THE SELECTION OF CULTURALLY-COMPATIBLE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Cathie Jordan

One of the distinguishing features of the KEEP program, and one of the probable reasons for its effectiveness, is that, at many key points, it is compatible with Hawaiian culture. This paper will first discuss some of the general issues and assumptions involved in the selection of culturally compatible classroom practices. Then, two major elements of the KEEP program will be proposed as examples of such culturally-compatible practices and some of the points of congruence between program element and culture will be discussed. Lastly, the issue of the cultural specificity or generality of the KEEP program will be considered.

Cultural Compatibility and Educational Practice

A few basic ideas constitute the organizing conceptual framework for KEEP's cultural work. First, a "difference," rather than a "deficiency," model of minority education is used. That is, it is assumed that all neurologically-normal children, regardless of cultural background, are capable of learning those basic skills that the schools are charged with teaching. No cultural group, as a group, lacks capabilities for and experience in learning; by the age of five or six, all neurologically-normal children have learned very complex material in their own cultural milieu. However, children from different cultures may have been socialized to go about the learning process in different ways and in response to different contexts. The differences in the ways that children learn are to a certain extent individual differences, but there are also group differences, and many of these group differences are culture-related. One of the reasons that children of many minority groups experience difficulty in school is that they have learned to learn in ways that differ from the ways in which their teachers have learned to teach. Schools are aware of individual differences among children and attempt to adapt to these. KEEP has operated on the premise that it is also possible and desirable for schools to adapt to cultural differences. The assumption is that the correct course, for both practical and ethical reasons, is not to attempt to change the children or their families to fit the schools, but rather to modify the schools in ways that will allow them to serve minority children more effectively. This position does not necessarily imply radical change in school practices; what it does imply is an effort to select, from the wide spectrum of available teaching practices and curricula, those that are compatible with the culture of the client population in ways that contribute to effective education. Given this policy, one is then faced with the question of how to guide the selection process. To answer this question, we rely upon the idea of "eliciting contexts."  

If no cultural group is deficient in learning skills, and if these skills are manifested in non-school environments, then one key strategy in efforts to improve the academic performance of low-achieving minority children should be to discover and delineate the features of those naturally occurring contexts which elicit skills and behaviors that are relevant to school goals. The next step is to select school contexts that possess similar features, thereby eliciting from the children the school-desired behaviors and skills, and so contributing toward the production of more effective settings for learning. Two facets of children's natal cultures have proven the most fruitful areas to attend to for information about potentially useful eliciting contexts. One is comprised of those contexts in which teaching and learning events frequently take place. The other is made up of those situations in which particular behaviors are exhibited which are also desired by the school. In the course of this paper, the way in which knowledge of such natal culture contexts has been employed at KEEP will be illustrated. In sum, the process that is advocated is a culturally-guided selection of teaching practices; the product that is hoped for is an educational program which is compatible with the children's culture in ways which elicit from the children those skills, abilities, and behaviors which will contribute to the desired learning.
Examples of Culturally-Compatible Classroom Practices at KEEP

Two instances of KEEP program elements which are congruent with Hawaiian culture will be examined in order to demonstrate at what points classroom contexts and relevant home contexts touch.

The first example involves the social organization of the independent work centers in which KEEP children spend four-fifths of their language arts period. These "learning centers" constitute a comfortable and effective learning context for Hawaiian children partly because the social organization of the centers is congruent in a number of ways with major non-school contexts in which Hawaiian children work and acquire new information and skills. The analogous home contexts are those of the sibling group, especially in its capacity as a work force, and to a lesser extent, the companion-peer group.

After infancy, Hawaiian children spend most of their time with other children, rather than with adults or in solitary activity. In particular, they are accustomed to working cooperatively in the context of a group of children, most often as part of a group of siblings. The tasks for which sibling groups are responsible are important ones, such as cooking and child care. Typically these are carried out without the need for close adult supervision. Also, adults tend to structure their relationships with children so that they relate to the sibling or companion group as a whole, or to a teenage "top sergeant" of the group, rather than one-to-one with each individual child.

