The Possibility of Storytelling: Building a Sense of Community within a Hawaiian Culture-Based School

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Introduction

This paper examines a collective storytelling practice at Kanu o ka ʻĀina Public Charter School as a foundation for belonging and community building. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human development follows a progression of need gratification that begins with physiological needs followed by safety and security, belongingness, respect and esteem, and finally self-actualization (Maslow, 1968; Maslow & Stephens, 2000). Prior to self-actualization or actualizing one's potential, there exists needs that can be satisfied "only by other people, i.e., only from outside the person. This means considerable dependence on the environment" (Maslow, 1968, p. 34). Taken within the context of education, the school environment is then of particular importance considering the amount of time students spend in school. Before schools think about student potential for learning and development, it may be practical for them to first consider how to cultivate a feeling of belongingness and to establish a sense of community that is safe and affirming for all their members.

Much literature on sense of community builds on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of sense of community: "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Within schools, a number of studies have explored sense of community and found it to be a positive indicator of students' physical and emotional well-being (Prati, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2018; Lenzi et al., 2017). Researchers have also found school sense of community to be positively correlated with prosocial attitudes and behavior as well as academic motivation (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Not only is sense of community an important factor in student well-being, studies have also shown that the school itself plays an important role in cultivating this sense of community.

In a study of over 4,000 adolescent students across 134 schools, Vieno, Perkins, Smith, and Santinello (2005) examined school-level predictors of sense of community in school and found a significant predictor of school sense of community to be the perception of a democratic school climate. They concluded that schoolwide strategies that "actively cultivate respectful, supportive relations among students, parents, and teachers may be critical to creating a generally positive attitude among students toward their school" (p. 337). Prati et al. (2018) contended that students' experience of membership could be enhanced by creating opportunities for students to participate in schoolwide activities, both on campus as well as in the larger community. In a study by Ferrari, Cowman, Milner, Gutierrez, and Drake (2009), school sense of community among staff at a faith-based university was explored not only through engagement of school mission, vision, and values, but also through activities that supported the school mission, vision and values. Vieno et al. (2005) recognized the effect of the culture of a school on students' experience. They contended that "if supportive interaction is key to the development of

sense of community among students, schools may influence such development through the policies and practices they adopt, the values they express, and the possibilities they offer to students in terms of spaces and events" (p. 330).

These studies suggest schools can enhance a sense of community on their campus by creating schoolwide events and activities that encourage positive relations among students and teachers. However, little has been shared about how this can be structurally or systematically done. In this article, I focused on piko, a daily morning gathering of protocol and chants exercised by all staff and students at Kanu o ka 'Āina (KANU) Public Charter School. I examined this collective storytelling practice in light of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of sense of community, exploring the extent to which such a practice could serve as an example of an intentional activity that enhances a school's sense of community. First, I considered the extent to which a sense of community existed at KANU; next I explored collective storytelling practices as a means to build community; and finally, I compared piko to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four elements of sense of community.

Kanu o ka 'Āina Public Charter School

In the countryside of Waimea on the island of Hawai'i sits Kanu o ka 'Āina Public Charter School, or KANU, the acronym by which it is widely known. KANU is a Hawaiian culture-based school that was created to provide a "place-based, project-based educational experience grounded in Hawaiian cultural values and traditional knowledge" (Matsu, 2018). In studies of the school, students described their experiences in ways reflective of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four elements of sense of community: a) membership, b) influence, c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and d) shared emotional connection. Membership meant the group provided emotional safety that cultivated a feeling of belonging to and identification with the group. Influence reflected a feeling of mattering to the group as well as of the group mattering to its members. Integration meant that being a part of the group

reinforced member needs, and shared emotional connection reflected the belief that group members were connected through a shared history.

In studies of KANU, students expressed an affinity to their school that reflected a sense of belonging and membership (Matsu, 2018; Hansen, 2011). A student interviewed by Matsu (2018) declared,

> This school is more, more like a family. Like, we know, we know each other. And, like if you went to a different school, you would only know like certain people and not everybody's close like how we are at this school. The teachers care more about us over here, about our education. And we get to learn life skills and stuff (p. 76).

The school was a safe place for students and a place where students felt valued and felt a sense of belonging.

