

From School-Culture-to-Family-Culture: Reflections on Four Generations of a Deweyan Education in Hawai‘i

*Amber Strong Makaiau
with
Linda Summers Strong*

In 1918, my great great aunt, Sophie Judd Cooke founded a small progressive school in Honolulu. Her brother Henry named it Hanahau‘oli School, which means joyful work school. In her memoir she gives an account of its beginnings,

I attended a series of lectures for mothers on ‘Literature for Children,’ given at Washington Place by Mrs. Goodrun Thorne-Thomsen of the Francis Parker School in Chicago. These talks were fascinating to me, and I was happy to meet Mrs. Thorne-Thomsen and got to know her quite well. I discussed my particular situation as to my children’s education with her and she suggested that I start a little school *of my own* and invite other children to join. This idea appealed to me, so we moved the home next door to us on Makiki Heights, which we had recently bought, down to an empty lot on Makiki and Nehoa Streets...Our school was ‘progressive’ in every sense of the word. We tried new methods and broke with the stilted formal type of instruction which was common at that time...we persisted, and I note that many of the methods—of correlating the work and ‘learning by doing’—have been widely adopted in the public schools. Our crowning event was when Dr. John Dewey, who had advocated this theory of teaching, and Mrs. Dewey, came to visit our school and gave us the ‘green light.’ This gratified us! (Cooke, 1964, pp. 78–79)



Sophie Judd Cooke, Hanahau‘oli School founder (Courtesy of Hanahauoli School)

Since Dewey’s “green light,” four generations of my immediate family have attended Hanahau‘oli School, which, to this day, continues to carry on the vision of Dewey (1916;1938) and other progressive educators who dedicated their lives to making “a child’s school life more meaningful” (Palmer, 1968, p. 1).

In this essay my mother, Linda Summers Strong and I reflect on the impact of Hanahau‘oli School’s Deweyan approach to education on the development of our family’s culture. We start with memories of my grandmother, Catherine “Cappy” Cooke Summers, who attended Hanahau‘oli School in the 1920s. Then we recount our own experiences at the school, which were remembered over a series of dialogues and inquiries that we engaged in with one another over the past couple of months. Finally, we share observations of my daughter, Catherine “Cappy” Kala‘iopua Makaiau, who is currently attending Hanahau‘oli School as a junior kindergartner. At the end of the essay, my mom and I comment on the special role that women played in progressive era education reforms, including the ways in which the women in our family have integrated a Deweyan approach to teaching and learning into our family culture.

Cappy Cooke Summers

When we started to think back on my grandmother's experiences at Hanahau'oli School my mom remembered her mother telling her "they didn't know what to do with me." When she asked her mother what she meant by this, my grandmother explained that over the course of her time at the school, some years she was promoted to the next grade and other years she was "placed back" a grade. I asked my mom what my grandmother thought about this, and she said that she got the feeling that my grandmother didn't take it personally because she knew that the school was doing its best to accommodate her specific learning needs. Overall, we remembered my grandmother having really fond memories of her time at Hanahau'oli School.

Among these memories were her warm recollections of her teachers. My mom recalled that one of my grandmother's teachers was Caroline Curtis. Miss Curtis was a deeply respected storyteller and writer who brought her knowledge of ancient Hawaiian legends into the classroom. My mom shared with me that she once asked her mother why Miss Curtis often mistakenly called my mom by my grandmother's name, and my grandmother told her that Miss Curtis had also been her teacher.

As my mom and I did more research about the origins of Hanahau'oli School we realized the significance of this memory. Mrs. Gudrun Thorne Thomsen, the lecturer who originally persuaded Sophie Judd Cooke to start Hanahau'oli School, was also a renowned storyteller.

Thorne Thomsen, who had a strong influence on the development of storytelling in [American public] libraries, believed that imaging exercises and listening to oral literature prepared children for reading... This insight into the relationship of oral literature, imaging, and reading, shared by Gurdun Thorne Thomsen, Francis Parker, and John Dewey, was lost for many years while schools emphasized the technical aspects of reading (Greene, 1996, pp. 18-19).

Storytelling, and its role in the development of children's literacy, was not lost at Hanahau'oli School during my grandmother's era. In fact, listening to Miss Curtis re-tell Hawaiian myths right before napttime was one of my mom's warmest memories of her time at Hanahau'oli School.

Linda Summers Strong

Before my mom entered the third grade, her family moved from Kailua on the windward side of the island. At that



Cappy Cooke Summers, studied at Hanahauoli, and her daughter, Linda followed in her footsteps. (This picture, taken by a press photographer, appeared in a local newspaper sometime during late 1950's)

time, my grandmother had to make decisions about where to send her three daughters to school, and my mother remembers my grandmother telling her that she was a "Hanahau'oli child" and that "she would be happy there." Later in her life, my mother recalls my grandmother sharing with her the belief that Hanahau'oli School isn't for every child, but in the case of my mother it was an ideal learning environment.

