It is a bright, sunny morning in Mrs. Akaka’s second-grade classroom in Honolulu. Sprawled out on the classroom floor, twenty Native Hawaiian students are working on their genealogy projects. The children chatter excitedly as they sort through and arrange their family photographs on a large poster board, which each student will fashion into a uniquely themed family tree. As the students glue photos and record the names of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, they begin to notice family traits that have been passed down through the generations, and they recall family stories, which they share with their classmates. One can sense great pride in who the children are, where they come from, and their relationships to their families and communities.

We selected this particular vignette because we believe this classroom is an exemplar of inclusive, culturally based literacy education. While research has been conducted on the benefits of culturally based education for indigenous and culturally diverse students, many educators continue to ponder what a culturally based literacy curriculum looks like in practice. We address this important question by providing examples of culturally based Native Hawaiian literacy instruction and considering how teachers in other diverse classroom settings can build upon and extend these examples.

**Historical Context**

Before the institutionalization of education, Native Hawaiians enjoyed a rich oral tradition characterized by an intense appreciation for and refinement of oratorical practices. Our Hawaiian kūpuna (ancestors or elders) had a keen awareness of the many expressive and communicative functions of language. They captured family histories, genealogies, and the ancient wisdom of our people in elaborate legends, proverbs, poetical sayings, and lengthy chants, which were meticulously memorized and passed on from generation to generation (Au & Kaomea, 2009).

Once the language was rendered into written form in the 1820s, Hawaiians “enthusiastically took up reading and writing as a national endeavor” (Nogelmeier, 2010, p. xii). Our Hawaiian kūpuna “loved to read and eagerly bartered for the pages that came from the press” (Day & Loomis, 1997, p.16). In two generations, nearly the entire population could read and write in Hawaiian. By the late 1800s, the literacy rate surpassed most of the world (Nogelmeier, 2010).

As the effects of western contact began to erode our native culture and national sovereignty, Native Hawaiians embraced Hawaiian-language newspapers, which disseminated information of national importance as well as Hawaiian historiography, genealogy, literature, and general cultural preservation. Hawaiian newspaper editorials pleaded for historians, genealogists, storytellers, and cultural specialists to submit material so this cultural knowledge would be available for future generations. The resounding response from Hawaiian authorship was over 100,000 newspaper pages of Hawaiian moʻolelo (stories or histories), moʻokūauhau (genealogies), oli (chants), and mele (songs), all of which were eagerly consumed by a highly literate populace (Nogelmeier, 2010).

In stark contrast to this aupuni palapala, or nation of fervent readers and writers, after nearly two centuries of American occupation and the near-total obliteration of our native language, Native Hawaiian students in Hawaiʻi schools today, like students from other diverse cultural and linguistic
communities, are consistently identified as struggling in the area of literacy. While many suggest a need for more standardized, externally developed literacy programs, we contend that more locally developed, culturally based literacy curricula can reconnect Native Hawaiian students to our rich cultural and literary heritage and increase educational success.

The Study: Background and Methodology

Cultural Diversity and Literacy Acquisition

The politics of high-stakes assessment and the awareness that schools have failed to provide students of color with the literacy skills that society demands have led literacy researchers to increasingly aim their efforts at understanding the relationship between cultural diversity and literacy acquisition (Fairbanks, Cooper, Masterson, & Webb, 2009). The understanding that students will be more successful in literacy classrooms that offer culturally responsive instruction is rooted in over a quarter of a century of research in multicultural education and educational anthropology. As early as the 1980s, educational anthropologists and multicultural educators have advocated the use of culture (Goodenough, 1981) to link students’ home–community environment with the more structured academic environment of school (Au & Mason, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1990; Gay, 2002).

Strengths-Based Methodology

This study responds to calls to shift away from indigenous research that “fetishizes” damage, pain, loss, and other devastating after-effects of colonization, and instead focuses on the positive aspects of indigenous communities (Tuck, 2009). Kana‘iaupuni (2005) explains that the mo‘olelo, or stories, that emerge from strengths-based research provide models of vitality and empowerment from which we can progress further. Following Kana‘iaupuni (2005), we ask: If by all accounts, our Hawaiian kāpuna once had a highly sophisticated literary tradition and a rich cultural history of cherishing oral and written resources, how can we draw from that history to rebuild this love of literacy for students today?

