

THE SCHOOLING OF THE NISEI IN HAWAII

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The schooling of the *nisei*—first American-born children of Japanese immigrants—in the local public schools has been traditionally viewed as a major factor in *nisei* success in postwar Hawaii. Liberal historians, such as Lawrence Fuchs, author of *Hawaii Pono: A Social History*, have extolled the Islands' public schools' ability to "reform" the inequities existing in the larger society by capturing and nurturing the imagination and loyalties of the *nisei* and other non-*haole* students with the promise of America.

Questions concerning this astounding achievement of public schooling have plagued contemporary educators and educational historians, especially in light of public schooling's alarming problems in providing adequate reading and writing skills, curbing violence, and accommodating the demands for equality by increasingly militant ethnics and feminists—and their conservative backlash. Were the teachers of the 1920s and 1930s of a special breed—dedicated and devoted—that today's crop cannot match? Were their young, non-*haole* wards special students—disciplined and eager—that today's students from Southeast Asia, South Pacific, and United States mainland backgrounds cannot measure up to? Was the *nisei* experience in the public schools of Hawaii a unique and isolated offshoot from the mainstream of an embattled and

disturbingly class- and racially-based public school system? Or was the *nisei* era of Hawaii public schooling its golden age?

Revisionist historians, such as Clarence Kariyer, Michael Katz and Colin Greer, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s and influenced by the civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, and women's rights movements have sought radically different explanations for public schooling's role in American society. They emphasize accountability to current conditions and set forth a view of public schooling as a means of social control and class perpetuation, not mobility and opportunity; as a conservative "battleground" for the status quo, and for limited change in response to dramatically changing economic developments.

The following summarizes a master's thesis in educational foundations titled, "*The Schooling of the Nisei*," that looks at how one version of revisionist history views the schooling of Hawaii's "most successful minority."

American Public Schooling in Hawaii

The public school system in Hawaii between the two world wars was characterized as "typically American," influenced by the overwhelming political and economic domination of the Islands by the

United States even before annexation, and charged with the overriding task of "Americanizing" the Islands' ever-increasing Oriental-American population, most of them of Japanese ancestry.¹

As early as 1845, a system of American-influenced public education was established in the then-Kingdom of Hawaii with the appointment of an American to be Minister of Instruction in the King's cabinet. Founded by missionaries with the intention of educating the native Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians who were the result of mixed marriages, the tax-supported system quickly moved out of private hands and missionary influence, and into government control with English, as opposed to Hawaiian, as the language of instruction.²

By the time of annexation to the United States in 1898, the Organic Act, which defined the territorial status of the Islands and the citizenship status of its residents, set into law the existing centralized, state-operated public school system because it was already American in character and well-adapted to the task of Americanizing the heterogeneous population of Hawaii.³

The effect of [compulsory education and English as the universal language of

instruction] is the most beneficial and far-reaching in unifying the inhabitants which could be adopted. It operates to break up the racial antagonisms otherwise certain, to increase and unite in the classroom the children of the Anglo-Saxons, the Hawaiians, the Latins, and the Mongolians in the rivalry for obtaining an education. No system could be adopted which would attend to Americanize the people more thoroughly than this.⁴

Reflecting a faith in the "melting pot" of America, the Organic Act and public school administrators saw the institution as the primary agent in committing the children of the disinherited to a process of internalizing shared goals and ideals collectively called "American."⁵

Lawrence Fuchs and other liberal reformist historians, whose interpretations and perspectives of public schooling in Hawai'i have dominated its educational history, have viewed the goals and ideals of public schooling as promoting and providing equal opportunity, freedom and rights, and progress. Fuchs saw the public schools of Hawai'i as functioning largely *outside* the mainstreams of oligarchy control and restriction.

