JOURNAL: Multicultural Teaching and Learning

(in press)

TITLE: Understanding the Process of Contextualization

AUTHOR: Tasha R. Wyatt

INSTITUTION: University of Hawai‘i-Manoa
Abstract

The literature on culture and education points to the importance of using students’ cultural knowledge in the teaching and learning process. While the theory of culturally relevant education has expanded in the last several decades, the practical implementation continues to lag far behind. This disparity points to the lack of tools and other resources available to assist teachers with implementation. By examining the practice of six teachers who scored high on a rubric measuring Contextualization, this pedagogical strategy was articulated into a three-step process. The findings indicate that the role of the teacher in guiding students through tasks that require cognitive processing has been missing from our understanding of this strategy. This study advances the practice of using culture in teaching by operationalizing how to use students’ cultural experiences to make academic connections.
Introduction

Communities around the world are experiencing a drastic shift in their ethnic and cultural make-up. The Organization for Migration (2013) estimates that over the last 10 years, more than 214 million persons worldwide have migrated to a new country. The organization places the US as the top migrant destination country in the world, estimating the total migrant population to be 20% or around 42.8 million persons who have migrated by 2010. This influx has reshaped the American educational system, such that the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our schools has increased at a staggering rate (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Yet, despite this high level of diversity, American pre-service and in-service programs remain unprepared to deal with the consequences of this change (Melnick & Zeichner, 1988; Ngai, 2004).

Each year, teachers continue to graduate from our nation’s programs lacking specific skills and strategies to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of their students (Sleeter, 2008). The typical response of teacher education programs is to add on an urban or multicultural education course, but otherwise keep the curriculum intact (Goodwin, 1997). Although courses such as these play an important role in teacher preparation, the content of these courses typically does not go far enough to prepare teachers for the high levels of diversity in today’s classrooms.

The notion that teachers must know their students and subsequently use this knowledge to design instruction pervades the literature on teaching culturally and linguistically diverse groups. This strategy is known as contextualization and is found in education that is: “culturally relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981), “culturally congruent” (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), “culturally
responsive" (Cazden & Leggett, 1981), and "culturally compatible" (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). Research has shown that teachers who are knowledgeable about their students’ family lives are better prepared to understand children’s in-school behavior (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). They are also better equipped to systematically tie students’ interests, concerns, and strengths with instruction, which in turn strengthens student motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The importance of using contextualized instruction permeates the literature, yet surprisingly very little is known about the actual process and steps involved in classroom enactment. Most of the available resources are descriptions of classrooms showcasing successful practice (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1992; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011) or lists of characteristics that define and describe culturally relevant teachers (e.g. Villegas & Lucas, 2002). What appear to be most needed in this area are practical tools and resources that contribute to understanding its implementation. Only when teachers have such tools available will they be able to make the theory on using culture as a resource commensurate with practice (Gay, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000).

This study aimed to understand the process of Contextualization by studying the decision-making of six teachers who scored high on a rubric measuring teacher enactment of the Contextualization strategy. Most studies that highlight teachers’ use of culture employ a single case-study approach (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1992; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). The current study employed multiple cases as a way to capture the process across teachers. This study was guided by the following research questions: "How do teachers make connections between school and students’ lives? What are the key steps/components in this (Contextualization) process?" The paper begins by
providing an overview of sociocultural theory, the theoretical framework used in this study, followed by the literature on culturally relevant teaching and contextualization.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits the human mind as an artifact developed out of social, historical and cultural contexts and reflects the goals and values of the community in which it develops (Bruner, 1987; Gauvain, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Students' interactions with family members and friends inform the ways they think, speak, and behave, which is then transferred to other contexts, including school and work (Gauvain, 2001; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Classrooms are thus seen as complex contexts for learning because they are part of a much larger world, but contain many cultural worlds within it. Even when students have common experiences associated with their group membership, each student has different experiences that define them as a person (Santoro, 2009).

