

Cultivating a Sense of Place Among Students in Hawai'i

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August 25, 2023

Introduction

As an aspiring educator who hopes to teach in Hawai‘i, I am interested in place-based learning (PBL), which integrates the community and environment into the teaching of all academic subjects through experiential learning (Sobel, 2004). Experiential learning refers to learning by doing (Dewey, 1938), which involves actively engaging students in hands-on opportunities where they lead the inquiry (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2012). The aim of PBL is to cultivate a sense of place in students by strengthening their connection with their local community. As a result, students develop a personal responsibility and commitment towards caring for their community.

Hashemnezhad et al. (2013) suggested that a sense of place is “a subjective perception of people about their environment and their conscious feeling about places” (p. 7). Hence, one's sense of place is developed through the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional interactions one may have with a specific place. Cognitive interactions refer to a spatial awareness of a place's location and physical characteristics; behavioral interactions include the functional purpose of a place and the ways people use it to meet their needs; and emotional interactions are the satisfaction and attachment that people feel to a place.

I have lived in Hawai‘i for my entire life, yet I find myself wishing that I had a stronger sense of place. I grew up in the suburbs of Mililani, surrounded by beige houses and concrete walls. The greenery was artificial: trees were planted at even intervals along the sidewalk and the grass lawns could not be too long. I grew up attending public schools that were 20 miles from my house. In spite of my local roots, my sense of place is literal: the town, the street, which freeway exit to take, and other geographic markers. While I am aware of the strength in these cognitive interactions toward place, I also realize the imbalance and lack of behavioral and

emotional connections I have to my suburban neighborhood and school. Focusing only on my daily commute between home and school has limited my ability to cultivate a stronger sense of place and in essence limited the development of behavioral and emotional connections within the community. My first meaningful experience with PBL was in high school when I took Ethnic Studies 101. I participated in a work day at Ka'ōnohi Farm, a lo'i kalo that is located between Pearl Ridge and Kamehameha Highway. The greenery of the kalo and the fresh water in the irrigation canals were in stark contrast with the concrete structures and the sound of car engines that surrounded them. Together with my classmates, we cut away weeds in the canals to allow the water to flow freely throughout the lo'i. For the first time, I felt as if I had given something back to the land that I was raised on. All of my most meaningful relationships and experiences have been created here. Although it was only for a few hours, I reciprocated a little of the care that Hawai'i has always provided me. Furthermore, since my classmates and I learned how the introduction of private land ownership led to much of Hawai'i's land being owned by foreigners, the existence of Ka'ōnohi Farm in the middle of urban development spoke to me as a symbol of resistance against settler colonialism. By working at the farm, I too was taking part in that resistance. The background knowledge that I learned in class made the workday experience much richer because I knew the context of that place.

The inspiration for this portfolio came from my experience as a student teacher at Hanahau'oli School, an independent school with a progressive educational philosophy that is grounded in experiential learning. I felt privileged to be able to learn in a school environment that was completely different than what I grew up in. A connecting thread throughout their curriculum is encouraging students to use their kilo or observation skills. Kilo is used to describe how Native Hawaiians observed their environment to make decisions about how to sustainably

manage natural resources (Mālama Learning Center, n.d.). Every morning, the students and teachers oli (chant) back and forth to each other. In the spring semester, the students went on learning trips to He'eia Fishpond, Mānoa Falls, Hūnānāniho Beach, Kuli'ou'ou Ridge Trail, and Hawai'i Island. Every trip seemed to further connect students to their sense of place in Hawai'i. For example, instead of only learning about native plants through pictures, students were able to plant them as part of a conservation project. After almost every learning trip, students wrote poetry to describe why they went and how it was meaningful to them. Teachers encouraged students to use sensory details and figurative language to show their experience of place. To describe Rainbow Falls in Hawai'i Island, the class incorporated its Hawaiian name (Kuna), a mele that told of a battle that took place there, and their own sensory experiences. At the end of the year, the students demonstrated their understanding of place through a "Where I Am From" poem. After having practiced writing poetry about their learning trips, the students were challenged to show who they are through the places and relationships that are significant to them. One student began his poem by writing about growing up in Kahala and ended it with his belonging to communities that work together in peace. This student teaching experience was an introduction to implementing place-based learning and connecting students to Hawai'i.

