

Kanaka ‘Ōiwi Leadership in Hawaiian-Focused Charter Schools: Advancing Cultural Revitalization and Educational Sovereignty

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Indigenous educational leadership is a cornerstone in reclaiming and revitalizing cultural identities within systems historically shaped by colonial paradigms. In Hawai‘i, Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS) have emerged as transformative spaces for educational sovereignty and cultural preservation.¹ These schools challenge conventional educational models, offering a powerful counternarrative that centers on ‘Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) values and practices.² However, the leadership that propels these initiatives remains underexplored, with limited research examining the unique principles, beliefs, and practices of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals who navigate these complex educational landscapes.

This study seeks to illuminate the foundational values guiding Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals in HFCS and explore how they operationalize leadership practices grounded in Kanaka ‘Ōiwi knowledge systems. By employing Kanaka ‘Ōiwi critical race theory as a theoretical framework, this research addresses critical gaps in the literature, offering insights into how Indigenous leaders foster equitable, student-centered learning environments while advancing cultural resilience.

Through qualitative inquiry, this study highlights the culturally grounded approaches that Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals adopt to balance their roles as educators, cultural stewards, and community leaders. It underscores the transformative potential of Indigenous leadership frameworks in addressing systemic inequities and fostering meaningful educational change. Ultimately, this work affirms the significance of HFCS as sites of cultural resurgence and innovation, contributing to the broader discourse on Indigenous leadership in education.

Historical Context: The Evolution of Kanaka 'Ōiwi Educational Leadership

Hawai'i, one of the most geographically isolated regions on Earth, is home to a rich legacy of education and leadership rooted in the ingenuity and resilience of its people. Long before European contact, Kanaka 'Ōiwi society thrived as a sophisticated community, with well-established systems of knowledge transfer deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life.³ Education was not confined to formal institutions; instead, it flourished within the 'ohana (family), the foundational socioeconomic-educational unit of Hawaiian society.⁴ Mary Kawena Pukui et al. encapsulated this familial dynamic through the 'ōlelo nōeau (Hawaiian proverbs and poetical sayings): *'Ike aku, 'ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai; pela iho la ka 'ohana*—recognize and be recognized, help and be helped; such is family life.⁵

PRECONTACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Children in traditional Hawaiian society were nurtured and educated through direct observation, practice, and mentorship within their families and communities. This education was holistic, encompassing physical, spiritual, and intellectual growth, and was deeply rooted in the interconnectedness of people, land, and the divine. Once a child demonstrated an affinity for a specific discipline, they were apprenticed to a master within their extended 'ohana or community, learning through hands-on experience and oral transmission of knowledge.⁶ This included disciplines as varied as navigation, medicine, politics, warfare, agriculture, and arts.

Oracy, the primary mode of instruction, was pivotal in the transmission of knowledge, values, and identity. Forms such as *mele* (songs), *oli* (chants), *hula* (dance), *mō'ōlelo* (stories, narratives), and *mō'ōkū'auhau* (genealogy) not only educated but also instilled a sense of cultural pride and continuity. These practices ensured the perpetuation of Hawaiian identity, or *Mauli Hawai'i*, across generations.⁷ The recitation of *mō'ōkū'auhau* (genealogical story), for instance, established an individual's place within their lineage and broader community, affirming their responsibilities and privileges as stewards of their heritage.

The *Kumulipo*, a cosmogonic genealogy recorded by King Kalākaua, exemplifies the depth of Hawaiian educational traditions. Its 2,000 lines encapsulate a worldview in which the relationships between land, gods, chiefs, and people are interconnected, affirming the sacredness of knowledge as a cornerstone of leadership.⁸ This chant, traditionally performed as an *oli*, was not merely a historical record but a didactic tool for teaching young chiefs about their responsibilities to the land and people, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of *pono* (righteousness) in leadership.⁹

Beyond intellectual instruction, physical and spiritual training were integral to a child's education. For *ali'i* (chiefly class), this included rigorous training in martial arts such as *lua*, athletic competitions, and rituals to cultivate physical strength, discipline, and spiritual connection. Education in spiritual practices was also vital, as leaders were expected to act as intermediaries between the divine and their people.¹⁰ Ceremonial protocols and *kapu* (sacred laws) governed the learning of sacred knowledge, reinforcing

a leader's *kuleana* (responsibility) to uphold societal balance and ensure prosperity for their people.¹¹