From this perspective, the teachers' role is to mediate students' learning between knowledge that is familiar with knowledge that is typically taught in schools. The meditational process requires teachers to have a shared understanding to use as a starting point in the teaching and learning process. In highly diverse classrooms, mediating learning can be complicated, because teachers and students come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and may have more difficulty understanding each other compared to teachers who share a similar cultural background and see the world in similar way (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). In this study, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is used to understand how teachers implemented
Contextualization by focusing on how teachers' helped students make academic connections.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive (or relevant) teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995b) stems out of the field of educational anthropology, which is concerned with cultural transmission in both formal and informal educational settings. Culturally responsive education is concerned with how teachers skillfully mediate or broker cultural knowledge to help students' navigate what they are learning in formal educational settings (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). According to Gay (2000) the goal of culturally responsive teaching to "build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural experiences (p. 29).” Therefore, in an ideal classroom, all instruction is tailor-made for particular cultural groups reflecting the sociocultural experiences of the learners (Sleeter, 2005). Thus far, Most of the research on culturally responsive teaching has focused on African American students (e.g. Lynn, 2006; Ware, 2006), but more recently Mexican Americans and English Language Learners have implemented this instructional approach in their classrooms (e.g. Gutstein, Lipman, Hernandez, & de los Reyes, 1997).

One of the strategies supported by culturally relevant teaching is *Contextualization*, which is simply defined as the verbal and conceptual bridge over which students cross to learn new information being presented (Lee, 1995). It is the act of creating relevance and meaning when linking students' everyday experience with academic knowledge (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Underlying this strategy is the belief that students come to school with a wealth of information, derived from personal and
cultural experiences that can be first harnessed and then used in the teaching and learning process. Some researchers have referenced this prior knowledge as “funds of knowledge,” acknowledging the role and importance of students' personal, cultural and communal knowledge in designing classroom activities (Moll, et al., 1992). While all children have funds of knowledge that they bring to the classroom, these repositories differ slightly because they are developed in the activity settings and routines that organize households and cultural communities (Gauvain, 2001).

The actual term, Contextualization was coined by researchers working at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE), one of the first research and development groups that sought to bring cultural compatibility to Native Hawaiian education (Au & Jordan, 1981). However, as mentioned earlier, this strategy has been well documented in educational anthropology by researchers such as Orellana (2001) who described it as “leveraging” students’ knowledge and Paris (Paris, 2012; Paris & Ball, 2009) who described it as “bridging” what students know from their home, school and community to the classroom.

Thus far, anthropologists have contributed greatly to our understanding the resources students bring to school that can be used in the classroom. However, little attention has been given to this instructional strategy from an educational psychology perspective, thus leaving how teachers integrated students’ cultural knowledge into instruction and their decision-making process mostly to guesswork. This study examines the Contextualization from an educational psychology perspective to better understand teachers’ decision making in terms of how they implemented Contextualization and why decisions were made in the actual implementation. The hope is to provide better
explanation for other practitioners on how to implement the strategy in a step-by-step format.

**Methods**

**Context of Study**

Participants in this study worked in Hawai‘i public schools, which served high populations of culturally and ethnically diverse children. Table 1 presents the three highest percentages of ethnicity for each school where the participants taught. Of the six participants in this study, all but one teacher had previously relocated from the continental U.S. to live and work in Hawai‘i and only one teacher was born and raised in the Hawaiian Islands. Only one teacher shared a similar cultural background to the students, the others represented a culture that is far different than the culture of the students. Most of the teachers had lived in Hawai‘i for several years (x=10 years), with six identifying as Caucasian, one identifying as Hispanic, and one identifying as mixed ethnicity including some Native Hawaiian ancestry.

Participants’ years of teaching experience varied considerably ranging from 1-28 years with a mean of 6.3 years. All teachers taught at the elementary school level with the exception of one high school and one middle school teacher. Teachers in this study taught Math, History or English language arts during their observations. See Table 1 for the year the teacher participated, the schools’ percentage of Native Hawaiian students during that year, the teachers’ ethnicity, teachers’ number of years living in Hawai‘i, teachers’ years of teaching experience, and the teachers’ grade-level and subject area.

All participants were enrolled in a program of professional development offered by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE)-Hawai‘i
during one of the years between 2009-2012. Teachers in this program learned to use the CREDE Standards, a set of pedagogical strategies designed for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tharp, et al., 2000) through a combination of workshops and intense instructional coaching. The CREDE Standards are steeped in socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes the role of assistance in the teaching and learning process, paying particular attention to issues of language as a mediating strategy and the development of higher-levels of cognition. To participate in CREDE professional development, teachers must take six credits of graduate-level course work at the University offering the professional development. All teachers in this study had been enrolled in this program up to or less than one year.

