

State of Hawaii Department of Education

A Sabbatical Project Report
Semester 1 SY 2022 - 2023

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SABBATICAL REPORT FIRST SEMESTER SY 2022 - 2023

The Sabbatical: An Introduction

When I read the email encouraging teachers to apply for sabbatical leave last year, the urge to apply became increasingly insistent as days went by. With Covid altering how instruction is delivered and how classrooms functioned, I knew I had to step back and rediscover a different approach to learning and teaching.

With recess and social interactions being highly discouraged to make room for social distancing, two things became the forefront of my teaching practice. My idea was to maximize brain breaks, using toys and *Manipulatives* to continually encourage play, collaboration, and hands-on learning. What that looked like consisted of integrating total physical responses in any way possible and providing individual students with binder pouches containing snap-on cubes, counting bears, a cardboard clock, base-ten blocks, and play dough. These were used throughout the year to help master different reading and math skills. Toys from home were also brought in so students can demonstrate understanding and provide an opportunity to talk and share with the class. My students also participated in our class' weekly Virtual Playdates. Children had the chance to bring



Chatting and building during one of our Virtual Play Dates on Webex.

building toys, art supplies, play dough or slime, and toy figures respectively. They had a chance to describe their work, ask questions, and give feedback on their friend's work. Remote instruction came with sets of different challenges, but these practices helped in making learning fun and engaging for students, even when we weren't physically together in the classroom.

However, I knew my ideas of play-based learning were scattered as these ideas would sporadically take form as mere supplements to student learning. As I reflect on this, time, the knowledge of its entirety, and the underlying contradicting beliefs on play and school limited the practice of play-based learning in my classroom.

In Table 1, Harvard's Project Zero Pedagogy of Play Project sums up the contradictions between play and school, which also act as barriers of implementing play-based learning. When Covid entered the school system, these barriers became even harder to conquer

Table 1. Paradoxes between play and school

PLAY	SCHOOL
Play is timeless.	School is timetabled.
Play can be chaotic, messy, and loud.	Schools are places of order.
Play involved risks.	In school, children should be safe.
In play, children are in charge.	At school, the agenda is generally set by adults.

Source: Harvard's Project Zero Pedagogy of Play Project

with children's access to playground, play areas and opportunities for socialization have been vastly restricted. In retrospect, the challenges of online learning highlighted the necessity of play. I wondered how play can be incorporated in a pandemic driven classroom? How can active engagement happen during online learning? The answer came as I constructed and transitioned curriculum to our school's chosen online platform (Seesaw). With what Covid had taken away and changed, students still had access to one thing at home - their toys! This *aha* moment further contributed to my initial interest on

toys as a learning tool and the Montessori Method. I have heard so many great things and seen so many teachers and parents talk about the Montessori Method, but my understanding of its totality barely scratched the surface. Who is Maria Montessori? What strategies can we glean from this method that can be applied in a socially-distanced classroom setting?

When my Sabbatical project got approved, my original plans were to take online classes and workshops about the Montessori Method, observe a Montessori class, provide a written report about my learnings, and share my report to my school community. At this point, the role of families during remote instruction have never been so active and crucial, so I decided to include the creation of an informational resource to empower families on how to support their children's learning at home.

Workshops and Courses

Officially, my sabbatical started in July and lasted throughout the first semester of SY 2022-2023. Some unexpected opportunities presented itself and led me to take different directions. My original plans of taking online courses were going well, initially. A friend had lent me Simone Davies' "The Montessori Toddler" book and discovered her online course offerings. I took her *Montessori Activities and Observation* course, which taught me what differentiates a Montessori activity, how to present a lesson, what to observe in children, and learned a myriad of ideas in creating Montessori activities from home. I did experience a setback when I heard of my dad's untimely passing back home in the Philippines. But thankfully, the workshops and webinars I have taken from Authentic Institute of Montessori were online self-paced courses. The courses included *How Montessori Works*, *Different Ages, Different Needs: Stages of Development*, and *Getting Kids to Listen*. These courses deepened my understanding of the Montessori Method. It provided insights on the way Montessori classrooms are designed to follow the interest of a child and meet the four planes of child development, including the development of language and movement. These courses also prompted reflections on my current

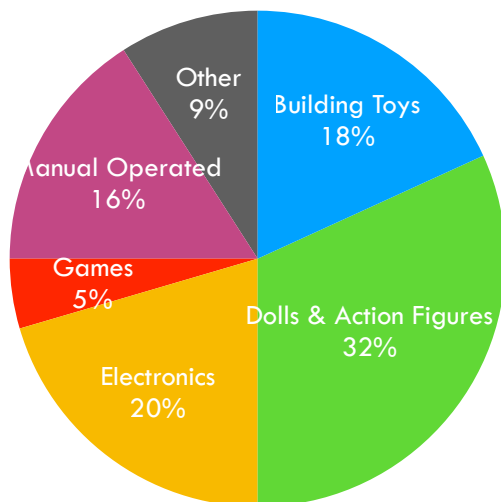
practice and reimagining of how a public school classroom should and could look like beyond the four walls of my first grade classroom.