"During the first two decades following Annexation," Fuchs wrote in *Hawai'i Pono*, "the powerful men of the haole community had more important things than education to concern them, and often the 'do-gooders,' sometimes women missionary descendants, were appointed school commissioners. For the most part, education was left to the commissioners and professional educators." In the absence of oligarchy control of the Islands' public schools, "the missionary spirit of education prevailed," he said.⁶

Karier, Katz, Greer, and other revisionist historians view the goals and ideals of American society and its schooling from a strikingly different perspective. Public schooling, they argued, reflected a

society that was materialistic, class-oriented, and restrictive in social mobility by emphasizing and rewarding such "ideals" as merit orientation, competition, private interests over public good, individual success over group success, and class consciousness and maintenance. Karier and others saw public schooling as being part of the control strategy of the dominant economic interests to maintain their position of wealth, privilege, and status. And Hawai'i, with its agrarian, two-class, racist, semi-feudal society, could hardly be any different.

Even before Hawai'i officially became "American," its public school system was established in such a way as to accommodate and facilitate the continued growth and perpetuation of an American community. That English would be its official language of instruction; that schooling was compulsory; and that it was supervised by the Territorial Government, which was controlled by the *haole* elite through the Republican Party, set the grounds for public schooling in Hawai'i as a mechanism of selective socialization and social control as revisionist historians have argued for the mainland schools.

Turn-of-the-century business interests of the "Big Five" in sugar and pineapple, growing in power and wealth in the following decades, had transformed the missionary-created public school system into a

government enterprise that more accurately reflected the increasingly industrialized and urbanized character of Hawaiian society. It would be absurd for the oligarchy to bring such a system under its wing, finance it, empower it with the task of training and Americanizing the thousands of children of their laboring force, and yet allow it to run itself as it pleased—as indeed, it did not.

As the urban sector grew in economic importance and as the industrialization of the plantations freed laborers to build a more diversified economy and to create viable, alternative communities, the Islands' horizons, as that of the *nisei*, were clearly in rapid transition during the first four decades of this century.

Public schooling between the years 1917 through 1941 came to reflect these growing pains in the semi-feudal economy of Hawai'i. Rather than a simple conduit for the training of workers for the plantations, public schooling was expected to meet the needs of a more complex industrial order, as well as the moods of the political climate, including the pressing question of the "Japanese problem."

Hawaiian Schooling and Economic Control

In a racist, stratified society where over 40 percent of the population were loyalty suspects and were becoming increasingly militant as labor organizing developed sophistication, the task of public schooling was dominated by the need for Americanization. This is not to suggest, as Fuchs has, that public school officials and teachers were unswayed by the pressures and needs of industry and all but ignored the manual training aspect of public schooling in their drive to provide a strong liberal education laced with Americanisms. Indeed, evidence points out that much of the thinking and teaching in public school circles

⁴Prior to 1900 the sugar industry had been greatly centralized. The twentieth century carried centralization further—until a complex of firms emerged with almost total control. The "Big Five"—Alexander and Baldwin, American Factors, C. Brewer, Castle and Cooke, and Theo H. Davies—controlled the bulk of the Territory's banking, insurance, utilities, wholesale and retail commerce, and transportation. Inevitably, they controlled politics as well. APK

were put into efforts to bring public schooling into harmony with economic interests.

Henry Wadsworth Kinney's appointment as the Superintendent of the public schools of Hawai'i in 1914 was prompted by the "hue and cry for economy" and the prevailing low price of sugar.⁷ His administration, marked by economy in operation and simplicity in curriculum, emphasized vocational training in shop and agriculture and specialized, self-supporting vocational programs.

During public schooling's most trying period in the late 1920s under the supervision of Will C. Crawford, the 1930 School Survey was commissioned by business leaders calling for a shift toward vocational training, particularly agriculture, in response to the growing unemployment problem and the stagnation of the economy during the Depression.⁸ Public schooling responded by doing away with expansion plans and urging its graduates to return to the plantations and farms to find work and opportunities, conditions that schooling had little or no control over.

Hawaiian Schooling and Class Perpetuation

In addition to being subject to the fluctuations of the economic pulse of Hawai'i, public schooling reflected the social structure of the two-class society in Hawai'i and the dominant *haole* class' attempts to maintain their privileged status.