Students also shared how everyone was encouraged to use their voice to influence change, whether at the school level or at the broader community or political level (Matsu, 2018). This reflected a significant sense of mattering or influence that students felt as members of their school. According to students, the school provided opportunities for them to learn to express their voice through projects and presentations, and subsequently were encouraged to use their voices to enact positive change around them.

Students shared a pride in being a part of KANU, reflecting their integration into the school community. They were proud to wear their school logo around town. According to one student interviewed by Matsu (2018), "the value that this school taught us is to always be proud of where you come from and to always represent your school, your family, your teachers, your community, and your nation. So, I just gotta represent those and keep moving forward." (p. 78).

Finally, students at KANU expressed a shared emotional connection through Hawaiian history and cultural values. Students learned chants in Hawaiian that taught them about their ancestors and about the land and the wind upon which the

school stood. There was a shared understanding and love for the land. One student expressed,

> The ʻāina (land) is like our mom, she feeds us and takes care, takes care of us, so that's why we have to mālama (to take care of) the ʻāina and take care of it because the ʻāina gives back to us and we give back to the ʻāina. Kōkua aku kōkua mai. Give help and receive help. So yeah . . . And the ʻāina has like a lot of history so you can learn from the ʻāina anywhere you go. (Matsu, 2018, pp. 73–74)

They learned and reenacted traditional Hawaiian ceremonies. One student described his experience as follows, "Like, when you're in the ceremony, you feel, you feel different. You feel different energy over there. Like you feel like your ancestors is with you. It's like, it's really powerful when you do ceremonies" (Matsu, 2018, p. 73). The very cultural foundation of the school rooted students in a shared emotional connection around Hawaiian history and language and culture.

Based upon McMillan and Chavis' four elements of sense of community, KANU was a school where students experienced a school sense of community. But how did the school create space and opportunity for this sense of community to develop? I propose that collective storytelling practices have been an important factor in creating a sense of community at KANU.

The Possibility of Storytelling

Research has found that by creating schoolwide events that encourage positive relationships among its members, schools can enhance a sense of community for all their students (Prati et al., 2018; Ferrari et al., 2009; Vieno et al., 2005). Collective storytelling practices may be one way to ground students and staff in community building activities of shared stories. These stories not only shape the school community, but are also stories within which students place their own identity as members of the school. They are stories with a historical and cultural context rooted within a values-centered construct. According to Linde (2009),

> Narrative works to establish identity, that is, to answer the question "Who are We?" Narrative is also the link between the way an institution represents its past, and the ways its members use, alter, or contest that past, in order to understand the institution as a whole as well as their own place within or apart from that institution (p. 4).

This assertion contends that stories play an active role in shaping an institution's identity. However, the story itself has no life without opportunities to tell and retell that story.

> It is the telling and retelling of core stories that gives an organization and its members a particular identity. Thus, if there is no event or place or practice that allows for the telling of a story, that story has little chance of becoming a core story that is known and shared by members of the institution. In essence, the occasion for remembering allows the story to take root and live amongst the members of an organization (Matsu, p. 34).

At KANU, these occasions for remembering can be found in collective storytelling practices. One such practice is piko, a daily morning gathering of staff and students emulating the traditional Hawaiian practice of chanting protocol and stories in Hawaiian.

Piko

At KANU, Piko was a daily morning protocol that included students and staff reciting chants in Hawaiian. There were chants by students asking adults for permission to enter school grounds and chants by adults welcoming them. Other chants recognized the land upon which they were standing and remembered those who paved the way for each person to be there in the present. Matsu (2018) described her observation of piko as follows:

> The adults lined up on one side by age; students were opposite the adults, lined up in rows according to their grades. Then began a ritual of chanting in Hawaiian. Students chanted asking for permission to receive knowledge from teachers. Teachers chanted

a welcome to students. It continued with other chants done in unison that recognized the place upon which they stood and the ancestors that came before them. The chanting was done with sincerity by staff and students, signifying the importance of this morning ritual. If students came late to school and were late to this gathering, they were to stand on the side. They could not join their classmates until they chanted their own request to enter and were received in turn. (p. 55).

