My Personal Educational Philosophy: Tri-Excellence

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I developed my own personal educational philosophy by first looking back on my school experiences. Public education has always been a big part of my life. My mother was a librarian at Heʻeia Elementary School in Kāneʻohe for over thirty years. She was an avid reader who took my sister, brother, and I to libraries, book sales, and book stores quite often while we were growing up. I have fond memories of attending the annual Friends of the Library of Hawaiʻi used book sale in the hot and dusty McKinley High School cafeteria each summer. Not surprisingly, I too grew up to be an avid reader. I had some really good teachers during my K–12 years, but also had some not so good and, quite frankly, really bad teachers. The good teachers pushed and encouraged me at the same time and the bad teachers applied the minimum amount of effort and consistently provided only negative feedback.

While I flourished at Mānoa Elementary School within a nurturing and disciplined environment, my self-esteem took a significant hit during my years at Stevenson Middle School during the late 1970s. Bullying behavior and regular exposure to cigarette and marijuana usage (by other students, not myself!) were prevalent. Those years were very challenging, but toughened me up in a good way. I learned how to interact with students from different backgrounds. It took a long time, but my self-esteem slowly built back up. I managed to graduate from Roosevelt High School with a decent GPA and SAT scores, struggled throughout my first two years at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, and finally figured things out during my junior year, subsequently graduating with a B.B.A in Travel Industry Management.

After looking back at my experiences, I then asked myself several questions: Which parts of my schooling did I like? Which parts did I dislike? Why? What would I have changed or done differently? How could I have been a stronger and happier student? I then came up with the following educational philosophy—**Tri-Excellence.** A student will only succeed in school if three things are in place—Student Excellence + Teacher Excellence + Family/Community Excellence. Everyone and everything must excel and work effectively together for a child to succeed in life. In this case, the popular African proverb, "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child" rings very true. Oviawe's article describes the Ubuntu African philosophy as structured around a collective approach where the "relationships between a person and his/her community is reciprocal, interdependent, and mutually beneficial" (Oviawe 2016, 3).

Tri-Excellence is a student-centered philosophy and based on students' experience within their families, cultures, and personal interests. Knowledge is not absorbed nor uncovered within a vacuum, but shared, created, and constructed together with others (Thayer-Bacon 2000).

The overall goal of Tri-Excellence is for students to become empowered to be advocates for themselves and others utilizing effective academic and social emotional skills. Empowered students will be able to make powerful change for their own good and the good of others (Manini, Taone, & Wengronowitz 2019). Within student-centered education, schools are not viewed as institutions that control and direct youth, but rather, institutions that work together with students to improve society or help students realize their individuality (Massouleh &

Jooneghani 2012). The Tri-Excellence philosophy is applicable throughout a student's lifetime, continually creating options for their future and building awareness and respect of other people and their cultures. According to the influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant, children should be educated not just for the present but also for improved humanity and the whole destiny of mankind (Ozmon 2012).

Tri-Excellence also draws from many schools of thought, including Idealism, Progressivism, Existential-ism, and Native Hawaiian Epistemology. I have learned about the importance of dialectic conversation and the search for the truth within Idealism and the importance of education for the whole child within Progressivism. I enjoyed reading Hunter's (1993) article which discussed two existential principles that teachers can easily pursue within their classrooms: teachers can celebrate, rather than discourage, authenticity and encourage their students to pursue interests in a peculiar, unusual, or authentic topic; and teachers can also instill within their students the courage to choose freely and authenti-cally and to be able to accept full responsibility for the consequences of their choices. Progressivism and Existentialism place the learner at the center of the edu-cational process as students and teachers work together on determining what should be learned and how best to learn it (Massouleh & Jooneghani 2012). From Native Hawaiian Epistemology I learned about the importance of spirituality and knowing—the cultural contexts of knowl-edge that originate from forces that include environment, family members long passed, God, the many gods, and ʻaumakua or family deity (Meyer 2003).

Teacher Excellence

Within Tri-Excellence, student-centered learning begins with the teacher. Teachers encourage student-centered learning by allowing students to share in decisions, believing in their capacity to lead, and remembering how it feels to learn (McCarthy 2015). The role of the teacher is one of several—co-creator, mentor, facilitator, coach, and learner. Both teacher and student teach to and learn from one another.

Back in the ninth grade, the extent of my English teacher's instructional methods included having the class watch movies and complete worksheets every day.