While our research focuses on the people and the place that we know best (that is, Native Hawaiians in the state of Hawai‘i), this study has implications for all educators working in culturally diverse communities across the globe who are committed to acknowledging the literary strengths and expertise of their students’ cultures and communities, and employing these strengths in their literacy instruction. Throughout this article, we use the word “culture” to refer to the values, beliefs, symbols, and perspectives that distinguish one group of people from another (Banks & Banks, 2013). Every culture represents a unique answer to the fundamental question What does it mean to be human and alive?—the consequence of one particular set of intellectual and spiritual choices made, however successfully, many generations before (Davis, 2009). While we acknowledge that cultures are dynamic, complex, and ever-changing, we simultaneously contend that certain key aspects of many traditional cultures endure across generations.

Setting and Study Participants

This article focuses on one aspect of a larger study that took place over the course of the 2012–2013 school year at an elementary school serving Native Hawaiians. The school, comprised of approximately 700 elementary students who are of indigenous Hawaiian ancestry, is working to enhance the cultural relevancy of its literacy instruction (Wurdeman, 2013). While four classrooms were involved in the larger study (two kindergarten classrooms, a second-grade classroom, and a fifth-grade class), this article focuses only on the second-grade classroom, comprised of 20 Native Hawaiian students. Their teacher, Mrs. Akaka, who is also Native Hawaiian, has been teaching for over 20 years.

Language Arts, Volume 92, Number 6, July 2015
Although all of the students at this school have at least one Native Hawaiian ancestor, most of them, like most students in Hawai‘i, are of mixed ancestry, with more than 60 different racial and ethnic groups represented in the student body. Thus, despite the students’ commonality of having at least one Native Hawaiian ancestor, the students at this school represent a diversity of cultures—much like students throughout the US.

Research Method
We used a modified version of the Preschool in Three Cultures method (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) because it is a well-established approach for capturing multiple interpretations (from both cultural insiders and outsiders) of the same classroom event. Three-hour long literacy lessons were videotaped in each of the four participating classrooms. Each of the 12 hours of videotaped lessons was subsequently edited down to 15–20 minutes per lesson and portrayed teacher instruction, classroom discussions, and student interactions. The edited video clips were shown to the teacher in whose classroom the lessons were filmed, and then to a focus group of five Hawaiian cultural consultants, including university Hawaiian language and Hawaiian studies professors, a middle school Hawaiian immersion teacher, kumu hula (scholars of Hawaiian dance and culture), and Hawaiian studies curriculum specialists. Cultural consultants were selected because of their deep knowledge of traditional Hawaiian education, language, cultural practices, and history.

During the classroom teachers’ viewing of the video clips, each teacher was asked to first confirm that the clip depicted a typical literacy lesson, and then to reflect on 1) how the lesson depicts teacher values, and 2) how the lesson portrays Hawaiian values. During the focus group viewing of the video clips, the five Hawaiian cultural consultants were asked 1) to comment on the lessons’ cultural strengths, and 2) to offer their visions or suggestions for building upon the strengths to increase the lessons’ cultural relevancy. The result was a video-­cued multi-­vocal conversation, with classroom teachers and cultural consultants discussing the classroom videos. The teacher interviews provided an initial, insider perspective on the lessons, while the cultural consultant focus group discussions provided an additional “insider-outsider” perspective, since the cultural consultants were considered insiders to Hawaiian cultural knowledge but outsiders to the classroom communities.

The discussions during these viewing sessions were videotaped and later transcribed. Having captured these multiple perspectives on the classroom lessons, we applied inductive analysis to identify recurring themes, then cross-checked and substantiated them with primary and secondary sources of Native Hawaiian literature, allowing us to view these contemporary classroom situations through a traditional Native Hawaiian lens.

