Progressive Teachers of Young Children: Creating Contemporary Agents of Change

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Abstract
This article describes how an Early Childhood Teacher Education program in Hawaii builds upon a history of progressivism in the field of early education in the U.S. to encourage students to become critical thinkers and agents of change. Reflecting through the historical lenses of educators such as Jane Addams, Patty Smith Hill and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, two progressive teacher educators call on their students to become "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988) and move from being agents of surveillance to agents of change (Foucault, 1972, 1995). Student data from blogs and action research projects illustrate how students challenged habituated practices in the field of early child education (ECE), which has been rapidly moving toward a narrow focus on academic readiness and the standardization of children and programs as a consequence of No Child Left Behind legislation and the Race to the Top competition for federal funds.

Keywords: early childhood education, progressive pedagogy, online teaching, agents of change, critical analysis

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Introduction

An agent of change is an advocate who is aware of policy, alert to issues of social justice, and feels supported to voice resistance and question existing policies and practices. Agents of change can be seen as advocates, "speaking on behalf of others, often from within existing political, social, and economic frames of reference" (Sumison, 2006, p. 3). In some cases, agents of change can also be activists "resisting and challenging those frames of references and the power bases that support them" (Kenny, 2004 in Sumison, 2006, p. 3). Our bachelor's degree program at University of Hawaii—West Oahu is focused on inspiring such agents of change.

A common and stereotypic conception of the identity of teachers of children from birth through age 8 does not seem to include this description of professionals as agents of change. The historical perspective presented by Snyder in *Dauntless Women in Childhood Education 1856-1931* (1972) based on Froebel's Mother Play in which teaching young children in the kindergarten (nursery school) was women's work and mothers learned from the kindergarteners (teachers). Snyder (1972) also indicated that the teaching force needed to change, moving towards a "more responsible social role" (p. 376).

We use Giroux's (1988) "category of transformative intellectual" (p.99) to define what it means to be socially responsible. Giroux suggests that teachers pay attention to the suffering and conditions of oppression in order to understand the lived experiences of individual children, their families, their cultures and languages, their social economic status and other conditions affecting the children's lives. Becoming a transformative intellectual includes a mindfulness of the conscience and an engagement with social justice (Freire, 1973; Greene, 1998). When our students learn to become transformative intellectuals, they develop the mindset to become agents of change, reflective of the ideals of progressive education, empowering children to be socially responsible as participatory members in a just society.

There are connections between the choices in the development and implementation of our early childhood program, our commitment to teachers as agents of change, and the work of the progressive educators. In the field of early childhood education, historic figure Patty Smith Hill was a key model of an ECE "agent of change" because she challenged the prevailing rigid interpretation of Froebelian beliefs and practices with young children. The following quote from an interview with Hill illustrates the educational dichotomy of her time, which is relevant today in 2012, particularly as we see teachers following the recipes of standards and scripted curriculums while others, often not revered, follow the voices and actions of children:

> There are two great divisions of teachers, you know: cookbook teachers and checkerboard teachers. A cookbook teacher sits down in the evening, measures out so much arithmetic, so much spelling, so much music, according to a pedagogical recipe and next day spoon feeds it into his pupils. He calls the process education. But suppose he were getting ready for a game of chess or checkers. Would it do any good to take the board the evening before and figure out the campaign – first this move, then that move? When he sat down with his opponents he would find that the vital factor had been entirely omitted from his calculations: the reaction of the other mind. Of course cookbook teaching is easier. But the other kind – well, from the child's point of view the other kind offers possibilities of real adventure. (Wolfe, 2000, p. 249)

How do we inspire "checkerboard" teachers? Patty Smith Hill, champion of play, author of many poems, children's songs and the famous Hill floor blocks was trained in the kindergarten movement by Anna Bryant. Wolfe (2000) describes the debates Patty Smith Hill had with the traditional Froebelian Susan Blow as follows,

The two women debated about the relative merits of play and work and the value of free versus directed play. Hill believed in some of Froebel's ideas but felt they should not be taken without critical analysis and modification when needed. Hill respected Froebel's method but did not see him as the 'sole prophet of truth'. Psychological findings of the time were also beginning to counter the formation of rigidity of Froebel. Hill focused on including the needs and interests of children in more functional ways. (p. 269)

This description of the debates illustrates the kind of striving for change that we encourage in our ECE students. We want them to be critical thinkers and to challenge the status quo when they believe that the prescribed practices are not sound or good for children. The readings we offer the students, the discussions using blogs, and the action research project all students complete as the capstone of the program all contribute to inspiring students to think deeply and understand how to enact change.