As a future teacher in Hawai'i's public schools, I seek to use my experiences with PBL to design lessons that help me and my students develop our sense of place. From an educator's standpoint, PBL uses experiential learning to involve students in their communities, which makes learning relevant, memorable, and enriching. Since I personally have a desire to feel more connected to Hawai'i, I hope to teach lessons that help students build that connection early on in their lives. Although HDOE public schools do not have the same funding as Hanalei, PBL can still be implemented under the Hā framework, which will be discussed below.

Background

The benefits of PBL include supporting ecological integrity, community social and economic vitality, and student achievement (Place-based Education Collaborative, 2010). These findings are the result of an evaluation of ten place-based education programs in more than 100 schools in the U.S. Since PBL encourages learning outside the classroom and service learning projects, students learn about environmental issues and become stewards who take action. Examples of PBL projects include soil and water testing, invasive species removal, hiking trail restorations, and exhibits and demonstrations that increase public awareness (Clark, 2008). This provides students with an opportunity to partner with leaders in their communities who are already advocates. Connecting students to their communities and inspiring them to take action increases public support for those communities and creates a tangible impact. One vignette from the comprehensive evaluation by the Place-based Education Collaborative (2010) explains how elementary students at the Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes in Burlington, Vermont, realized that their school buildings were not accessible for all students and successfully advocated to their district for ramps to be installed.

PBL engages students in community and environmental issues that make learning relevant to the real world. Teachers who implement place-based education not only report high levels of student engagement and enthusiasm but also increased job satisfaction and expanded peer and community networks (Place-based Education Collaborative, 2010). Furthermore, when compared with students who did not experience PBL, students who did score higher on standardized tests, especially in math and science (Place-based Education Collaborative, 2010). The benefits of PBL are well-documented and support its implementation.

In Hawai‘i, Native Hawaiian charter schools are a model of implementing PBL from an indigenous perspective. In *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School*, Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua (2013) reflects on her decade of experience teaching at the charter school Hālau Kū Māna. Although the creation of charter schools on the U.S. continent is associated with defunding public schools and privatizing education, Native Hawaiian charter schools are an avenue for providing PBL and Hawaiian immersion education because they “afforded local communities limited autonomous school governance” (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013, p. xv). Although charter schools are public schools, they are governed under independent boards rather than the full HIDOE system. This allows charter schools to develop curriculums that may not follow the norms of a traditional public school. PBL occurs at Hawaiian charter schools because for Native Hawaiians, a sense of place is already part of their worldview and way of life. PBL in Hawai‘i, therefore, inherently draws from indigenous knowledge and perspectives because of how central a sense of place is to Native Hawaiians. Local teachers who implement PBL must recognize that their instructional practices are tied to indigenous knowledge.

HIDOE public schools operate under the Nā Hopena A'o (“HĀ”) framework “that reflects the Department of Education’s core values and beliefs in action throughout the public educational system of Hawai‘i” (Qina‘au, 2016, p. 4). As a framework, the purpose of HĀ is to guide teacher practices and shape school cultures; it is not meant to be used as a formal assessment. HĀ was approved in 2015 by the Hawai‘i Board of Education to be implemented in all public schools and applicable to all members of the school community, including teachers. The six outcomes of HĀ are a strengthened sense of belonging, responsibility, excellence, aloha, total well-being, and Hawai‘i (Lupenui et al., 2015). The meaning of this framework is significant; Qina‘au (2016) explains that “*nā* indicates a plural, *hopena* means outcome, and *a ‘o*

means both learning and teaching in the Hawaiian language” (p. 3). Furthermore, the first letters of the outcomes can be arranged to spell BREATH, which is HĀ in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i.

The official contributors Lupenui et al. (2015) partially define a sense of belonging as students knowing who they are and where they are from. Currently, there is general guidance for how HIDOE teachers can build a sense of place within students by using the HĀ framework, but there is no comprehensive resource that organizes lesson plans by schools or specific areas. HIDOE support for implementing HĀ includes community days, the HĀ Summit, and documentation of HĀ implementation in various schools. At the community days, members from schools, state offices, and community-based organizations gather to model HĀ. Past examples of community day activities include harvesting salt, exploring wahi kūpuna (ancestral areas), restoring fishponds, and sharing mo‘olelo (HIDOE, 2017). The HĀ Summit is an annual, two-day event for HIDOE employees to experience HĀ on huaka‘i (excursions) (Source). The Summit is essentially a community day but on a statewide scale. One limitation of these resources is that it is unclear whether the Summit and community days are still being held because the last Summit was held in 2020 (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) and the last record of community days was held during the 2016-17 school year. Furthermore, the documentation of HĀ implementation in schools only provides a general description of each project rather than a step-by-step guide on how to replicate or modify it.