One consequence of this family organization is that Hawaiian children tend to be highly peer-oriented. Another consequence is that elementary-age Hawaiian children are accustomed to acquiring skills and knowledge by participating and cooperating in activities and tasks with the more competent children of the sibling or companion group. This implies that they learn to learn from a variety of people, and that other children constitute one of the main sources of help, skills, and information that they learn to utilize. Moreover, they are accustomed to changing roles, from that of "learner" to that of "teacher," depending on their competence relative to others in the group.

Turning to the KEEP classroom, what features do the learning centers share with the culturally familiar sibling and companion groups? Groups of children from two to six are brought together at learning centers as the social context for much of the school day. This group setting is congruent with the importance of peers and siblings outside of school, as it allows children the company of other children in adult-approved circumstances. More specifically, the group of children at a learning center is congruent with familiar sibling and companion group contexts for working. Although the teacher is present, she ordinarily does not intrude upon the working group of children. Consequently, as at home, other children are the most readily-available sources of help or information. Also, since for any individual child at a center there is usually at least one other child present who is currently doing or has already done the same work, the potential for cooperative work is present, and a good deal of cooperation and helping does take place. In one study, one such interaction occurred roughly every two or three minutes.

Considered as a context for learning, because centers allow and encourage peer interaction and cooperative work, the children are able to mobilize strategies for teaching and learning acquired at home. Some examples of such strategies are: seeking and giving immediate feedback about small segments of performance; scanning for and utilizing multiple sources of help and information; scanning for evidence that other children need help; volunteering help to others; switching between "teacher" and "learner" roles; joint work; and the use of modeling and intervention as major teaching devices.

Of course, peer groups at centers are not identical in their make-up or social organization to sibling or companion groups. For example, the latter are usually composed of children covering a range of ages, while the children in a classroom are very close in age. However, as we have seen, the two contexts are congruent at certain points, and these similarities allow the children to be at ease in the center setting, encourage them to work on school tasks, and enable them to use familiar social interactional strategies for teaching and learning.

A second example of compatibility between home and school is to be found in the reading lessons. Three features of the lesson which are points of cultural congruence and which may contribute to its effectiveness with Hawaiian children, will be outlined here.

First, the social organization of the reading lesson event involving a small group of children interacting with an adult, rather than children performing individually for the teacher on a one-to-one basis. As we have seen, for Hawaiian children, the former is the more appropriate context for interaction with an adult. Also, interaction with the adult is largely voluntary, at the pupil's own discretion and decision. All this contributes to producing a setting in which the children are able and willing to participate actively in the lesson.

Second, the reading lesson, like the center context, shares features with non-school learning situations. The children work on a task as a group, rather than alone. There is mutual participation of the knowledgeable person (the teacher) and the less-knowledgeable person (the student) together in the carrying out of the task. Also, learning takes place in a mode of "enterprise engagement."
This means that the learning situation involves actually engaging in the task or skill to be learned, rather than talking about how to perform the task. Furthermore, learning takes place in the presence of the performance of the whole task, rather than only some small part of it which may not be clearly related to ultimate performance goals in the minds of the children. For example, at home, children learn how to take care of infants by participating in the family enterprise of caring for a baby, gradually taking on larger components of the entire task, but continuously having available the model of baby care being completely and competently done. Similarly, in the KEEP comprehension-oriented reading lesson, the teacher guides the children in learning to read by actually engaging in the whole process of reading, comprehending and incorporating into their thought processes, the written text. They interact with the printed symbols, manipulate those symbols, relate the text information to previous experiences and use the information in conjunction with and on the same basis as they are accustomed to using information from other sources.