Communal values such as *aloha* (love, respect), *mālama* (care), and *laulima* (cooperation) were foundational to the educational system, fostering a collective identity that transcended individual achievement. Learning was not limited to specific individuals but was communal, with the well-being of the *lāhui* (nation) as the ultimate goal. These values underscored the importance of shared responsibility in maintaining harmony and sustainability within the *ʻohana* (family), *ahupuaʻa* (land division), and kingdom.¹²

The educational structure was adaptive, responding to the needs of the time and community. For instance, during times of environmental challenges or external threats, education focused on skills such as agricultural sustainability or strategic warfare. Conversely, in times of peace, emphasis might shift to artistic expression and cultural refinement, such as mastering intricate *hula* performances or composing *mele inoa* (name chants) to honor ancestors and leaders.¹³

This dynamic and integrative approach to education ensured that every individual, regardless of their station, contributed to the vitality and resilience of the Hawaiian kingdom. Leadership development, in particular, was viewed as a sacred process, where the cultivation of personal virtues such as humility (*haʻahaʻa*), courage (*ikaika*), and spiritual authority (*mana*) prepared future leaders to act in service of their people and the land.¹⁴

Through these practices, Hawaiian society not only preserved its rich cultural heritage but also adapted and thrived in an ever-changing world. These lessons continue to offer valuable insights for contemporary educational and leadership models, particularly in Indigenous contexts.

Missionary Influence and Early Kingdom Education

The arrival of Protestant missionaries in the 1820s coincided with the political and religious upheaval following the death of Kamehameha I.¹⁵ With the assistance of ʻŌpūkahaʻia, missionaries developed an alphabet for the Hawaiian language, facilitating the translation of the Bible and other religious materials.¹⁶ Their influence rapidly transformed Hawaiian education, introducing literacy and Christianity while dismantling traditional systems of governance.¹⁷ This shift left a profound mark on the Hawaiian kingdom, which, under Kamehameha III, established the Department of Public Instruction in 1841, making Hawaiʻi the fifth nation in the world to mandate universal education, primarily in *ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi* (Hawaiian language).¹⁸

Key figures such as John Papa ʻĪi and Davida Malo oversaw the kingdom's educational initiatives, reflecting a commitment to both literacy and the preservation of Hawaiian culture. However, this balance began to erode with the encroachment of colonial ideologies that increasingly prioritized English as the medium of instruction.¹⁹

Colonial Assimilation and Educational Suppression

The illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893 marked a turning point in the trajectory of Kanaka ʻŌiwi education. Hawaiian-medium schools declined precipitously,

and the 1896 Act 57 mandated English as the exclusive language of instruction in both public and private schools.²⁰ This policy, described by former Hawaiian attorney general William Nevins Armstrong as necessary to ensure Hawaiians did not become “nothing,” sought to erase Hawaiian language and culture in favor of assimilation into American systems.²¹ By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, education in Hawai‘i had become a mechanism for forced assimilation, producing a labor force aligned with capitalist ideals while marginalizing Hawaiian identity.²²

The Hawaiian Renaissance and the Revitalization of Leadership

The cultural resurgence of the 1970s, known as the Hawaiian Renaissance, marked a critical turning point in reclaiming Hawaiian language and cultural identity. Efforts to revitalize *‘ōlelo Hawai‘i* through Hawaiian-language immersion schools and Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS) reflected a broader movement to restore educational sovereignty.²³ These schools, supported by state and community initiatives, reintroduced Hawaiian values and practices into formal education, creating spaces where students could reconnect with their heritage while pursuing academic excellence.²⁴

The evolution of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi educational leadership reflects a dynamic interplay between resilience and adaptation. From precontact systems grounded in familial mentorship to the transformative educational initiatives of HFCS, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi leaders have consistently sought to preserve cultural identity while addressing contemporary challenges. This legacy affirms the enduring relevance of Hawaiian values such as *pono*, *mālama*, and *kuleana* as guiding principles for educational leadership.

