

Historical Trauma and Triumph: An Overview of Native Hawaiian Education and Culture

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Introduction

The case of Native Hawaiians and education is a promising example of progress achieved in light of a darker sociohistorical past. As a cultural-linguistic minority group, today's Native Hawaiians share similar experiences with other Indigenous and racialized groups in the United States and beyond. The unique cultural lineage of Native Hawaiians traces back to a thriving, vibrant Polynesian society, which achieved highly sophisticated resource management and knowledge systems to navigate and prosper in the Pacific. Located at least three time zones away from any significantly sized landmass, Hawai'i is the most isolated archipelago on the globe. Our people have inhabited these shores for more than 200 primordial generations, with influx populations from throughout the Pacific Ocean coming via canoe, led by famous navigators such as Pa'aoof Samoa, Hawai'iloa from the Marquesas, and Kupe and his entourage who voyaged into New Zealand.



These travels and lineage shape the identity of our people. The names for the gods, emotions, morals and values, names for the land and sea and all that lives upon and within them—our languages—are within 70 percent related. We are globally renowned as Polynesians, the most spread out single race of people in the world,

connected by the vast Pacific ocean. In the case of the Hawaiian people, the islands were unified under a single kingdom that negotiated and established international treaties across the globe.

As with our other Polynesian kin, Hawai'i has been infiltrated by and divided up among those who speak English, French, Spanish and German. Western contact brought exposure to new diseases and drastic population decline, reducing the Indigenous society to one-tenth its size (Nurdyke, 1989). Importantly, it also brought codification of the Hawaiian language, followed by literacy rates topping 90 percent in the Hawaiian population and a flourishing reading, writing, and publishing community (Wilson, 1999). Although the majority of teachers were Native Hawaiians in Hawai'i's first schools, today they comprise less than 13 percent of public school educators teaching in classrooms where one in every three students is Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Under US occupation since the late nineteenth century, the culture and language unique to Hawai'i became highly threatened. Its people suffered in kind, reeling from assaults including the debilitating impact of educational policies that prohibited the use of Hawaiian language in the 1890s, which remained in effect for nearly one hundred years. As a vehicle for language decimation and western acculturation, schools in Hawai'i did not serve well the interests of Native Hawaiian youth and families (Benham and Heck, 1998; Kamehameha Schools, 2005; Thomas, Kana'iaupuni, Freitas, and Balutski, 2012; Wilson and Kamanā, 2006).

Primarily fueled by the concerns and passion of community members, culture and language revitalization has been an organic solution to the negative social indices that have plagued Hawai'i's Indigenous and Pacific Islander children for decades, including poverty, high-risk behaviors, depression, and poor educational outcomes. Data gathered on Native Hawaiian educational well-being show that ever since Hawai'i became a state in 1959, its Indigenous people continue to achieve below

national norms on standardized tests and college completion, and are overrepresented in the population of special education programs, suspended and retained students, and the youth criminal justice system. Native Hawaiians are comparatively more likely to experience the death of an infant, to face drug, alcohol, and child abuse, to have incarcerated parents, and to live below poverty thresholds. As a bright spot, recent data show big strides in Native Hawaiian enrollment at the University of Hawai'i. However, Native Hawaiian students still take longer and are less likely than their peers to graduate from college. Degree completion among Native Hawaiians enrolled at the various UH public campuses is concerning, ranging from a low of 16 percent to a high of 66 percent within a 150 percent time frame (e.g., taking up to six years to complete a four-year degree) in 2020.

Historical and Cultural Context

The history of Native Hawaiians reveals a unique perspective that counters such dismal figures. Intellectual cunning, articulation, and mastery are highly prized skills among Native Hawaiians. Education and cognitive well-being are top priorities for Kanaka Maoli leaders seeking social change and betterment—a pursuit that continues the strong tradition of knowledge acquisition that our ali'i (chiefs) cultivated long ago. Numerous sayings, stories, and songs are replete with references to wisdom and knowledge. The Hawaiian word for teaching (a'o) is the same as the word for learning. The saying "a'o aku, a'o mai" signifies a nuanced understanding of the give-and-take of teaching and learning through mentoring relationships. In fact, from a Kanaka Maoli worldview, relationships are central to education—a process of learning, applying, and mastering knowledge, in which the highest level of mastery is teaching that knowledge to others. Consummate learners and innovators, Native Hawaiians are known to travel far and wide to discover new places and new knowledge.

