

Introduction

This book is dedicated to the memory of William G. Demmert, Jr. (Tlingit/Oglala Lakota) who spent his life working to improve the education of Indigenous students. Bill was born in Klawock, Alaska in 1934 and began his formal schooling in a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Sitka, Alaska in 1940 as a kindergarten student. He graduated from Seattle Pacific College with a B.A. in Education with a Social Studies Major and Physical Education Minor and taught from 1960 to 1964 in Forks, Washington and from 1965 to 1968 in Fairbanks, Alaska. After receiving his Masters Degree in Educational Administration from the University of Alaska in 1968 he moved back to his hometown of Klawock where he became chief administrator and part-time teacher of seventh and eighth grades in the public school and experimented with culturally sensitive education. The school had about 65 Tlingit students and two non-Tlingit students. Bill entered the field of education just as concerns about the quality American Indian and Alaska Native education were intensifying in the 1960s and universities became interested in seeing what they could do to help. Bill joined a cohort of twelve Indigenous graduate students at Harvard University in 1970, beginning a doctoral program and becoming deeply involved in efforts to improve Indigenous education (Demmert, 1999).

Bill wrote in a 1999 *Journal of American Indian Education (JAIE)* article,

In March of 1970, during my last year as teacher and administrator for the Klawock Public School, I was invited to attend the “First Convocation of American Indian Scholars.” Organized by Rupert Costo and Janette Henry, founders of the American Indian Historical Society in San Francisco, California, the Convocation was held at Princeton University. This was my first exposure to other American Indian educators and it was the birthplace for the idea of creating the National Indian Education Association [NIEA].... Invitees to the Convocation had to have an advanced degree of at least a masters level or be recognized as a traditional medicine person or hold some other special status in a tribe. Over 200 people met and discussed the issues facing us as Indian educators and issues concerning the education of Indian children. It was an exciting opportunity for most of us attending to meet other Indian educators and discuss ideas and issues that were important to us as individuals and as indigenous peoples of the United States. (Demmert, 1999, pp. 7-8)

At this convocation Bill talked about “the tremendous dropout rate” and “parents turning away from the school because they were no longer involved” in the education of their children (*Indian Voices*, 1970, p. 230). He also recalled in his 1999 *JAIE* article,

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I remember getting acquainted with a number of the participants during that first day of the convocation. I had met several of them through my National Education Association activity and, as we talked and renewed acquaintances, we decided to get together that evening. We were all teachers or administrators working with Indian children and we were all members of one of the many tribes that still exist in the United States.... We talked about how great it was to have the chance to meet together as professionals in the Indian community, to discuss common interests, and talk about the education of Indian students. We felt that it would be important to explore what we might do to become more effective teachers, better school administrators, and to create a forum to explore practical experiences that might provide a path for improving schools serving Native America.

We met that evening, as we had agreed to do, and discussed what we might do as a group to create a forum for an annual discourse on education. Rosemary [Christensen] indicated that the Minnesota Indian Education Department, headed by Will Antell, had held a national Indian education conference in the fall of 1969, and that the continuation of such a conference would provide a great forum for getting together.

At the meeting that evening we agreed to form a national organization. Sparlin Norwood and I suggested a National Indian Education Association. (We were both very involved with the National Education Association at the time and thought that an organization specifically for Indian education would be a great model to follow.) (Demmert, 1999, pp. 8-9)

It was noted the following year that “Indian cultures and values emerged as a dominant concern” and that became the theme of the second Indian education conference held in August 1970 in Minneapolis (*NIEA Newsletter*, 1971, p. 1). In the NIEA’s first newsletter published on February 1971, Bill, now the NIEA’s treasurer, wrote,

If the school is to be effective and play a more important role in the development of a child, then it must work with community problems as it attempts to educate its young. Responsibilities to others as well as self must be recognized and understood. Interaction of rights and responsibilities between the school and community is necessary. (*NIEA Newsletter*, 1971, p. 2)

He went on to receive the first NIEA Educator of the Year award in 1977 and received its lifetime achievement award in 2004.

As he was working on his doctorate at Harvard he and other cohort members were enlisted by Senator Edward Kennedy to help draft and gain tribal input and support for legislation in Washington, D.C. that eventually became the Indian Education Act of 1972. Bill later wrote that Senators Kennedy and Walter Mondale told him that the legislation “might not include everything I wanted, but

it would not include anything I opposed” (Demmert, 1999, p. 11). Bill went to Washington and his work on this legislation became his Harvard doctoral thesis *Critical Issues in Indian Education 1972–1973*, and he received his Doctor of Education degree in 1973. As Deputy Commissioner of Education in the U.S. Department of Education from 1975 to 1976 he helped implement this new legislation. He then served as Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Office of Indian Education Programs from 1976 to 1978. He went on to become Alaska’s Commissioner of Education from 1987 to 1990 and subsequently co-chair of U.S. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos’ Indian Nations at Risk Task Force. In the Task Force’s final report’s transmittal letter Bill and former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell wrote:

The Task Force believes that a well-educated American Indian and Alaska Native citizenry and a renewal of the language and culture base of the American Native community will strengthen self-determination and economic well-being and will allow the Native community to contribute to building a stronger nation—an America that can compete with other nations and contribute to the world’s economies and cultures. (INAR, 1991, p. iv)

The Task Force recommended as one of four national priorities, “Establishing the promotion of students’ tribal language and culture as a responsibility of the school” (INAR, 1991, p. 22).