When I asked my mother to think back on her experiences at the school she remembers clearly how each grade level had a unique and distinguished focus of study. In third grade the students studied ancient Hawai'i. They made kapa, learned chants for Makahiki, and, through storytelling, learned ancient Hawaiian myths. In fourth grade the students studied pioneers and Native Americans, and missionaries and whalers in Hawai'i. The fourth graders also ran the school store, which "sold" classroom materials to the students and teachers in the other classrooms. On a designated day, student representatives from each class would come with a list of supplies that they needed to purchase. The fourth grade students would take inventory of the students'

list, add up the bills, distribute merchandise, and make the business transactions. In fifth grade students studied the Greeks and other ancient civilizations. The students represented various Greek city-states and competed in their own Olympic Games. My mother remembers how the olive branches, which were used in the Olympic awards ceremony were harvested from her grandmothers' house.

In sixth grade the students studied medieval history, explorers, and inventors. They made books and learned about calligraphy. As a part of the curriculum, the sixth graders also gave a gift to the school. In my mother's case, her class wanted to buy a movie projector costing one hundred dollars. They spent the entire year planning and carrying out various activities to raise the money. They sold labels and stationary, painted stilts for a Junior Achievement Club, collected silver and gold to redeem for cash, and had every student in the class enter an essay-writing contest with the hopes of winning a cash prize. When they finally purchased the movie projector they invited each class at Hanahau'oli School to come and view movies in their classroom.

Another lasting impression on my mother was shop class. What she liked the most about shop was making things. She recalls how she used wood to build a stool, a dollhouse, and a "crazy critter" that was made up of the scraps of past projects. The shop students also worked in clay, sewed on a treadle machine, wove on a table loom, created block prints, and learned how to hand bind books. They engaged in seasonal projects such as painting Ukrainian Easter eggs, constructing crèches for Christmas, and making kapa for Makahiki. And in all of her recollections of shop class, my mother's most vivid memories were of Miss Ramey, her shop teacher, a woman of many talents who also tended to the school's beehive. At the end of each shop class my mother remembers how clean-up was always part of the lesson, and to this day she thinks about this ritual as she cleans up her own art studio.

Rituals, traditions, and events are an integral part of life at Hanahau'oli School. My mother remembers morning flag, reciting St. Francis' canticle to the sun, Friday assemblies, Christmas carols, the school fair, annual visits to the Honolulu Museum of Art, stepping stones, and shaking the hand of the principal when the school bell was rung at the end of each day. These same rituals, traditions, and events are a lasting part of my memory of the school as well.

Amber Strong Makaiau

When I think back to my days at Hanahau'oli School, I instantly remember singing and "learning by doing." I can remember word-for-word all of the songs that we learned during music class. Not only were the songs fun to sing, for the most part they all had lessons embedded in them. For example, I learned about the history of slavery in America and the 1960's civil rights movement through African-American spirituals and songs like "Abraham, Martin & John." I vividly remember singing these songs during Friday assemblies, where the students who were chosen to lead the assembly each week would stand in front of the entire student body, faculty, and parents with the lyrics so that everyone in the Hanahau'oli School community could participate.

Like my mother, I also remember acting out a Greek Olympics, Greek oratory, Hawaiian Makahiki, medieval feast, and a number of other dramatic plays like the story of Helen Keller's life. On each of these occasions we would research the history of the event, read about the people and cultures through literature and informational text, plan out how we would enact the event, designate roles and responsibilities for everyone in the class, create traditional costumes, design artistic backdrops and props, and then carry out the event in front of our school community. In addition, we would document the event through reflective writing and art.

I have particularly strong recollections of using this process to study endangered species in the sixth grade. We started by researching endangered species in the library, and then we used our findings to construct models of endangered species habitats in a blended art and science class. Then we built wooden masks of the different endangered species that we were studying in shop class. We wore the masks in a musical production about endangered species that we put on for the entire school. We also created our own chapter of the World Wildlife Fund, which we had weekly bake sales for so that we could send our raised donations to the headquarters of this international organization. To this day, I often think about the impact that this interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning had on my current abilities to think creatively, make connections, and see the big picture.

I also think about Hanahau'oli School's emphasis on learning how to learn. One of my most enduring memories is connected to the school library and learning how to conduct "independent" research. In every grade level we would select inquiry topics that we were interested in and that related

to the theme of our classroom studies. Then we would ask questions, and learn how to pursue our questions by finding resources in the school library. Within the library we were given a quite workspace of our very own where we could immerse ourselves in all of the information that we gathered. We were taught to challenge our thinking, open up the topic, and pursue further questions as a part of the inquiry process. We learned how to analyze and organize all of the information we gathered, outline our findings, and develop a piece of writing that we could share with the class.