Social Justice: Historical and Contemporary Issues

One feature central to the work in our program is the practice of deep discussion regarding social justice and education. This is also reflective of much of the progressive agenda: "Out of this unashamedly optimistic, ardent, democratically driven experimentalism came a deep and abiding belief in the creative capacity of the individual as a social being to devise intelligent solutions to real problems and to posit meaningful future plans – plans designed to ensure continuous educative growth" (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p.221). We expect our students to not only debunk traditional early childhood practices, but to use their creative capacity to seek intelligent solutions connecting social justice and education. Our intent is that students engage in serious explorations about the assumptions and implications of choices in early childhood pedagogy, demonstrating a commitment to democracy. For, example, we share with our students how Lucy Sprague Mitchell established the B.E.E., The Bureau of Educational Experiments in which "initiatives were launched into areas of school nutrition, educational testing, visiting teachers, school playgrounds, day cares, nursery schools and demonstration programs at the grass roots of educational and social change" (Wolfe, 2000, p. 358). These topics ring true to most ECE students today, yet the reality is that contemporary ECE has become focused entirely on academic readiness. We empower our students to deconstruct the pervasive readiness agenda as an instrument to rethink equity in educational policy and its enactment in classrooms.

As standards and federal grants continue to focus on the narrow view of literacy as the mainstay of early childhood education, our program bursts forth with emphasis on community and education. Interestingly, Jane Addams's work at the Hull House disrupted this very same view as she saw the program "ultimately a protest against the restricted view of the school" (Cremin, 1964, p. 61). In our choice to inspire agents of change we believe we are protesting against the restricted constructions of teachers as agents of surveillance.

The conception of teacher as an agent of surveillance is inspired by the work of Foucault (1972; 1995). Foucault's technologies of power, hierarchical observation, and surveillance are evident in the forms of enacted accountability and standards. Control is central and is utilized to ensure compliance and homogeneity as well as the separation of teacher and student, positioning the teacher with power and the student as the site of manipulation. Many teacher education programs perpetuate the image of teachers as agents of surveillance by only teaching standards with little to no understanding of the historical and social contexts of education. This is often masked in the overwhelming amount of teacher education courses with scripted methodologies that teach lesson planning as the foundation of education. Is teacher surveillance synonymous with teacher control and student compliance? Doesn't this impede the empowerment of teachers as agents of change?

Jane Addams (1902) echoes many of these same ideas in her response to similar restricted perspectives of education,

> We are impatient with schools which lay all stress on reading and writing, suspecting them to rest upon the assumption that all knowledge and interest must be brought to children through the medium of books. Such an assumption fails to give the child any clew to the life about him, or any power to usefully or intelligently connect himself with it. (Cremin, 1964, p. 62)

Addams's answer to these practices is to engage students with humanity, understanding historical and relational contexts of an industry along with the actual training. These very ideas are prominent in our program as we encourage our students to become agents of change. We hope that our students understand the humanness of teaching and its relation to the community, moving beyond methodologies to a comprehension of the historical decision-making within the early childhood community. Mitchell writes, "I was tired of working in an academic ivory tower, with golden domes but no firm foundations. I wanted to mix cement and sharp stones and build an educational foundation which would develop people with live thinking and live feelings" (Biber, 1967, p. 358). Mitchell's conception of, "live thinking and live feelings" further the hope of humanness we have for our students. All of our courses create spaces for students to both think and feel. It is common for a student blog response or discussion board posting to include both a critical discussion and a personal experience. The presence of thought and feeling contribute to the students' commitment to see early childhood education practices as other than they are typically portrayed, evident in our current students as well as graduates.

Progressivism and an Early Childhood Degree

Our early childhood teacher education bachelor's degree program articulates with the university system associate's degree programs in early childhood education based on a mainstream perspective of early childhood focused mainly on child development. Our students are all practitioners working in the field of early childhood education. In the bachelor's degree program, we call for critiquing practice from theoretical and cultural perspectives, interrogating power within the workplace and community, and embracing advocacy so that teacher professionalism evolves as society changes. The culminating practicum for the bachelor's degree is a 6-credit course, which includes an action research project. In reality, the associate's degree maintains a more conservative norm of mainstream child development while the bachelor's degree expands with more progressive and liberal orientations to the field. This creates a tension for our students as we ask them to disrupt what they know from their Associates program and begin to rethink practice from a critical framework.