Contemporary Circumstances: Challenges Faced by Kanaka ‘Ōiwi Principals

Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals in HFCS operate within a complex landscape of cultural resurgence, systemic inequities, and policy constraints. A primary challenge is navigating the dual responsibility of meeting state educational standards while fostering culturally grounded learning environments.²⁵ Unlike traditional public schools, HFCS prioritize Hawaiian language, culture, and values, which often necessitate alternative approaches to pedagogy, assessment, and governance.²⁶

Resource scarcity is a significant issue for HFCS principals, who must address gaps in funding, facilities, and staffing. Many principals report feeling stretched thin as they juggle administrative duties, teacher development, and community engagement, all while advocating for policy changes to better support HFCS.²⁷ The leadership model itself—grounded in the values of *mālama* and *aloha ‘āina* (love for the land or nation)—requires principals to act as cultural practitioners, educators, and community stewards simultaneously, often without adequate institutional support.²⁸

In addition, the lingering effects of colonialism manifest in ongoing struggles to legitimize Hawaiian knowledge systems within mainstream educational policy frameworks. Principals frequently confront misconceptions about the rigor and validity of culturally responsive education, requiring them to advocate for their schools’ methodologies and outcomes.²⁹ The current emphasis on standardized testing and

Western-centric benchmarks poses challenges to integrating ‘ike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge systems) into formal education systems.³⁰

Despite these obstacles, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals remain committed to advancing educational equity and cultural revitalization. They employ transformational leadership practices to inspire teachers, students, and families to embrace Hawaiian values as a foundation for academic and personal success.³¹ By addressing systemic barriers with innovative solutions and a focus on relational governance, these leaders exemplify resilience and dedication to the *lāhui* (Hawaiian nation).³²

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study, focusing on the leadership practices and cultural values that define Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals in Hawaiian-focused charter schools:

1. What foundational principles, beliefs, and values guide the work of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals in leading Hawaiian-focused charter schools?

This question sought to uncover the cultural frameworks that underpin the leadership practices of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals. Drawing from Kanaka ‘Ōiwi critical race theory, which emphasizes themes such as *aloha ‘āina*, *mo‘olelo*, and *kuleana*, the research explored how ancestral knowledge systems inform decision-making and governance within HFCS.^{33,34} Existing studies, such as those by George S. Kanahale (1986) and Keiki Kawai‘ae‘a et al. (2018), highlight the centrality of Hawaiian values like *pono* and *mālama* in shaping leadership philosophies. This study builds on such literature to examine how these values manifest in contemporary educational settings.

2. How do Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals actuate leadership practices in Hawaiian-focused charter schools?

This question investigates the ways principals translate foundational values into actionable leadership practices that align with both cultural and educational objectives. Previous research emphasizes the significance of culturally responsive leadership in advancing equity and inclusion within schools.^{35,36} However, the specific practices of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals—particularly in their efforts to sustain Hawaiian culture and language while navigating systemic challenges—remain underexplored. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to understanding how Indigenous leadership operates within HFCS as unique sites of cultural preservation and innovation.³⁷

These questions are informed by a critical need to document and analyze the lived experiences of Indigenous educational leaders, as highlighted in the broader literature on culturally responsive and transformational leadership. By situating the research within the framework of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi critical race theory, Hawaiian cultural values and leadership theories, this study advances the discourse on Indigenous educational sovereignty and offers practical implications for fostering culturally grounded leadership practices.

Literature Review

This literature review provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the practices and values of Kanaka 'Ōiwi educational leadership in HFCS. Organized into three subsections, it explores leadership theories, Indigenous studies, and cultural frameworks while integrating the principles of social justice as a foundational theme.

Leadership Theories: Transformational and Social Justice Leadership

Leadership theories provide critical insights into the practices of HFCS principals. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating stakeholders to achieve shared goals, fostering systemic change.³⁸ Similarly, social justice leadership emphasizes equity and inclusion, addressing systemic barriers to empower marginalized groups.³⁹

Social justice leaders actively dismantle inequitable structures by advocating for diversity, challenging biases, and creating culturally responsive environments. Scholars Katia Paz Goldfarb and Jaime Grinberg (2002) define social justice leadership as altering institutional arrangements to sustain human rights, equity, and fairness.⁴⁰ This principle is particularly relevant to HFCS, in which principals strive to reclaim educational sovereignty while addressing disparities in access, resources, and outcomes for Kanaka 'Ōiwi students.

