PASE Policy Analysis & System Evaluation

InfoBrief

September 2003

Educating Hawaiian Children:

How the Learning Environment Matters

Introduction

Why do Hawaiian students need their own school? Throughout the twentieth century, Hawaiians endured forced assimilation into mainstream American culture and lifestyle. Despite indications that the Hawaiian kingdom was one of the most highly literate nations in the world during the 1800s, the indigenous language was banned from the public and private school systems in 1896 and remained an unrecognized language by the government for nearly a century. The English-only legislation resulted in a precipitous decline in Hawaiians' understanding of their own culture, history, values, spirituality, practices and identity as a people. The effects of colonialism and institutional racism permeated the 1920s (when only 24,000 native Hawaiians were left), were embedded in Hawai'i's society and system during World War II, and continued through statehood in 1959.

In the years following statehood, a surge in tourism and an influx of newcomers drastically altered the social and natural landscape of Hawai'i, threatening the survival of the still fragile Hawaiian culture. The tide began to turn in the 1970s with a dynamic movement by Hawaiians to hold fast and reconnect with their cultural roots. It was an era of cultural pride. Yet even this vibrant and promising "Hawaiian renaissance" could not upstage the debilitating effects of more than 200 years of political, social, cultural and psychological trauma, the legacy of which is manifest in statistics documenting the marginalization of today's Hawaiian families and children.

Against this history, Kamehameha Schools strives to help rebuild cultural and social stability by working to restore Hawaiian cultural literacy among Hawaiians of all ages. Kamehameha Schools also institutionalizes Hawaiian cultural perspectives and practices throughout the organization, and instills in children a strong sense of pride, self-esteem, and identity with their own native culture. This approach directly combats the experiences that Hawaiians would otherwise face in more western-oriented schools. Prior research has shown that the structure of classrooms and limited access to curriculum in public schools impeded the academic progress of Hawaiians historically (D'Amato 1988). The believed superiority of the dominant culture led to classroom activities that often negated and denied Hawaiian cultural traditions and ways of learning (D'Amato 1988, Benham and Heck 1998). Research also suggests that even the threat of negative stereotypes in the classroom may hinder the academic performance of marginalized students. High-achievers are particularly vulnerable to this problem.

As a school specifically for Hawaiians, Kamehameha Schools provides a secure learning environment that welcomes Hawaiian children's experiences and learning styles and that allows Hawaiian children to flourish scholastically without fear of discrimination. To support this argument, we draw on research and theory concerning stereotypes, ethnic bias, and learning environments.

Stereotypes, ethnic bias and Hawaiians

As members of a disadvantaged minority, Hawaiian children contend with negative stereotypes on an ongoing basis. In a series of focus groups conducted with students in Hawai'i, Mayeda, Chesney-Lind, and Koo (2001) find that Polynesian youths—Hawaiians and Samoans in particular—are perceived by their peers as performing poorly in academics and investing little effort in school. Some Polynesian students internalize this negative stereotype, seeing themselves as less qualified academically than Asians.

Yet more disturbing is that Polynesian students perceive that their academic development is impeded by social obstacles, including ethnic bias among teachers. Mayeda et al. (2001) report that Polynesian children may feel "neglected and treated unfairly by their teachers" because of their ethnic background (p. 112). Although data on the extent of discrimination are limited, the majority of teachers in the Hawai'i State Department of Education (DOE) are either white (26 percent) or Japanese (38 percent); relatively few are Polynesian.

Experiences with discrimination, perceived or otherwise, have very real psychological consequences for students. Research confirms that Hawaiian children are at greater risk of suicide, depression, anxiety and substance abuse disorders compared to non-Hawaiian children (Andrade et al. 2003, in press). These outcomes are more common among adolescents who have been excluded, ridiculed, unaccepted or otherwise discriminated against for being Hawaiian (McCubbin 2003).

Stereotype threat and perceived bias

In addition to mental health disorders, discrimination affects students in other ways. Claude Steele and colleagues (Steele 1992, 1997, 1999; Steele and Aronson 1995, 1998) argue that perceived discrimination and negative stereotyping has measurable effects on student performance. They defined the concept of *stereotype threat* as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele, 1999, 12). The argument is that stress associated with stereotype threat may impede the performance of minority students and eventually lead them to disengage from academics. Steele found that black students perform significantly worse on achievement tests than do white students when the tests are explicitly presented as measures of ability. However, when the same tests are presented as either simple laboratory tasks or as tests designed by black researchers to be race-neutral, black students perform at a level equal to that of white students. In short, the gap between the scores of black and white students disappears when the fear of being judged unfairly is removed.

Steele's research has clear implications for Hawaiian students. Similar to African-Americans, Hawaiians are a marginalized and oppressed minority with historically low educational outcomes. And, as studies have demonstrated, Hawaiian children are similarly aware of and sensitive to negative academic stereotypes attached to their ethnicity (Mayeda et al. 2001, McCubbin 2003). Applying Steele's theory of stereotype threat to Hawaiian children suggests that the poor academic outcomes of Hawaiian students are exacerbated by the ongoing threat of stereotypes and discrimination in the classroom.