All About Toys

One of the other component of my Sabbatical project includes creating a resource for parents so they, too can use toys to build foundational academic skills. I sought Hanahau'oli children's favorite toys and K-1 public school parents' insights on toys in the classroom. About 50 children were interviewed and 30 public school families anonymously participated in the survey. Parents were asked the kind of toys their children plays with, who plays with their children, and what they think of toys being a part of their child's classrooms. The data gathered allowed me to create a more relevant resource based on their children's preferences and toy availability. The data will also be used for possible future parent-school initiatives on play-based learning.

As I interviewed the Hanahau'oli children and asked what their favorite toys were, dolls and action figures came out as the top favorite, with electronics and building toys falling behind. In my conversations with them, I realized how they saw play and toys as almost synonymous to each other. A handful of the children had asked what I meant about "toys" and in clarifying, I specified "toys = objects they play with."

Kukunaokalā's Favorite Toys



n=50

Public School K-1 Families Top 3 Toys

1. Dolls & Action Figures
(Barbie, LOL Dolls, Bluey Toys)
2. Slime
3. Electronics
(iPad, Nintendo, Video Games)

Interestingly, the parents' survey also revealed the same toy choices of children - dolls and toy figures, slime, and electronic games, respectively.

Based from this question, here are some playful ideas parents and teachers alike can use in the classroom and at home, expanding toys' purpose beyond its intended function.

PLAYFUL IDEAS

Dolls, Plush Toys, Action Figures

LANGUAGE ARTS

- Use as Reading Buddies to practice reading with
- Create Narrative & Creative Writing pieces by having take their toys on a weekend adventure
- Practice observational skills by learning about Adjectives, Similes, Metaphors
- Retelling a Story / Role-playing using their toys

MATH

- Demonstrate numeracy and number concepts (one-to-one correspondence)
- Develop visual perceptual skills, thinking and memory skills by sorting & classifying toys

SCIENCE

- Use plushies to classify animals, and learn about animal characteristics

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- Put plush toys to work to comfort a child throughout the day

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Use toys to discuss different cultural or governmental symbols



Electronics & Building Toys

LANGUAGE ARTS

- Create procedural writing on how to play games.
- Write a letter to a friend and send it using a drone*
- Recreate fictional stories from novels

MATH*

- Create scale models using ratios and proportional reasoning



SCIENCE*

- Work as a team to build a sustainable environment

SOCIAL STUDIES *

- Recreate local historical and cultural landmarks
- Create an immersive special timeline of historical events.



*Source: Interview with Kukunaokalā Students.

*Source: Higgin, Tanner. Common Sense Media.

Manually Operated Toys

LANGUAGE ARTS

- Create procedural writing on how to play a toy.

MATH

- Play battle games to demonstrate collecting, organizing, analyzing, and comparing data.



SCIENCE

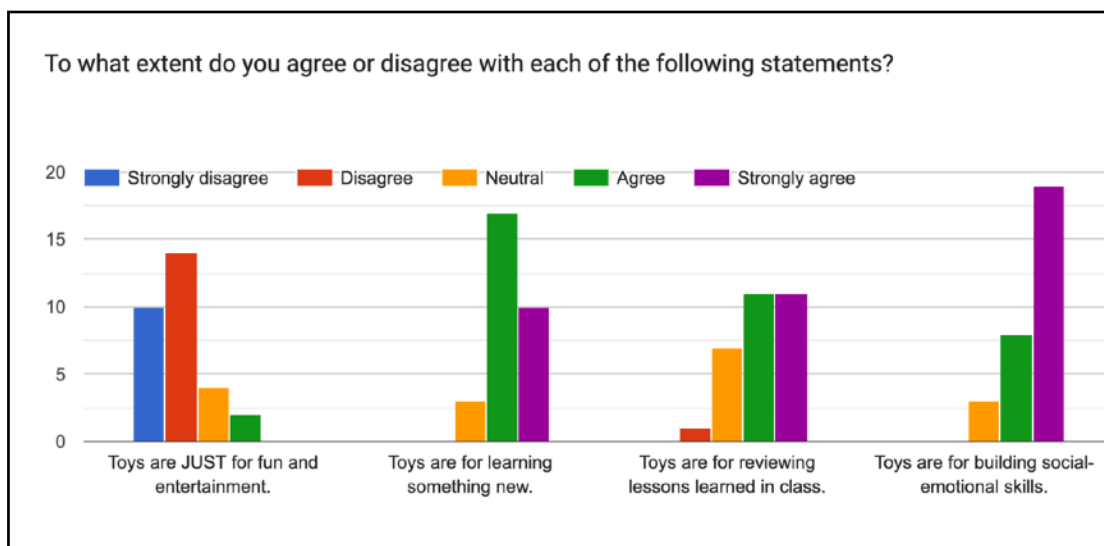
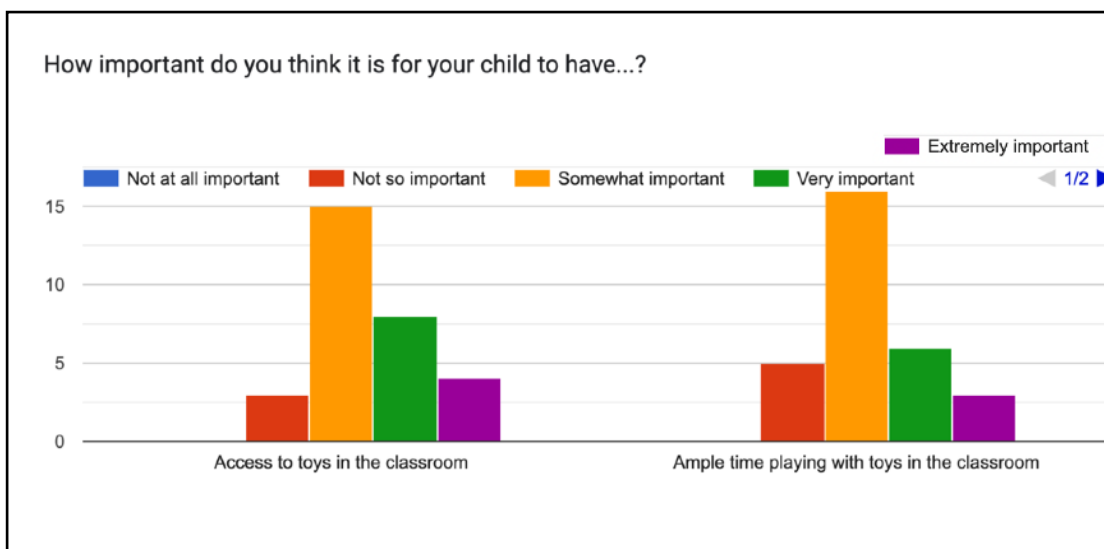
- Take apart toys to learn about simple machines and explain how things work.
- Use toys to demonstrate Force and Motion: Pushes and Pulls