The main format for our program is an online environment, servicing students throughout Hawaii and other Pacific Islands. Through the use of Laulima, a Sakai online platform supplied by the university, and blogger.com, students engage with readings and discussions based in a variety of texts. The process begins with each student writing a question in response to the readings and then writing an initial post to a blog or discussion board. Then both the professor and peers respond to the initial post with more questions. These questions are meant to inspire deeper thinking and more questions rather than drive towards a specific answer. Our process is meant to help the students to develop clarity and discomfort in order to stimulate evolution in their thought processes and teaching practices. In a process that embodies Freire's (1970) ideas of dialogue, respect, and engagement of students collaborating, our students have the space to disrupt "banking" notions of education.

Students spend the first weeks of the course reviewing resources describing a version

of Socratic dialogue (including a colleague's paper on the Neo-Socratic method and the website http://socratesway.com/ everyday.html) and the first posting on the discussion board or blog for the course is the students' interpretations of these ideas in relation to their experiences and beliefs. This experience begins the process of students becoming critical thinkers. An example of this is depicted in the following student posting,

> ….When we stop to analyze or critique something that is when we use our minds and develop our answers to what we believe in. We cannot always accept everything everyone says because to them, it means something and have created that thought because of an experience, and to say you agree but not look into the situation, you may never know what really is out there.

Another student explains how the Socratic readings influence how he considers advocacy and teaching practices,

> …To be true advocates in the field of ECE, we all need to look into ourselves and not be "sold" into one idea because it came from research or a text book. Besides the universal ECE shortcomings (wages, respect, gender equity) there are opportunities within our programs to advocate for or against something.

These two students, along with others in the class, were willing to question their source of information and act as "agents of change" based on what they learn. They were willing to disrupt expected assumptions in the field of ECE, through dialogue with their peers and professors, rethinking what is possible in teaching and learning and what could be enacted daily in their classrooms.

Pedagogical Choices of Progressive Teacher Educators

We encourage our students to experience teaching as an engaging, experiential process through the use of blogs and discussion boards. With each posting and familiarity with the process of responding to the readings through questioning, students begin to imagine early childhood education as something beyond what they already know. This includes developing and understanding of critical theory and how to use theory in order to disrupt common expected early childhood practices and beliefs. This process is how our students become advocates. This advocacy will be the source of their professional "voice" as agents of change. Bringing these elements of discussion into action is how these teachers to create a humanity-central environment for themselves and the children they teach. For example, in one blog, a student reflects on a reading from *Making Learning Visible* (2001), sharing her deconstruction of power ideas surrounding truth,

> I know I occasionally have a hard time accepting information that seems counter to what I've learned. Like Howard Gardner wrote about on page 337, learning new paradigms isn't always so easy. How do you un-think something you considered fact? Or, a bigger question could be, "What does it mean to know something?" This line of thinking takes me back to my philosophy classes discussing the concept of what is really truly real. Are your thoughts real? Are the things you can taste and touch (etc.) real? How can we ever really know the truth of life? Is there even such thing? And what, if anything, do these questions mean when working with young children?

Developmentally appropriate practice, teacher identity, standardization, and academic push-down are common characteristics of the ways in which early childhood education is and often understood by teachers. Readings introducing these "grand narratives" within early childhood education are offered to the students in order for the students to have a basic background to dispute. Alternative perspectives are also shared through the readings,

presenting other ways to see these practices. Our hope is that students consider how their experiences can impact the disruption of a practiced pedagogy and move them from efficient practitioner to transformative intellectual (Giroux, 1988) and an agent of change.

As early childhood teacher educators, we know that NCLB has taken away the beauty of childhood, interpreting each child as the same, meeting the same standards, without regard to culture or context (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). Sameness continues as those with the power, politicians, policymakers, and administrators, impose academic push-down in hopes of ensuring, ironically, that no child is left behind. Ideas of push-down echo in children's texts, further pushing childhood to the margin and placing academic push-down as the norm. Student accounts in the blogs depict how academics for young children are perceived by the students as both pervasive and problematic. Some of our students are Head Start teachers and have seen their paperwork increase as readiness testing and accountability rule their classroom time. Projects and play and emergent curriculum do not fit this paradigm.