The detrimental effects of stereotype threat are particularly salient among high-achievers within a marginalized population—precisely the sub-group Kamehameha Schools has targeted in its academically competitive admissions process. Steele notes that to feel the stress associated with stereotype threat—e.g., to worry about being judged unfairly in a field such as academics—one must identify with and value that field (1998). Thus, students who are indifferent to grades and test scores are less threatened by negative academic stereotypes. Greater damage occurs among high-performing students who value their academic achievements and have invested time and energy to maintain scholastic success. For such students, the threat of stereotypes and biases in the classroom has lifelong repercussions on school outcomes and the students' sense of self-worth. This relationship suggests the advantages of a learning environment like Kamehameha Schools for academically competitive Hawaiian students. These high-performing students are most vulnerable to the effects of stereotype threat in less caring settings where Hawaiians are often systematically disadvantaged merely for their race.

The key: a secure learning environment

What happens when stereotype threat is not addressed? Researchers argue that to reduce the stress of guarding against discrimination and negative stereotypes in the classroom, minority students may learn to devalue education and to engage in oppositional behaviors (Steele 1998, Ogbu 1991). Labeled "disidentification" in the psychological literature, this reaction is a chronic problem among Hawaiian children.

What then is the solution? First, it is important to note that although stereotype threat is a psychological phenomenon, it is a reaction to the external environment. One possible solution, therefore, is to eliminate the stressors by staffing schools with unbiased teachers and school officials. This may be both unrealistic and insufficient because, according to Steele, it is the *fear* of discrimination (as opposed to the actual practice) that undermines student performance. The key to dispelling stereotype threat and its effects is to provide students with a learning environment they trust. African-American students in Steele's study achieved positive results when the element of white competition was removed or when the test was framed as an instrument developed by black researchers.

Similarly, one can argue that Hawaiian students will feel most secure in an institution developed by Hawaiians for Hawaiians—a school where Hawaiian children do not expect teachers to favor Japanese students or to pick on Polynesians. Ongoing research suggests that children at Kamehameha Schools feel greater support from families and friends than do

Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians at other major public schools. Although depressive symptoms are not statistically different, rates of aggression among KS students are lower than those of other Hawaiians and comparable to those of non-Hawaiians. KS students also report the lowest rates of substance use of the three groups. In the nurturing environment of Kamehameha Schools, gifted Hawaiian students can flourish academically without the threat of negative Hawaiian stereotypes or discrimination. As a school by Hawaiians and for Hawaiians, Kamehameha Schools is a unique educational setting where students know they will not be unfairly judged because of their Hawaiian heritage. In this special setting, the positive experiences and nurtured development helps to better prepare these children for strong leadership roles.

Does it work? Empirical evidence from historically black colleges/universities & single-sex schools

Recent research supports the notion that separate learning spaces for disadvantaged minority students may alleviate disidentification tendencies and enhance student performance. For example, Berger and Milem (2000) find that black students at church-based historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs) have a better academic self-concept and a greater achievement orientation than do black students in predominantly white schools. In a review of research on the outcomes of black college students, Fleming (1985) concluded that African-American students in traditionally black schools enjoy more fulfilling post-secondary educational experiences, both academic and personal, than do their counterparts in white institutions. A host of studies concur, finding that black students at HBCUs earn higher grades, are more satisfied with their college experience (Allen 1986), are more likely to persist into their second year and to graduate from college (Anderson 1984), and score as well or better in math, science, and other areas (Pascarella et al. 1996, Bohr et al. 1994) compared to black students at other schools.

Although numerous studies find that HBCUs have a significant and positive effect on black students, this research is focused on post-secondary education and early adulthood, a period that arguably may be quite different from the primary and secondary school years covered by Kamehameha Schools. However, a second analogy, single-sex education, provides further support for separate educational spaces as a means of addressing stereotype threat in childhood.

The gender gap in educational outcomes is well-established. Girls do not perform as well as boys on standardized math and science tests, and they are less likely than boys to pursue both advanced courses and occupations in math and science (American Association of University Women, 1992). Most researchers agree that the discrepancy is primarily attributable to social forces (e.g., norms that characterize math and science as "masculine" fields, children internalizing beliefs about the women's inferiority in the subjects, and school officials and family members who reinforce these beliefs by favoring boys or pushing girls into traditionally female fields). Single-sex schools and classes are considered one effective solution for such inequities.

Most empirical studies agree that girls in single-sex schools perform better academically and have greater post-secondary success than do girls in coeducational schools. Causes for this are varied; prominent studies since the 1990s indicate that experiences in the single-sex environment build self-confidence in girls and improve their attitudes toward and interest in math, science, and technology. In addition, girls in single-sex schools improve in science and reading in high school by significantly greater margins and achieve greater success in post-secondary education compared to their coeducational counterparts.