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Study how tops change over time, and explore the same toys in different cultural contexts.

On the second part of the survey, majority of parents think that having access to toys and having enough time to play with toys are somewhat a priority in the classroom.

Interestingly, majority of the parents also believe toys can be used for both mental, social and emotional learning. There seems to be a disconnect of ideas between playing with toys in the classroom and the purpose it serves. I wonder if the paradoxical ideas of play and school, as mentioned earlier, are beliefs also held by the parents. If so, this could be a starting point to open conversation about how play-based learning in the classroom works. Also, providing parent workshops demonstrating the many possibilities of academic learning with toys might prove beneficial.



School Placements

Prior to submitting my Sabbatical proposal, I started reaching out to different Montessori schools to observe their practice. However, my requests were not granted and understandably so, as most schools were learning to navigate CDC guidelines. In February of 2022, I had taken a professional development workshop called *Natural Scientists: Children in Charge* at Hanahau'oli School and got connected with Dr. Amber Strong Makaiau, the school's Director of Professional Development. I ended up spending majority of my time observing and learning from the teachers and students of Hanahau'oli School.



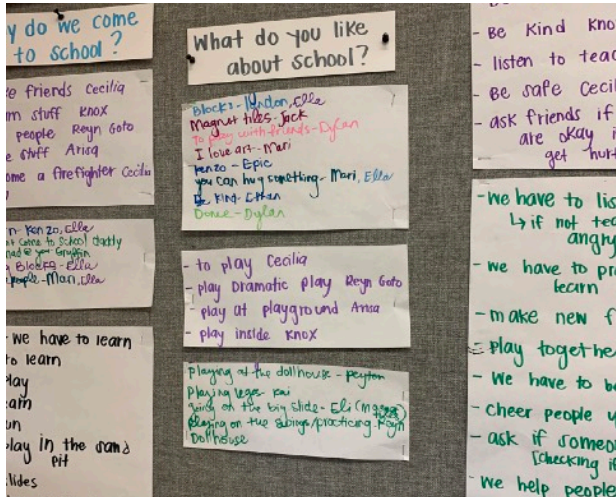
Hanahau'oli School's Main Playground Area

Hanahau'oli School's progressive approach to education is based on John Dewey's legacy where education should be child-centered, active and interactive, and includes the social world of the child and the community (Hanahau'oli School).

During my time here, I also got connected with Pamela Strode of Strode Montessori, where I spent a few hours observing how Montessori learning materials are organized and used by the children. Both experiences were distinct, and it afforded me the opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation of different learning theories. John Dewey's and Maria Montessori's philosophical and theoretical concepts on education challenged my pedagogical practices, and elevated my perspective on the established cultures within

the public school system.

School Observation at Hanahau'oli School and Strode Montessori



JK students talk about the best things they like about school.

When I first stepped foot at Hanahau'oli years back for a different professional development class, I immediately knew that there is something unique and special about this school. I deeply appreciated the intertwining of nature, school structures, and children's art displayed across the campus. There's a sense of calm with the towering trees filtering just enough sunlight, creating these tranquil spaces beneath dappled shades. And amidst the calm, I hear the voices of children echoing

in its walls and the steady voices of adults in varying roles as their guides.

As my days unfold, Hanahau'oli's core beliefs and values as a school community gathered beyond these initial impressions. I had the chance to observe JK - 6th Grade classes, with majority of my time spent with Kukunaokalā, the K-1 class. The Kukunaokalā class consists of two classes namely, Ka 'imi loa and Ku'ikahi with a total of 54 students of mixed-age groups and 4 teachers. Here, I found myself immersed in a lot of playful learning and a new ohana, who have challenged the way I teach children, empowered my identity as a teacher, and elevated the way I see school systems. This is just a tiny account of the many things I have learned from my time there.