The heart of my experiences at Hanahau'oli School was learning how to balance my individual interests with the goals of our community of learners. I also learned how important music, art, and drama are to learning about math, science, English, and social studies. I developed a voice, and was frequently told that what I had to say was important as long as I was mindful of my peers and teachers. Hanahau'oli School gave me the tools to be self-reflective and connected to others. Most importantly, through my experiences at Hanahau'oli School, I learned to love learning.

Cappy Kala'iopua Makaiiau

This year, my daughter began her journey at Hanahau'oli School, and although it has only been a couple of months since the school year started, I can already identify the ways in which Hanahau'oli School is inspiring her own love of learning. Since starting at the school, my daughter has become fanatical about illustrating, narrating (she has someone else write her words onto the pages), and assembling "books" of her very own. Not only have I enjoyed seeing the ways in which her teachers at the school have nurtured her interest in book making, but I've also seen how they have introduced her to new language to help her articulate her thinking about the bookmaking process. She talks continually about "new ideas" for her next books, and this language comes from the "idea box" that she has in her classroom, in which students are encouraged to use their ideas to create things out of recycled objects. This is just one example of how Hanahau'oli School has stayed true to its student-centered origins.

I have also observed other ways in which the school has maintained its progressive roots. Each day that my daughter comes to school she is expected to mark her own attendance by writing her name and moving a small yellow version of herself to a board at the front of the classroom. These two

actions, although they may seem simple demonstrate how she is learning how to write and count by doing authentic and meaningful activities in her pre-kindergarten classroom.

She has also been encouraged to learn through play and creative work. This past summer the class read books about bears, and in one of the stories the bear traveled to the moon. The class was then encouraged to use their own imaginations to go on their own adventure to the moon. They constructed a large spaceship out of cardboard, as well as space gear. They practiced shape recognition and fine motor skills as they cut out shapes, squares and circles to decorate the rocket ship. Then, during dramatic play they acted out their trip to the moon, and played with "moon sand" on the playground. Through classroom initiatives and experiences like these, my daughter is experiencing "joyous work," which is teaching her, in turn, that learning is fun.

Progressive Education and Feminist Pedagogy

In her book about Hanahau'oli School, Louisa F. Palmer, a former principal of the school, explains how innovations in education, and how a school based on Dewey's educational philosophy, are not always easy to put into practice.

To break with tradition has always been a difficult thing to explain. Words have many different meanings to people. To label work at this new school in 1918 as 'joyous work' immediately meant only play to many, as well as the lowering of academic standards. And when phrases like self-expression, creative work, and freedom were added, this immediately was translated by the school's critics as 'children doing as they please, no discipline, etc.' The idea was not yet accepted that school work utilizing a child's real interests and abilities gave him the motive power to do his best. Few could conceive that a child's school should be, not a thing apart, but a vital element of youth and growth-'a process of living and not simply a preparation for future living'-as Dr. Dewey expressed it in *My Pedagogic Creed*. (Palmer, 1968, p. 15)

As I reflected with my mother on our family's history at Hanahau'oli School, I couldn't help but think about the bold ways in which Sophie Judd Cooke had helped to break the tradition of male dominated educational leadership that was pervasive in the United States at the turn of the century.

With further research, I learned that she was not alone. There were a number of other women in the early 1900's who were female founders of innovative progressive schools

and leaders of “educational organizations and movements, including public school districts, teacher unions and museums” (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, p. 1). Although they didn’t get as much press as other progressive era reformers like Dewey, these women had a profound impact on the development of child-centered approaches to education in the United States.

For example, contemporary scholars in feminist pedagogy point out the ways in which these women helped to introduce into the field of education new styles of school administration. They explain how the research, including case studies of women educational leaders during the Progressive Era suggests “female pedagogy and leadership are more humane, less authoritarian, more democratic, and more concerned with caring and relationships than abstract goals” (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, pp. 2–3). In light of this research, I often wonder if part of Hanahau’oli School’s success in effectively translating a Deweyan approach to education from theory to practice was due to the fact that my great great aunt was a woman of her time.

From School-Culture-to-Family-Culture

In her memoir, Sophie Judd Cooke wrote,

I believe a valuable thing in life is to develop a child’s initiative. At Hanahau’oli there are opportunities to develop individual and group initiatives in various projects. A well known math teacher at Punahou called me aside once and told me that on the first day of school at Punahou, she could always note a Hanahau’oli School child by his or her initiative in going to find out where his classes were to be held, instead of wandering around bewildered (Cooke, 1964, pp. 78–79).