For example, research based on the *High School and Beyond* study found that girls in single-sex Catholic schools exhibit greater gains in reading, writing, and science achievement than their coeducational Catholic school counterparts (Lee and Bryk 1986). Controlling for factors such as pre-existing ability, school traits, and family background, Riordan (1990) finds that girls in single-sex schools achieve higher cognitive development and self-esteem than do girls in coeducational Catholic schools. In later research, Riordan (1998) argues that the positive effect of single-sex schools is strongest for girls from minority and low-income backgrounds. In other words, as income decreases, the single-sex effect increases.

Together, the positive educational outcomes associated with HBCUs and single-sex schools suggest the potential benefits of schools like Kamehameha Schools and other new and emerging Hawaiian charter schools. But the best evidence is the success of the children themselves. PASE's research at Kamehameha Schools shows that Hawaiian children can perform among the top in the nation, that they can achieve 100 percent graduation

rates, that as many as 95 percent of a graduating class can go on to college, and that they can together help build a future that values and respects a living Hawaiian culture. (See "From Learners to Leaders," PASE report 03-04:6, forthcoming.)

By establishing a school by Hawaiians and for Hawaiians, Kamehameha Schools creates a nurturing and supportive educational setting uniquely suited to Hawaiian children. Their successes confirm the importance of such a learning environment, where children can strive to achieve their maximum potential and begin the process of building new horizons for our Hawaiian communities.

by Shawn Malia Kanaiaupuni, Ph.D.
Koren Ishibashi, M.P.P.

We thank the staff at the Hawaiian Cultural Center Project for their contributions.

REFERENCES

Allen, W. (1986). *Gender and campus race differences in black student academic performance, racial attitudes and college satisfaction*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Education Foundation.

American Association of University Women. (1992, February). *Shortchanging girls, shortchanging America*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.

American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. (1998, March). *Separated by sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.

Anderson, K.L. (1984). *Race differences in the effects of college characteristics on educational attainment.* [Abstract]. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED256249)

Andrade, N.N., Hishinuma, E.S., McDermott, J.F., Johnson, R.C., Makini, G.K., Nahulu, L.B., Yuen, N.Y.C., Bell, C.K., Carlton, B.S., Goebert, D.A., McArdle, J.J., Miyamoto, R.H., Nishimura, S.T., Else, I.R.N., Guerrero, A., Waldron, J.A., & Yates, A. (submitted). Prevalence of mental disorders in Native Hawaiian adolescents using the NIMH Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC) Version 2.3 and meta-analyses of comparison studies. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (manuscript invited for revision).

Benham, M.K.P. & Heck, R.H. (1998). *Culture and educational policy in the silencing of native voices.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Berger, J. & Milem, J. (2000, July). Exploring the impact of historically black colleges in promoting the development of undergraduates' self-concept. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*(4).

Bohr, L., Pascarella, E., Nora, A., & Terenzini, P. (1995). Do black students learn more at historically black or predominantly white colleges? *Journal of College Student Development, 36*(1), 75-85.

D'Amato, J. (1988). "Acting": Hawaiian children's resistance to teachers. *Elementary School Journal, 88*(5), 529-44.

Fleming, J. (1985). *Blacks in college: A comparative study of students' success in black and white institutions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Lee, V.E. & Bryk, A. (1986). Effects of single-sex secondary schools on student achievement and attitudes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 78*(5), 381-395.

Mayeda, D.T., Chesney-Lind, M., & Koo, J. (2001, September). Talking story with Hawaii's youth: Confronting violent and sexualized perceptions of ethnicity and gender. *Youth & Society, 33*(1), 99-128.

McCubbin, L.D. (2002). *Resilience among Native Hawaiian adolescents: Ethnic identity, psychological distress and well-being*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI.

Ogbu, J.U. (1991). Minority coping responses and school experience. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 18 (4), 433-456.

Pascarella, E. (1996, September-October). Additional evidence on the cognitive effects of college racial composition: A research note. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(5), 494-501.

Riordan, C. (1990). *Girls and boys in school: Together or separate?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Riordan, C. (1998, March). The future of single-sex schools. In American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (Ed.), *Separated by sex: A critical look at single-sex education for girls*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.

Steele, C.M. (1992, April). Race and the schooling of Black America. *Atlantic Monthly, 269*(4), 68-78.

Steele, C.M. (1997, June). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape the intellectual identities and performance of women and African Americans. *American Psychologist, 52*, 613-29.

Steele, C.M. (1999, August). Thin ice: "Stereotype threat" and Black college students. *The Atlantic Online*. Retrieved on July 18, 2003 from http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99aug/9908stereotype.htm.

Steele, C.M. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(5), 797-811.

Steele, C.M. & Aronson, J. (1998). Stereotype threat the test performance of academically successful African Americans. In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 401-27). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.