Finally, the reading lesson resembles a speech event in Hawaiian culture, “talk-story.” For effective education, it is necessary to engage fully the linguistic and cognitive capacities of children. One of the richest settings for complex linguistic performance in Hawaiian culture is that called talk-story or a sub-type of talk-story, “story-telling.” Although the talk-story mode does not appear to occur in mature form before age 12, under certain circumstances the talk-story form can be elicited from younger children. Among the features present in such settings are: A small group of children, a sympathetic and receptive adult, informality, turn-taking, overlapping speech, joint performance, and co-narration. Under such circumstances, very rich verbal interaction and idea manipulation is produced.

In the KEEP reading lesson, similar features are present: the small group, co-narration, joint performance and overlapping speech. There are differences, of course. For example, the teacher ensures equal opportunities for each child to speak, over a period of days. However, she does not enforce a rigid turn-taking system, nor demand responses from a child who is not ready to participate, thus preserving the child-experienced informality of the enterprise that is necessary for the child’s continued engagement with the lesson.

In sum, the reading lesson is a context in which the social organization makes it possible for the children to interact easily and richly with an adult and to respond to adult questioning; it shares features with non-school learning settings in which the children are accustomed to acquiring new knowledge and therefore is likely to elicit the social interactions and cognitive operations necessary to learn; and it resembles a context, that of talk-story, which elicits rich language production and verbal manipulation of ideas.

Some Hypotheses

Discussing the KEEP program in terms of cultural compatibility, raises the issue of whether or not the program is specific to and usable only with Hawaiian children; and if it is potentially more broadly useful, to what degree and on what basis may extensions to other settings reasonably be made? At this point, there are three hypotheses which represent the range of opinion within the KEEP staff. These may be called the parameters hypothesis, the process hypothesis, and the learning modes hypothesis.

The first, or parameters hypothesis states that KEEP has evolved a program which is in accord on many points with current knowledge about sound educational practice in general, and which also offers some information about possible additions to or refinements of the current state-of-the-art, at least for lower SES students. The KEEP work, then, has produced a basic list of the parameters of effective educational practice, the outlines of which might be filled in only slightly differently for different cultural groups.

The second hypothesis, the process hypothesis, is that it is the process that is generalizable, and not necessarily the product. Perhaps KEEP has generated a model for a generally useful process for selecting appropriate educational practices, but the product of such selection may be substantially different for different populations.

The third, or learning modes hypothesis, does not exclude the previous two, but is an extension of them; it also represents the view of the author. Speaking in broad terms, this hypothesis suggests that there are a limited number of ways that learning situations can be arranged, and that there may be basically two contrasting modes, which actually represent two ends of a continuum. These are, on the one hand, a learning mode which involves learning by talking about what is to be learned. It typically utilizes rule statements, deductions and exposure to small segments of skills or tasks in the absence of the performance of the whole and in settings removed from the context in which such skills are finally to be practiced. This mode, it is suggested, is characteristic of societies and cultural groups which are highly technological, urban, and literacy-dependent. For children of such populations, the traditional Western-school model probably works reasonably well.

On the other end of the continuum, is the mode to which KEEP’s programs may be well adapted. This is a learning mode which involves close observation of models, learning by engagement in the task, and gradual
approximation to complete and correct performance. It calls for internal judgments about readiness to perform particular task components and inductive thought processes, and it involves learning in the presence of the performance of the whole task. This type of learning context may be found in non-urban or recently-urbanized societies, with relatively low levels of technology, where literacy is new or is not so potent a force as it is at the other end of the continuum. This learning mode may be found also among subcultural groups within urbanized, literacy-dependent societies, when such groups are to some degree isolated from or independent of the mainstream culture, as is the case with some groups of Hawaiians. It may be that for these populations, KEEP-like programs will work, with some relatively minor modifications, especially well—quite as well as they seem to work for Hawaiian children.

Footnotes
3See Tharp, R.G., in this issue (Metamethodology) for a fuller discussion of the interface of ethnography and other research methods.

Cathie Jordan is Research Anthropologist with KEEP and the Kamehameha Educational Research Institute. She was formerly a Research Fellow with the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum and has, since 1965, worked on issues related to Hawaiian education.