This quote resonated with my mother and I as we began to think about the lasting impact of Hanahau’oli School’s Deweyan approach to education on the development of our family’s culture. In addition to cultivating a multicultural home life which is full of song, art, inquiry, community service, and projects in which we are constantly engaged in the business of “learning by doing,” we believe that it is Hanahau’oli School’s culture of student-driven initiatives that has become the defining characteristic of our home culture.

This is reflected in both the small and large actions of our daily lives. For example, just last month I was in

charge of Halloween decorations for my son’s classroom, and instead of buying them from Walmart I felt compelled to hand-craft an intricately designed Halloween bat for each student in the class. When I was a teenager, and I wanted a “cool” vest like all of the other girls at school, my mom got out the sewing machine and taught me how to sew the garment myself. And I will never forget how my grandmother, as she was trying to figure out how ancient Hawaiians made cordage, sat with me on our front lanai, and taught me how to make a bracelet by braiding coconut and horsehair. Common phrases in our family are “we could make that,” or “we can do that” which often leads to a new endeavor that everyone is invited to engage in.

This is especially true on a larger scale. In the past three generations, the women in my family have carried out this sense of initiative in the larger community. My grandmother was an archeologist who was originally led to the field by her curiosity of Ulupo heiau, a Hawaiian temple located near her home in Kailua. In my memory of her, she always had a question that was driving her archeological inquiries, and during our time on Moloka’i together, she would take the entire family along to find the special pōhaku or fishpond that she was currently studying. Fueled by her own sense of wonder and inquisitiveness, my grandmother went on to write a number of influential books about Hawaiian sites, fishponds, cordage, and the hale pili at Bishop Museum.

My mother, an art educator at an all-girls school dedicated her career to focusing on women artists because she recognized that they were sorely absent in high school art history programs at the time. When asked to reflect on her life in the classroom, my mother believes that her Hanahau’oli education has been a major influence on how she teaches art, including her desire to design projects where everyone is able to participate and experience success. In recent years my mother has dedicated her time to reviving the Honolulu Museum of Art’s Lending Collection—a project that has inspired me to work alongside her to find new ways that we can support teachers in integrating the arts of diverse cultures into their teaching across all subject areas.

When I reflect on this collaboration with my mother, I realize that much of my career in education has been dedicated to giving students in Hawai’i access to the type of education that I was given the privilege of experiencing

at Hanahau'oli School. This includes my work with philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI), which practices an approach to teaching and learning that transforms traditional classrooms into intellectually safe communities of inquiry. When my daughter was only a year-and-a-half old I would take her with me to practice p4cHI with students and teachers at Waikiki Elementary School. I realize that she probably won't remember sitting in a circle, asking questions, and thinking with the students during those p4cHI sessions, but I'm assured that she will have similar types of experiences as she engages in discussion around the dinner table at home and in her classrooms with her peers and teachers at Hanahau'oli School.

At the very end of her chapter about the origins of Hanahau'oli School in her memoir, Sophie Judd Cooke writes, "I hope Hanahau'oli will be my 'monument' when I pass out of the picture" (Cooke, 1964, pp. 80). From my perspective, not only has Hanahau'oli School memorialized the incredible legacy of my great great aunt's vision for progressive education in the community at large, but it has also helped to shape the culture of her family in future generations. In our case, Hanahau'oli School and its Deweyan approach to education has empowered the women in our family to use the *initiative* that was fostered in each of us at Hanahau'oli School to create a home life that is characterized by genuine inquiry, a love of the arts, creativity, a sense of responsibility to the community, the honoring of tradition, and a drive towards innovation. It has also helped to ensure that the lives that we live at home are mirrored in the lives that we lead as educators in the community. As time marches forward and the lives of future generations, like my daughter, unfold, I am encouraged that the role of education in our family will continue to be "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1897, p. eighty-seven).

REFERENCES

- Cooke, S. J. (1964). *Sincerely Sophie*. Honolulu, HI: Tongg Publishing Co., LTD.
- Dewey, J. (1897) My pedagogic creed. *School Journal*, 54, 77-80. Retrieved from <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm>
- Dewey, J. (1916; 1938). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1929). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: MacMillan.
- Greene, E. (1996). *Storytelling: Art and technique*. West Port, CT: Greenwood.
- Palmer, L. F. (1868). *Memories of Hanahau'oli: The first fifty years*. Honolulu, HI: Hanahau'oli School.
- Sadovnik, A. R., & Semel, S. F. (Eds.). (2002). *Founding mothers and others: Women educational leaders during the progressive era*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.