Bringing Your Whole Self to the Classroom

A Native Hawaiian Perspective on Identity in Early Childhood Education

Nicol Russell

Editors' Note

As Brian L. Wright and Mona M. Abo-Zena note in their article "Did You Lose Your Teacher Voice? Reclaiming Educator Agency, Voice, and Choice Through a Critical Lens," teacher voice and agency are essential for sustaining caring, equitable learning environments for all children.

Educators in different contexts experience varying supports of and challenges to their agency and voice. This impacts how they make decisions about teaching and learning. In her chapter in the upcoming NAEYC book *No Single Story: Amplifying the Voices of Asian American and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander Early Educators,* Native Hawaiian educator Nicol Russell offers her perspective on identity in early childhood education. She explores the concept of intersectionality and challenges stereotypes and misconceptions while also celebrating the strength that comes from navigating multiple worlds. She shares recommendations for policy and practice along with her reflections and hope for the future.

In the following excerpt, Russell writes about how her identity shapes and influences her teaching. She describes the disconnect she experiences when the early childhood education field claims to honor identity but does not make room for the identities of educators. Her story shows that more work needs to be done so that every educator has agency and voice in their setting.

Knowing and Being in Early Childhood Education

Our identities shape everything—how we speak to children, what we notice, what we celebrate, what we challenge, what we believe is possible. As a Native Hawaiian educator, my identity influences every part of how I teach, lead, and show up in community. My teaching philosophy is rooted in relationships. In Hawaiian culture, learning happens in the context of aloha (love) and pilina (relationships)—deep connections. You cannot teach a child you do not know. You cannot know a child without knowing their family, their history, their gifts. Hawaiian scholar Dr.

Manulani Aluli Meyer, in her article "Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology" (2001), helped me understand the depth of this view of children as learners and me as an educator. My knowing and being is in their knowing and being. So, my classrooms were always built around those relationships, around the belief that learning flows from connection, not compliance.

My relationships with families are guided by the value of *hoʻokipa*—welcoming with generosity and care. I see families not as clients but as partners, carriers of cultural knowledge, and co-teachers in the lives of their children. My own experience growing up in a multigenerational household taught me that learning doesn't begin or end in the classroom. It's everywhere.

My approach to equity is informed by the understanding that many of our systems were never designed with Indigenous children in mind. Equity, for me, isn't about treating everyone the same—it's about restoring what was taken, making room for voices long silenced, and challenging practices that perpetuate harm, even when they are labeled as "best practices."

There is so much that Native Hawaiian traditions offer the field of early childhood education. We bring an understanding of communal responsibility, of the sacredness of childhood, of learning that is embodied, intergenerational, and land-based. We understand the power of ritual, of chant, of story. We know that to teach is to lead with aloha, and that to lead with aloha is to be in relationship—with people, with place, with spirit. Our identities are not distractions from professionalism. They are the foundation of authentic, effective, and just teaching. When we honor who we are, we create space for children to do the same.

The Disconnect: Whole Children Versus Fragmented Educators

We talk often, and rightly so, about the importance of seeing children as whole beings. We affirm that children are capable, curious, complex. We speak of honoring their cultures, families, and lived experiences. We celebrate their languages, their emotions, their stories. But what happens

when the people teaching those children are not offered the same wholeness? What happens when the very educators tasked with nurturing the brilliance of diverse children are asked—explicitly or implicitly—to shrink themselves?

There is a painful paradox in our field. Early childhood education claims to honor identity, yet it so often makes little room for the identities of the adults doing the work. We are expected to leave our accents, our grief, our spiritual practices, our political consciousness, our ancestral wisdom at the door. We are allowed to teach diversity, but not embody it. We are asked to show up fully for our students, but only partially for ourselves.

When I was a classroom teacher, I was not neutral. I carried passion, memory, resistance. I brought my ancestors into the classroom with me. I spoke with conviction and cultural fluency. And I learned that this makes some people uncomfortable. The truth is, when we talk about "professionalism" in early childhood education, we are often talking about assimilation. We are talking about codes of conduct, dress, and demeanor that prioritize White, Eurocentric norms. We rarely ask: Who gets to be seen as professional? Who decides what professionalism looks like?

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Cultural Implications for Native Hawaiian Educators

As a Kanaka ʻŌiwi educator, navigating these expectations has meant constantly translating—my language, my values, my intentions. It means watching cultural practices be misunderstood or dismissed as "inappropriate" or "irrelevant." Even worse, it is seeing and having to participate in events that dishonor your culture (like "luau"-themed staff lunches) or the awkwardness of explaining why a child calling me Aunty isn't disrespect—it's love.

I have been told more than once that I'm "too passionate," that I "take things too personally," that I "care too much." But what others don't see is that in my culture, to teach is to care with your whole being. To lead is to be in a relationship. To educate is a spiritual act.

There have been moments when I've felt deeply disconnected—sitting in staff meetings where equity is discussed in abstract terms, but my lived experiences are invisible. Walking into professional learning spaces and knowing I am the only Native Hawaiian in the room, again. Being asked to explain my culture as though it's a footnote in someone else's narrative rather than the center of my own.

And yet, I remain. I remain because I believe our children deserve to see themselves reflected in those who teach them. I remain because our stories matter. I remain because every time I bring a Hawaiian chant into the classroom, or speak the names of my ancestors, or make space for a child's tears without trying to fix them—I am reclaiming something sacred. The disconnect between how we see children and how we see educators is not a small thing. It is a rupture. And if we are serious about equity, about justice, about truly honoring identity, then we must begin by extending the same wholeness to teachers that we extend to children. Because we are worthy of being seen.

About the Author

Nicol Russell, EdD, is the chief academic officer at Teacher Strategies in Phoenix, Arizona. Her greatest ambition in life is to leave a legacy of love in action. Her professional interests are grounded in the ethics of knowledge—how we know what we know, and how we use that knowledge responsibly in systems that affect people (children and adults).

This piece is excerpted from the NAEYC book *No Single Story: Amplifying the Voices of Asian American and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander Early Educators*, edited by Debbie LeeKeenan, Iris Chin Ponte, Caryn Park, and Sandra Baba. It will publish in Fall 2026.

References

Meyer, M.A. 2001. "Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology." *The Contemporary Pacific* 13 (1): 124–48. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2001.0024.

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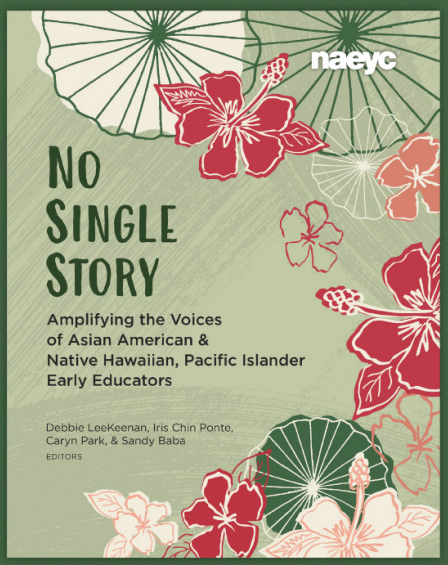

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