One student discussed the victimization and rights of children from the academic push-down:

> Tests and standards hold too much weight in our schools. In fact, they are more important than the well-being of the child. What kind of logic is this? I don't understand why, when there is evidence to suggest otherwise and examples in other countries, parents and educators still insist on the earlier the better. I love Elkind's (1981/1988/2001) phrase "an assault on childhood". We are forcing our future generation to grow up too fast in a system that leads them to feel like they are failures. Imagine a future with no imagination, no creativity and little social skills. What kind of world are we creating?

In chat discussions through the online teaching platform, students tell stories about their friends, trained in early childhood education, who have left public school elementary teaching because the job was becoming so standardized and focused on high stakes testing. They felt they had to develop teaching identities as technicians for testing, rather than creative, child-centered teachers. Within our teacher education program, the development of identity is part of inspiring agents of change.

Action Research

Our students engage in change during our program through a capstone project using action research and a practicum experience. Action research is about social change (Lewin, 1946) and can empower communities to take action (Freire, 1973). Equity (Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klekr, Zeichner (Eds.), 2007) and teaching practice (Britzman, 2003) are central to the action research process, creating a cyclic space for contemplation, doubt, and revolution. This experience furthers the students' understanding of themselves as agents of change rather than experts in the rhetoric of standards and accountability (often defined outside of the community and construct of school). Being able to engage in action research throughout a teacher's career is valuable to both teachers and students as it gives teachers the process in which to continually rethink practice in order to best meet the needs of the students and community.

Each student is expected to complete 120 hours in a classroom outside the classroom she/he may be working in currently, and also to collaborate with the teacher in the practicum classroom to complete an action research project. The purpose of the practicum is to utilize the experience as a mirror on current teaching practices. We expect students to become part of the practicum classroom, participating in the ordinary day and observing daily practice. Each student then returns to her own personal classroom to consider her teaching practice through

the action research process.

One student's action research project focused on the question, "Will openness in teaching and learning help empower children's learning experiences?" Before entering the action research process, this teacher thought she created a classroom based on holistic ideas of learning. She constructed "being a teacher" by responding to her students. Yet, after videoing herself teaching and reviewing her teaching practices, she recognized how she was manipulating her students as she attempted to "control" learning situations. According to the student,

> Many of us as teachers and adults may think that we are providing rich learning experiences. But how can we define those experiences as rich when we are the one's controlling the learning taking place? I speak from personal experience. I thought that I was fair and open as a teacher. But when I heard and saw myself on video for the first time I was pleasantly awakened. I saw myself trying to control the learning that was already taking place. There was no need for me to control the outcome of the activity, or achieving the objective. I remember the feelings of frustration that I felt at the time. Why? I ask myself. For the first time, I realized that I needed to let go of my urge to control the learning that was evolving right in front of me (Iorio & Parnell, In Press)

This identification in her practice positioned her to reflect on power and manipulation in all of her teaching. The analysis of her data inspired her to begin letting go of her own power as teacher and attempting to share power through conversations with the young children in her classroom.

Rules in the early childhood classroom were the focus of another student's action research project. This student recognized how rules are embedded in the preschool setting and teachers often make and then enforce the rules. For her project, she wanted to investigate what the rules meant to the children, and how teachers' perspectives on control, freedom, and risk would contribute to the children's experiences with rules and throughout the classroom environment. This project included the student interviewing teachers and students in her personal classroom and the practicum site about rules. At her personal classroom, she also tallied the amount of times teachers corrected according to rules. This student noticed how her baseline data constructs the classroom environment and her role,

> The data suggests that the children are being reminded of the rules on a very frequent basis. They all know there are rules though they are not sure why. Most children alluded to the need to comply with these rules or face a teacher-imposed consequence. Interestingly, none of them admitted to ever breaking the rules yet I know through prior experience that they have. The children know that I know this, as their teacher. I wonder how my position influenced their answers.

The change this student implemented included discussion with the children in the classroom to rethink the rules and then several related discussions with the teachers. Following the change, the frequency of corrections based on rules by the teachers dropped. Interestingly, when the teachers discussed this drop in corrections, they immediately attributed the decrease to the absence of certain children. The student's analysis indicating a deep understanding of power and control in daily classroom interactions,

> ….two teachers pointed to sources outside of themselves to account for the difference in the number of rule reminders when I shared the results of my time-sampling observations, and both assumed the change was due to the absence of certain children from their group. Referring back to the children's discussion of who makes the rules,

according to the children, the teachers are the keepers of the power and yet, the power to disrupt the norm was pushed off onto the children when the teacher felt less in control and was having to remind the children of the rules more often. Essentially, the teachers were looking for compliance to a set of standards that fulfill society's expectations of the teacher/student relationship.   When the children didn't fit into the normal range of compliance, they were thought to disrupt the whole group. Perhaps the teacher felt the power was no longer in her hands.