In HFCS, transformational and social justice leadership converge as principals act not only as administrators but also as cultural stewards. They inspire systemic change by embedding Hawaiian values into governance and pedagogy, ensuring that these schools remain sites of empowerment and cultural revitalization. By amplifying Indigenous voices and advocating for equitable policies, HFCS principals align their practices with the core tenets of social justice leadership.

Indigenous Studies: Reclaiming Educational Sovereignty

Indigenous leadership literature highlights the necessity of culturally responsive educational models that challenge colonial paradigms.⁴¹ HFCS embody this ethos by grounding their practices in ancestral knowledge systems ('ike kūpuna) and serving as powerful vehicles for educational sovereignty.⁴²

Kanaka 'Ōiwi critical race theory (informally, Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit) provides a valuable lens for examining Indigenous educational leadership. This framework emphasizes *aloha 'āina* (love for the land), *mo'olelo* (narratives), and *kuleana* (responsibility) as guiding principles for navigating systemic challenges while fostering cultural resurgence.⁴³ Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals utilize these concepts to create culturally safe spaces that affirm students' identities and empower them to succeed academically and personally.

By reclaiming educational sovereignty, HFCS principals align with broader Indigenous movements that prioritize equity and self-determination. They challenge Western-centric educational models by centering Hawaiian epistemologies, addressing achievement gaps, and fostering culturally grounded curricula. This approach situates HFCS as exemplars of social justice in action, aligning with Luigi and Andres

Santamaria's (2013) assertion that diverse leadership practices enhance equity and inclusion.

Cultural Frameworks: Hawaiian Leadership Values

Kanaka 'Ōiwi leadership is deeply rooted in cultural values that guide decision-making and interactions. These values—*pono* (righteousness), *mālama* (care), *mana* (spiritual power), and *ikaika* (strength)—serve as foundational principles for HFCS principals, ensuring their practices remain culturally grounded.

PONO: RIGHTEOUSNESS AND EQUITY

Pono emphasizes moral integrity and justice. HFCS principals integrate *pono* into their leadership by advocating for fair and equitable practices, addressing systemic inequities, and fostering inclusive learning environments. Historically, leaders such as Kamehameha III exemplified *pono* by prioritizing the well-being of the Hawaiian people during times of political upheaval.⁴⁴ In contemporary contexts, this value aligns with social justice principles by promoting fairness and advocating for marginalized voices.

MĀLAMA: CARE AND STEWARDSHIP

Mālama reflects a reciprocal relationship between leaders and their communities, encompassing care, stewardship, and service.⁴⁵ HFCS principals institutionalize *mālama* by prioritizing the well-being of students, teachers, and families. This practice parallels social justice leadership's focus on creating supportive and inclusive environments for all stakeholders.⁴⁶ The *mo'olelo* of 'Umi, a chief renowned for his acts of compassion, exemplifies how *mālama* fosters trust and relational governance.⁴⁷

MANA: SPIRITUAL AND RELATIONAL POWER

Mana represents the spiritual and relational power that legitimizes authority in Hawaiian leadership. George S. Kanahēle (1986) asserts that *mana* encompasses qualities such as wisdom, humility, and respectability. HFCS principals harness *mana* to inspire transformative practices, fostering trust and unity within their communities. This relational power aligns with social justice leadership's emphasis on collective action and shared accountability for equity.⁴⁸

IKAIKA: COURAGE AND RESILIENCE

Ikaika, or courage, is integral to Kanaka 'Ōiwi leadership. HFCS principals embody *ikaika* by advocating for culturally grounded education amid systemic challenges, exemplifying the resilience required to sustain cultural identity and promote equity. This courage parallels the determination of social justice leaders who challenge inequities to create inclusive and empowering educational spaces.⁴⁹

Social Justice as a Cross-Cutting Theme

The principles of social justice leadership are deeply intertwined with Kanaka 'Ōiwi leadership values, creating a natural synergy between the two frameworks.

HFCS principals exemplify social justice by addressing systemic inequities, centering cultural knowledge systems, and fostering inclusive learning environments that affirm Indigenous identity and promote equity.

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

HFCS principals actively challenge the systemic barriers that perpetuate disparities in education for Kanaka 'Ōiwi students. This aligns with Muhammad A. Khalifa's (2018) assertion that culturally responsive leadership must address both historical and present-day inequities to create equitable learning environments. By advocating for resources, policies, and practices that support culturally grounded curricula, HFCS principals embody Goldfarb and Grinberg's (2002) definition of social justice as the exercise of altering institutional arrangements to sustain equity and fairness.