Literature review

Native Hawaiian charter schools are a prime example of PBL in Hawai‘i from an indigenous perspective. Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua’s book, *The Seeds We Planted*, provides insight into how one Hawaiian charter school structures its broad curriculum and classroom-level unit plans

around sovereign pedagogies, which assert Native Hawaiian’s right to self-determine what constitutes knowledge worth teaching. In terms of enacting individual change, these sovereign pedagogies build students’ sense of place and belonging while also “telling [Hawaiian] stories of persistence, reaffirming [their] collective presence and permanence” (p. 5). One specific example of PBL at Hālau Kū Māna is how the staff and students manage a lo‘i kalo in partnership with Lyon Arboretum. They “plant, harvest, use, eat, and trade the kalo and other plants grown within their lo‘i” (p. 129). The lo‘i, therefore, serves the functional purpose of providing food and hands-on experiences but also a larger political purpose in which Native Hawaiians revitalize their cultural practices. Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua (2013) also notes that students stopped to look around before entering the lo‘i, which is similar to how Hanahau‘oli teachers encourage students to use their kilo or observation skills. Hawaiian charter schools such as Hālau Kū Māna are a testament to the fact that PBL is not a new concept, and it is braided into the culture and curriculum of those schools. Hawaiian charter schools highlight the importance of having a school culture that supports PBL at the classroom level. The PBL I seek to implement will therefore build upon HĀ, a framework that was implemented in HDOE schools statewide to connect students to Hawai‘i.

In a recent review of HĀ, Kastein (2022) reflects on her experiences as a classroom teacher implementing the HĀ framework from its pilot year. She centers her reflection on the idea of a beloved community, which originated from civil rights activists who strived to dismantle racist structural practices. A beloved community “encourages investment through knowing our identity and community” (p. 134), which is similar to the ideas that underpin PBL and the purpose of developing students’ sense of place. Kastein’s reflections provide a model on which to base my own reflections as I complete my fieldwork and create place-based lessons. When planning lessons with HĀ in mind, Kastein (2022) “often thought about how HĀ worked

in tandem with other parts of our school community such as our curriculum, the assessment standards for teachers, suggestions by colleagues, and other aspects of my teacher training” (p. 154). However, Kastein cautions against making generalizations about implementing HĀ because the needs of every school are different. This affirms the significance of this portfolio, which will produce PBL lessons for a specific school.

The reflections of Kastein (2022) document a change in her perspective as an educator. Using the HĀ framework is not only meant to impact students but staff and faculty as well. Written as a conversation, Halagao & Lupenui (2020) discuss their experiences as former board members who were part of the initial efforts to make HĀ official. Halagao acknowledges how teachers who are not Native Hawaiian can feel uncomfortable adopting the HĀ framework because they believe they lack a sufficient background of indigenous knowledge to implement it with fidelity. As of the 2020-21 school year, only approximately ten percent of Hawai‘i public school teachers are Native Hawaiian (ARCH, 2022). Non-Hawaiian public school teachers may face discomfort “using language and cultural concepts from ‘outside’ one’s own ethnic and racial background” (Ebersole & Kanahele-Mossman, 2020). However, Lupenui points out that “[t]he space of learning is one of discovery, not achievement!” (Halagao & Lupenui, 2020, p. 191). In other words, teachers should not feel as if they need to be completely knowledgeable about Hawai‘i and Hawaiian culture before they implement HĀ. Instead, HĀ cultivates a culture of learning for everyone in a school, including teachers. As a teacher candidate, I see my own worries reflected in Halagao’s perspective, yet Lupenui, who is one of the founding contributors of HĀ, asserts that teachers who want to make a change in their students using HĀ must be open to changing as well.