1. What's the Message? Wielding the Power of Communication in Shaping the Whole Child



Kukunaokalā's discussion on what safe spaces mean to them.

It was 10:00AM when I first officially toured the campus with Dr. Amber. Halfway through the tour, I have already met majority of the teachers, admin, and staff, spoke with students, and been asked questions from my Sabbatical project to my family. There was an openness and an ease to these conversations that translated back in the classrooms.

Student voice, teacher autonomy, and

language choice are practices deeply embedded in meaningful conversations happening at Hanahau'oli.

Student voice so enriches the dynamics in the classroom and drives daily learning experiences. Most classes use a community ball and/or have circle time carved out into their day to give every student an opportunity to listen and be heard. Students partake in the workings of democracy where students construct class agreements, influence what gets prioritized, elect what projects they get to create, and essentially, play a huge role in what happens in their classrooms and their learning. This practice empowers students to take ownership of their learning and establishes a good foundation in a child's natural development of learning a language.

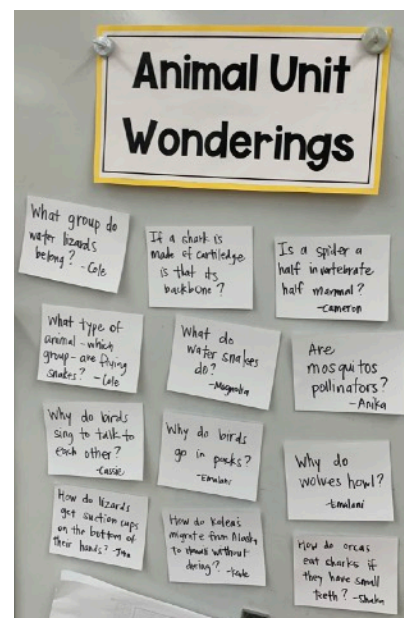
Equally valued at Hanahau'oli are teachers' autonomy. I have sat in several grade level planning time and faculty staff meetings, and witnessed teachers as active participants in the decision-making in their classroom and the whole school. Teachers have fostered a school culture where collaboration and support for each other is the norm. They got to design, decide, and drive student's learning experiences from games, art, special



Kukunaokalā creating their community ball.



Students voted to name the chickens they raised in class.

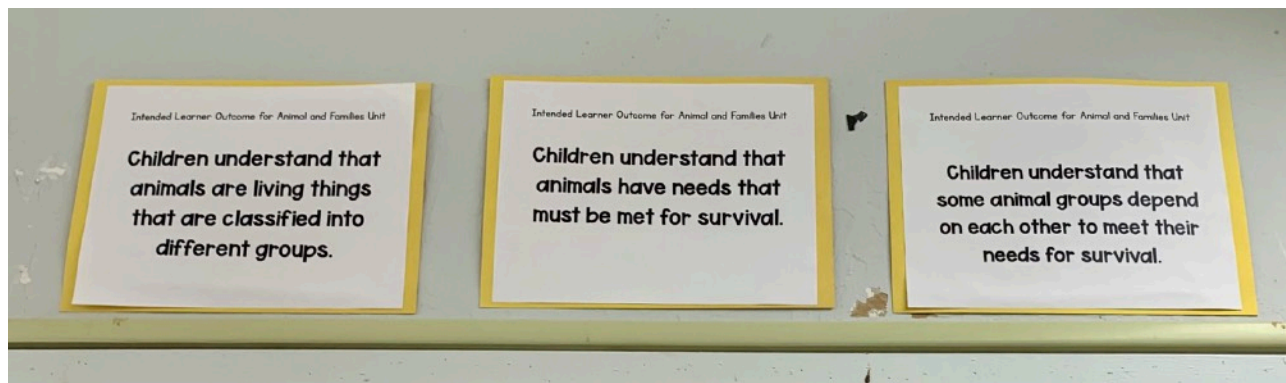


Questions students asked during their lessons on Animals.

projects, assessments, worksheets, learning trips, and guest speakers based on their observation and assessment of how and where the students are taking their education. A sense of academic freedom pervades throughout the school. Teachers' input are highly valued, and both teachers and students determine the depth of knowledge into which they dive into.

As much as the "who" (speakers and listeners) matter in these conversations, language choice plays an integral part in the way the Hanahau'oli community relate to each other. As the school models inclusivity in their language, the use of "children" more often than "student" is striking. I have listened multiple times to staff refer the learning environment as child-centered learning versus student-centered learning.

