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Introducing Hānai Pedagogy: A Call for Equity in Education Through an AANAPI Lens
Robin Brandehoff

This paper introduces a novel pedagogical framework titled Hānai Pedagogy, which embraces cultural identity, language, and familial relationships to counter dominant narratives around historical and colonial educational systems. Derived from a larger study on informal mentorships (Brandehoff, 2020) and Indigenous concepts of familial connectedness and community, Hānai Pedagogy is Hands-on; builds Alliances with students, families, and community members; Navigates racial, cultural, and economic oppressions; centers Authenticity among educators and learning practices; and encourages explorative teaching through Interrelations of cultural tradition and modern modes of learning. Using an Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander (AANAPI) lens, this new pedagogical framework will be applied to future studies of Grow Your Own Teacher preparatory programs. The goal of these studies is to refine this pedagogical framework and better understand how educators of Color use culture, Indigenous traditions, and language to shepherd learning and navigate teaching mandates to weave curricula and classroom relationships driven by cultural identity, Indigenous languages, and community epistemologies.

As an Asian American and Pacific Islander, I remember growing up in Maui, Hawai‘i, and the influence of my kumus (teachers) and the ways in which the ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language)

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was barred from being used or taught in my schools. I distinctly remember my second-grade teacher assigning each of us tasks when the principal or district leaders came through for a visit. I remember the walls of the class being adorned with laminated, hand-drawn ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i vocabulary posters with vivid pictures of native plants and animals to support our learning. I also remember these posters being covered by store-bought pictures in English to demonstrate the monthly calendar and counting lists. The posters would remain covered throughout the day but revealed during class time for us to learn the language and application. My kumu (teacher) was also a fan of flip-chart paper. The back pages held songs and myths in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, the middle pages were blank, and the front pages were “American” songs in English like “My Country Tis of Thee,” “American the Beautiful,” and “This Land is Your Land.” My task was to flip the ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i songs to the English songs on the right side of the chalk board. I took this role very seriously. I also remember discussion in class where we would try to learn these American songs but struggled. They were hard to memorize because their imagery was foreign to us. What were wheat fields and grain? Why were we “crowning good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea”? We were an island surrounded by water and did not wear crowns. We wore leis. It never made sense. We memorized it anyway.

In the fifth grade, my family moved to the mainland U.S., to a rural town in North Carolina. I was the only “Asian” kid my classmates ever saw outside of Ke Huy Quan in The Goonies or Temple of Doom. Add to that my sun-kissed skin and Pidgin accent, and I became a dark-skinned foreigner in a class of mostly white faces (I had one Black classmate). It was hard to make friends and my mainland teachers admonished my accent and Pidgin English. I taught myself “proper” English by watching TV and shows like Avonlea on the Disney channel. Once I learned to talk like everyone else, I stopped getting in trouble and even got better grades, but I missed the lyrical sounds of home. We eventually moved to East Los Angeles, which felt more like home. The mixture of Spanish and English was reminiscent of my childhood, and the familial relationships within my neighborhood were
similar to how I referred to elders as auntie and uncle and my neighbors as cousins back in Maui. Here, it was tía, tío, and primo, and my elders all called me míja (daughter).

As an educator and scholar, my epistemology stems from my experiences growing up in both Maui and East LA. The connections and relationships I cultivated between myself and my self-appointed mentors were purposeful for academic and professional reasons, but also wove us to each other through fabrics of underlying familial structures. In turn, I used these mentoring structures as my own pedagogy in the classroom and centered it as my area of research for my dissertation with rural, Latinx, gang-affiliated youth and their community mentors (Brandehoff, 2020). This work led me to my current ongoing research (discussed later in this report) on the west side of Oahu, Hawai‘i, and the incredible work and mentorship occurring through a community-driven Grow Your Own Teacher program called Ka Lama with the organization INPEACE (Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture). They have graciously agreed to partner with me on this research, to uncover how their program and teachers use Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) traditions, language, and culture in their own pedagogies, and how the mentorship provided by INPEACE supports teachers in their own academic and professional journeys.

Mentorship is central to my work as an educator and as a human being. My childhood experiences taught me the importance and need for mentoring relationships, even if they are cultivated beyond the walls of formal mentoring programs like Boys and Girls Club or Big Brother Big Sister (Brandehoff, 2020). I was never a participant in those spaces, but instead cultivated my own mentorships through my relationships and connections with adults in my neighborhood, and with the educators I encountered in school and work. My mentors advised me, but also became my chosen family. Not having an extended family beyond my mother and siblings, this self-established, familial community became my system of love and support. My neighbors celebrated my graduations and acceptance into college harder than my own (DNA-related) family members. My aunties and uncles
sat down with me to listen to my struggles as a first-generation high school graduate, and though they could not offer advice on FAFSA applications or sociology class essays, they were there for me and shared similar experiences of struggle and resilience. They mentored me to persevere and to hold my head high regardless of my background, because it was my background and community that set me apart from others. And this was something to be proud of.