From 1992 to 2008 Bill taught at Western Washington University, and on June 12, 2009 we were honored to have him come to Northern Arizona University and deliver the keynote address on “What is Culture-based Education? Understanding Pedagogy and Curriculum” at our American Indian Teacher Education Conference. A biographical sketch of Dr. Demmert adapted from one he provided us when we invited him to keynote our conference can be found on page 196 of this volume.

Culture-, community-, place-based education

Dr. Demmert emphasized again and again that students have trouble finding meaning in decontextualized one-size-fits-all curriculum and instruction that does not relate to their cultures, communities and homes. Indigenous groups have lobbied the United Nations to support their right to self-determination and culturally appropriate education, and in 2007 they achieved their goal of a *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* that states in Article 14:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning....
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children,

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including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Culturally appropriate education is not just a basic human right, it is also good educational practice. The best way to contextualize education is to relate what students are learning to their cultures, communities, lives and land. While students need to learn the knowledge and skills included in tribal, state and national standards, they and their teachers also need to respond to local concerns and have some choice in what type of learning projects they can become engaged in.

In a study of ten schools in north, central and eastern Canada, from the islands of Hudson Bay to the coast of Newfoundland that were identified as having exemplary success with Indigenous students, the researchers concluded:

All schools worked to provide culturally relevant learning experiences and affirm students' pride in their identity. Aboriginal language immersion programs were present in about half the schools and in some this was the language of instruction until Grade 6. Most offered local cultural classes—some of which were accredited, and the remainder infused cultural content across the core curriculum. In all schools, the importance of the traditions and culture was affirmed by displays, ceremonies, excursions on the land, and the use of elders and local resource people. (Fulford, 2007, p. 12)

A previous Canadian study of successful schools for Indigenous students noted, “the fully independent band-operated model provides Aboriginal communities with the greatest control of their educational systems” (Bell, 2004, p. 295). The researchers in that study found that band-operated schools could better integrate the delivery of education from Pre-K to post-secondary into an overall community plan.

Culture is ever-present in schools. As Shawn Kana'iaupuni writes,

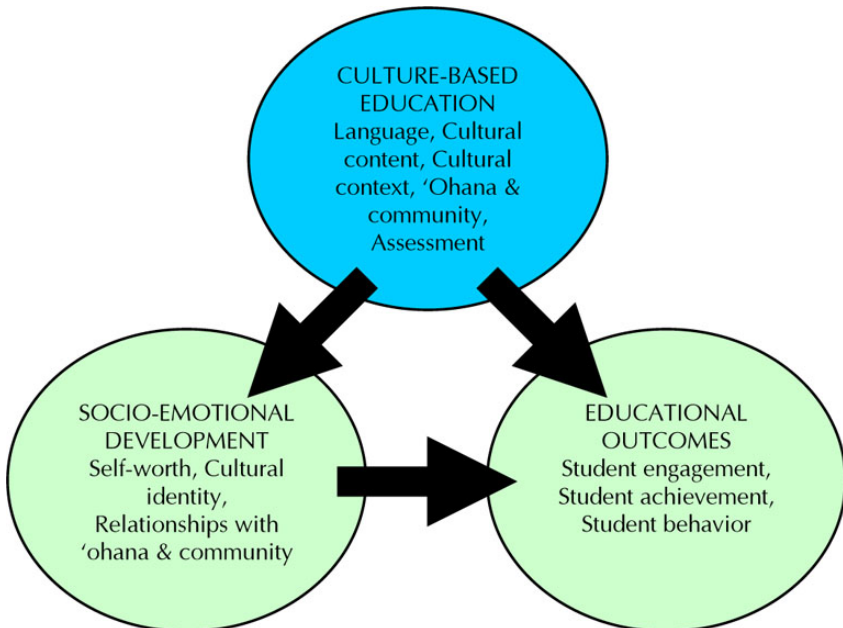
culture refers to shared ways of being, knowing, and doing. Culture-based education is the grounding of instruction and student learning in these ways, including the values, norms, knowledge, beliefs, practices, experiences, and language that are the foundation of a(n) indigenous culture. Because U.S. society typically views schools through a Western lens—where Western culture is the norm, what many do not recognize is that all educational systems and institutions are culture-based. Hence, the term is conventionally used to refer to “other” cultures, and in this case indigenous cultures. (2007, p. 1)

Brandon Ledward and Brennan Takayama (2008, p. 4) in a Hawaiian study categorize culture-based activities into seven broad themes:

PILINA 'OHANA: Involvement of the family in education;
PILINA KAIĀULU: Incorporation of community members into the classroom and the classroom into the community;
HAKU: Development of original compositions;
MĀLAMA 'ĀINA: Land stewardship and environmentally-based projects;
KŌKUA KAIĀULU: Active service promoting community well-being;
HŌ'IKE: Authentic performances and demonstrations of competency;
OLA PONO: Practical application of life and cultural skills and the teaching of values.