This student's conclusions focused on how rules perpetuate a hierarchy of power within the construct of school, leave children with little or no power, and how modes of surveillance are constant in teaching practices. This student furthered the cyclic nature of action research by ending her project with even more questions: "Is it possible for teachers to let go of the idea of 'teacher' and relinquish the power and control of children? Can we allow children the freedom and respect to truly explore without being constantly under our watchful eye?"

Both of these action research projects illustrate how our program supports students in becoming agents of change. The action research project creates a space for students to question assumptions about policies and practices constructing early childhood education. The emphasis on critical perspectives within our program is evident as these look beyond methodologies in order to understand conceptions of power and how power dynamics contribute to the teaching practices. Both examples also show how giving voice to children is an essential part of practice as well as positioned the teacher to listen and respond to children rather than placing children as having to only respond to the teacher or the structure of school. The action research process gives students the chance to enact change. This experience carries forward into their teaching outside of the college classroom as they practice as agents of change.

Relationships with Community

Our program is informed by the community where our students teach as well as the global community. As our students dialogue through blogs and discussion postings and through the process of action research, our hope is that their work is furthering their communities while also inspiring new ways of action and change (Dewey, 1897; Freire, 1970). The critical component of all of this is a deep understanding and connection to the community. This takes several forms in our program including defining of identity in terms of community, connecting work to indigenous communities, and responding to the needs of local communities.

After reading several articles in regard in *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* (Pelo, 2008) focusing on sense of place in terms of connecting to the earth and its communities, students often comment in their blogs on how they define and understand their relationships with the local and global communities. Sense of place plays a large part as indicated by this student's blog posting exploring how much the sociocultural and ecological contexts of lived experiences contributes to identity,

> When compared to cultural and social identity, how much weight does one's ecological identity hold? How much does one's understanding, knowledge, and love for a specific place grow to encompass love for other places? Coming from the tiny, South Pacific island of Guam, I identify with island life. Island life on Guam centers on a few common values – love for yourself and your neighbors, a sense of community and looking after one another, respect for the elderly and authority, and belief that hard work pays off. I feel very blessed to have grown up in an environment where I was always looked after by family, friends, or neighbors. At

present, I am writing this from Guam, where I have been for the past month. I am lucky enough to visit the island every year and relish in the opportunity to come home. Being here gives me an appreciation for the little things. There are no distractions (or traffic) on the island and the sun is always shining. Time seems to stop, even if just for a brief minute, here for me every day. Never has it been more apparent to me that my ecological identity is woven into the fabric of who I am as an individual and a contributor to society.

We live in a culture that dismisses the significance of an ecological identity – just how detrimental is this type of environment and culture? Where can our nation be headed if we do not have an understanding of where we have been? When it comes to coexisting with nature, the Western world could stand to learn much from the Eastern world. We Westerners are more concerned with conquering nature and bending her to our will. In contrast, Eastern societies have lived in harmony with nature, coexisting together for centuries. We have harnessed nature and profited off of her. In turn, we have wounded her to a point almost beyond   healing. When compared with the rest of the world and our relationships to the environment, the United States seems to be the most blatant offender of the environment. Does this lack of respect for nature stem from the United States being such a young country? How have older countries and their experiences of living off the land affected their views of the environment? How has the U.S.'s lack of living off the land affected our views of the environment?

Another student responded to this student in terms of her own experiences:

I feel that you're right about appreciating the little things about where you come from. I experienced that myself when I went home (Kauai) just 2 weeks ago. Even though the islands are so close; unless you have truly experienced both; they are entirely different. The little things I appreciated were, getting in my car and driving down the road to my cousins house, taking a drive out to the north shore where my family is from and spending time with them, and being able to almost stop time for a minute and look out at that beautiful stretch of ocean that surrounds the island, these are the little things that you appreciate once you don't get the chance to do them anymore. On my trip home I got to eat the most delicious Samoan crab that my dad had caught in nature like he does with most of the foods he eats. But like you said in your last question of your blog, many people in the US lack living off the land and yes it does affect how we view nature. Before buildings and skyscrapers our world was one big nature. What happened to it? Have people forgotten what beautiful things nature has to offer? Without nature how would our society be viewed? Have we lost the true value of nature?