While four classrooms participated in this study, here we present how Mrs. Akaka’s culturally based literacy lessons not only connect her young students to their contemporary families and communities, but also reaffirm their identity as descendants of a highly literate Hawaiian nation. We begin each section with a description of a videotaped lesson in Mrs. Akaka’s classroom. These accounts of Mrs. Akaka’s lessons provide our first level of narrative. Next, we weave in the voices and perspectives of Mrs. Akaka, the focus group of Hawaiian cultural consultants, and authors of traditional Hawaiian literature. Together these perspectives provide a tapestry of voices—of insiders and outsiders, practitioners and academics, and contemporary and historical cultural experts—who each share their reflections on the classroom lessons and culturally relevant instruction.

The Importance of Names in Hawaiian Culture
Ola Ka Inoa (The Name Lives)
When one enters Mrs. Akaka’s classroom, a peacefulness greets you. On this particular morning, Mrs. Akaka and her students are preparing for their daily literacy lesson. Mrs. Akaka positions herself at the front of the classroom as her students eagerly gather on the rug around her. After a warm exchange of greetings, Mrs. Akaka explains they will focus on
the topic of the students’ inoa or names; then she shares the origin of her Hawaiian name.

Mrs. Akaka: You all did an investigation asking your parents and family members the meaning of your name. So very special. I shared with you how I was given my Hawaiian name. I treasure that. It was from my grandmother. They were expecting. They wanted a girl. They had two grandsons and that is all that they had. They wanted a granddaughter. They were so excited. They wanted something from the heavens, and out came me. And they gave me that special name, Makanaokalani [“gift of the heavens”].

In this brief introduction, Mrs. Akaka conveys the deep sense of importance that she attaches to her name—a treasured possession that was given to her by her grandparents. In doing so, she sets the stage for her students to share the meanings behind their names.

Naming in Traditional Hawaiian Culture

To understand the cultural significance of this lesson, one must first understand the significance of names and naming in Hawaiian culture as well as the power that names, and words more generally, possess in the Hawaiian language. Names were highly valued in traditional Hawaiian culture (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972). Prior to the introduction of print literacy, Hawaiians passed on knowledge through an oral tradition with a highly developed language system marked by extreme precision and intentionality (Nogelmeier, 2010). For Hawaiians, words and the naming of people, places, and objects are intentional. Each name carries great significance in depicting a function or purpose, describing the context in which something is situated, capturing a historical event, or anticipating the future. As Earl Kawa’a, a cultural practitioner knowledgeable in Hawaiian naming practices, explains, “Something happens and we give it a name; it is not an accident, it is purposeful” (Kōhala Center, 2011).

According to Hawaiian tradition, names can be generated in a number of ways (Ka’iwakilo’omoku, 2011). A name can come to someone through a dream, a sign may prompt the giving of a name, a family name might pass on through the generations, or a name can be given to commemorate a significant life event. Names that are categorized as inoa ho’omana’o may change throughout an individual’s lifetime due to changing life circumstances. After the tragic death of her young son, Queen Emma was named Kaleleokalani, which means to flee to Heaven. When Emma’s husband, King Alexander Liholiho, also died the following year, Emma was renamed Kaleleonalani. The change from kalani to nālani makes the “flee to Heaven” plural, emphasizing the heartbreaking loss of both her loved ones. As Pukui explains:

In a society without a written language, history was a matter of human memory and human voice. Long oli [chants] told of great events and heroic sagas. But for the “verbal shorthand” reminder, the nimble tongue Hawaiians used the inoa ho’omana’o. (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972, p. 96)

While inoa ho’omana’o were used to commemorate and preserve knowledge of important historical events, other names were given with the intention of shaping the future. When Ka’ahumanu was baptized as a Christian, she took the name Elizabeth. [Ka’ahumanu] would have made the selection with great care, knowing that one’s inoa was in itself a force. She had grown up in the belief that a person’s name was her own special property, yet at the same time that it had a life of its own, an intangible, sometimes mystical, power to shape events. (Silverman, 1987, p. 97)

The name Elizabeth securely connected Ka’ahumanu to the powerful history of Queen Elizabeth and the British Monarchy. In a similar fashion, Mrs. Akaka’s culturally based literacy lessons connect her Hawaiian students to their family histories.