Being a mom of two kids, the use of "children" personally stuck as it implies a nurturing meaning, carrying a heavier weight to it. When I think about "children," they are young, complex, and unique human beings with different personalities and qualities they all bring in the classroom. They can be messy, quiet, loud, curious, with big emotions. They come with mental, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual growing needs that are ever-



Intended Learner Outcomes for Kukunaokalā's Animal and Families Unit.

changing. Not to say that “student” is should be an obsolete term, however, as the landscape of the public school education system prioritize students in taking a standardized test, it brings the definition of “student” with a heavily academic undertone. Terry Heick, Founder and Director of Teacher Thought in differentiating Learners and Students writes, “Student hopefully learn, but the word “student” connote compliance and external form more than anything intrinsic or enduring.” How would my classroom looked like if language shifts from students to children and children as students? What other language or word choices need improvement or completely withdrawn? I pondered on this, as the subconscious and conscious way of addressing children



Examples of how to use inclusive language in the classroom at Hanahau'oli.

profoundly shapes the interactions between teachers, students, and other members of the Hanahau'oli community. Sheena Yamamoto, a Kukunaokalā teacher, talks about exactly as such. She gives an example of a child holding a rock. At times, adults would immediately make the assumption that a child might do something destructive with it. The typical response usually asks the children to put the rock down or put it away, but Yamamoto encourages a change of response. Changing the language to say, “What do you plan to do with that?” shifts the attitude of admonition to curiosity. The conversation now opens for a child to think about their actions, which provides teachers a better insight of the child's thinking process. It reveals a

child's personality and the state of their overall well-being. John Dewey sums it up this way, "Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession. It modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it" (11).

Most importantly, Hanahau'oli's commitment to keep the Hawaiian language alive by practice is admirable work. As children explore community issues, nature, and Hawaiian history, the use of the Hawaiian language are integrated in different areas of the children's school life. For example, children learn and use different *mana'o i ka lā* and Hawaiian chants as the start

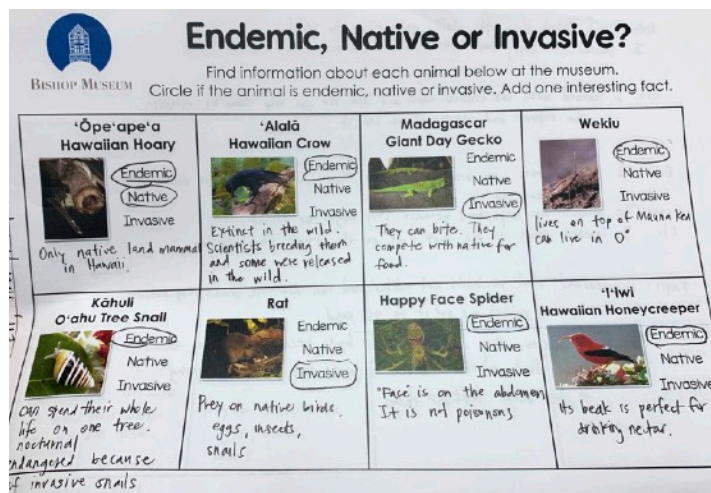
of their school day. Hawaiian terminologies are purposefully integrated in the campus evident in the projects, lessons, groups and classes they are in. Thinking back on the



Story time No Ka `elepaio Kolohe

Montessori curriculum on Cosmic Education, Montessori highlights the interconnectedness of all things (Montessori Academy) in the world. Similarly, the purposeful use of Hawaiian language allows for this interconnectedness where children learn to embrace the culture of Hawai'i, understand their sense of place, and strengthen their sense of responsibility to our islands and the world.

Keiki Kawai'ae'a', founders of the Hawaiian immersion movement, describes the importance of language, "Language contains the way we see the world knowledge that has been created by that specific group, knowledge that is unique to any other place in the world. It connects us to our identity of who we are and where we come from. Lose the



Learning trip activity at the Bishop Museum

language and you lose the culture, the knowledge pool, and that way of seeing and being in the world." ("Working to Restore Olelo..") As part of Hawai'i's public school system, there's so much to learn from this practice so we can effectively ensure that the Hawaiian language and culture endures.

2. The "Spirit of Cooperation": Where Social Emotional Learning Thrives

A class quilt with student-drawn pictures proudly hangs inside the 6th Grade classroom. I could not help but snap a photo, as it represents Hanahau'oli School's value for community. Like the quilt, Hanahau'oli School is a coming together of different people for a cause. In Louisa Palmer's "Memories of Hanahau'oli: The First of Fifty Years," she dedicates a chapter on the Spirit of Cooperation and recounts the many noble and purposeful work of the school, students, parents, and other members of the community who strived to establish the "Hanahau'oli Family" (74). The many aspects of the school are ripe with communal activities weaved in the school's daily life where everyone knows each other by name.



Class quilt hanging inside the 6th Grade classroom



Kukunaokalā students giving the bookmarks they made for Po'e Kahele class

At the start of each day, two children leads the school's morning activities. Part of these activities, is a time carved for school announcements. These announcements consist of students and staff gathered to honor the notable work both children and adults have achieved. Beaming with pride, children showcase art pieces and learning projects in hand. Often, newcomers and visitors to the school are also welcomed and recognized. Children celebrating their birthdays also get to choose a birthday book and shares it during this time.

At lunch, students eat together like a family. Each lunch table comprise of students, teachers, and staff from different grade levels. Students also get the chance to share and tell a joke, sometimes with a friend, play some music, and work with others to keep their area clean. Recess are also structured where breaks overlaps. This overlap allows for mixed-age play, where children interact with others outside of their peer age groups. This set-up further provides teachers with an opportunity to make observations of how students relate with each other, which are then used to group students effectively, modify lessons and activities, and check for understanding.