**Hānai Pedagogy**

Every culture has a term for chosen family. In Hawai‘i, we used *Hānai*, the closest translation being a person who is adopted kin. They do not need to be biologically related to you but can be a member of your community: an elder, a child, a neighbor, a student. This concept of familial connection is common in communities of Color, particularly those that have experienced social and racial oppressions and colonization (Smith, Yzaguirre, Dwanyen, & Wieling, 2022). Indigenous connectedness honors and strengthens familial bonds which exist within a community linking itself to the central family unit of grandparents, parents, and children (Ullrich, 2019). Red Horse (1997) described the potential of a family unit as being both biological and spiritual, meaning that a family can be related by DNA and/or by their principles, values, and connectedness. Anishinaabe female community elders are present at the birth of all children, welcoming them into the tribe through songs and stories (Talaga, 2019). As Anishinaabe children grow up, they learn about community kinship through their biological and spiritual family members within their community, thus preserving the past as they step through to the present. In Brazil, familial-based community connections link individual tribes to a greater whole and functions as a response to colonization, enslavement, and separation dividing tribes and families across the country (Barretto Filho, 2018). History and colonization have taught us that oppressive divisions of a community can at once separate tribes and peoples, but also bring them together in solidarity and as a single unit.
In my research with youth in areas lacking resources and formal mentoring programs, young adults often describe mentors from their local community and their favorite teachers in familial terms: “Other Mother,” “Uncle/Tio,” “Auntie/Tía” or “Cousin/Primo” (Brandehoff, 2020). Moving toward this collective notion of familial mentorship, and influenced by my own culture and Hānai experiences, this report introduces a pedagogical framework that is still in process, which I am building upon foundations of culturally and linguistically affirming education, encompassing Hānai core values, to share and spotlight Indigenous identities and cultural epistemologies. Central to this framework are the familial relationships that informal mentorships cultivate and can ultimately sustain between educators, students and the community at large.

In my aforementioned larger study on mentorships between Latinx gang-affiliated youth and community mentors, mentees shared that their chosen mentors were family members living outside of their household (older siblings and uncles) or community individuals (employers, teachers, and principals) who stood in the gap of a family member such as a father or a mother (Brandehoff, under review). These latter mentors offer a unique perspective and stance as influential adults in the lives of children with the ability to employ an educational pedagogy based on close relationships. They can blur the line between family and mentor, or educator and mentor, by providing students a close, understanding, and unconditionally loving and affirming mentor who sees the student as a whole individual—someone with a past, a present, a future, flaws, and strengths.

This familial perspective of mentorship was the spark that ignited this Hānai Pedagogy study². Situated in Waiʻanae, Hawaiʻi, this ethnographic study centers the Ka Lama teacher

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² This study is still in its infancy, but this paper will present early findings from the first leg of data collection which includes 18 hours of in-person, semi-structured interviews with six educators, five school leaders, and five INPEACE staff as well as fifty hours of community-based ethnographic field observations, site visits, and one classroom observation. As mentioned in the discussion section, this study is ongoing and will continue to develop the overall pedagogical framework through additional data collection and analysis in 2023.
preparation program, which mentors Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and AANAPI educators serving a local population that has the highest concentration of Native Hawaiians in the state (Hawaii.gov). In this area, a majority of the population is living at or below the poverty line, with 46% of residents having received their high school diploma, 11% having attained their bachelor’s degree and only 3% having attained a graduate degree (World Population Review, 2023).

Just like the stories of the mentees and mentors who shared their experiences in my initial study (Brandehoff, 2020), Hānai Pedagogy is purposefully hopeful and collaborative. It is drawn from similar social and educational worldviews of decolonizing education and research (Smith, 1999; Meyer & Kotler, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Bishop, 2011), but (for now) it is specifically situated within the space of Wai’anae, Hawai‘i, and the Asian American and Pacific Islander community of teachers, mentors, and students within the frame of this study. Their experiences and knowledge are rooted in their community and specific lived histories, yet they are also akin to the current experiences and forms of learning of Indigenous Asian American, Native American and Pacific Islander (AANAPI) groups who have also held on to their historical and educational capital through painful acts of colonialism and cultural violence to pass on their ancestral knowledge to future generations. This pedagogy recognizes and honors our history, amplifies our silenced experiences, and celebrates the familial connections that can be forged within educational and community spaces to serve and support each other for the continued growth of the next generation.