Names and Family–School Connections

Wrapping up the discussion of her own name, Mrs. Akaka turns her attention to ‘Ehukai, who is seated with his classmates on the rug. As she invites him to...
share the meaning of his name, she motions toward a poster of his family tree showing photos of successive generations and outlined by a drawing of a large ocean wave.

**Mrs. Akaka:** 'Ehukai, I hope you don’t mind. I love this picture. This is 'Ehukai’s illustration. . . . 'Ehukai, when you brought in your family tree, this [picture] really matches. Do you want to explain to them the meaning of your name? Why you have this name? Because it is very, very special.

**'Ehukai:** Because my grandmother thought I would like going inside the water.

**Mrs. Akaka:** And what is your name?

**'Ehukai:** 'Ehukai [which refers to the sea spray that accompanies a large ocean wave].

**Mrs. Akaka:** There is a really interesting thing about it. You said everyone in your family . . .

**'Ehukai:** Has that middle name.

**Mrs. Akaka:** Has that same middle name. Because . . .

**'Ehukai:** [Surfing] is something that we all do.

**Mrs. Akaka:** Did everyone see his family tree? What it did, 'Ehukai, it brought so much life to your story. Seeing your family, it just brought your name to life.

As mentioned earlier, Hawaiians traditionally believed that a name could have great influence on the bearer of the name and could secure someone’s destiny. 'Ehukai comes from grandparents and parents who surf and spend most of their days in the ocean or kai. Thus, 'Ehukai was given the name in reference to the ocean, which is reflected in his poster of a giant wave that outlines his family tree. This naming reaffirms and sustains his family’s love of surfing in 'Ehukai. When Mrs. Akaka asked 'Ehukai why all his family members had this name, he responded by connecting their name to surfing, explaining it “is something that we all do.”

During the Hawaiian cultural consultants’ discussion of this clip, Lei, a Hawaiian Studies professor, commented on the importance of this exchange.

**Lei:** In the first clip, the teacher created an opportunity [for 'Ehukai] to tell his story. She is creating . . . a space for the importance of his name. It aligns closely with the [Hawaiian] value of getting to know your name and understanding your name. Maybe they do not understand the depth of it at this time. But she is creating the space for them to move into that place.

In this statement, Lei explains that Mrs. Akaka is creating a space for her students to begin to appreciate the depth and significance of Hawaiian naming.

---

**BY THE NUMBERS**

21% of the US population over the age of 5 speaks a language other than English at home.


Over 40% of all school-age youth in the United States are students of color.


17% of teachers in the United States are people of color.

tradi
tions. She also suggests that Mrs. Akaka is creating a space within the classroom where these children can make connections to their families and thus begin to validate their Hawaiian identities.

When these spaces for connections are not created, the consequences can be devastating (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). As Ho'omanawanui (2008) explains, school environments that refuse to validate students’ home cultures and their “indigenous based multiple literacies” can be “confusing and damaging” for Hawaiian children (p. 212).

Following Mrs. Akaka’s viewing of the video, she explained that when she was growing up in California, she felt a division between her home and school lives and was made to feel that she had to hide her Hawaiian identity in school. She explained that this rift between her home and school experiences inspired her to create a different learning experience for her students.

Mrs. Akaka: Family is always important. For me, it wasn’t important learning about your family and names at school. I love that they are bringing [this] into the classroom. I think it is important to bridge the family and school. When I went to school, the most important thing was to become a fly on the wall. You didn’t ever show who you were. You were a student. I remember my neighbor growing up was from the Dominican Republic. When you would go into her house, there was beautiful food, and smell from the food, and family. Then you go to school, and it stopped. You got this hidden message that when you get to school, you hide all of that. I value who [my students] are and that they bring this to school. I just want them to value their family, their stories. They don’t hide who they are . . . . They can stand up and say who they are.

Following the focus group viewing, the cultural consultants concurred that, in their school experiences, they too had to compartmentalize their Hawaiian identities and leave that knowledge at home.