Data Sources

Data were collected from 2009 to 2012 as teachers enrolled and participated in a program of professional development offered through the University. Data sources included: a) videotaped reflections, b) teachers' reflections on their videotaped lessons, and c) semi-structured interviews. The original pool of teachers completing the CREDE program totaled 35, however the final number of participants only included six teachers. As the teachers participated in the CREDE program they were taped 3-4 times per year. Yet only 9 lessons scored at the highest levels for Contextualization (level 4 or 5) and selected for further analysis.

All lessons were scored by three independent CREDE researchers using the Classroom Observation Rubric (COR) (Author, 2011), an observational tool used to rate teachers' use of the CREDE Standards in teaching. This instrument was developed by CREDE-Hawai'i researchers from its original form, known as the Standards Performance
Continuum (Hilberg, Doherty, Epaloose, & Tharp, 2004), which was used in observational research on culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms for more than a decade. The SPC was expanded because there was not enough variability in performance scores across teachers. In this study, the COR was used to rate teacher performance on all videotaped lessons.

The COR is designed as a continuum ranging from: Not observed (0) – Emerging (1) – Developing (2) – Advancing (3) – Enacting (4) – Exemplary (5). Only those lessons (observed or videotaped) that were scored for Contextualization at a level of Enacting (4) or Exemplary (5) were selected for this study. To score at the Enacting (4) level, teachers must integrate students’ background into the design of the lesson. The description on the COR reads:

> The teacher designs and enacts instructional activities that integrates knowledge of what students know from their home, community, or school (not just building on current unit of instruction). The teacher assesses and assists students in making an academic connection to their experiences.

At the Exemplary (5) level, teachers must meet this requirement with the addition of having “a clear goal [of] helping students to reach a conceptual/abstract understanding.”

Because both scores require the integration of students’ background knowledge, levels 4 and 5 were judged as having a sophisticated level of implementation. The difficulty in reaching a level 4 and 5 on the COR is evidenced in that only 6 teachers moved forward for further analysis. The low number of lessons even among these teachers indicates that contextualization is difficult even with on-going professional development.
**Videotaped lessons.** All videotaped lessons were collected and then scored for teachers’ use of the Contextualization strategy. Lessons were scored using three independent coders. The coders consisted of two who did not work on this study and one who did. Those lessons that were scored at a level 4 or 5 then proceeded for further analysis. The coders’ inter-rater reliability was .839.

Once aspects of the tape were identified for their high level of Contextualization, segments of the lesson were then transcribed for further analysis. These segments ranged from 10 minutes to 23 minutes per tape and were analyzed using discourse analysis (Mercer, 2010).

**Teachers’ reflections.** Teachers’ reflections on their videotaped lessons were analyzed to understand the overall goal of the lesson, teachers’ perspective on implementation, and whether the lesson went as the teacher planned. These reflections helped to understand teachers’ thinking in terms of the design and structure of the lesson.

**Teacher interviews.** Semi-structured interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were conducted with all 6 teachers. Most of the participating teachers in this study were not from the Hawaiian Islands, therefore by the time all the videos were scored in 2013, some of the teachers had moved back to the continental US where they originated. Therefore, some teachers were interviewed in person (1 participant) while some were interviewed over the phone (3 participants) or by email (2 participants). All participants were sent their videos ahead of time and instructed to watch them prior to being interviewed. The in-person and phone interviews lasted 20-35 minutes and the emailed interviews had a minimum of four turns in correspondence.

**Data Analysis**
This study took a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2009) as a way to compare the process of Contextualization across teachers. Data, in the form of transcribed segments of videotaped lessons and teachers’ reflections on their lessons, were initially analyzed using activity setting analysis (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Activity setting analysis includes the recording of who, what, when and where of the activity and helps to create an overall picture of the lesson. Once the data was organized in these terms, teachers’ interviews were used to understand the why of the lesson. According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), although activity settings can look very similar on the surface, the why of the activity differs between cultural contexts and requires further analysis.