The Five Values of HĀNĀI

Hānai Pedagogy embraces cultural identity and familial relationships to establish a framework of teaching that is Hands-on; builds Aloha (love and gratitude) with students, families,
and community members; *Navigates* racial, cultural, and economic oppressions; centers *Authenticity* among educators and learning practices; and encourages explorative teaching through *Interrelations* of cultural tradition and modern modes of learning. This framework is grounded in seven principles that offer educators an opportunity to situate their pedagogy and ongoing connections with students and family through culturally sustaining practices.

The Seven Principles

*Cultural Identity*

The seven principles of Hānai Pedagogy have been developed using preliminary data collected from semi-structured interviews, site visits, and community fieldwork observations. They include: Cultural identity, Language, Relationships, Community, Service, Talk Story, and History. Establishing a classroom that is culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) means learning about the cultural identities of all members of the learning community and purposefully representing those identities throughout all aspects of the learning process: celebrating cultural languaging (Sembiante & Tian, 2021), representing *cultural identity* through in-class texts, inviting in student experiences, and collaborating with community members to conduct an authentic learning experience through sharing knowledge and cultural traditions. To do this, educators must let go of modern and colonial practices of assessment to share in and explore decolonized methods of learning and growth. Interviews with Ka Lama educators and school leaders showed unanimous agreement that classroom learning must encompass the local mythologies of Wai’anae and integration of community members and ideals into daily programming. The cultural identity of Wai’anae was articulated best by Ikaika, a high school special education teacher, who stated that Wai’anae is “the ‘āina (land) and the people.” Educators agreed that for learning to occur, culture must be recognized, honored, and celebrated. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to harness their cultural identity as a critical stance, a form of
social capital, and to share their learning through acts of languaging (Nawyn et al., 2012) which are representative of them, their speech communities, their families and their youthful exploration of evolving language as self-expression (including “slang”).

**Languaging**

In *Kanaka Ōiwi* populations, **languaging** is not only a verb, but is a circular act of honoring the past through culturally sustaining lessons and knowledge-sharing, passing wisdom and experiences down through generations. It is how individuals connect with each other: by blending languages influenced by cultures and peoples introduced to the islands. It is how *Kanaka* elders teach their children about the power of language, and how languaging can bring communities together to take back the power that was stripped from them through colonization. It is a way of carrying the past into the present and continuing to nurture it, a notion that appears throughout Indigenous cultures and histories.

In interviews and classroom observations, I noted that educators would launch into a local accent and dialect (Pidgin) when conversing with their class, and especially in one-on-one asides with individual students. From a raciolinguistic perspective, this form of translanguaging (Chaparro, 2019) is invaluable in AANAPI classrooms where race, culture, and bilingualism are interwoven, forming a complex language of movement, connection, and discussion.

**Relationships**

This pedagogy is not established overnight, but through **relationships** built and tended to in and out of classroom spaces. For Ka Lama educators, the relationship begins with their Ka Lama
mentor. Sherry, a middle school history teacher, attributed her success as a non-traditional teacher to her mentor and Ka Lama colleagues who went through the program and college courses with her. Other Ka Lama educators also cited the same Ka Lama mentor as the person who would check in with them, continually encourage them, and support their work even when they experienced imposter syndrome in their classes. In addition to social and emotional support, Ka Lama also supports their students financially by providing free classes, buying their books, paying for lab fees and more. For non-traditional and first-generation graduates these forms of relational supports help to break down barriers and encourage students to keep striving toward their dreams.

The mentor relationships between Ka Lama program leaders and student teachers do not end with graduation. Instead, these mentoring relationships continue well into the graduate’s professional years. In some instances, graduates come back for ongoing professional development opportunities and reach out to current students as mentors, continuing the circle of mentorship and extending the Hānai educator family. In these relationships and conversations, Ka Lama graduates and program leaders share their personal experiences and wonderings with current students. These discussions shape and guide continued learning and pedagogical exploration for all participants, providing a supportive space to model conversations and relationship-building for use in the classroom with younger students.

Thus, using these mentoring spaces to explore courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006), educators can create similar spaces in their classrooms by inviting students to share of themselves. In conjunction with other principles of Hānai Pedagogy, educators must also share directly in these courageous conversations, and be open to discussing their own epistemologies and foundations for learning with other educators, and especially with their students. By actively articulating an authentic appreciation of, and honoring, representations of cultural identities in their classrooms and throughout their curriculum, educators can find opportunities to connect with their
students beyond assessment data and mandated learning standards. Teachers will likely find intersections between their own culture(s) and upbringing and those of their students which will bring about a stronger sense of connectedness and community within their classroom space.