Established as early as 1842 by missionaries, Punahou was to develop into a prep school, assigned the almost exclusive task of educating the future business and professional leaders of Hawai'i. Overwhelmingly *haole* with high tuition fees, and high "standards" of English proficiency required for entrance, Punahou was truly the elite's school, preparing the sons and

daughters of the local oligarchy for admission to mainland colleges and finishing schools abroad. These young graduates were destined to rule Hawai'i.

When a *haole* middle class began to emerge as the result of a sudden influx of military transfers and accompanying civilian workers (who found lucrative employment at Pearl Harbor and in growing urban centers) during the military buildup of the 1930s, the English Standard School developed to educate the children of these newcomer *haole*. Most of these middle-class *haole* were unable to pay the high tuition in such schools as Punahou and Hanalei (its elementary "feeder" school), and yet they were loath to send their children to the public schools where the non-*haole* dominated. To these middle-class *haole* and part-Hawaiians whom the English Standard Schools primarily serviced, public schooling meant their children mingling with social inferiors.

Clearly, from the time the first English Standard School was opened in 1924 at Lincoln Grammar School in Honolulu, the schools, although under public auspices, segregated the *haole* from the non-*haole*, or more specifically, the upper-middle-class *haole* from the lower-middle and lower-class non-*haole*. From 1925 to 1932, Oriental students never made up more than 7 percent of the school population at Lincoln Grammar, a quota comparable to the situation at Punahou.

Given the territorial status of Hawai'i and its desire to become an American state, its leaders moved cautiously in the legislation and legalization of overt racism, although racist acts and institutional discrimination were commonplace in the Islands, especially against the Japanese. Responding, however, to the pressures to retain *haole* privilege in the face of growing Oriental ambition, the English Standard School set up language fluency, especially oral fluency, as the

criterion of admission to these schools. And this was in spite of the fact that English proficiency was one of the major goals of public schooling. Massive campaigns had been launched in public schools to eradicate pidgin English with only partial success. As equally important, therefore, as the racist character of the English Standard Schools, was their timing.

The national mood in the US had rapidly moved from uneasiness with Japan's expansionist schemes in the Pacific to outright anti-Oriental by the 1930s. At home in Hawai'i and on the US West Coast, the Japanese were apparently also "on the march" as they moved into neighborhoods and occupations considered the exclusive domain of the *haole*. Their ethnic communities, isolated and independent, were large, sophisticated, and distinctly Japanese in character. The English Standard School, seen against this backdrop of economic and social forces interacting at home and abroad, was a major effort to protect and maintain *haole* privilege in the Islands.

Public schooling, in other words, could hardly be viewed as progressive, liberated "island" surrounded by the semi-colonial seas of rigid economic, political, and social controls, as Fuchs and other liberal reformist historians have claimed. But rather, public schooling for the Islands' non-*haole* Americans was undoubtedly influenced by the basic political philosophy and class structure that favored the ruling oligarchy, if only to a lesser extent than other areas controlled by the oligarchy, such as government or communications.

Hawaiian Schooling and Occupational Training

The first four decades of this century were years of tremendous change in Hawai'i brought about by

significant developments in the Islands' economy. Industrialization and urbanization helped spawn a sophisticated labor movement and a language school test case, both voiced by urban non-*haole* intellectuals and activated by non-*haole* political consciousness; the first Federal Survey of Education, pointing out the urgency of Americanization programs in the public schools; and the growth of an urban middle class of ethnic diversity.

Public schooling would respond to these new industrial needs of the economy and new social pressures in its society with dramatic shifts in its occupational training programs and its Americanization programs.