Lunch Time!



Kukunaakalāokala students sharing their Tree Art Projects

In the beginning of my time at Kukunaakalā, the teachers have always encouraged me to “be ready to jump in.” Teachers have anticipated the possible social-emotional needs of the kids coming out of the pandemic and recognized its impact to their development. Not soon after, I have encountered disagreements among the children and had multiple opportunities to listen to their point of view. In these scenarios, children learn to articulate their feelings and opinions, and also learn how to listen and consider another’s. Sitting through those interactions, I wondered how I might have cut these kind of learning opportunities way before children have the time to resolve their conflicts. How many times have these learning moments been sacrificed to finish curriculum and/or for time’s sake? In these instances, allowing conflicts to happen and accepting it as an inevitable part of life must occur. Instead of avoiding conflict, seeing it as moments to build social emotional learning skills is something all educators would and

should strive for. An environment where both academic and social learning are equally important needs to be established.



Parent volunteer showing the wing span of the The Mōli of Kalaeokauna'oa

Lastly, the expected direct involvement of parents in a child's education completes the circle of Hanahau'oli's community. Parents play an active role in their child's school experience by being present in different school celebrations and volunteering their time, talents, expertise and resources. It's not uncommon to see parents come and go serving in different capacities around the school. Parents

would come to celebrate their child's achievements and birthdays. They have come to cut, sort, organize, and complete projects with small groups of children. In Kukunaokalā's unit on Animals, parents share their knowledge on different animals and assisted in bringing family pets. Parent's active participation in the school adds depth and complexity in the learning experiences of the class. Further, the unmistakable joy and pride of students introducing their parents to the class is priceless. "It takes a village..." they say, and Hanahau'oli School has embraced this practice with arms wide open.

3. Play-Based Learning: A Joyous Work

The sun was shining brightly that day, and recess has already started. The wide green space comes alive with barefoot children playing football, and the play equipments in plain view beg for free, unstructured play. Closer to Mr. Miyamoto's woodworking class are the swings, big blue blocks of different shapes and sizes, and a shaded picnic table with a red first aid



Sandbox Fun: Hanahau'oli students "baking" mooncakes for sale.



Kulaiwi's idea station, where students can create or build projects from recycled materials.

kit sitting atop. Where I began my walk that day sits the sandbox under two orange cantilever umbrellas and a colorful wooden house right next to it. The children were busy filling containers with sand, creating cake-like mounds dotting the concrete slab that borders sand and soil. I waited. I listened. A few moments in, the children excitedly volunteered the answer to the questions looming in my mind, “We’re making mooncakes!” and “It’s from Mandarin class.” This will be the first of many encounters I have of children extending their knowledge out into their playtime.

What is play-based learning? Its definition has been explored in many different ways, but to put it simply, play-based learning is learning while playing (Danniels, Pyle). To further explore the concept of this approach, Keala Lee, Kulāiwi (Grades 2-3) teacher, provided more insight recounting her teaching experience on community. In this unit, the class imagined and created a whole community of important people, places, and issues relevant to what they were learning. They dressed up as community helpers and built their community with boxes and recycled materials. Students learned how democracy works and provided solutions to problems a community might face. This learning experience inspired the addition of the colorful wooden house by the sandbox, where everyone now gets to recreate what and how a community looks like.

In the Kukunaokalā class, children learned to classify animals and different lifecycles using animal figures and stuffed toys. They discovered bugs and critters as they explore the outdoors. They have created different arts and projects on animals, and were exposed to a myriad of learning trips to encounter the animals in real life. In math, students played card games and manipulatives to learn basic math skills.

The extensive body of research on the impacts of play-based learning points to all its benefits on a child’s overall well-being. As UNICEF describes, “play is meaningful. Children



Halloween Makeover: Kukunaokalā students design a costume for their chosen animal figures.

play to make sense of the world around them, and to find meaning in an experience by connecting it to something already known. Through play, children express and expand their understanding of their experiences" (Learning through play...). Children absorb new knowledge, form new perceptions, and caused them into action all while having fun and while building relationships with others. Suffice to say, play is the preeminent avenue where deeper learning of themselves, others, and the world around them, happens.

4. All About Toys: Leveraging Toys as Learning Tools in the Classroom

Strode Montessori is situated inconspicuously inside a unique yellow building on the corner of Bethel and Merchant. As soon you walk in, the front desk welcomes parents



Fraction Puzzles



Mushroom puzzle



Children hang the corresponding number of beads in order from 1-9



Thermic Tablet Montessori material to refine a child's sense of temperature. The tablets are made with cork, glass, felt, wood, steel, and slate.

and children get checked-in. The beautiful architecture inside adds to the charm of its carefully and thoughtfully designed learning spaces.

One distinctive practice of the Montessori Method is having a “prepared environment.” This means creating a purposeful classroom space to meet the needs of a developing child and what makes sense for them (Breeze). From the children, the adults, large open spaces, miniature shelves, mats, the myriad of books, and the Montessori materials (Ferreira, 27), perhaps, viewed by a non-Montessorian (Cossentino, 211) as toys, a prepared environment must have these components working harmoniously.