CENTERING HAWAIIAN EPISTEMOLOGIES

Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals center Hawaiian epistemologies, or 'ike kūpuna, to counteract the dominance of Western-centric educational paradigms. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2019) emphasizes the importance of reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems as a form of resistance against colonial structures. By integrating *mo'olelo*, *aloha 'āina*, and *kuleana* into their leadership practices, HFCS principals ensure that education serves as a tool for cultural revitalization and empowerment, aligning with Santamarías' (2013) advocacy for diverse leadership practices that enhance equity.

AMPLIFYING MARGINALIZED VOICES

Social justice leadership amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, ensuring their perspectives inform educational practices and policies.⁵⁰ HFCS principals create culturally safe spaces where students, teachers, and families can thrive, drawing on the relational power of *mana* to build trust and unity within their communities.⁵¹ By prioritizing *pilina* (relationships) and fostering collaboration, these leaders transform their schools into spaces of collective empowerment, reflecting Maenette Ah Nee-Benham's (2003) observation that shared narratives among leaders of color create powerful opportunities for problem-solving and systemic change.⁵²

Through their culturally aligned leadership, HFCS principals act as both cultural stewards and social justice advocates. Their practices demonstrate the transformative potential of integrating Indigenous values into contemporary educational leadership, offering a compelling model for creating equitable and empowering educational spaces.

CONTEMPORARY CIRCUMSTANCES: CHALLENGES AND CONTEXTS FOR KANAKA 'ŌIWI PRINCIPALS

Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals in Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS) operate within a dynamic landscape shaped by historical inequities, community aspirations, and the evolving demands of public education. The contemporary educational ecosystem presents both opportunities and challenges as these leaders navigate their roles as cultural stewards, administrators, and advocates for systemic change.

Gender and Leadership Trends in Hawai‘i

The demographic composition of school principals in Hawai‘i has evolved significantly over the past five decades. A study in the 1970s revealed that 80 percent of secondary school principals in Hawai‘i were men, most of whom held advanced degrees and had substantial experience in teaching and administration.⁵³ By the 1990s, research by Cassandra Adachi explored the barriers and motivators influencing women aspiring to leadership roles in K–12 schools. Adachi’s findings shed light on gendered perceptions of leadership and aimed to empower women to overcome these challenges.⁵⁴ While there has been progress in diversifying leadership, gender and cultural representation remain pertinent issues, particularly in HFCS, where the alignment of cultural values with leadership practices is paramount.

The Charter School Movement

The broader charter school movement has influenced the growth and development of HFCS in Hawai‘i. Charter schools, recognized as incubators of educational reform, emphasize autonomy and innovation in governance, curriculum, and administration.⁵⁵ Initially envisioned as an alternative to the “factory model” of education, charter schools have introduced new approaches to serving diverse student populations.⁵⁶ However, the expansion of charter schools nationwide has also led to unintended consequences, including increased segregation in urban areas.⁵⁷

For Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals, these dynamics underscore the importance of tailoring HFCS to meet the specific needs of Indigenous communities. While HFCS share some characteristics with mainstream charter schools, their mission prioritizes the revitalization of Hawaiian language, culture, and values, setting them apart in significant ways.

The Hawaiian-Focused Charter School Movement

Established in 1999, HFCS emerged as a response to the systemic marginalization of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi students and the erosion of Hawaiian language and cultural practices in public education. These schools are an expression of Hawaiian self-determination, providing families with an alternative to traditional public education that emphasizes culture-based learning.⁵⁸ HFCS operate with a shared mission: to foster students who are deeply rooted in their cultural identity while preparing them to navigate and influence the modern world.⁵⁹

With eighteen HFCS serving more than 4,000 students—81 percent of whom are Native Hawaiian—these schools play a pivotal role in improving Kanaka ‘Ōiwi well-being through education.⁶⁰ Grounded in Hawaiian values, these schools prioritize cultural identity, community connection, and student empowerment. Instructional approaches often integrate Hawaiian language, ethnomathematics (the study of how different cultures develop and use mathematical knowledge), and place-based learning, equipping students with the tools to reclaim Hawaiian rights and practices.⁶¹