Native Hawaiians have a rich tradition of oral knowledge, storytelling, and heightened capacity to recall large quantities of information. For example, the *Kumulipo*, a cosmogonic genealogy, decoded the evolution of heavenly and earthly life long before Charles Darwin wrote *Origin of the Species* in 1859. It is 2,102 lines long and was passed through the generations by precise memorization. The *Kumulipo* is one example of the rigorous discipline of learning and observation that led Native Hawaiians to achieve deep sophistication in navigation, meteorology, agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, healing modalities, kapa making, weaving, carving, featherwork, warfare, diplomacy, oratory, governance, and treaty making with other nations. Hawaiian learning and ways of being have endured for centuries. However, many of these traditions eroded or were systematically destroyed with western contact and occupation, which replaced carefully cultivated modes of education and mentorship with a universal western system that prioritizes assimilation.

Prior to western contact, Native Hawaiians had a complex social class structure that governed economic, political, religious, cultural, and educational systems. Learners were schooled through a philosophy of "learning by doing," which valued cultural knowledge in areas such as history, medicine, farming, navigation, fishing, hula, and genealogy. After the missionaries' arrival in Hawai'i, Native Hawaiians continued to excel in reading and writing. By 1846, nearly 100 percent of Native Hawaiians were literate, a figure that ranked among the highest in the known world at that time, and Hawaiian language newspapers were plentiful. Ironically, while the ali'i valued education and placed a high priority on western thought, the well-being of the Native Hawaiian people continued to diminish in the late 1800s. The influence of colonization and Christianity on Native Hawaiian education produced destructive historical forces similar to those inflicted on Native American Indians and Alaska Natives (Benham and Heck 1998). Today, the intergenerational effects of the loss of identity,

the displacement from our land base, and the upheaval of religious beliefs are evidenced in ongoing disparities in the educational attainment and well-being of Native Hawaiians as a whole.

Areas of Momentum

One of the most encouraging trends is the sea change in understanding the role of culture in education. This wave of change has been led by courageous immersion and charter school communities over the past four decades, which set the course for today's learners and leaders to create a thriving Hawaiian culture-based education system. The kūpuna (elders), 'ohana (families), kumu (teachers), and haumāna (students) of this movement are now harnessing the potential of this learning system to create intergenerational change, to reverse historical trauma, and to generate positive and sustained outcomes. This legacy of teaching and learning, based on Native Hawaiian values and practices, is starting to be normalized across Hawai'i's educational landscape. Today, Hawaiian culture-based education is increasingly common across our educational systems, and mounting research shows its positive effects for Indigenous youth. The collective energy around Hawaiian culture-based education serves to counterbalance system vulnerabilities and disparities facing the lāhui (nation, people).

Increasing momentum is also evident in progress toward universal prekindergarten and the rising prominence of 'āina-based education, which is steadily changing mindsets, landscapes, and systems, acknowledging that a degraded 'āina (land) hurts us all. Beyond education, we are witnessing momentum in the socialization of 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), where the number of speakers has blossomed in recent decades, especially among children. The abundance of our mo'omeheu (cultural resources) is becoming more obvious, linking our past, present, and future in deep and dynamic ways. 'Ōiwi leadership perspectives are

increasingly evident in initiatives, policies, programs, and critical dialogues about island resiliency and earth justice. Signs of progress are also apparent as conventional health practices begin to shift toward holistic and comprehensive frameworks that reinforce the interrelated dimensions of well-being and affirm Indigenous perspectives on health.

New momentum demonstrates greater community capacity to mobilize and protect sacred places like Mauna Kea, and to link hands around the world in caring for our oceans, as championed by the Mālama Honua Worldwide Voyage. Heightened community activism is being fueled by 'ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge and wisdom), strong values, greater access to historical and cultural information, and dissatisfaction with the status quo, especially among our young people. A more prominent Indigenous voice, especially from younger generations, is influencing multiple segments of society, particularly regarding the use of 'āina. Locally, social entrepreneurship and innovation have grown significantly as new Indigenous players and ideas design more equitable, triple-bottom-line futures. And within higher education, Native Hawaiian faculty representation and scholarship are on the rise at the University of Hawai'i.