Granted he was a pleasant man and it was an easy "A" class grade to obtain, but truly, the negative effect of an entire school year wasted cannot be measured. It took me years thereafter to learn how to write effective prose. Continued professional development and growth are critical components toward teacher excellence. Day, Stobart, Sammons, Kington, & Gu (2007) state that teacher effectiveness is primarily influenced by their colleagues, leadership, workload, and commitment. It is important for teachers to be evaluated by their peers us-ing collaborative observation and coaching techniques. Similar to students, teachers should also be empowered and have agency in selecting learning experiences that best support learning goals and co-construct evaluation criteria together with leadership.

The best teachers utilize an effective combination of pushing and challenging students forward and nurturing them at the same time. Fullan & Leithwood (2012) opine that educators need to emphasize the development of the collective capacity of the profession and its respon-sibility for continuous improvement and for the success of all students. I myself excelled in the classroom when I was given positive feedback and the freedom and en-couragement to think and explore beyond the textbook.

Student Excellence

The role of the student in Tri-Excellence is also one of several—co-creator, leader, learner, and explorer. A key component that I feel was missing from my K–12 educa-tion was the lack of empowerment and an overall lack of awareness of and concern about my community and the world at large. My formative years within Hawaiʻi's public education system did not provide many opportunities for learning outside of the classroom and awareness about the larger global community. Traditional instructional methods, as defined by Dewey (1938) were utilized. Knowledge was usually acquired via drill or rote memori-zation from texts and teachers and not via experiences. I am unable to recall classroom debates on current events and policy that were held on a consistent basis.

I am embarrassed to admit that my sense of social justice and a genuine awareness of the inequity within education did not occur until I started my EDEF graduate studies in 2017. I had mistakenly assumed that I was pretty well-versed within the field of education after

accomplishing many years of schooling and work experience. However, as I complete each course I continue to expose the stark reality of how little I do know and how much more I have to learn. Within the past two years I was (and continue to be) fortunate to learn from passionate educators and their experiences. According to Mayes (2010), education is existentially valid only when it helps an individual live authentically in the light of his own self-discovered, self-defined, and deepest meanings. We are all beings who seek meaning, and we typically find it in creating a story of our lives.

Empowered students with a strong sense of social justice will be able to make powerful change for their own good and the good of others. Klarman (1994) shares an example where the 1954 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn segregation in schools via Brown v. Board of Education led to the broader and widespread civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. Klarman (1994) argues that while this decision within the sphere of public education initially resulted in severe backlash and rioting throughout the southern U.S., it actually helped to carry forward the long-term goal of implementing civil rights legislation nationwide. The entire nation watched the attacks on brave African-American students as they attended their new schools and defended their rights for equality. Public opinion across the country then quickly shifted towards support for civil rights legislation. According to Voigt (2018), learning can transform lives when lessons are relevant to real world issues and when student work makes a positive difference in addressing social injustices in the community.

Student excellence should be measured holistically and not just via standardized test scores. Davies, Busic, Herbst, & Sherman (2014) argue for an alternative method of culturally relevant assessment. Student assessment can be conducted by utilizing three components: product, observation, and conversation. While the standard remains the same, the assessment allows for differentiation. Triangulating assessment within these three components produces a much richer view of a student from a growth vs. deficit perspective.

Tri-Excellence methods include critical analysis of texts, Socratic seminar discussion, logical speaking and writing, and empathy (Manini et al. 2019). Tri-Excellence curriculum includes lessons that are flexible and relevant (based on current topics and issues); lessons that facilitate challenging and deep conversations and push students' thinking forward; and lessons that require critical thinking and problem solving skills. Place-based and project-based learning are also essential components of the Tri-Excellence curriculum. Place-based learning immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences; emphasizes participation in local school and/or community service projects; and draws on communities' multigenerational and multicultural resources (Ledward, Takayama, & Kahumoku 2008). Project-based learning allows students to identify, through research, a real-world problem (local through global), develop its solution using evidence to support the claim, and present a solution. Project-based learning also promotes communication and teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Ledward et al. 2008).

Critics of student-centered learning argue that this practice actually enables dissent while oppressing equality. Student-centered learning places teachers at the opposite end of the equality spectrum by assuming students' ultimate rights to challenge the teachers' assumed powerful status (Phan 2014). There is no such thing as equality when advocates of student-centered learning seek to empower students by simultaneously (not necessarily or intentionally) disrespecting and distrusting teachers (Phan 2014). Simon (1999) also critiques student-centered learning, stating that if each child is unique, and each requires a specific approach appropriate to him or her and to no other, the construction of an all-embracing pedagogy or general principles of teaching become an impossibility. Some teachers can take advantage of student-centered learning by exerting the minimal amount of effort, relying too much on group discussion, and not providing the necessary amount of guidance and instruction. These criticisms are valid and it is essential that a healthy balance is maintained between serving the unique attributes of each child and pursuing general principles of teaching and best practices.

Family/Community Excellence

The final component within Tri-Excellence is family/community excellence. Similar to the state of Hawai'i Department of Education's Nā Hopena A'o Statements HĀ: BREATH (2015), family and community support are

vital to student learning. Students need to have a sense of belonging and connectedness to their family and community. When parents are engaged in a number of ways, students attend school more regularly, earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in post-secondary education (Henderson & Mapp 2002). Parents are seen as a child's first teachers and it is important for families to share their heritage, roots, and history. Students should also develop a healthy respect for their elders. Rothon, Goodwin, & Stansfeld (2011) completed a longitudinal study in England where it was found that positive mental health outcomes were most strongly associated with family social support, and positive educational outcomes were associated with both family social support and community social capital.

Growing up, I was lucky enough to have two parents who were extremely involved and supportive of my education. They attended every parent-teacher meeting, every band concert, chaperoned many school field trips, etc. I remember the excitement of going to Longs Drugs before the start of each school year to buy brand new school supplies with my mother. My parents were not rich, but both worked hard to provide for my sister, brother, and I. My father used to work at an airline and we were able to travel abroad at minimal cost. I humbly acknowledge the reality that not all students can rely on the same level of family support that I had and my life certainly is not indicative of most students today. Therefore, when a gap exists with respect to parental support of a child, it is important that this is filled by other family members and/or the broader community. Tri-Excellence also promotes the empowerment and agency of family and community members within the sphere of their child's education.

Proposed Action Research Plan

A first step within a proposed action research plan to effectively study and measure how empowering students by drawing on their personal experiences affects

TABLE 1. Tri-Excellence Primary Data Collection – Sample Survey Questions for Teachers, Students, and Parents/Community Members

Sample Teacher Survey Questions	❖ What are some key factors that may have contributed to the success and empowerment of your students? ❖ What strategies, innovations, and methods did you use and find to be effective in attaining success and empowerment of your students? ❖ What did you learn? ❖ What contributed to your learning?
Sample Student Survey Questions	❖ In what ways did your teacher(s) encourage you to advocate for yourself? ❖ In what ways did you teacher(s) encourage you to advocate for others? ❖ What contributed to your learning? ❖ What did you learn? ❖ When are you happiest while learning? Why?
Sample Parent/Community Member Survey Questions	❖ Do you agree or disagree that your child can advocate for themselves? ▪ if agree, please share an example of how your child advocated for themselves. ❖ Do you agree or disagree that your child can advocate for others? ▪ If agree, please share an example of how your child advocated for another person. ❖ What contributed to your child's learning? ❖ What did your child learn? ❖ When is your child happiest while learning? Why?

engagement in learning would be to gather primary data via separate surveys of teachers, students, and parents/community members (Manini, et al. 2019). One possible research question would be "Are stronger academic achievement indicators found within students who demonstrate that they can effectively advocate for themselves and others?" The next step would be to cross-reference the survey data with other student achievement indicators and attempt to find any patterns or connections. The final step would be to supplement the primary data with secondary data (additional re-search studies, peer-reviewed journal articles, etc.).

Looking ahead, I see my personal ties to public education continuing to strengthen. My husband of 20+ years is a middle school teacher within the state of Hawai'i Department of Education and I slowly and systematically work towards the completion of my MEd in Educational Foundations (EDEF). I also find myself in a bit of a role-reversal as I am now happily taking my 85-year-old mother to our beloved annual community used book sales. It has taken me almost fifty years to reach the level of societal awareness that I now have. EDEF has opened my eyes to the realities of the world and I hope that the majority of students in the future will achieve this much earlier within their lifetimes. I already see this change occurring. I truly feel that empowered students are the future leaders of our world. This philosophy will hopefully help to create more awareness and empathy to the current inequity that exists within society and also help to create and implement strategies to overcome this. Tri-Excellence will result in stronger teachers, stronger students, and stronger families and communities, all working together towards a com-mon goal.

My educational experiences, both good and bad have made me the person that I am today and I have no regrets. I have learned to persevere and learn from my mistakes. I am thankful for this opportunity to reflect back and look forward to try and create a meaningful option for the future. Students today should possess the growth mindset that empowers them to approach their future with confidence, to dream big and to achieve big (National College and Career Readiness Indicators, 2019). I will continue to advocate for stronger social justice and equality for all.

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