The cultural consultants likewise commented on the importance of encouraging the current generation of students to use their Hawaiian names in school in order to connect the students to their Hawaiian identities. As Lei explains, “If they focus on their Hawaiian name, [and] know the stories [behind their name], then they can find pride in who they are.”

Sharing Mo'olelo in Mrs. Akaka’s Classroom

Mrs. Akaka’s lesson in one’s name and its meaning was the first in a series of lessons aimed at helping her students make critical connections between their home and school lives, as well as their home and school literacies. In a subsequent lesson, Mrs. Akaka emphasizes that the mo'olelo (story or history) behind one’s name is as important as the name itself and that students should learn these and other family mo'olelo so that this historical knowledge can be passed down.

The Hawaiian word mo'olelo, commonly translated as “story,” is the contraction of two words—mo'o (succession) and 'o 'olelo (talk)—and is literally translated as “the continuation or succession of talk” (Puku'i & Elbert, 1986, p. 254). The act of storytelling goes far more deeply; that is, mo'olelo serve as repositories of ancestral wisdom and a means for passing down cultural truths and values.

Ancestral wisdom is essential to Hawaiian epistemology. Traditionally, knowledge was a matter of utility and survival. Although there were some cases where knowledge was aesthetic, learning needed to have a purpose. Meyer (2003) explains, “Utility with regard to knowledge made everything learned something of value. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake was a foreign belief, a waste of time” (p. 126). The acquisition of knowledge was highly revered and the transfer of this knowledge to future generations was critical. Following Mrs. Akaka’s viewing of the video, she expands on this idea of ancestral stories serving as waihona,
or repositories of knowledge, and explains how her literacy lessons encourage the passing on of family stories or mo'olelo within her classroom community:

> I tell the parents at Open House that they need to tell their stories to their kids. Then I really want the kids to document the stories both in written form and orally. I value when their parents are passing on stories. I want the kids to pass on the stories to someone else.

In the focus group discussion following the viewing of this lesson, the Hawaiian cultural consultants likewise commented on the importance of students learning their family stories from their mākuʻa and kūpuna (parents and grandparents) and passing those stories on. As cultural consultant Malia, a Hawaiian language curriculum specialist, affirmed, “Names have mo'olelo. The storytelling [behind] the names are so important.”

While in the previous lesson the students learned about the meanings of their names and the names of successive generations of their families, in this lesson the students were encouraged to delve more deeply into the mo'olelo or story behind the giving (and receiving) of their particular names. Before the following lesson, Mrs. Akaka had asked her students to go home and learn about the story of their names from their parents or grandparents. Here, students shared the stories learned at home.

**Emalee:** My mom and dad wanted [my name] to be special and unique. My name was thought up before my mom was pregnant. My parents wanted me to grow up and become the best of each of them. So they gave me a piece of each of their names [Emma and Lee].

**Manaʻolana:** What they should name me? They took surveys but couldn’t decide. The night my mommy went to the hospital to give birth to me, the doctor found out I had an umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. After the information, my mom and dad took the baby name book and they look and looked in the book for a possible name. They named me a name that means “hope.”

In both of the examples, the children received their names in traditional Hawaiian ways. Emalee received her name as an inoa kūpuna, or a name handed down from one family member to another. Her name was a combination of her parents’ names. Manaʻolana received her name through inoa hoʻomanaʻo. Like Queen Emma Kaleleokalani (who was later renamed Kaleleonoalani), Manaʻolana’s name commemorated a significant, and potentially tragic, event in her young life, to which her parents responded with optimism and hope. While there was a great deal of variance in the cultural origin and circumstances behind the children’s names, each of Mrs. Akaka’s students returned to school with a story, which they shared with pride.

In documenting and passing on the stories, the students emulate and perpetuate the work of Hawaiian historians such as Mary Kawena Pukūi who traveled to remote Hawaiian communities throughout the islands to record people’s stories because she realized that their precious knowledge needed to be documented for future generations (McGregor, 2007). Pālani Vaughan, a Hawaiian author and songwriter, also discusses this important link between Hawaiians’ past and the present, between kūpuna (grandparents) and moʻopuna (grandchildren).