The Montessori learning materials are also referred to as didactic materials and/or close-ended toys, meaning there is “one specific purpose and way to use them”(Montessori in Real Life). The best examples are puzzles and matching games, which are designed to teach a specific skill. Close-ended materials allow children to show mastery, build independence, gain confidence and learn how to follow a series of steps for completion (Montessori in Real Life). They can then choose to work on the same materials or move on to a new one.

Montessori materials are also made from natural materials like wood, glass, and steel, and are made easily accessible to the children. The materials are laid out neatly in trays and are easily “recognizable as to what they are” (Ferreira, 31). Children are exposed to multi-step activities that improve fine motor and build problem-solving skills.

Seeing the Montessori method in real-time and how progressive education operates, the stark difference between Strode Montessori and Hanahau'oli School's use of toys is

worth noting. Where Montessori encourages a lot of close-ended materials, Hanahau'oli's approach provides a lot of open-ended materials allowing a child's imagination and creativity take tangible forms. Children are highly encouraged to create, build, and make something out of the objects given as they see fit.

Despite the differences of the two, one thing is certain — toys play a crucial role in the life of children as it “helps them organize and understand themselves and their environment” (Clavio and Fajardo, 88). Both Strobe Montessori and Hanahau'oli have maximized toys to aid a child's development. Here are the many ways toys were used to support student learning.



Hanahau'oli JK students building a dinosaur “enclosure.”

• Toys as Learning Tools



Some of the Keiki Kauku play sets.

When the right toys are used in the classroom, lessons can transform into powerful learning experiences. When blocks, toy figures, dolls, cars, balls, etc. are used to learn new concepts, it help set foundational skills critical to a child's success (STC, 3). Playing with toys help “construct building blocks of language and concept development” (Mustafa, 146). April Hail, Keiki Kauku owner, shares the same sentiment. She believes and hopes that families who use her Hawai'i play sets not only “facilitate connection”, but also foster language learning and open conversations about the different food and cultural practices in Hawai'i.

In her many observations, Maria Montessori noticed children beginning to learn

language at a very young age, and that children hunger for language and communication (Maunz). Puzzle shapes, for example, help with vocabulary and early language skills as attributes and characteristics of each shape are discussed. At Strode Montessori, I watched as a child match miniature figures of different American symbols with its name and picture. The child is learning to use words and pictures to represent the objects in support of his language development.



Playing with different American Symbols at Strode Montessori

At Hanahau'oli, children sorted animal figures and toys as they explored how animals are classified according to their unique features and attributes. They were introduced to science vocabulary such as invertebrate, vertebrate, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals setting the



Hanahauoli K-1 students sorting each animal toy according to their Animal Classification.

foundation of an in-depth exploration of each Animal Classification.

Through toys, children learn new ideas, vocabulary, and different skills. It allows for an enjoyable learning experience where they learn by doing and playing.

• Toys as an Assessment Tool

When my kids turned 2 years old, their pediatrician began using different toys to check and observe their milestones. A light-up toy was used to check their eye tracking abilities. Using a teddy bear, my children were asked to name its body parts, and wooden blocks were used to assess their fine motor ability to stack, at least, three blocks. These doctor visits were always fun, and it was interesting how toys informed the pediatrician's assessment of my children's development.

Similarly, toys can be a teacher's tool for assessing student progress. In the course *Montessori Observation and Activities*, Simone Davies encourages parents and teachers to observe children while playing, and ask questions like, "How do children play with [their materials]?" "What do they say or [not say]?" "How long are they [doing an activity]?" Observing and asking questions when children are at play help inform teachers of children's current abilities, changes in their development, and plan or modify lessons.

One of the Kukunaokalā classes were buzzing with excitement one Thursday morning as they paired up to play a card game favorite — *War*. As students gather with their peers, two of the many variations of the game were introduced to differentiate their learning.



War Games: Kukunaokalā students play to take the most cards from their opponent.

First, children who were learning to recognize numbers were asked to draw their top cards and determine who has the higher or lower number. Then, children, who were mastering addition of two numbers were asked to draw two cards and figure out the total before deciding who wins the round.

Highly engaging, the game quickly assessed children's math skills. Playing the first variation of the game reveals children's subitizing abilities and the specific numbers they still need to master. The game's second variation reveals children's ability to add numbers accurately. It also gave an insight to addition strategies they were inclined to use in finding the sum - count-on, doubles, and make-10.

There are many ways toys can be used as an assessment in different subject areas. Toys,

as a form of assessment, offers students alternative means to demonstrate understanding. It also provides teachers with an authentic perspective of a child's abilities, and crucial feedback to make informed decisions on how to change, adjust, and pivot lessons for the day.

- **Toys as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Support**

Many research points the critical role of social-emotional learning in student success to an extent where social emotional learning toys have emerged. In a study cited by the American Academy of Pediatrics, preschool children, who anxiously entered kindergarten, showed a twofold decrease on anxiety after 15 minutes of playing with toys or their peers. Playing with toys and their friends give children opportunities to share and work with others, allow them to recognize their feelings, practice self-expression and build lifelong friendships.