Community and Service

With established connections, it is easier to bring community members into the classroom, blurring the edges between school and community to find common ground—a shared space of wisdom, support, and tradition. Within these communal spaces, educators and school leaders can learn more about their students’ strengths, forms of capital (Yosso, 2005), and needs. The school and community can thus work in tandem to uncover the needs of its members and work together to understand and problem-solve obstacles through community-driven services (Newman et al., 2020).

In the ongoing study in Wai‘anae, one elementary principal discussed the importance of connecting with the local community and establishing familial bonds with community members as part of their pedagogy. This elementary school participates in a local program where they “adopt” a grandparent. In this program, kapunas, or elders, are assigned to the school to work with the children in outdoor classrooms. The kupuna share local and ancestral stories and mythologies, connecting the ʻāina to the children and their teachers as a form of history, ongoing learning, and as a form of Indigenous note-taking. Hānai pedagogy encourages Indigenous-led learning through storytelling as a way to engage with information and pass down knowledge through narratives. This provides students a foundation for their own memory-making and story-writing on paper. Kapuna and Ka Lama educators tie these local stories to STEM standards by focusing on the ʻāina, biology, and solar system. Others connect the moʻolelo (stories) to Hawaiian and United States history, and the impacts
of politics and oppression on local families. Finally, these stories blend seamlessly into daily English language classwork such as writing, oral traditions, and language work.

**Talk Story Through History**

The final two principles of Hānai Pedagogy are Talk Story and History, which are both connected to the cultural knowledge wielded by the community (Brown et al., 2021). Hands-on learning can be incorporated into daily curricula, and mentored through dance, language, traditions, spirituality, food, and tending to the ʻāina. To celebrate Indigenous knowledge and decolonized methods of learning, elders and students alike can present information they have learned through *talk story*, a narrative assessment of their learned and lived experiences, woven from the *history* of their land and ancestors.

Hānai Pedagogy can be seen across INPEACE’s work, particularly with their community outreach program and STEM learning opportunities. INPEACE and Ka Lama provide professional development opportunities for all interested educators to learn more about Kanaka histories and culture and implement culturally sustaining pedagogy into their syllabi and course offerings. Ka Lama’s STEM director has cultivated incredible lessons on Kapa (the history of making cloth using Indigenous methods), farming, and moon phases. These teachings have been shared with educators and implemented in classrooms across Waiʻanae and are currently being rolled out to the public with interactive exhibits available to residents throughout the island free of charge. These exhibits not only extoll the value of discussion in the form of talk story, but also initiate deeper conversations around social and historical oppressions while celebrating and honoring Indigenous liberation.

**Discussion**
Hānai Pedagogy reflects the mission of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO) by challenging oppressive systems impacting AANAPI residents of Hawai‘i and the ongoing effects of colonialism. This pedagogy calls for culturally sustaining critical thinking and implementation in curricula to seek liberation through education and community connectedness. I invite you, the PTO readership, as scholars and practitioners, to examine your own epistemologies and lived histories, and question how the relationships we cultivate reflect the principles of Hānai Pedagogy, to move our pedagogical practices forward. How can Hānai Pedagogy principles be utilized outside of the classroom in spaces of practice and social justice movements? How can mentorships support liberatory efforts and popular education? How can PTO theories and practices weave themselves within Hānai principles, and how do you see yourself exercising these practices within your work with students and the community?

This study is still in a preliminary phase. This pedagogy will continue to develop and grow, much like the ever-changing current of knowledge and experience, and much like the communities, students and educators who utilize it. With growing numbers of AANAPI-identifying students (Vaughn et al., 2021), it is imperative that we enact an AANAPI lens to our teacher preparatory programs so that students who have been deeply marginalized by racially-binary forms of research are highlighted, uplifted, and heard. My future work will apply Hānai Pedagogy’s framework to Grow Your Own Teacher programs (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019), one in Colorado serving racially and culturally diverse students (Goings, Brandehoff, & Bianco, 2018), and to my own continued research in Hawai‘i, serving Kānaka ‘ōiwi youth and families (https://inpeace.org).

Using an AANAPI lens, my new pedagogical framework will continue to examine how educators of color shepherd learning and navigate teaching, to weave a curriculum driven by cultural identity and community epistemologies that honor each student’s learning through Hānai Pedagogy and the love and understanding that communities and educators of color provide.
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