> The little ones give to the elders their laughter and joy for new life. And the kūpuna pass on the knowledge and lore of the old Hawaiian tradition. The moʻopuna, [literally] waters of succession, follow the flow of the kūpuna, waters of propagation. (Vaughan, 1987, p. 67)

These companion ideas of propagation and succession are evident in Mrs. Akaka’s literacy lessons.

**Hawaiian Genealogy and the Power of Oration**

Names are powerful because words are powerful. A familiar ʻōlelo noʻeau, or wise saying, reads, “I ka ʻōlelo no ke ola, i ka ʻōlelo no ka make” (In the word is life, in the word is death) (Pukui, 1983, p. 129). Hawaiians traditionally believed that words can bring life or death to a situation. Consequently, poets, songwriters, and orators who were skilled in the use of words would carefully select the appropriate words for a particular occasion with the understanding that carelessness in the choice of words might result in death for the composer or
the person for whom the composition was intended (Pukui, 1949).

The use of oration with just the right words was a traditional Hawaiian art form and a way to carry historical knowledge, information about names, and one’s genealogy from one generation to the next. Kākāʻōlelo or orators were highly respected individuals in the chief’s circle (Chun, 2011). The kākāʻōlelo knew and could chant or recite important moʻolelo, histories, and genealogies recounting the names and deeds of a chief’s ancestors, and were often called upon during battle to provide historical insights that might resolve a conflict (Kamakau, 1961). For instance, when chiefs went to war with each other and both sides suffered reverses, it was the custom for the chiefs’ genealogy experts to suggest a conference to end the war, at which time they would recite the warring chiefs’ genealogies in such a way as to reveal that the chiefs were actually related.

As Kameʻelehiwa (1992) explains, our moʻokūauhau or genealogies are the histories of our people. Through them we learn of the “exploits and identities of our ancestors—their great deeds and their follies, their loves and their accomplishments, and their errors and defeats” (p. 19). Consequently, knowing the names of one’s ancestors and making connections to these names provides Hawaiians a birthright to everything that their names may entail (Kanahele, 2011).

Reciting one’s moʻokūauhau connects a person to his or her ancestors, to others in the community, and to the body of knowledge that comes with these connections. In the next section, we examine the ways in which Mrs. Akaka provides opportunities for her Hawaiian students to make these connections through genealogical orations that reflect the traditional Hawaiian value of carrying forth ancestral knowledge into the future.

**Genealogy and Oration in Mrs. Akaka’s Classroom**

In the final video clip from Mrs. Akaka’s classroom, a young boy stands before his classmates with a pointer in hand. As he recites his genealogy and family names through successive generations, he points deliberately to each corresponding individual on his family tree.

During the question-and-answer period immediately following the boy’s presentation, a child in the audience points to one of the photos and asks who that particular individual is. The presenter clarifies the misunderstanding and then tells the child who asked the question, “You should know that. I said that already.”

In the interview session following the viewing of this clip, Mrs. Akaka refers to this interchange as she reflects on the impact that these lessons in family genealogy and oration have had upon the confidence of this young boy, who was typically quite shy:

This child is very shy, but he is so confident in this clip. He is the guy with all the knowledge. He has taken on the persona and pride [of an orator] when he looked at the audience and said you are supposed to know this, I said this already. He is very shy, but this knowledge has made him the authority. He takes on a certain pride.

Meyer (2003) discusses the importance of a relationship of continuity among Hawaiian family members and how these relationships traditionally grounded Hawaiian children and instilled them with confidence and pride. She explains:

Relationship—feeling one’s family presence, knowing their names—all became a part of how a child learned. As they matured, Hawaiian children internalized this kind of relationship. It guided them and connected them to life. (p. 108)

This sense of pride in one’s family relationships is evident when the presumably shy boy remarks, “You should know that already.” In essence, as he shares his connection to his family, he expects his audience members, his classmates, also to understand this strong connection.