Once the interviews were collected, all the documents were coded using open coding and then further analyzed using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), allowing for the examination of relationships between the categories. Guiding the axial coding process were the following questions: (1) Goals: What was the teacher trying to accomplish? (2) Process: What were the sequences of events, transitions, turning points, and changes in the lesson to reach this goal?, and (3) Strategies: What methods/techniques did teachers use to make connections to students’ background knowledge? And (4) Reasons: What were the teachers’ reasons for each of these events, transitions, methods, techniques, etc.?

Pattern matching (Yin, 2009) was employed using previous studies that focused on aspects of the contextualization process, including “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and culture-based teaching (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lipka, 1991; McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011) and then compared to the current study. Pattern matching allowed for comparison across other studies in which
students’ background and culture has been used in the teaching and learning process. Finally, cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009) was used as an analytical tool to examine the similarities and differences across teachers. The analysis resulted in a list of themes organized into four groups: 1) The need for Contextualization, 2) Phase I: The invitation, 3) Phase II: Making the connection, 4) Phase III: Practice & Ensuring arrival.

**Results**

The teachers discussed the Contextualization process in terms of three steps: inviting students into the lesson, making the connection, and then ensuring the academic goal was met. All 6 teachers referenced how the level of diversity in their classes impacted their decision to contextualize because they needed a point of reference for the students, and “Contextualization provides students with a frame of reference from which they can begin to better understand the material that the teacher presents.”

Avery and Terrance taught in the same town and described their classes as highly diverse. Terrance indicated his class included “Filipino kids, Samoan, White, Black, kids from military backgrounds who have lived all over, kids who have never left Ewa Beach and don’t want to.” Other teachers, such as Beverly described their class as diverse “not only [in] ethnicity, but culturally, academically, and emotionally.” Beverly taught SPED and many of her students live in shelters, on the beach, or in foster care. If they are not in these conditions, her students live with extended family members. Only Beverly expressed that she could relate to her students’ experiences, “I felt I could relate with my students because I was born and raised in the same community and I myself come from a diverse culture/ethnicity and have had my share of hard times and dysfunctional family members.”
Two teachers felt their own background experiences were so different than their students that they needed to find ways to make learning relevant and meaningful. Avery explained this challenge in this way, “I am not from here. I can’t just talk about when I was a kid in Ewa Beach or [that] I was born and raised here or born in the Philippines and came to live here with all of my brothers, sisters, aunties, and uncles. I don’t know what that is like.” The same difficulty was echoed by Mahina who described how the lack of a shared background made it difficult to connect the curriculum to her students, “Hawai‘i is the only thing that [my students] know. . . . They don’t [often] get [new concepts] because it is not contextualized and doesn’t have anything to do with Hawai‘i and what they already know.”

Phase I: The Invitation

In order to Contextualize, the teachers needed to ensure that whatever they were teaching was relevant to students’ lives. The high-level of diversity in each of these classrooms created a unique challenge, as students had diverse experiences and myriad cultural understandings. Therefore, teachers employed one of two strategies to invite students into the lesson. They either created contexts to frame learning or built upon students’ personal schemas. Teachers viewed this step as an invitational process.

Creating Contexts

Some of the teachers created a context for students and then used this context as a backdrop to teach new concepts. Mahina found this strategy to be particularly powerful for her students, explaining that this helped put everyone in her class on a level playing field, including herself. Some of her students are “from other islands other than Hawaii” like Micronesia, the Philippines, and other Polynesian island groups, which “makes it even
more difficult sometimes because [she is] not familiar with their cultures and where they came from.” Because of the students’ recent arrival in Hawai‘i, Mahina has very little knowledge of them and their culture to draw upon. Therefore, to contextualize, Mahina had to “create opportunities in the classroom to help them contextualize things.”

In one lesson, Mahina began by activating students’ memory about a class’ trip to the Core Value store, an on-campus service where students can trade their hard-earned points for school supplies, toys, and desired treats. The objective of her lesson was to teach the concept of “counting on,” the strategy of beginning from the number of objects the person holds and counting up to the number of objects the person needs. She began her small group activity in this way,

Teacher: Raise your hand if you remember going to the core value store yesterday.

Students: [Raise hands]

Teacher: Raise your hand if you got to buy something yesterday.

Students: [Raise hands]

Teacher: Raise your hand if you saw something in the core value store and you really, really wanted it, but did not have enough core values.