A multimethod study by Halvorsen et al. (2009) on the impacts of teachers' attitudes on student achievement supports Lupenui's belief that teachers who are hesitant to teach under the HĀ framework must be open to working towards the HĀ outcomes alongside their students. Halvorsen et al. (2009) report that teachers who maintain high expectations and take responsibility for teaching all of their students contribute to higher levels of student achievement. When teachers feel they have a responsibility for students' learning, it increases their sense of self-efficacy because they believe they can help all students learn. As Kastein (2022) demonstrated through her reflections, teachers who invest themselves in the HĀ framework will see a change in themselves and their students. These teachers take responsibility for their students' learning and recognize the applicability of HĀ to their own lives and practice. I, therefore, aim to have my reflections in my research journal document how HĀ contributes to the development of my sense of place.

Portfolio purpose and components

The purpose of this portfolio is to explore how PBL can be implemented in Hawai'i and to take concrete steps to develop my own PBL teaching practice. This work will operate within the HĀ framework that has already been established in public schools. The portfolio will be based on my fieldwork at Haha'ione Elementary School, a public IB school in Hawai'i. As a teacher candidate in the Exceptional Students and Elementary Education program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I will satisfy my student teaching requirement at Haha'ione from Fall 2023 to Spring 2024.

The components of this portfolio will provide comprehensive documentation of how to begin developing a sense of place as a teacher and how to create place-based lesson plans based

on the specific demographics of the students and the location of the school. The primary end product will be a resource bank of place-based lessons, designed specifically for my field school that will be accessible to the teachers at that school. This portfolio not only serves a practical purpose for established teachers but also functions as a documentation of my personal and professional growth as an aspiring educator. This may be useful to teacher candidates who feel that they are not capable of implementing PBL. Furthermore, this portfolio has significant personal meaning to me because in creating place-based lessons, I hope to develop my own sense of place. As a professional, developing a sense of place will help me improve my PBL lessons because I will have an understanding of how to develop students' sense of place if they do not have one. Moreover, since I grew up in Hawai'i, I have a personal desire to feel more connected to the place that I have lived in for my entire life.

Component 1: Record of Professional and Personal Growth

My first component is a record of my professional growth as a teacher and my personal growth as a person finding their sense of place. This component has three parts: a research journal, an initial teaching philosophy, and a final teaching philosophy. The research journal will integrate my personal experiences with research-based practices in the areas of PBL and effective teaching. I will begin compiling scholarly sources for the research journal in the Summer of 2023 and continue to add to it during my fieldwork at Hahaione. The journal will serve as my justification for any instructional decisions I make as I develop my place-based lessons and implement them. The research will serve as a guide for my lesson plan development.

In addition to documenting my professional growth as an educator, the research journal will chronicle my own development of my sense of place. It will consist of reflections on how my understanding of place shifts as I endeavor to tap into the students' sense of place. The

structure of the reflections will be based on the Tier 1 HĀ assessment tools provided by the HĪDOE. I will reflect on the following questions: How full is my sense of each HĀ outcome? What has strengthened my sense of HĀ? How can I continue to strengthen my sense of HĀ? Although I seek to document my sense of place, which most strongly relates to the HĀ outcomes of belonging and Hawai‘i, all of the HĀ outcomes are interrelated. Tracking my development in all outcomes of HĀ will provide a fuller picture of my growth as opposed to only focusing on two outcomes.

The teaching philosophies will explain my perspectives on teaching and learning. They will provide an idea of who I am as an educator and what beliefs guide my instruction. The initial teaching philosophy will be written in Fall 2023 at the beginning of my fieldwork. The final teaching philosophy will be written in Spring 2024 near the end of my fieldwork to document how my perspectives have changed since implementing PBL.

Component 2: Place-Based Lessons

The focus of the second component will be creating place-based lessons. This component has three parts: place-based lessons designed for the ahupua‘a that my field classroom is in, and a pre-assessment and post-assessment of my and my students’ sense of place. The lessons will be implemented in my field classroom at Haha‘ione Elementary in Spring 2024. The lessons will be created in close collaboration with my mentor teacher. To serve as a record of my instructional thinking and creative process, I will track how I develop my lessons in my research journal. The lessons will also be informed by research to ensure that I am teaching with purpose.

