Centering Ancestral Knowledges: Leadership in Learning Environments

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative

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Ancestral knowledges are systems of knowledge based on the epistemologies (ways of knowing), and written, oral, and spiritual traditions of Indigenous peoples. Because of colonialism, slavery, genocide and other systems of oppression, Ancestral knowledge of some Indigenous peoples has been threatened and even erased. Ancestral knowledge has also been preserved and passed on. For example, as many Indigenous nations in the U.S. were forced into other areas of the U.S., and as Africans were enslaved in the U.S. and Latin America, they maintained varying levels of their Ancestral knowledge. Researchers suggest that it is crucial for these knowledges to be identified, maintained, and centered in schooling and other educational activities for Indigenous and Minoritized youth. Ancestral knowledges should not be viewed as a side, marginal, or elective class. Nor should they be viewed as static, finalized bodies of knowledge. Rather, they should be the centerpiece of a dynamic knowledge (and curriculum) for all students, including non-Indigenous students from dominant cultural groups. The purpose of this research brief is to highlight some of the research related to the importance of Ancestral knowledge in all schools, and particularly those that serve Indigenous and other Minoritized youth. We wish to highlight the importance of wholly accepting Indigenous youth as Ancestral (inheriting, adapting/adding to, and conveying knowledge) as well as intergenerational (gaining insight from elders, and thus assuming place in a line of knowledge transmission between generations).

Ancestral knowledges make up the centerpiece of the epistemologies (ways of knowing) of Indigenous and Minoritized students, and to deny access to this is a deep form of oppression that continues to marginalize students in school.

Accessing & Centering Ancestral Knowleges in School Contexts

Allow learning and school space to resemble community space so that Indigenous students encounter a safe space and develop a sense of belonging in school

Create ways for elders from students' communities to guide [decision making, curriculum design, etc.?]

Decriminalize and de-minoritize all types of Ancestral knowledge; make it the center of learning in school

Institutionalize pathways for educators to spend time in Indigenous and minoritized communities

Establish a collaborative of educators, students, and community elders to ensure that schools maintain rigorous standards from a Western perspective, as well as rigorous standards from Indigenous and minoritized perspectives.

ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGES

Given that Colonialism and Slavery were imposed so hegemonically on Indigenous peoples in so many different ways, more precision is needed to determine what is 'Indigenous' or Ancestral knowledge[1].

In Cuba, for example, Yoruba (Western African) spiritual belief systems (known as Santería) are widely practiced across the Island—by Indigenous African and White Spanish alike. Moreover, Santería looks quite different from how Yoruba peoples in Nigeria currently express their spiritual beliefs[2]. Also, Santería is still evolving as a spiritual system and a source of maintaining and re-envisioning Ancestral knowledge. I use this brief example of Santería to raise several questions and highlight several important factors related to Ancestral knowledges.

On a quick note, I distinguish Indigenous from Ancestral in the following way: Indigenous knowledge is strongly associated with knowledge developed in a particular land and associated with knowledge developed in a place. Ancestral knowledge is associated more with people, their experiences, and their embodied transmission of knowledge. Thus, Yoruba

creation stories could be regarded as Indigenous knowledge, and narratives contained in the music of Cuban jazz great Ibrahim Ferrer—while not always linked to the glorious African Yoruba past—still could be regarded as Ancestral knowledge.

ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE: TRANSPORTED, HYBRIDIZED, AND APPROPRIATED

Like the case with Santería, Ancestral knowledges were often re-versioned and hybridized with the practices of other Indigenous communities, and even sometimes co-constructed with the Colonizers and White Slaveowners[3-4]. Moreover, Ancestral knowledges have been appropriated or outright plagiarized by White Western Europeans [5-6]. Despite this appropriation, it is can still be Ancestral knowledge at base. But it is all the more important to seek out and embrace Ancestral knowledge epistemologies and expressions that are not popularized or embraced by White dominant culture as well.

ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE: SOURCE OF STRENGTH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

For many Cubans, Santería is a source of strength. This is true because, like other forms of Ancestral knowledge, Santería represents a wholeness that speaks not only to spirituality, but to social, economic, intellectual, musical and artistic expressions[2]. From the perspective of Ancestral knowledge, there are not barriers between spirituality, education, family, and other aspects of life[7]. Therefore, it is not possible for educators and schools to engage

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on Western European forms of colonization, schools in the U.S. were designed to eradicate all types of Ancestral knowledge in the past and prioritize Western European, Christian, capitalist, and male-centered epistemologies.

This attempted eradication of Ancestral knowledge is built within the structures of school, and will automatically reproduce itself.

This reproduction happens as educators—who might be unaware of their privilege or bias— continue to provide learning contexts that promote Western European ways of learning, and marginalize Ancestral knowledge.

Therefore educators must all take an anti-oppressive stance by not only recognizing Ancestral knowledges, but by promoting them and making them the centerpieces in all subjects taught.

Indigenous and Minoritized families and communities without understating the preeminent role of Ancestral knowledges, and without understanding and building from some aspects of the Ancestral knowledges of the students and families they serve[8-9].

ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE: A CENTERPIECE FOR ALL STUDENTS

Many educators understand Ancestral knowledges to be a subject or elective class. But unfortunately, this understanding will continue to minoritize and exoticize Ancestral knowledges. Rather, Ancestral knowledge such as Santería should be the center of discourse, course content, and knowledge production in school. Sleeter[10] found that when New Zealand centered the Te Kotahitanga approach to schooling, with the premise that "what will work for Indigenous students works for everyone, but what works for "everyone" does not necessarily work for Indigenous students" [(p. 137)], all students, in particular the Indigenous but even Whites, grew and benefited. We embrace this research and suggest that Ancestral knowledges are not a marginal exotic knowledge, but a centerpiece that it can help begin to humanize descendants of Colonizers and Slaveholders. There are several ways to identify, and begin the ongoing process of enriching learning with, Indigenous knowledges. To honor Indigenous traditions, one way may be to invite the elders into schools to share knowledge with educators. As they guide and train teachers, they can also observe teachers and offer advice on how they may better honor Ancestral knowledge.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Scholars such as Hermes, Bang and Marin[11], Sleeter[10], and Castagno and Brayboy[12] encourage us to consider the following question: how can schools center Ancestral knowledge and Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and spiritual reflections in school. While Greco-Roman traditions are currently the center of U.S. education[5],the hegemony of these have pushed all other epistemologies aside. While these researchers and others suggest that all students can benefit from leading with Ancestral knowledges, we hope that more researchers and community activists will explore ways this Ancestral centering can happen throughout all schools.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILIES & PRACTITIONERS

ROLE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members can use this research to push for change in schools. This research makes it clear that educators neither know how to recognize, nor incorporate and honor your Black, Latino, Indigenous, spiritual, and other types of knowledge. However, after the push for systemic change, partner! Educators will need your community-based expertise. Without this, they will rely on surfaced approaches like Black history month readings, or Cinco De Mayo celebrations. Ancestral knowledges and honoring children of color can only be realized with family and community members being at the center of the growth and reform.

ROLE FOR PRACTITIONERS

It is crucial for educators to recognize that must rely on community elders and leaders in order for them to access Ancestral knowledge; this only comes through mutual respect and trust. Educators and leaders in school will find community partners and students to engage this work. Ancestral knowledges, if conveyed in Eurocentric, Western ways, can have the unintended effect of muffling or improperly representing/appropriating Ancestral knowledges. So not only can community partners help identify and share Ancestral knowledge, they can inform educators about pedagogy and the safest ways of conveying the knowledge.

But as practitioners work to center these knowledges, they will quickly learn that this knowledge must be institutionalized—it cannot be sustained on a per-classroom basis. Rather, it must be reflected in all aspects of schooling, and will likely bring new understandings of schooling and how resources should be repurposed in schools.

Go to community elders and ask for them to identify partners. Western educators are often cultural outsiders, and do not know the dynamics around the communities they serve. Be thorough so that you are not reproducing oppression in your anti-oppressive works.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LEADERS: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

This work must be institutionalized in four main areas listed below. Formal school leaders play a critical role in creating and maintaining institutional pathways for Ancestral knowledges to be fully embraced in school contexts [13]. As you are doing this important work, consider:

→ How can you connect with the local holders of Ancestral knowledge in your areas? How can you do so without exocitisizing or appropriating this knowledge in ways that have been done with Indigenous and Minoritized people before?

→ How can you rework your school curriculum, and retool your educators, to center Ancestral knowledge?

→ Oppression and epistemicide are ever encroaching, dynamic, and renewing How can you and your colleagues find ways to contest Western epistemologies from hegemonizing Ancestral knowledge?

CRITICAL SELF REFLECTION

→ Ancestral knowledge can foster self-reflection in multiple ways.

→ Ancestral knowledges should not only be used to critique Eurocentric, Western knowledge, but they have decolonial, transcendent narratives that are unconnected to Western thought.

→ The content contained within the narratives and stories can push back against the hegemony of Western knowledge

→ The presence of elders can reify Ancestral voice as authoritative

CENTERING AK IN PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES

→ Verbal knowledge conveying (sometimes referred to as storytelling) is a crucial part of Ancestral knowledge

→ AK should situate all knowledge on the humanization of students and communities, and should always seek to place the well-being of the student and community, and the land and environment, above all else

→ AK recognizes that knowledge is connected to a spiritual connection to something bigger than self, and more important than academic success for individual gain

→ AK leads pedagogical activities with the guiding presence of elders

LEADING WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

→ Ancestral community engagement looks very different, as in this regard, parents and elders should lead (and at minimum, co-lead) "school-engagement" activities; communities are in charge!

→ Focus agenda and engagement on the alleviation of important social issues that are community-centric

EXTRA-CURRICULAR CONTEXTS

→ Ensuring that extra-curriculum and extra-classroom contexts are culturally responsive and ancestrally based.

→ Extra-curricular activities should be grounded in improving Indigenous communities

→ Extra-curricular content should occur outside of schools and within in communities

→ Should revolve around the dynamic, ever-changing interests of children.

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THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) is a national network of over 40 scholars, practitioners, and family and community leaders who seek to center racial equity in family engagement by catalyzing an expansive national research agenda and developing "next" (beyond current "best") practices, measures and tools. We envision family and community wellbeing and educational justice as core aims in this work that begins from non-dominant family and community ecologies, creates ongoing transformative possibilities, and builds solidarities towards collective action for racial equity, from early childhood to secondary education.

We mobilize inter-disciplinary and experiential forms of expertise and see families and communities – particularly those marginalized by race, class, language, or immigrant status – as learning experts, co-designers, collaborators, and fellow leaders in the work. For more information, visit our website at www.familydesigncollab.org or email us at uwfldc@gmail.com

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