Students: [Raise hands]

Teacher: If you want to go back to the core value [store] and buy whatever you saw, what do you need to do?

Student: Get more.

Student: Earn more.

Teacher: Yes, you need to get more core values because you didn’t have enough.
She explained that the notion of “not having enough” came from her students’ experiences in being at the store and realizing they didn’t have enough core values to purchase the items they wanted. She described her students’ experience in being at the store, “Some of them really wanted something. But, even at the core value store, the person that works there would say, ‘Oh you don’t have enough because it is this many and you only have this many.’” The core value store then served as a context to teach students to compare two numbers. She explained that it was “a lot easier to let them have the experience of going to the core value store . . . instead of putting up the number 7 and the number 3 and asking them, which one has more. They wouldn’t really know what they were doing.”

Teachers who did not create contexts activated students’ schemas to teach new content. In Terrance’s lesson on creating counter-arguments, he was trying to teach the skill of “getting into someone else’s head” as a strategy to figure out how to create these arguments. To start out the lesson, he activated his students’ schemas on what it means to take on another person’s perspective. He showed segments of movies that illustrate moments when characters had “gotten into someone else’s head,” including clips from *Harry Potter* and *Being John Malkovich*. By showing clips of these movies, he introduced what it means to take on a perspective and anticipate another person’s point of view. He explained that he was really trying to make this idea salient by using familiar videos in his lessons, “I was really driving that metaphor through the videos. For me, pop culture was a common way to contextualize for all of my students. Broadly, YouTube culture, to me, is a form of bringing in students’ own background experiences.”
In the following excerpt, Terrance has just shown the class a clip of *Harry Potter* as a way to create a common context for the lesson. He is just starting to introduce the lesson’s objective, by asking what happened in the video.

*Student:* He puts a spell on him.

*Teacher:* Yeah, that is right. *Harry Potter* uses that spell to get inside Snape’s head. And what does he find when he is in Snape’s head?

*Student:* His dad wasn’t a good guy.

*Teacher:* Yeah, yeah, that is right. He found out that his dad wasn’t exactly how he had his pictured his dad in his own mind. He was actually bullying Snape quite a bit. If you remember this movie, why were they practicing this? Why was this happening?

*Student:* To keep him out of his head.

*Teacher:* Yeah, that is right. [He was learning how] to keep Voldemort out of his head. It is this whole thing about…(interrupted by student)

*Student:* You called him by his name!

*Teacher:* Oh, He Who Shall Not Be Named? Oh no, I call him Voldemort. I am not afraid. But, that was the purpose of the spell, to learn how to block someone out of your head. That is what we are going to be doing today.

He explained that contextualizing in this way allowed him to create a platform for his students to understand a new concept. In articulating why he chose pop culture to contextualize his lesson, he explained, “I think it is easy to think of diversity in terms of, say, my students’ Hawaiian background, but I’d argue that pop culture was the greatest
common cultural practice for my students in such a rich, diverse, classroom landscape.”

He expanded on why pop culture seemed to be more effective than using ethnic culture:

Instead of pulling out all the different strands of diversity within my classroom, I
looked for points of intersection. In my class, I found internet/pop culture to be a
common intersection for my students—movies, film, music, memes, whatever it
may be, were common cultural resources that my students brought into the class
with them. Sometimes pop culture is dismissed as not valuable, or not
educational, but I think the role of the teacher is to use it, to employ it, in ways
that the academic material can build off of it.

Terrance thinks that by drawing on students’ previous experiences with references
to videos found in pop culture, he was able to activate students’ schemas for “getting into
someone’s head,” therefore framing the rest of his lesson on counter arguments.

Maile also drew on students’ schemas as an introduction to her lesson. In one
lesson she elicited students’ prior experiences for predicting events by showing her
students a picture of a pregnant woman. The objective of her lesson was to teach students
about different sources of knowledge readers use to predict events. Maile thought they
could relate to the picture and predict what would happen next,

Teacher: What is this a picture of?

Student: A girl.

Student: One pregnant girl.

Teacher: Yes, a girl that is pregnant.

Student: She get one baby.
Teacher: Yes, she has a baby in her tummy! Bing! How did you know? Raise your hand if you have a baby at home?