Areas of Concern

Even as cultural vibrancy and collective efficacy uplift our people, troubled waters are evident as Native Hawaiian children and families experience disparate economic and other challenges.

For example, about half of Native Hawaiian families with young keiki (children) do not earn a livable wage. Compared with the major ethnicities in Hawai'i, Native Hawaiians continue to have the highest rates of poverty and unemployment. Although the proportion of Native Hawaiian children with a working parent has increased, Native Hawaiian parents, as a whole, tend to have comparatively lower levels of education and employment. Native

Hawaiians are disproportionately employed in lower-wage jobs, even among those with higher levels of education. Native Hawaiian homeownership rates in Hawai'i have stagnated since 2006, whereas home prices and rents have increased substantially, contributing to increased homelessness (51 percent of the homeless population is Native Hawaiian). In the face of these and other economic constraints, Native Hawaiians are the only ethnic group in Hawai'i with consistently more people leaving than entering the islands over the past fifteen years. The impact of the extended COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated these trends.

Native Hawaiians also face challenging health and social conditions that intersect with economic disparities. For example, although cancer incidence among Native Hawaiians is similar to that of other ethnicities, Native Hawaiians contract cancer at younger ages and have higher fatality rates. Moreover, about one in five Native Hawaiians suffers from poor mental health—a condition that is more pronounced among those with lower levels of education and income, mirroring trends for Indigenous peoples across the United States. Within the foster care system, Native Hawaiian keiki are overrepresented, though recent years have brought slightly lower rates and higher likelihood of keiki being placed with relatives. Among adults, increased arrests and incarceration rates for Native Hawaiians create major obstacles in the path toward a thriving lāhui (nation, people).

Stubborn health, social, and economic barriers have profound impacts on Native Hawaiian education progress and learning. Educational data show large achievement disparities between Native Hawaiian learners and their peers—a trend that has persisted for decades. Additionally, a “school-to-prison pipeline” in Hawai'i disproportionately affects Native

Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander children, who comprise a majority of in- and out-of-school suspensions *every year* (Figure 6). In fact, Hawai'i has the longest school suspension periods in the nation, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students are more likely than their peers to be suspended, losing an average of 75 days of instruction per 100 students. These students truly are left behind. The various obstacles, in turn, influence educational outcomes such as high school completion—an accomplishment that one in five Native Hawaiians does not achieve.

In summary, these areas of momentum and concern for Native Hawaiian well-being suggest that our current social and educational systems are in need of repair and reimagining. Solving systemic challenges calls for a reactivation of our superpower as an Indigenous people: our strong roots in 'ohana, community, 'āina, and spiritual connections. This inherent strength among Kānaka Maoli leads us to revive our cultural practices and reignite ancestral knowledge to solve contemporary challenges. This broad context of strengths and values guides our work of repairing and reimagining at the systems level to improve Native Hawaiian well-being.

Out-of-school Suspensions

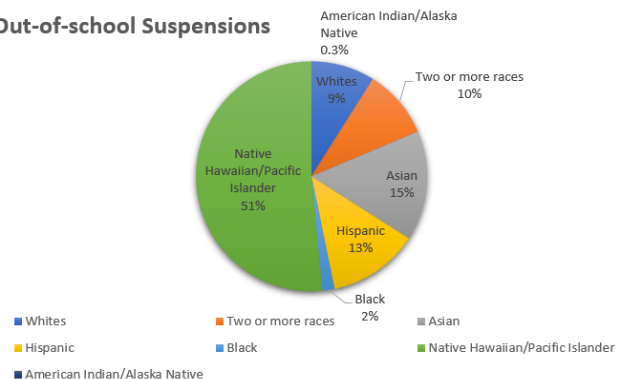


Figure 6. Out-of-School Suspensions, State of Hawaii Public Schools, 2017-2018ⁱ

<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/profile/9/district/29005/summary?tool=true>

ⁱ Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection,