Our Journey: 
The Voices of Leaders Emerge

It is true that lessons can be found everywhere we look, but life’s most important lessons are often found when we keep an open mind and are receptive with all our senses and, most importantly, an open heart. In the weeks past, there have been several key life lessons that have reaffirmed the thinking behind where we are in our work with the children today.

In February, our entire faculty met to examine and reflect upon how we at Mid-Pacific cultivate global education and citizenship. What we learned is that fundamentally there needs to be a balance of two principles: ethics and empathy. Two core values that transcend geography and are synonymous with the pedagogy and philosophy of a Reggio Emilia-inspired program. The third component which makes a Reggio-inspired program truly its own is the interweaving of the local culture unique to each school. Here at Mid-Pacific, imparting the values of the culture and traditions of Hawai‘i through the cultivation of relationships with nature and the land is where and how we begin. However, this year, in looking at memories and how memories are shared much like the passing on of knowledge from generation to generation in particular through ‘story,’ caused us to look to the Hawaiian culture for their ancient ways of knowing that parallel the natural order in which children construct knowledge and learn about the world around them.

As we took a closer look, we discovered that legends and hula, both unique to the culture of our islands, held the key to the history of how things came to be, but in a way that children and even great inventors know and learn best, teetering on the edge of reality and fantasy! In our own work with the children, we were learning that one of the strongest anchors of memory was the connection they made in their mind’s eye to stories, some their own recounts of events or experiences that had happened, and others, stories that were shared with them and now belonged to them as if it were their own. Being natural storytellers themselves, we wondered if in their research of developing a relationship with the ‘aina, and space at Ho‘omaluhia Botanical gardens, a story would emerge, much like in the legends of old Hawai‘i. We turned to hula in particular because in thinking through the lens of the “hundred languages” we were searching for yet another language to tell stories besides the written and oral languages. Hula, was the perfect marriage of culture and story, and as we continued to learn more about this ancient language and treasure, we would soon find out that behind the aesthetic movement and dance, lies a complexity and depth of spirituality that is the essence of not only understanding culture and art, but also understanding and finding ourselves in the process.
In the midst of our project work, Grandparents’/Kupuna day arrived. This is by far one of our most meaningful and memorable days of school because on this day we honor all our kupuna, both near and far. In the preschool it is especially auspicious because we often get to see three generations, three different perspectives on the timeline of life coming together in celebration of the youngest and oldest members of a family. While each Grandparents’ day is different, on this day, the children presented their kupuna with the gift of hula. One of the hula danced, was composed in collaboration with each other and with the help of Sarahlea Kekuna our music teacher. In learning that the “hand lyrics” or motions to each song have their own meaning and voice in telling a story, the children came up with the hand lyrics to a popular island favorite, “Aloha Kakahiaka.” Reminding us that even in the passing down from generation to generation there is still room for reinvention, and in reinventing we become steps closer to honoring and perpetuating the creative process and path that our ancestors once walked long ago.

Back in the classroom, our lens as teacher/researchers has been looking at “What does leadership look like - what is the image of a leader? How do the children express leadership, take the initiative of leadership, and succeed in leadership in their own way, as opposed to stereotypical leadership qualities? How are children learning about leadership from each other?” Because of the way our environment or the “third teacher” is designed, there are many opportunities on a daily basis for a child’s sense of leadership to unfold. Each opportunity unique to the protagonists involved but always grounded by the guiding principles and balance of ethics and empathy.

One example from an ordinary moment inside the classroom shared between three students, unfolded as the simple act of driving cars around a table led one child to take the lead and lift her car into the air. Although the positioning of her body in the line of children was not in the “front” as we would expect the leader to be, taking the initiative to add to the play with an idea that broke the conventional movement of a car from rolling to flying propelled her from one of the pack, to the leader as the other two children followed her lead and mimicked her moves around the table.

Another ordinary moment shared between friends outside, came about when a child tried to step in and help a friend who wanted to aid another child who was being captured in the pretense of good guy/ bad guy play. This child showed both empathy and ethics in not merely being a bystander but rather taking action to help save a friend, even if it was only pretend that he was rescuing another from. The beauty in this seemingly insignificant event unfolded in the shared
interactions that followed. The play shifted from good guy/bad guy play to a prolonged interlude between two different types of leaders, as the two boys (one of our youngest and one of our oldest) rode side-by-side on the Exerbugs for the rest of the outdoor time as equals—leaders in their own way.

Most recently while out on a research trip to the gardens, we (the teachers) were fortunate to bear witness to a most touching act of leadership and empathy. There in the midst of a slightly stronger river current, unfolded two separate stories. The first was of a child who time after time would traverse the stream bed, from bottom to top and back again. Chronologically one of our youngest, yet again age is proving to be an irrelevant factor in the correlation of leadership, especially when maneuvering across the “river” as the children call it. On this day, as C.L. moves back and forth, he happens upon L.F. who wants to make it up to the top, but is apprehensive as her confidence and intuition tells her the river is stronger today. C.L. grabs her hand and says, “I will help you,” and together they make their way up the river. From our perspective, leadership is a balance between taking action and an intrinsic empathy for other. C.L. recognized someone else’s need for help, in C.L.’s thinking, he knew and was confident that he could help! For leadership is not about being served but rather about being of service to others.

The second story unfolded as another child wanted to take the challenge of making his way upstream, but acknowledged his sense of fear. Without hesitation E.M. extended a helping hand, it was almost as if the invisibility of one’s courage was made visible through transference from one hand to another. In the kindness of his words, E.M. shared with B.K. strategies of support in helping B.K. make it from one point to the next, avoiding the slippery rocks and choosing better places to step. Reading the water as it flowed more vigorously on one side than another, but still allowing B.K. to ultimately make his own choices, and eventually leading him to be able to make it the rest of the way on his own. The amazing aspect of E.M.’s style of leadership was his strategy of thinking aloud in passing on the knowledge of how to do it rather than just taking him. It was also striking to see E.M.’s own balance of when to help and when to pull back. Knowing that he can’t do everything for B.K. and that B.K. needed the freedom to try out his own confidence in order to make the triumph and success be his own.

Ending our week, Leslie and I attended the showing of the movie *The Haumana*. In support of our very own Kumu Hula, Lanakila Casupang, and his students as they embark upon their journey in 11 days to New Zealand. The movie itself opened with the definition of haumana which translates to students - “The Haumana, learning about who we are through hula, learning
from those who came before us, and those around us, students for life.” This movie was striking for many reasons. First, because the protagonists in this movie portrayed on screen the essence of leadership in its many forms, but also because it made visible the reciprocity between students and teachers as we both search to find meaning in what we do and who we are. The director, Keo Woolford, shared with us that his inspiration came from a desire to share with the world the true richness of Hawaiian culture and the tradition of hula stemming from a long history of warriors and not just a dance made popular by tourists and iconic Waikiki. The last line at the end of the movie encapsulated our thoughts as we continue on our own journey of cultivating citizens of the world guided by ethics and empathy. As we are blessed with this opportunity before us to take part in the language of hula — the dance of culture and story in coming to know ourselves, each other, and our island home. We are thankful to be here at Mid-Pacific, sharing this journey of uncovering the layers of children’s thinking and learning that honors the memories of the past, present and future with all of you.

“Under the hula is the sun, the moon, and the stars, legends and thousands of years of genealogy. Under those are volcanoes and oceans. Under the volcanoes and oceans are mountains and valleys full of foliage. Under those are the Kings and Queens, knowledge and poetry celebrating all the things above them. Under those are the history of a people and my kumu. Under my kumu is me...” The Haumana