Students: [All hands raised]

Maile’s invitation to students focused on eliciting their prior experiences in using prediction, the skill she later introduced in the context of reading. Predicting the outcome of the pregnant woman was an experience in which Maile knew the students could relate.

**Introducing the skill/concept before schema activation.** Other teachers used a different approach. Rather than eliciting a schema on the front end, these teachers introduced the academic skill/concept and then elicited students’ knowledge throughout. Connections were made to students’ personal experiences as a way to reinforce the objective. For example, in Maile’s lesson on types of conflict found in literature, she began by introducing the types of conflict used in fiction and then elicited examples from students of when they have experienced such conflict. Through conversation, the teacher directed the students to their prior experiences in and out of school for when they had conflict with another person, nature and themselves.

Beverly had students compare and contrast food, shelter, and clothing used in Mesopotamia with their own lives. She felt that her students would relate to this because these were things her students “need and use daily.” She was particularly concerned with ensuring that her students could relate to the concept they were discussing, noting that by framing her lesson in terms of what students’ use daily, she was connecting to their own experiences of survival. She elaborated on this idea, pointing out that food, shelter and clothing “are things that you need to survive and a lot of my students were either
homeless, under foster care and/or from broken homes.” Therefore, the notion of items needed for survival was salient and it was “easier for students to grasp.”

She began by explaining the objective, which was to compare and contrast modern day life with how people lived in ancient Mesopotamia. By constantly comparing ancient Mesopotamia with life in the 21st century, she was able to help students make the connection that “we are still using/need the same things with not much change as far as the basics.” Beverly believes that it was important to connect the lesson to the present day, rather than students’ individual family or personal experiences because of the difficulty so many of her students had with their home lives. She explained, “I purposely do not isolate home situations for respect and privacy of the students. I like to generalize . . . . to keep anyone from feeling embarrassed, it is better to generalize [with] ‘we’ and ‘our.’”

**Phase II: Making the Connection**

After creating a reference point for students in their lessons, the teachers tied the students’ experiences to their lesson objectives. This was accomplished by guiding students through application and analysis tasks. The teachers explained that they needed to focus on their role in order to make the connection between the learning objective and the students’ experiences to make this connection successful.

The teachers described their role in terms of facilitating students’ successful connection by acting like “a facilitator.” Mahina described her role in this way, “[My role is] to ask students questions and, as I am asking them questions, making sure that my questions were connected to something they were familiar with.” Cory created advanced questions to facilitate this part of the process, emphasizing the need to listen when answers were given, “[My role is to] listen to students’ thinking so that I could begin to scaffold
their thinking toward understanding that concept. . . . To listen to them and to develop questions that would lead them into that [goal].”

Avery believed that this second step, helping students to think through their prior knowledge, is the heart of the contextualization process. He describes it in this way, “Them accessing that knowledge, then thinking through their own experiences is the reflective piece, but also the starting point of them moving forward. I don’t want them to stay in that place. I don’t want this to be so reflective in nature, so that are not moving past the concrete [experience].” In Avery’s lesson, he had students analyze song lyrics from two popular artists, 2Pac and Eminem. To begin the lesson, he brought in video clips of the artists and read a poem about a flower that pushes up through the concrete and survives in spite of the harsh living conditions. He began by asking the students to consider how their life is like the flower described in the poem and then instructed the students to create a Venn diagram noting the overlap in their life with the authors’ experiences. Avery explained how powerful it was to have students analyze the poem in the context of their life and to “put themselves in 2Pac’s shoes or put themselves in the poem and then bring it back to Ewa Beach and contextualize and write about their life.”

Other teachers assisted students in applying what was already familiar into new academic contexts. For example, Cory began the lesson by having students draw pictures of their families and describe them to their peers. She indicated, “Each family is different, has different numbers, has different members and that really allowed to me to lead the students to understanding the differences between the fractional pieces and representations.” Therefore families served as a solid starting point for teaching academic content. After the students discussed their families, the students saw that the entire family
can serve as a whole, but the number of females/males, adults/children, young/old can be used as parts to create fractions, thus guiding students to think about their families in a mathematical way. She explained that one of her goals in this lesson was to have students really understand the meaning of numerators and denominators but also to have the lesson serve as a “contextualized point of reference.”