Ledward and Takayama maintain that “culture-based educational strategies affect socio-emotional development and education outcomes” and put forward a theoretical model diagrammed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Hawaiian Cultural Influences in Education theoretical model (Ledward & Takayama, 2008, p. 1)



Closely related to culture-based education is place-based education. A 2006 report on the National Science Foundation’s Rural Systematic Initiative notes that “Place-based education strengthens communities” and is “inherently interdisciplinary and project-based, it builds on local resources and expertise without great cost” (Boyer, 2006, pp. 114-115). This idea of teaching students about their specific locality and its people and their cultures and languages is not new. Neither

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is the criticism of teaching that focuses on test preparation and memorization, which can lead to American Indian and Alaska Native school dropouts. Studies by Paul Platero (1986) and Donna Deyhle (1989) found that most frequent reason given by American Indian students for dropping out of school is that they were bored. They got tired of being told to read textbooks with content that they could not relate to their lives and being told to answer the questions at the end of the chapter—chapters often written a couple of grade levels above their reading ability. They perceived teachers who were more interested in the subject matter they taught than their students as uncaring (Reyhner, 1992).

In the 1933 edition of *How We Think* John Dewey (1933/1998) called on teachers to engage their students in “constructive occupations” or “projects” that engage students’ interests, have intrinsic worth, awaken curiosity, and are carried out over an extended period of time. Projects should integrate as many of the basic subjects taught in schools as possible, and the “project method” was used successfully with American Indian students in the 1940s. In a 1944 article anthropologist Ruth Underhill declared that Tohono O’odham children traditionally “learned through activity, in a system surprisingly like our modern project method” (p. 5). In a 1948 article on day school methods for Dakota Sioux students the Indian Services’ Associate Supervisor of Education Gordon MacGregor wrote:

The project method is exceptionally well suited to educating the Dakota because it follows their own method of learning by doing and following the example of others. By bringing the children to participate and to share in the work and the responsibility for completion of a project, this method also reinforces the training for cooperative work already begun in the family. (pp. 6-7)

He noted that this method had been used for seven or eight years very successfully in Pine Ridge schools, and he found the competition between students and individualism fostered by traditional American teaching methods was difficult for young Sioux children to understand as they were taught at home to work cooperatively and not to outshine their peers (MacGregor, 1964).

Indigenous education has been criticized for being too vocational and slighting academics in the past with racism seen as a factor that lowered academic expectations for Indigenous students (see e.g., Barrington, 2008). However, the Director of Education for the U.S. Indian Service from 1936 to 1952, Willard Beatty was himself a graduate of a model vocational high school in San Francisco and saw the value for everyone of a challenging curriculum that combined academics with vocational education (Stefon, 2009). Beatty in a 1944 collection of articles from the Indian Service’s *Indian Education* biweekly newsletter included 17 articles in a section on “Culture: Background for Learning” that emphasized teachers need to understand, appreciate and build on the cultural background of American Indian and Alaska Native students.

There are many ways that creative teachers can put before their students the many issues Indigenous nations face today from which their students can

pick projects that can get them reading, writing, and learning more about their culture, history, science, mathematics, economics, the arts and other subjects. The editors hope that this collection of papers will help educators and policy makers understand how the education of Indigenous children can be improved. First, Bill Demmert and Navin Singh give overviews of research on culturally based education and its effects on American Indian and other students. Subsequent chapters in this monograph provides a variety of examples of how Indigenous students can be “turned on” to education by providing them with an education they can relate to. Former NIEA president Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert describes the National Science Foundation Native Science Connections Project, and Pauline Chinn describes how a *Mālama I Ka ʻĀina* sustainability workshop helped teachers become aware of the need for understanding the role and importance of Indigenous knowledge and practices to better serve their students. MaryLynn Quartaroli and Frederick Sherman describe how a university-based environmental education outreach program can recognize and build on the cultural background of Indigenous students. James W. Bequette and Kelly Hrenko describe Project Intersect that helped teachers incorporate Indigenous art into their classes. Sandra Wolf describes a history project that motivated three seventh graders and got them to better understand the American Indian Movement. Then Matt Oppenheim describes the development in Guatemala of a textbook for Mayan youth that describes efforts at community development. Finally, Lorenzo Cherubini and John Hodson describes a large Canadian school district’s attempt to understand better what Indigenous parents want for their children.

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