Moreover, as Mrs. Akaka suggests, the boy’s sense of authority that accompanies his oration is typical of the art form of kākāʻōlelo. Kākāʻōlelo were highly revered for their oratorical skills and their vast knowledge of histories, moʻolelo, and genealogies (Chun, 2011). As Mrs. Akaka explains, when orating his family genealogy, this “shy” student has all the knowledge. He accentuates the importance of his speech and his delivery of the
knowledge when he tells his classmate, “I already said that.” Ultimately, he is advising the classmate, “As a listener, when I say something you need to listen,” reaffirming that significant knowledge can be given orally and likewise needs to be respected.

Conclusion

In 1824, Kauikeaouli, Kamehameha III, proudly referred to our Hawaiian nation as “He aupuni palapala,” a nation of literacy. The fervor for literacy that pervaded our Hawaiian community at the time is captured in historical accounts of Hawaiians who were so enthusiastic about reading and writing that they were equally skillful at reading texts upright, upside down, or sideways, as the supply of printed materials could not keep up with the readership’s demand, necessitating several Hawaiians to crowd around and simultaneously read from a single text (Nogelmeier, 2010). Our kūpuna valued literacy because they could appreciate its utility not only for reading and disseminating information of political and national importance, but also as a repository for cultural preservation. They viewed literacy as a means for connecting themselves with one another and with the world.

In sharing these mo’olelo of culturally based Hawaiian literacy lessons in Mrs. Akaka’s second-grade classroom, we aim to inspire other educators of culturally and linguistically diverse students to identify, acknowledge, and ultimately build upon the cultural and literary strengths that exist in their students’ families and communities. Our hope is that by working together in our respective communities, we can begin to reignite within our children a fervor for literacy similar to that which was once so prevalent in our proud aupuni palapala.

The examples featured in this article suggest a number of practical implications for classroom teachers who are committed to providing culturally and linguistically diverse students with a rigorous, strengths-based approach to literacy instruction that honors their lived experiences and cultural frameworks alongside mainstream academic literacies. At the same time, however, these examples may understandably raise a number of questions or concerns.

One question that may arise for teachers after reading this article is: “If one teaches in an urban, multiethnic setting with students from a dozen or more cultural and linguistic backgrounds, does this research and these examples still apply?” Our response is, “Yes, most definitely.” In this study,

---

For Inquisitive Minds

Reading


This research-based guide showcases stories of “what works” when literacy teachers in elementary school classrooms throughout the country partner with families across cultural and language differences to have a positive impact on students’ literacy learning.


This article responds to three frequently asked questions about culturally responsive instruction and offers practical suggestions for how culturally responsive instruction can be applied in classrooms with students of many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.


After identifying barriers to the successful teaching of children of color, Delpit shares a range of teaching strategies for educating children whom “we have heretofore failed” (p. 34). She urges educators to resist teacher-proof curricula and scripted low-level instruction, and instead to believe in these children, learn who they are, and build upon the “deep cultural gifts” (p. 155) that these students bring to school.
while the students all share a common Native Hawaiian ancestry, the large majority of the students are ethnically mixed and together represent a diversity of cultures.

While particular naming customs may vary from culture to culture, students of all cultures could benefit from an opportunity to investigate and share the origin of their names. In some cultures, the selection of a name may be a relatively straightforward process, as in the case of some Indonesian and African cultures in which a single name is given to each child that describes the order in which siblings were born (e.g., “first born,” “second born,” “third born,” etc.). In other cultures, traditional naming practices may be quite complex, including some Asian cultures in which individuals traditionally assume multiple names at various points in their lives, in addition to a family name and a generation name. While contemporary naming practices may follow more inventive or creatively applied variations of traditional naming customs, each name has a story behind it, which the bearer can share with pride.

Similarly, a version of Mrs. Akaka’s family genealogy lesson can likewise be applied to diverse, multiethnic classrooms. Everyone has a family history to share. A genealogical study of family histories can help teach students who they are and connect them to a heritage and identity that has been handed down across generations. As students trace their family’s genealogy and their journeys, and begin to see where their families came from, they can begin to understand and appreciate the unique contributions that every culture brings to a community.