Terrance also engaged his students in an application process. After showing clips of *Harry Potter* and *Being John Malkovich*, he transitioned students into applying what they knew about what it means to get into someone’s head to the exercise of creating counter-arguments. He explained that he wanted his students to practice “predicting the arguments that the other side would make in order to counter them, to prepare for them in order to take them head on.” To transition students, Terrance assisted them in creating counter arguments about bigger debate issues, thus, applying students’ experience of “getting into someone’s head” to writing counter arguments.

**Small group vs. Whole group.** Teachers expressed differing opinions on how the size of the group affected the success of the lesson. Three teachers felt that the lesson was most successful in a large group format, but their reasons for this differed. Terrance explained that, “it was a way to bring the class together and was partially a management tool.” However, he later divulged that his lesson may have been too personal to be conducted in a small group, adding, “I think my gut instinct is that I don’t know whether or not they would have gone to that depth and been vulnerable enough to share the things they were writing.” His response indicates that grouping has a lot to do with the level of intimacy students will experience and for him, he wasn’t sure this would have facilitated learning, “Beverly had a different reason, indicating[“My] students needed to learn to
work together...and because [in] all other academic areas they have to do individualized work according to their level and IEPs." A whole group setting was a break from the routine and not necessarily related to how successful the lesson would be executed.

Mahina and Cory found the intimacy of small groups useful in conducting contextualized lessons. Mahina described her class as having high levels of SPED and ELL students, in addition to the cultural diversity she described earlier. The small group format assisted students in sharing their thoughts in ways that did not happen in whole group teaching. She explained, "I had students who were very quiet so it really helped having small groups because they felt comfortable to talk." Cory expressed that small groups were better because they allow for authentic assessment of complex concepts. In small groups, she felt that she could access students' thoughts and provide them individualized assistance in ways that are not possible in large groups, "[In a large group] you can't assess. You can guess, but you can't be accurately assessing them."

**Phase III: Practice & Ensuring Arrival**

After finding ways to invite students and then tying their experiences to the academic content, the teachers described the importance of assessing the academic goal at the end of the activity. The purpose of this was to ensure the students learned the intended concept and did not just focus on the familiar knowledge that was initially activated. They knew the lesson was successful because the students' were able to practice the new skill or understand the concept in a de-contextualized manner. For example, Cory indicated, "I know I reached my academic goal for each individual student. They were able to write a fraction number story with very little help." And Maile’s students could “distinguish the various story elements.”
Other teachers looked for evidence within the activity. Terrance looked for students’ anticipation and readiness to deal with counter arguments when students “got into the head of the person who might argue from the other side.” Avery’s method was to individualize assessment, indicating for each student the assessment used was different, “There are layers to [assessment]. I wanted some to share, some to really go deeper, but at least for every single student to go through the process of comparing themselves to 2pac and showing how their life is similar or different.” Regardless of their approach, the teachers found assessment of the new concept/skill to be important to the process.

Discussion

Researchers assert that it is imperative that we prepare our teachers for the cultural and linguistic diversity represented in our current educational settings (Bartolome, 2004; Hong, 2000; Phuntsog, 1999). Thus far, our pre-service and in-service programs have not been adequately prepared for the high levels of diversity that pervade the American school system. Further, studies on culturally relevant teaching have not gone far enough in assisting teachers with implementing this strategy in their own contexts. The findings from this study indicate that the Contextualization strategy can be organized into a three-step process, thus providing a starting point for implementation.

The finding that Contextualization can be used in classrooms of highly diverse students expands our application of culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995b) by demonstrating that when there are high levels of diversity, teachers create a context to unify students. The benefit of creating contexts rather than drawing on students’ background experiences is that teachers are relieved of having to gather relevant and meaningful information prior to conducting a lesson. Research on the “funds of
knowledge” (Gonzalez, et al., 2005) advocates for this information to be gathered ahead of time, however, such an endeavor may no longer be easily accomplished with so many cultural groups represented in our classrooms. The time needed to collect information is immense, may be time consuming, and possibly not always feasible.

In addition, analyzing the Contextualization process through an educational psychology lens reveals the role of the teacher is perhaps more important than has previously been acknowledged in the literature on culturally responsive teaching. In this study, the teachers actively led students through activities that asked them to analyze or apply what they know from their prior experience into a new learning context. This step speaks to the importance of both the guidance of teachers, as well as, the need for students to process new information. What little attention it has been given to this area has described the need for activities to be intellectually engaging (Sleeter & Combleth, 2011) without highlighting the role of the teacher in the process.