Both students illustrate a sense of place, observing the small details of their communities and the ways these details might inform perceptions and decisions. A student's racial/ethnic identity, self-assessment as a teacher and his/her epistemology (cultural and social "ways of knowing") are formed by these perceptions and inform their decision-making. As part of the continuing dialogue, questions are offered by the professor to further connect community and teaching practice,

- How might an understanding of the historical, political, and economical choices of the United States in terms of ecology empower teachers to offer children ways to connect to the environment?
- Should teacher education include a course understanding ecology?
- How might an ecological focus impact how teachers understand the importance of children develop deep relationships with the local and global world?

- How might this focus aid in rethinking early childhood practices to build a sense of place, especially in an era where accountability seems to primary?

These blog experiences with community build to inform other work in the program, in particular, the action research and practicum experience. A Hawaiian student focused her action research project on Hawaiian Values. After a practicum experience in a Waldorf setting, she noted the deep presence of values in the Waldorf classroom. She wondered if her own classroom, based in Hawaiian culture and language, reflected the same level of deepness she viewed in the Waldorf classroom. The way she connected her work directly to the indigenous Hawaiian community as well as to her own community illustrates her understanding of how the community and classroom are connected.

Through her data collection, this student discovered the lack of Hawaiian values in particular parts of the daily classroom:

Based on my data analysis, the dining area in my family childcare environment did not represent a majority of the Hawaiian values I chose. Ironically, eating is an important aspect of the Hawaiian culture. It is through sharing of food that social and cultural exchanges occur. The values not present were *malama* [to take care of, to care for, preserve, protect, support] and *laulima* [cooperation, group of people working together]. My qualitative data showed that much of what was occurring in the dining area was a result of me doing for the *keiki* [children]. Having the *keiki* become more involved in preparing for meal times would result in the opportunity of the values *malama* and *laulima* to be present.

The change enacted through this project included preparing meals at the children's level, changing the furniture so the children could gather comfortably, and having the children set the table with all-reusable materials (cloth napkins, ceramic plates, no plastic). According the student, "In enacting these changes, I hope to provide an environment that clearly shows the use of the values *malama* and l*aulima*. I also hope that it provide more opportunities that, through the use of these values, *keiki* will learn more from each other as to what these values might mean." An analysis of the change reveals how deep understanding of Hawaiian values offers a means for connection to the community,

Making a few changes to my child care environment brought great learning experiences for the *keiki* within my program. By reconceptualizing my dining area, I was able to provide opportunities that reflected Hawaiian cultural values. Values act as a point of reference in our judgments and our conduct (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). It defines cultures and is one of the foundations on which society is built (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). This idea defines the bigger picture as to why I believe using values as a foundation for teaching and learning is relevant to our everyday lives. School should be a place where values are transmitted, where values are discussed, and constructed (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). The text describes that "to educate" also means to educate the intrinsic values of each individual and each culture, in order to make the concept of values extrinsic, visible, conscious, and shareable (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001).

This action research project is an example of connection to the indigenous community. Meeting the needs of the communities served, and embracing the cultures of our families beyond the indigenous community is a foundation of our work as progressive teachers in Hawaii today.

Another example of how we work in the community has been my (author Adler) consulting work with the Ho'okahua project with Early Head Start, Head Start and Kindergarten teachers at Kamaile Charter School, which is the catchment area of families in 4

shelters. As part of our grant, we are focusing on providing the project approach as a way for teachers to engage the children and their families in culturally relevant learning. It is inquiry based and comes from the interests of the children. For example, one Head Start teacher (who is part of the grant) really listened to her children, some who live in the shelter where the Head Start center is located. Her children referred to the shelter as a place ("my jacket is in the shelter", or "we have a Christmas tree in the shelter"), but not as a home. So she queried her three- and four-year-olds about "What is a shelter?" to acknowledge their lived experiences, and to debunk the negative stereotypes of living in shelters and of being homeless.

The shelter project included lots of children's drawings and documenting their observations in their journals, group problem solving, making models of a shelter, class discussions with student responses on chart paper, (which brought delight to parents as they read their child's words), and survey work to gather data. One child asked if his home was a shelter since there were 21 people living there. His mother described how he surveyed family members on whether they thought their home was a shelter. In our presentation of the Shelter Project at the Hawaii State Early Childhood conference, she described how family members were confused why this 4-year-old was asking such complex questions of them. Using the definition the children had decided upon (A shelter keeps us out of the weather and keeps us safe), this child concluded that indeed, his home was a shelter!