A second question or concern that teachers may have after reading this article is: “If I don’t share the same culture(s) as my students, can I still effectively implement culturally relevant literacy instruction?” Again, the answer is “Yes.” Numerous studies suggest that while teachers who share their students’ cultural backgrounds may initially have an advantage in providing their students with culturally relevant instruction, teachers from other backgrounds who commit to learning about their students’ cultural contexts and adjusting their curriculum accordingly can be equally successful (Au, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Effective teachers, whatever their background, need to believe in their students’ ability to succeed and become actively involved in learning how their students’ cultures can be integrated into their classroom learning experiences.

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy insists that students’ cultural competence is valued

---


This book is about the millions of descendants of formerly colonized and subjugated people around the world who are now classified as poor readers, bad writers, and inept learners. Focusing on the lives of seven colonized individuals who have moved from silence to control of their own lives, the author envisions educational frameworks that will help individuals recover a sense of dignity as human beings while also serving to “reconstruct and reinvent cultural roots, local economies, native wisdom, and students’ potential as learners, thinkers, and creators” (p. 199).


This book provides a “critical and situated” (p. 8) sampling of approaches to multicultural teaching used by early childhood educators across diverse contexts. Drawing from inspiring examples in a range of early childhood classrooms, the author identifies a host of tools and strategies that can be utilized by teachers who are just getting started in multicultural early childhood education.
by their teachers and that students are aware of it. Teachers can explicitly demonstrate that they respect their students’ home and community cultures, show students that they are accepted for who they are, and honor the education that occurs during the hours when they are not at school (Fairbanks et al., 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy invites students and teachers to challenge the status quo in terms of whose knowledge is valued. In order for this approach to succeed, teachers actively engage in what Ladson-Billings (1995) calls a “fluid and equitable” (p. 163) mindset in which they are both teachers and learners.

A final lesson that we learn from Mrs. Akaka is that in acknowledging the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that are rooted in our students’ families, cultures, and communities, and by encouraging our students to bring this knowledge into the classroom, we are simultaneously acknowledging that we, as teachers, are not the sole authorities of knowledge. As Paulo Freire (1993) suggests, in traditional models of literacy education, teachers are the holders of knowledge, which they transmit to their students. As Mrs. Akaka shows us, however, teachers who are truly committed to culturally relevant and empowering literacy education need to be willing to give up this authority and acknowledge, even celebrate, the fact that there will be times when their students (like the young orators in Mrs. Akaka’s class) are the ones with “all the knowledge.”

Freire suggests that truly liberatory education begins with reconciliation of the teacher–student dichotomy so that “both are simultaneously students and teachers” (Freire, 1993, p. 72). As Mrs. Akaka’s example suggests, in order for culturally relevant literacy curriculum to be effective, we, as teachers, need to be truly committed to learning from our students, honoring the funds of knowledge that they bring from their families, cultures, and communities, and allowing ourselves to be changed in the process.

References


Katherine Wurdeman-Thurston and Julie Kaomea  |  Fostering Culturally Relevant Literacy Instruction


**Katherine Wurdeman-Thurston** is a graduate of the PhD in Education Program at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and can be reached at kawurdem@gmail.com. **Julie Kaomea** is a professor of education at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and can be reached at julie.kaomea@hawaii.edu.

---

**INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK**

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org provide additional examples of projects that can be done to share family information and stories:

**Creating Family Timelines: Graphing Family Memories and Significant Events**

Students interview family members, and then create graphic family timelines based on important and memorable family events. http://bit.ly/1zQ3SrX

For an activity that can be done out of school, see http://bit.ly/gcdQzm

**Exploring and Sharing Family Stories**

Writing gets personal when students interview family members in order to write a personal narrative about that person. http://bit.ly/1zySkLa

**My Family Traditions: A Class Book and a Potluck Lunch**

After analyzing a book about families, students create a class book with artwork and information about their ancestry, traditions, and recipes, followed by a potluck lunch. http://bit.ly/1zdHlnQ

**Recording Family Stories**

Older students can take part in the process of building family histories by recording the stories, or memoirs, of family members. http://bit.ly/fAgCaQ

---

Lisa Storm Fink

www.ReadWriteThink.org

---

*Language Arts,* Volume 92, Number 6, July 2015