By the 1920s the Japanese were no longer the majority race among plantation laborers, having been replaced by the Filipinos who began arriving in 1910. Having become the largest numerical ethnic group in the Islands, the Japanese undoubtedly made a tremendous impact on schooling. In 1900, for example, only 10 percent of the total population of Hawai'i was in attendance in school. But by 1930, the proportion in school had risen to almost 23 percent with the Orientals making up a significant part of this increase.⁹

Undoubtedly the "urban pull" that had enticed their parents to move to the cities kept the older *nisei* in the cities seeking more diverse and profitable jobs than those to be found on the plantations where work was still menial and advancement extremely limited.

Responding to the demand for skilled labor prompted by commercial diversity in ethnic communities and the larger American community, vocational training in the local public schools gradually shifted from a predominantly agricultural emphasis (to the chagrin of the planters) to a commercial one. The 1911-12 *McKinley High School Handbook*, for example, lists commercial courses of shorthand, typing, bookkeeping, commercial geography, and law

which were nonexistent in the 1905-06 *Handbook* curriculum offerings.¹⁰

Even following the landmark 1920 *Federal Survey of Education* and the introduction of progressive educators and educational policies, McKinley High School (the only public high school on O'ahu at the time) continued to expand its three-fold curriculum of college prep, general prep, and commercial to allow the student to take manual arts, clearly separated into those disciplines for boys and those for girls. Home economics and industrial shop in particular were highly recommended by the Survey.

Hawaiian Schooling and Americanization

Vocational training was nevertheless an addendum to the primary and essential purpose of schooling—socialization—the achieving of a sense of community among diverse unequals.

The primary responsibility of the public schools of Hawai'i, as delineated by the 1920 Federal Survey, was "to make loyal, intelligent Americans by imparting to children of alien and non-English speaking Oriental parents the ideals, customs, and language of America."¹¹ In this context, civics, social studies, student government, oratorical contests, extra-curricular and social club activities, and also hygiene, physical education, home economics, and ROTC—curricular and extra-curricular activities central to a "liberal education"—carried special messages for the non-*haole* student. They would become the "chief connectors with organized society" outside his family home and neighborhood and they would serve as the reshapers of those aspects of a non-*haole* student's ethnic background that were incompatible with the American community's interests.

Civics and American history drove home the message of individualism—getting ahead by yourself—an abrupt turnabout for the group-oriented Japanese and other Asians. Athletic contests, speech competitions, and debates taught competitiveness as opposed to cooperation.

Manners and appearances did not go unheeded as well. After-school "classes" on pronunciation, etiquette, and hygiene saw dozens of Asian-American students in attendance.

Colin Greer, author of *The Great School Legend*, a revisionist history of American education, offers a revisionist view of minority eagerness to embrace the overstated Americanism taught in the public schools:

What a child brings with him to the public school classroom is not a pure or direct product of a historical homeland, but the combined product of some of those patterns established by the group in order to survive in its assigned place in America. These are the factors which contribute to ethnic self-image and to varying degrees of preparedness for 'making it.'¹²

What the *nisei* child undoubtedly brought with him were the collective experiences of anti-Japanese and pro-American sentiments. As Koji Ariyoshi explained "growing up" *nisei*-style in Hawai'i during the days before the Second World War:

The Nisei grew up in the years of U.S. isolationism and an exaggerated popularization of Anglo-Saxon culture. Americanism was the Anglo culture which was stamped upon and indoctrinated among the Nisei and other non-whites. This attempt at cultural genocide of the heritage of the non-white minorities was intense, particularly in the public schools.¹³

The enormous magnetism and group identification created by national pride were central to the Americanization programs at McKinley and other public schools

which exalted the American experiment in democratic government (ignoring the wholesale genocide of Native Americans and the exploitation of Eastern European immigrants in industrialization) to capture the loyalties of the *nisei*. In much the same vein in Japan, the Meiji educational policy of glorifying the Emperor created for that society a unified and loyal nation of diverse class backgrounds.