One of our students, another teacher on the grant, shared that some of the Head Start children live in the bushes adjacent to her center or on the nearby beaches with their families. Their "home culture" is one of poverty as well as their Hawaiian ethnicity, both of which should be addressed with "culturally relevant teaching." Our Hawaiian Head Start lead teachers' commitment and cultural connection to their families has lead to respectful and meaningful learning experiences for the children. "All of your children are so smart," the teacher of the Shelter project told her parents, "They did this project work themselves. I was just the facilitator". She encouraged her parents to really listen to the voices of their children, for by doing so, they will learn so much.

The active connections to the community are essential to engaging as an agent of change. Our students are expected to make these connections throughout the program, beginning with blogging and continuing through action research while we, as the professors, are also connecting to the community, embracing the very commitments we expect of our students.

Teacher Educators Walking the Talk

The expectation of our students to be agents of change is the same expectation of us as professors and researchers. Holding to this expectation positions us to share power with our students as we encounter what it means to challenge traditional assumptions as early childhood educators. For example, when I (author Iorio) encountered homophobic students, I immediately began to find resources and ask questions that countered the heteronormative assumptions of early childhood education. This lead to the development of a documentary depicting the lesbian adults and their early childhood experiences as well as a teacher and grandmother advocating for gender variant children. The film has begun to create a space for both teachers and professors to discuss traditional early childhood practices that exclude and how to rethink practice in order to advocate for children.

I (author Iorio) am always in dialogue with my students, my colleagues, and myself in order to continue to create spaces for rethinking practice. I value developing relationships with my students that encourage collaboration and support. Through these relationships, students take risks, challenge their own understandings of the world, and rethink what can be possible in teaching and learning. When I consider this relationship, I imagine a connection

that is based in trust and respect, a foundation for creating a space where students can be in discomfort and evolve. Availability, creating spaces for honest reflection, sharing, and support as well as acceptance all contribute to the development of relationships between student and teacher scaffolding ways to engage and understand the content of coursework. This has engagement has influenced the constant revision of my coursework. Since our coursework is online, I have been utilizing the variety of technology available for online teaching. I have moved from discussion boards to the variety of blogging and wiki tools for discussion. I often found the tools in our current online platform flat and did not help the students connect with each other. After researching and reading several resources regarding online learning (including *Uses of Blogs* (Bruns, 2006), I began using blogger.com. The change in discussion from the students was remarkable as the students began to share more and reflect on a deeper level to each other. My willingness to understand my limitations as a teacher and to challenge my own teaching practices models the expectations of our program.

In another instance, one young student, who was feeling discomfort when asked to critique Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), a predominant practice in early childhood education, could not believe that the Professor (author Adler) indicated that DAP was not accepted practice in all cultures for all children. I recall the student's passionate query about how this "small Japanese lady" could tell her what she had learned for two years was "wrong". For example, in some Asian school settings education of young children is didactic and teacher-centered, but this is countered by a collective social norm of nurturance and respect for developmental differences in childrearing practices.

Parents in my (author Adler) study of Hmong families in the Midwest (2004) believed in a separation of responsibilities between elementary school and home: teachers teach academics while parents teach social norms and respect for social systems. Unlike middle class Western parents, Hmong parents in the study were more interested in whether their children behaved and were respectful in school, than in their scores on tests and academic placements. These Hmong parents trusted that teachers "know what they are doing" and, no matter how well educated, they would not give assistance on academic issues, expect to have input on educational programs, or would directly challenge the curriculum or teaching (p.69).

As a teacher educator, I (author Adler) believe it is important to model ways in which we critique existing practices and find multiple perspectives to educational issues. As a result of my research, I am not surprised that many Japanese parents in Hawaii (mostly first generation or recent immigrants) favor academically oriented preschools over play oriented curriculums. The student that was disturbed by being expected to critique DAP was actually taught at an early age in the Philippines under teacher-centered pedagogy, yet when being "trained" as an EC teacher, she accepted the fact that differing rates of child development requires a child-centered or play oriented curriculum. Accepting authority was actually part of her personal Asian epistemology; thinking "outside the box" to analyze and challenge norms, part of our progressive pedagogy, required a paradigm shift. It seems to be the reverse of the pushdown issue previously discussed and illustrates our focus on finding multiple perspectives on issues.