Furthermore, a pre-assessment and post-assessment will be designed to evaluate students’ sense of place before and after the implementation of the place-based lessons. I will also take the assessments before I start designing the lesson plans and after I implement them. The

assessments will be based on the Tier 1 HĀ assessment tools provided by the HDOE (See Figure 1). Students and I will self-evaluate the fullness we feel for each HĀ indicator on a scale of 1 to 7. The center of the wheel is 0, which indicates “not very full,” and the outer edge of the wheel is 7, which indicates “very full.” Based on our self-evaluations, we will shade in the wheel accordingly. After completing the wheel, students and I will explain why we indicated a certain degree of fullness for each indicator. This explanation can draw from personal experiences that justify our sense of fullness.

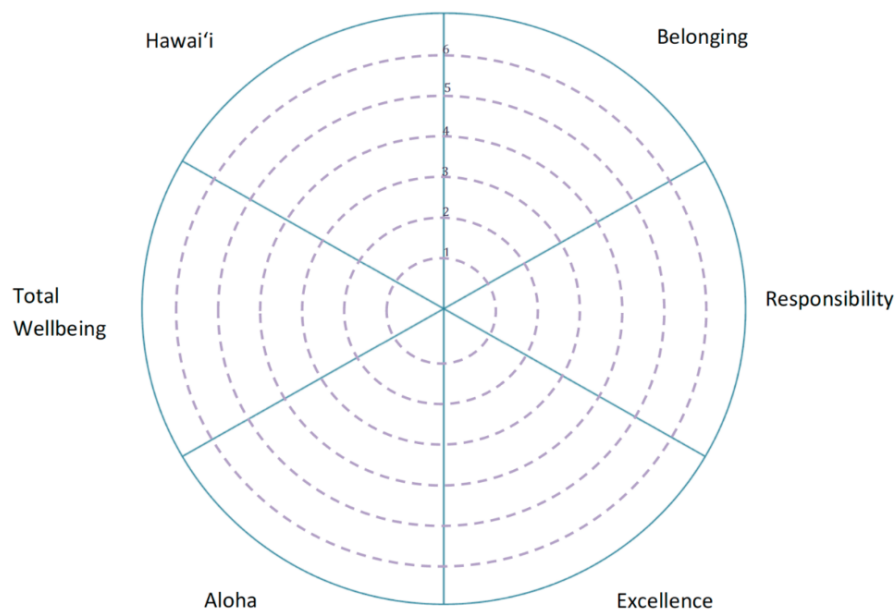


Figure 1

Individual HĀ Wheel from the Tier 1 HĀ Assessment Tools

Component 3: Resource Bank

The third and final component of my portfolio is the creation of a resource bank of place-based lessons for my field school. Since I may not be able to implement my lessons due to the structure of my education program, a resource bank allows me to leave a useful product for

the teachers who may decide to implement the lessons in the future. The resource bank will be hosted on a website for the teachers at my field school, but it will also be publicly accessible to serve as a model of how to create place-based lessons for a specific school. The design of the resource bank will be modeled on the Ethnomathematics Curriculum Library hosted on the UH Mānoa College of Education website. The library allows the user to filter lesson plans by grade level, academic content, and whether they include HĀ principles. My resource bank will also allow users to filter by ahupua‘a and location since the lessons will be specific to a certain place in Hawai‘i. Each lesson plan in the Ethnomathematics Curriculum Library is detailed and includes all necessary worksheets, which are features that will be included in my resource bank.

Timetable

Time Period	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Summer 2023	Begin selecting scholarly articles to reference in a research journal (Articles will be focused on effective teaching practices for PBL and on developing a sense of place.)		
Fall 2023	Complete initial teaching philosophy Continue to work on research journal, articles will be focused on tailoring my teaching practices to the student demographic of my	Fieldwork at Haha‘ione Elementary School begins Work with my mentor teacher to select the teaching date and content of PBL lessons Take pre-assessment	

	classroom	myself Design pre-assessment to gauge students' sense of place	
Winter 2023	Continue to work on research journal	Fieldwork at Haha'ione Elementary School continues Administer pre-assessment to students Finalize PBL lessons Design post-assessment to gauge students' sense of place	
Spring 2023	Complete final teaching philosophy	Fieldwork at Haha'ione Elementary School ends Implement PBL lessons Administer post-assessment to students and myself	Create a resource bank for implementing PBL at Haha'ione Elementary School

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