Although the teachers used aspects of cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) in the design of their instruction, such as drawing out students’ long-term memories and schemas for familiar content and linking this to new information, the findings from this study draw greater attention to the important role that teachers play in ensuring cognitive processing occurs. According to Lockhart and Craik (1990), new learning occurs when learners process new information. In fact, the more processing and associations that are made between what student’s know and the desired learning outcome, the greater the likelihood that learning and retention take place. Processing information is accomplished by engaging students in activities requiring sorting, analyzing, and interpreting new information in the context of familiar material (Beals, 1998). In this study, the results
reveal that the role of the teacher is paramount in assisting students with making academic connections, a finding that has not been highlighted in the literature on culturally responsive teaching.

Finally, the findings indicate that the third step of the Contextualization process is for teachers to assess whether students learned the intended goal of the lesson. In culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995b), this final step is not included. However, assessing learning completes the important assess-assist-assess cycle of teaching that provides teachers with assurance that the academic goal was achieved (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

The results of this study have strong implications for teacher education and the preparation of teacher candidates. While virtually everyone in the field agrees that the contextualization practice is essential in reaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Jordan, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Lipka & Adams, 2004; Tharp, et al., 2000; Wyatt, 2011), until now, understanding the decision-making of teachers implementing the process was underdeveloped. Previous studies have not given enough attention to the role of the teacher in mediating students’ learning, which according to this study is essential, if not the linchpin in moving this strategy forward.

The implication for teacher education is that this step may require explicit instruction in our teacher education programs. Teachers may need to be taught how to weave various threads of students’ experiences within activities in ways that advance students’ thinking. This “tying-in” step has long been missing in work produced by educational anthropologists and speaks directly to Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005)’s
description of the double move. The double move requires teachers to hold the academic objective in mind while monitoring learners' changing understanding. This skill may not be easily taught, but seems important in educating culturally and linguistically diverse students.

**Future Research.** Although this study lays important groundwork for how teachers can more effectively bring culture into the classroom, it needs to be augmented by further research. Specifically, researchers should track teacher change as they learn to implement this strategy. As evidenced by the low number of teachers who were able to successfully reach a level 4 or 5, Contextualization is difficult. Therefore, further research should investigate teachers' understanding and use of Contextualization over time, once teachers have been explicitly taught how to implement the strategy.

And finally, any further work in this area should consider what is most useful to teacher education programs at a practical level. Advocates for this kind of instruction agree that our teachers need step-by-step tools for implementing best practice and not more theory (Gay, 2002). It is only when our pre-service programs begin to prepare all teachers for diverse classrooms will these programs keep up with the changing demographics of our student populations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Year of Participation</th>
<th>Top 3 Ethnicities Represented in %</th>
<th>Teacher Ethnicity</th>
<th>In Hawaii (# of Years)</th>
<th>Teaching (# of Years)</th>
<th>Grade &amp; Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Avery   | 2009-2010            | Filipino 40.2%  
                      Native Hawaiian 21.2%  
                      White 7.7%            | Caucasian         | 1                     | 1                    | 7th English     |
| Beverly | 2011-2012            | Native Hawaiian 58.9%  
                      Micronesian 8.1%  
                      Samoan 7.1%         | Part-Hawaiian     | 1                     | 1                    | 4-6th SPED      |
| Cory    | 2010-2011            | Japanese 26%  
                      White 14.2%  
                      Native Hawaiian 12.6% | Caucasian         | 15                   | 28                   | 3rd Math        |
| Maile   | 2011-2012            | Native Hawaiian 58.9%  
                      Micronesian 8.1%  
                      Samoan 7.1%         | Asian             | 1                     | 1                    | 2nd-3rd ELL     |
| Mahina  | 2011-2012            | Native Hawaiian 58.9%  
                      Micronesian 8.1%  
                      Samoan 7.1%         | Caucasian         | 4                     | 4                    | 1st Math        |
| Terrance| 2009-2010            | Filipino 42.4%  
                      Native Hawaiian 17.7%  
                      White 6.4 %        | Caucasian         | 1                     | 5                    | 11th English    |
References