Understanding our perceptions of ourselves as progressive educators, teacher educators, and researchers contributes to how we walk the talk. The documentary work(s) focuses on only one example of how we may be progressive teacher educators and scholars. Identity, professionalism, knowledge, and epistemology further inform how we engage with our students and as agents of change. For both of us, social justice and democratic education are about freedom and respect for the voice of all students and teachers, directly linking our work to the progressives and framing us as agents of change. By understanding our own

histories and positioning of how we have become agents of change, we are better able to listen and respond to our students in order to support their becoming as agents of change.

An Agent of Change in Action

We have been speaking about how our program inspires agents of change, but what happens when our students graduate and practice in the world? The story of one of our first graduates is relevant to this question. Shanda, a graduate from our program and now a graduate with her master's degree in Educational Foundations, has spent over 11 years in the early childhood field. She believes teaching and learning through the arts humanizes us as it creates learning situations engaging us in dialogue. Further, reflection defines how Shanda considers her own practice, often interrupting familiar practices in order to see another perspective. This is evident in her own work as she recognizes how arts have been placed in the margins in schools as accountability drives the contexts of even the early childhood classroom. In order to understand the power of the arts, Shanda became involved in community of at-risk youth engaging in "graffiti" by actually learning the art as well as creating spaces for the youth to practice "graffiti". The creation of these spaces contributed to a shift in the community perception of both "graffiti" and the at-risk youth. Her master's project included revisiting this experience through an autobiographical, ethnographical methodology and comprehending the impact of the arts on disrupting assumptions in education and society. Shanda shares in the closing words of her paper,

> I am personally invested in our future by acknowledging the present interests, talents, and cultural knowledge of our youth. And I hope that you the reader are also motivated to take a stand against the power structures that dehumanizes us by looking within and asking yourself, "Why do I want to teach?" The movement starts with you.

Through these words it is evident how she calls for change not only in herself but also in people and community around her. These experiences are now present as she opens a new preschool classroom in the university children's center incorporating a central focus on the arts and awareness of power hierarchies as well as how to listen to and respond to children. When asked how she is agent of change, Shanda shares,

> I can only change my situation by changing myself. This means re-evaluating what and how I teach that respects children as individual human beings. How I choose to live my life, my values, the decisions that I make as a teacher affects the lives of my students. Because I am willing to evaluate myself, it helps me to better understand the situation that I may be struggling with--and change becomes a natural process. You cannot let fear control your actions of change. (personal communication, 6.18.2012)

Conclusion

Being an agent of change enacts a process of becoming. The process may begin with encounters with knowledge and models of the past. It continues by using these encounters as frames for self-reflection, offering spaces of discomfort and evolution, while understanding of identity. Action research becomes the vehicle for practicing change, comprehending positioning as teacher and learner, questioning policies and practices, and engaging in agency. The becoming of our students as agents of change is evident in their action research choices and their later decisions as working early childhood educators. Summing up this process, one student illustrates her own becoming,

> The trusting relationship is the foundation and then the teacher and the child co-construct knowledge, skills, language and more with pleasure and emotional

sharing. Teacher is a co-constructer of children's future, not a person who "teaches". I didn't think we could "teach" young children, because they learn through doing/play on their pace and level, but I also didn't have the idea of we **co-construct** children's knowledge, skills, creativity, language, thoughts and their young lives. Those wonderful "happenings" happen in relationships among and between children teacher and community.

This student's rethinking of what it means to teach, the critical importance of relationship, connection to the community, and sharing of power with children all construct the teacher as an agent of change. The disruption of teacher as an agent of surveillance through this rethinking furthers the future of teaching practices based in response to children rather than at children through rhetoric and scripted ideas.

As we consider our own place as teacher educators in the process, we come to better understand what it means to advocate and support resistance to traditional assumptions and expectations about early childhood. We take our professional obligations seriously, but with humor and compassion for our students' culture, knowledge, and epistemology. This is done within an articulated program with Hawaii Community Colleges, online, and with the belief, articulated by the Head Start teacher to her parents: "Our students are so smart and bring such rich experiences to their learning!" We try to listen, respect their cultural knowledge, co-construct new ideas, and learn from them, which often causes us to inquire more. Thus, this is the process we use to inspire our students to become progressive early childhood educators and continue our journey as ardent educational progressives.

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