Piko as a collective storytelling practice brought all school members together in a shared participatory narrative reflective of the four elements of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership is based on a feeling of belonging, a feeling of having invested in the community. It is actualized in boundaries. Boundaries indicate that there are those who belong to the group and those who do not belong to the group. Groups create these boundaries through language, attire, and rituals. Boundaries are important because they "provide members with the emotional safety necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop" (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Piko was a collective storytelling practice that enhanced membership through language and ritual. Structurally, piko followed a detailed protocol from where to stand to what to say. The protocol itself established boundaries between those who knew and those who didn't know the protocol. Included in the piko were chants declared in Hawaiian. Again, the chants strengthened boundaries between those who knew and those who didn't know the chants. Not only was knowing the chants evidence of membership, but the chants were also in Hawaiian, further solidifying membership, as understanding the chants were limited to those who knew the Hawaiian language. Thus, piko established boundaries and belonging that came with membership through a highly structured protocol, complex and meaningful

chants, and language that limited not only the understanding of, but also the ability to copy, the chants.

The second element of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community was influence, defined as "a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members" (p.9). As part of the protocol of piko, students who were late had a specific place to stand. They could not enter the circle nor chant with their classmates until they recited a chant seeking permission to enter and were in turn received by a welcoming chant (Matsu, 2018). This part of piko reflected the element of influence, the sense of mattering. McMillan and Chavis (1986) contended that "uniform and conforming behavior indicates that a group is operating to consensually validate its members as well as to create group norms" (p. 11). Students knew they had a responsibility to their classmates to be on time and if they weren't, they had to ask for permission to enter the circle, permission to enter the group. The group in turn had the opportunity to recognize late members as being important and then receiving them into the group.

According to McMillan and Chavis' (1986), the third element, integration and fulfillment of needs, meant "the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members" (p. 12). In Matsu's (2018) study of KANU, many of the interviewees mentioned the importance of piko, including the sixth and seventh grade social studies teacher and academy planning coordinator. He shared that "students who graduated would always come back and express how much they missed piko, indicating how piko was not just a recognition of stories, but was indeed a part of students' memories and experiences" (p. 90). This personal connection to piko suggested that piko was indeed a means of integrating students into a community.

The fourth and final element of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community was a shared emotional connection that was based in part on a history with whom all group members identified. Piko reflected a shared Hawaiian cultural

history. Not all students were Hawaiian by blood, but all were included in this shared history (Matsu, 2018). Piko gave staff and students

a way to pass on the stories, the history, and the culture of the Hawaiian people. [One of the teachers] explained, 'Just to see our culture alive and thriving is another part. That it's there. It's important and it has life and it has meaning and we have to pass that on, you know, to the next generation and why it's important to pass that on.' (Matsu, 2018, p. 58–59).

Conclusion

Piko as a collective storytelling practice encouraged all four elements of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of sense of community. The structured protocol as well as the chants being done in Hawaiian created boundaries between members and non-members, solidifying identification and a sense of belonging members had to the group. While piko was done collectively, if students were late, they were reminded that they mattered to the group. They could not quietly enter the group; instead they had to individually chant their own request to enter, and the group would collectively chant their welcome response. Students were also found to have a personal connection to piko, reflecting the integrating role of the morning practice. Finally, the historical and cultural context and values of the practice provided a shared emotional connection.

However, piko is just one collective storytelling practice, and more research could determine whether additional collective storytelling practices exist at this school, practices that similarly give space and opportunity for students and staff to participate in a positive, connecting schoolwide activity. Further research could also explore collective storytelling practices at other culture-based schools and their effect on school sense of community as well as whether or not collective storytelling practices at non-culture-based schools could similarly engage students in McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four elements of sense of community.

According to research on school sense of community, schoolwide activities that promote supportive relations among staff and students help to build a school sense of community (Prati et al., 2018; Ferrari et al., 2009; Vieno et al., 2005). Piko as a collective storytelling practice provided students with space and opportunity to connect with each other as well as with teachers and administrators in a positive activity rooted in a cultural and historical context. This suggests the possibility that schools may be able to enhance a sense of community for all their members by implementing collective storytelling practices meaningful to their schools. As we consider the possibility of collective storytelling, we recognize not only the importance of having a school sense of community, but also the role schools play in building that community for all their students.

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