But no public school in Hawai'i achieved the scope and the stature of McKinley High School in the schooling of the *nisei*. It is not surprising that McKinley's student bodies, in testament to the sense of kinship nurtured during their school years there, have consistently perpetuated class reunions and have boosted stronger and more active alumni organizations than any other public school in the State. Significantly, the greatest participation is by alumni from the 1930s and 1940s, and a dramatic drop in numbers is evident among those who graduated in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴

The only public high school until 1920, where over half of the Islands' non-*haole* were educated, McKinley High School, during the years 1917 through 1941 became the "community" for the *nisei* in Hawai'i. It gave them a whole new language (standard English); it provided them with teachers, some devoted, some not, who provided the models of behavior and aspiration sought by children whose parents were aliens in this society; and it set up curricular and extra-curricular activities to provide the non-*haole* student with the opportunity for individual merit reinforced by appropriate rewards.

There was real thirst on the part of the *nisei* and other non-*haole* students and they drank deeply, as Fuchs put it, of what public schooling offered. But it was not what schooling promised that they heeded, but more what it provided for them as the disinherited and

alienated of the society: and that was not opportunity, advancement, and status! Schooling had no control over such things. Rather it was security, place, and skills that enabled them to take their assigned places in society.

This is not to imply malicious design and manipulation on the part of liberal educators, like Dr. Miles Cary who was McKinley's principal from 1924 to 1948. Dr. Cary and others, who acted on public schooling's behalf in the years 1917 through 1941, did so in full faith that the society in which they lived, despite the enormous inequities that existed, was part of the ethos of America as a land of opportunity and progress. And undoubtedly, the thousands of bright, young non-*haole* students in their classes were proof enough of this belief.

Certainly the intent of Cary and others, in the liberal tradition, has been to provide encouragement, ambition, and opportunity to the *nisei* and other non-*haole*. Their official reports and individual perceptions of school curricula and activities clearly reflected this intent. Fuchs and other liberal reformist historians have taken these judgments at face value, imbued with that same perception of American society, and have pointed to *nisei* success as proof of the transformation power of public schooling.

But the public schools of Hawai'i, like public schools across the United States "have always represented conservative social forces expressing and reflecting the aspirations, the fears, and the interests of the more affluent members of the communities."¹⁵

The public schools of Hawai'i were the primary agents of a massive Americanization campaign, exaggerated in its depiction of American history and virulent in its attempt at cultural genocide of the heritage of the non-*haole* in Hawai'i.

The schools caught the mainland trend of liberal education to fulfill the "communal" needs of its non-*haole* population, particularly the *nisei*, who made up the majority of the 65 percent Oriental enrollment of McKinley in 1920 and who were increasingly rejecting the cultural and traditional mores and observances of their Japanese heritage which were not only considered alien, but enemy in this period before World War II.

And the public schools of Hawai'i maintained the social stratification of the society in its segregation, both in policy and in goals, from the private school system. There was no question during those years of *nisei* upbringing that Punahou and McKinley schooled two different student bodies for two different stations in life.

Fuchs expressed, in an interview with the *Hawai'i Observer* in 1974, his concern that Hawai'i was developing a two-class educational system. Hawai'i has always had a two-class educational system—in the past, between the *haole* in the private and English Standard Schools and the non-*haole* in the public schools, and today, as Fuchs points out, between "well-to-do people mainly from Oriental and *haole* backgrounds [who] send their children to private schools or to schools in the public school system which are favored, and poor people in the Islands, mainly Hawaiians, Samoans, Portuguese, and [the] poorer [*haole*] who are in a small minority [who] send their kids to neglected public schools."¹⁶ Class society remains in Hawai'i and so it remains in its schools.

Without doubt, the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and other immigrants who came at the turn-of-the-century, have quickly moved into the middle class, especially since World War II. But their impetus did not come from schooling, given the limited and defined role of schooling in pre-World War II Hawai'i. Rather it came from a variety of sources, including economic stabilization of ethnic communities, political

consciousness among the dispossessed through labor organizing, deterioration of absolute oligarchy rule, development of diverse capital resources including banking and real estate, and timing and luck.

Some of these conditions can never be reproduced. The *nisei* "achievement" of material success, so dramatically attributed to schooling and a cultural reverence for education, may never be an example for other minority groups to follow, despite the claims of liberal historians.

