrinsic beliefs we have, and so it's a moral education that we want, fundamentally, for our children.

David: Those are the things we still have to define because Hawaiians should be able to golf. (laughter!)

Manu: You can't do Hawaiian things without it being political. I can't even think of developing Hawaiian curriculum without it becoming a political issue; so politics and culture are two words on the same coin. We shouldn't apologize for it anymore. If we want Hawaiians to participate in real-world learning experiences, we shouldn't apologize for it. We know our priorities with regard to intelligence, and now we are stepping further and further from the shadows of compromise to let people know what we want our grandchildren to know. Hawaiian education has certainly grown!

Alapa: If we can just focus on staying connected to our family and community. No matter where we live, they can take the goodness of our people wherever they go and help other people see and know what we know.

David: I want us to remember to always ask the question: "What information do you want your grandchild to have?" What abilities, what attitudes? If we focus on what is it that we want our education to be for our grandchildren then that's what Hawaiian education should be for a Hawaiian. The answer is from a Hawaiian. So, if everybody had a chance to answer that question, I think it would pretty much be the same as my answer and the same as your answer, but if we keep focusing on that rather than measuring your child's education based on SAT scores that compare them to what other kids are doing in the school, we're just missing it rather than re-defining for ourselves--this is what I want our children to have, and schools aren't providing it. Maybe we have to supplement it, but we have to provide that vision so people continually know what our grandchildren should have.

Manu: I just got a revelation! Because of the nature of what I know: who are my people, what am I doing, how am I giving back, who I come in the room with--we do not do Hawaiian things. *We are Hawaiians doing things.* So, of course our education is distinct. We come from a different cosmology. That, for me, is the core of Hawaiian Education. It's time for us to draw our pedagogy, policies and curriculum from our *own* epistemology and no longer compromise on the priorities that have been asked from us long ago. I believe this is my destiny.

David Kekaulike Sing, a native Hawaiian and Director of Na Pua No'eau (Center for Gifted and Talented Native Hawaiian Children), is noted statewide for his leadership in developing successful educational programs for native Hawaiians and other underrepresented groups. Dr. Sing has designed a Hawaiian education model for optimizing learning and has conceptualized the utilization of culture in the context of education of native Hawaiians.

Linette Alapa Hunter, Assistant Director for Programs at Na Pua No'eau at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, was born and raised in Hawai'i and is a graduate of the Kamehameha Schools. Dr. Hunter has taught at the elementary through college levels and served as administrator for Pago Pago Elementary School (American Samoa) and American Samoa Community College.

Manu Aluli Meyer is the fifth daughter of Emma Aluli and Harry Meyer. She comes from Mokapu on the island of O'ahu and grew up around her 20 cousins. Her background is in coaching, experimental education, and working with a full spectrum of children and adults. She is currently an Assistant Professor at UH Hilo in the Education Department and teaches courses on methods, philosophy, and Hawaiian epistemology. She carves rocks in her free time and finds waterfalls along Hilo Pali Ku.