At Kukunaokalā, children participate in “Ohana” day where children come together to complete an activity and play with each other. Similar to center stations, children get to choose from a wide range of activities from water play, art projects, dramatic play, building toys, reading, books, etc. where they get to interact with their peers, teachers, and volunteer parents.



Kukunaokalā students playing and making up their own game using K'nex.

On one occasion, a small group of children started to design and build their own spinning tops using K'nex. Once everyone had completed their tops, they engaged in an invented game where tops are spun, and whichever top is left spinning, wins! The fun comes when the tops collide and you can hear the “Ohhh...” and see the winner beams with pride. Although K'nex might have not been originally purposed as a social emotional learning toy, the children were still developing social skills. They learned how

to take turns, work together as a team, gracefully accept winning or losing, and build friendships along the way.



Practical Life Area at Strode Montessori

At Strode Montessori, a section of the room is dedicated to “Practical Life” activities. Aptly called “Practical Life,” children are learning everyday activities like pouring water in glass cups, scooping corn, and sweeping the floor using miniature utensils and supplies. The activities are meant to help children to live by fostering independence and responsibility. They learn how to take care of themselves (doing chores, baking, preparing snacks) and teaches children how to be responsible members of their community by keeping their spaces clean.

The ways Hanahau’oli School and Strode Montessori leveraged toys in the classroom, whether used for its intended purpose or creatively “contribute[s] to the development of cognitive, motor, psychosocial, emotional, and linguistic skills, and plays a key role in raising self-confident, creative, and happy children” (Cetin, Turkkan, Kacar, Dag, 414). However, as educators, using toys as instructional tools, assessment tools, and/or social emotional learning supports should not be taken lightly. It requires careful planning and intentional strategies to capitalize fully the benefits it produces in enhancing children’s learning experiences.

School Observation Summary

Being a part of the Hanahau’oli ohana even for a short while has been valuable to my teaching growth and development. Through their child-centered and research-based teaching practices, I was able to experience a different way of teaching and learning, and have been challenged to do better and be better with my practice. The valuing of others, of place, and of the community-at-large in the way collaborations and learning

occur make the children and the staff's work, joyous, indeed. To that end, I make the following observations and suggestions that Hanahau'oli school may find of value.

- Emerging readers might find it helpful to have more phonics games or activities built into their day. During my observations with the Kukunaokalā class, students are immersed in a language rich environment where the love for reading is fostered, but repeated and targeted phonics and phonemic awareness will help emergent readers improve their decoding and comprehension skills. Furthermore, advanced readers might enjoy the gamification of phonics instruction as they learn to apply phonological rules and manipulate different phonemes.
- One of the best things about Hanahau'oli is the different learning toys, materials, loose parts, and resources available for children to use. All these allow for a unique hands-on learning experience while nurturing creativity, but it can also be difficult to manage. The school might consider establishing a criteria to determine a toy's usability, relevance, and level of interest. It will provide opportunities for evaluating a child's thought process and academic progress, and maximize the use of their learning spaces.

Final Thoughts

If there is one word to sum up all my learning this past semester, it's **INTENTIONAL**. I want to live and teach with intention. I want to be intentional with the time, people, spaces, activities, and mindsets I pour my energy into.

In the classroom, I want to be intentional about the way I relate with my students, families, and the people around me. This means thinking about the way I speak to, speak of, listen, and be conscious with the words and language I use. This means improving the relationship between Holomua and families, by nurturing a class environment where parents are actively involved in the inner workings of our class. This means fostering a

collaborative spirit with my grade-level, other teachers, and future educators by openly sharing all my learning experiences. Lastly, this means becoming a more astute observer of my students, bringing curiosity in the forefront and halting instantaneous assumptions in any situation.

I want to be intentional about the way I structure curriculum and lessons by incorporating play-based learning in the classroom. To start, I participated in a UH-led project called Hope: Hawai'i Online Portal for Education, which allowed me to create a Science unit about the ocean. In this unit, students will use animal figures to sort animals who call the ocean their home versus animals that do not. I also wanted to improve this unit by thinking of a way to add water play as part of the activity. Asking questions like, "Am I aiding the development of my children? Does this support the beliefs I have about play-based teaching and learning? Are the activities age-appropriate and mindful of each child's learning abilities? How are children enriched by the toys and learning materials they have on hand?" and re-examining worksheets, activities, and resources will be a continual practice.

Last, but not the least, I also want to be intentional about the way I design our learning space. I wanted to create an open and inviting classroom where children feel at home and where they look forward to coming everyday.

As I end my sabbatical journey, I am full of gratitude to Hanahau'oli School and Strode Montessori for welcoming me to their ohana. For the direction Hanahau'oli school has given my sabbatical project, I am deeply indebted. For my Holomua family's overall support, thank you for sharing my joy. I end this season with a greater appreciation of the education reforms conceptualized throughout history. I end this chapter with more questions and ideas for exploration. I take with me a greater confidence in providing a rich, developmentally appropriate, and active learning experience for my students. I carry with me a fresh outlook that sees the unlimited possibilities and potential of every student and every school. I hold within me a flame creating rippling positive change in my class

and a renewed hope of seeing positive changes in our public school system come to pass.

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