Debunking the "myth" of schooling for success, revisionist historians, on the other hand, have looked to internal forces within ethnic communities and families, rising out of cultural traditions and economic accommodations to American society, in developing "preparedness" among its people.

The Japanese-American community, for example, traditionally viewed by reformist historians as a cultural stronghold providing reinforcement in the *nisei* pursuit of higher education, has come to represent a much more diverse and viable institution in the creation of *nisei* success. In the community of peers, the *nisei* found a marriage of pre-capitalist values and behaviors (savings, wage labor, mercantilism) of early Meiji Japan with sophisticated and solid social constructs (political organizations, churches, newspapers). This provided the *nisei* with social, economic, and political opportunities often unavailable in less-developed ethnic communities and the place to exercise them.

Colin Greer has even argued that "school success came after the establishment of an indigenous ethnic stability (e.g., ethnic business and political organizations grounded in the community) and the subsequent need of a high school diploma to advance it."¹⁷ Greer

argues that an ethnic community's economic sophistication and stability were prerequisites for its members' success in other reaches of society, including schooling. In 1940, he points out, the recently-arrived Japanese community—tightly organized around its own business enterprises—ranked high on school achievement.¹⁸ Says Greer:

The "business" quality of the ethnic community has not itself been the vital ingredient; the key factor is the indigenous grounding of the unit within the ethnic boundary; that is, the establishment of an ethnic middle class before scaling the walls of the dominant society. Economic stability for the group preceded its entry into the broader middle-class stage via education.¹⁹

Furthermore, Greer qualified the value of public schooling by stating that for ethnics "public education was the rubber stamp of economic success; rarely has it been the bootstrap."²⁰

For Fuchs and other reformist historians to take progressive liberal intentions and rhetoric as economic, political, and social reality in Hawai'i is to deny ethnic communities and peoples a share in the making of their own history; to deny public schooling its rightful role in its society and its proportionate share in any laurels; and to deny the historical continuity of public schooling from *nisei* times to today.

Footnotes

¹Wist, Benjamin O. *A Century of Public Education in Hawai'i: October 15, 1840-October 15, 1940*, Honolulu: Hawai'i Educational Review, 1940, pp. 36-48.

²*Ibid.*, p. 48. Also, Lawrence Fuchs, *Hawai'i Pono: A Social History*, New York: Random House, 1961, pp. 263-264.

³*Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴The Report of the Hawaiian Commission Appointed in Pursuance of the "Joint Resolution for Annexing the Hawaiian Islands to the United States," Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1898, p. 10.

⁵Karier, Clarence J. "Liberal Ideology and the Quest for Orderly Change," in Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas and Joel Springer, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973, p. 88.

⁶Fuchs, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁷Wist, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-155.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 162-166.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁰*Course of Study for the McKinley High School, 1904-1905 and Course of Study for the McKinley High School, 1911-1912*, Honolulu: Bulletin Publishing Co., Ltd., 1904 and 1911.

¹¹"Survey of Education in Hawai'i," *Bureau of Education Bulletin*, No. 16, Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1920.

¹²Greer, Colin. "Remembering Class: An Interpretation," in *Society: The Ethnic Experience in America*, Colin Greer, ed., New York: Basic Books, 1974, p. 19.

¹³Ariyoshi, Koji. "Nisei in Hawai'i," in *Japan Quarterly*, October-December 1973, p. 438.

¹⁴Statements made to the author by Herbert Chang, president of the McKinley High School Alumni Association on the event of the 110th anniversary of the school, Hon Kung Restaurant, September 25, 1975.

¹⁵Katz, Michael B. *Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971, pp. 110-111.

¹⁶"Shaping Our Understanding of Hawai'i," in *The Hawai'i Observer*, November 19, 1974, p. 7.

¹⁷Greer, Colin. "Immigrants, Negroes, and the Public Schools," in *Divided Society*, p. 89.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 18.

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