Contemporary Challenges

Despite their successes, Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals face significant challenges in sustaining HFCS. These include the following:

1. *Resource limitations.* Like other charter schools, HFCS often struggle with insufficient funding and infrastructure support.⁶² Principals must navigate these constraints while maintaining high-quality, culturally grounded educational experiences.
2. *Balancing state and cultural expectations.* HFCS leaders must meet state educational standards while integrating Hawaiian epistemologies into their curricula and practices. This dual responsibility can create tensions, particularly in areas such as standardized testing and accountability metrics.⁶³
3. *Cultural representation and advocacy.* Principals frequently act as cultural advocates, ensuring that Hawaiian language, values, and traditions remain central to their schools. This requires balancing administrative duties with the role of cultural practitioner and community leader.⁶⁴
4. *Educational equity.* As charter schools, HFCS are part of a broader movement often critiqued for increasing segregation.⁶⁵ HFCS principals must counteract these trends by fostering inclusive, culturally safe spaces that support the diverse needs of their students and families.

Opportunities for Transformation

Amid these challenges, HFCS principals continue to innovate and advocate for systemic change. By embedding Hawaiian values into school governance, they demonstrate the transformative potential of culturally grounded leadership. HFCS serve as models for integrating culture-based education with twenty-first-century learning, affirming the importance of education as a pathway to both personal empowerment and collective self-determination.⁶⁶

The work of HFCS principals highlights the resilience of Kanaka 'Ōiwi communities in reclaiming their educational sovereignty. As these schools grow and evolve, their leaders remain at the forefront of a movement that seeks to honor the past, navigate the present, and shape a vibrant future for Hawai'i's youth.

Theory, Methods, Methodology

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study reflect the intersection of transformational, culturally responsive, and Indigenous leadership principles, with a specific focus on Kanaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) perspectives. These frameworks informed both the design and interpretation of the research, providing a culturally grounded lens through which to examine the experiences and practices of Kanaka 'Ōiwi *po'okumu* (principals) in Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is framed by several complementary theories:

1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on changing organizational culture by aligning it with stakeholders' values and fostering collective goals.⁶⁷ For HFCS principals, transformational leadership manifests in their efforts to inspire systemic change while honoring Hawaiian cultural values.⁶⁸ Principals model behaviors that reflect their schools' missions, motivating staff members, students, and families to work toward a shared vision of educational sovereignty and student empowerment.⁶⁹

2. Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership emphasizes acting consistently with one's inner values and beliefs to build trust and integrity within organizations.⁷⁰ Kanaka 'Ōiwi *po'okumu* embody authentic leadership by grounding their decision-making processes in cultural principles such as *pono* (righteousness) and *mālama* (care). Their leadership serves as a bridge between traditional Hawaiian values and contemporary educational needs, ensuring alignment between personal beliefs and institutional practices.

3. Culturally Responsive and Indigenous Leadership

Culturally responsive leadership highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the cultural contexts of the communities being served.⁷¹ Indigenous leadership expands this focus by centering historical and cultural awareness, recognizing the systemic marginalization of Indigenous peoples, and restoring control over educational systems.⁷² These principles are critical for HFCS principals, who act as stewards of Hawaiian culture while navigating external pressures from standardized educational policies.

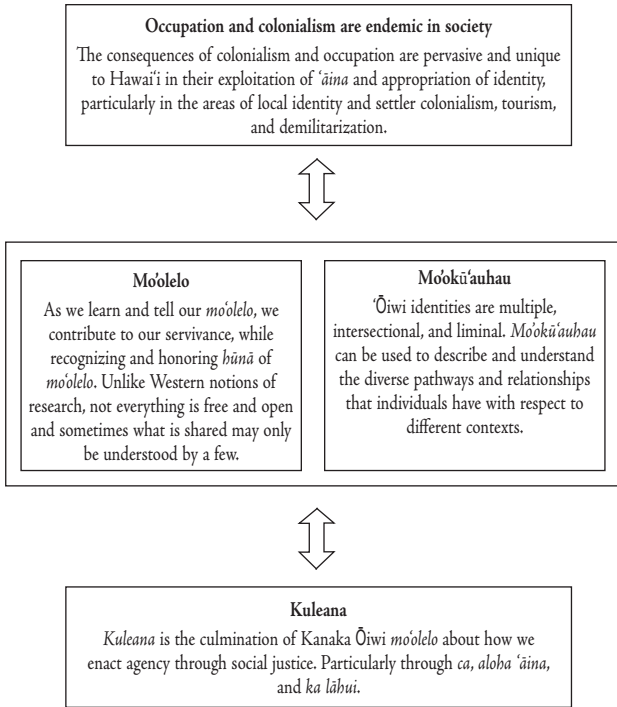
4. Kanaka 'Ōiwi Critical Race Theory (Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit)

Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit, developed by Erin K. Wright and Brandi Jean N. Balutski (2016) and expanded by Nik Cristobal (2018), provides a culturally specific lens for examining the leadership experiences of Kanaka 'Ōiwi *po'okumu*. This theory focuses on four culture-based themes (see fig. 1):

- Aloha 'āina (love for the land or nation)
- Mo'olelo (stories and narratives)
- Mo'okū'auhau (connections to people, place, and space)
- Kuleana (responsibility, privilege, authority)

Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit considers these themes in relation to colonialism's societal impacts, the *po'okumu's* self-expression and cultural connections, and their enactment of *kuleana* through social justice and *aloha 'āina*. This framework grounds the study in a uniquely Hawaiian context, ensuring that the research reflects the realities of Kanaka 'Ōiwi educational leadership.

FIGURE 1. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi critical thematic intersections by Cristobal.



Contributions to Theory and Practice

By integrating Kanaka ‘ŌiwiCrit with transformational, culturally responsive, and authentic leadership theories, this study contributes to the development of a culturally grounded framework for understanding Kanaka ‘Ōiwi educational leadership. It offers practical insights for supporting HFCS principals as they navigate the complex demands of their roles while advancing the broader goals of cultural revitalization and educational equity.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and analyze the experiences and leadership practices of *po'okumu* (principals) in Hawaiian-focused charter schools. By centering Kanaka ‘Ōiwi cultural values and frameworks, the research aimed to uncover how *po'okumu* interpreted their roles, values, and practices in advancing Hawaiian education. The methodology integrated ethnographic case studies and qualitative data collection methods to honor and reflect the culturally specific experiences of the participants.

The study's qualitative approach centered on understanding the lived experiences of HFCS *pōokumu* through their narratives, situating these within a culturally grounded framework. Qualitative research, as described by Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell (2016), prioritizes participants' voices and their interpretations of roles, decisions, and actions within cultural and organizational contexts.⁷³ This study adopted an ethnographic focus, combining individual case studies with cross-case thematic analysis to explore both unique and shared dimensions of leadership among Native Hawaiian principals.

A key feature of the study was its use of Indigenous research methodologies, which honored the cultural, spiritual, and relational aspects of knowledge creation. Drawing on Shawn Wilson's *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), the study approached research as a relational and reciprocal process, emphasizing the interconnectedness of researcher, participants, and knowledge. Wilson describes this approach as a ceremony that binds all participants and the research context, creating an ethical and respectful space for shared learning and understanding.⁷⁴

The study also incorporated Jo-Ann Archibald's *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (2008), which emphasizes the power of stories as pedagogical and epistemological tools in Indigenous contexts. This method provided a framework for centering participants' narratives, treating their lived experiences and leadership journeys as rich sources of knowledge.⁷⁵ Stories were not merely data but dynamic expressions of identity, community values, and the *pōokumu's* commitments to *aloha ʻāina* and *kuleana*.

In addition, the study integrated "talk story," a method grounded in Kū Kahakalau's *ma'awe pono* research methodology (2004), which prioritizes culturally relevant and relational data-gathering techniques. "Talk story" is a conversational approach rooted in Hawaiian cultural practices, creating a comfortable, respectful environment for participants to share their experiences. This method aligns with the Hawaiian tradition of oral storytelling, enabling participants to reflect deeply on their motivations, challenges, and successes as leaders in HFCS.⁷⁶

To guide the analysis and coding process, the study used the culturally grounded metaphor of lei-making. This process symbolized the careful selection and arrangement of narratives, grouping them into themes that reflected the essence of *pōokumu* leadership. Each story was treated as a "flower" contributing to the overall garland of findings, reflecting the interconnectedness and diversity of perspectives within the study. This lei metaphor symbolized the interconnectedness of each *pōokumu's* story, weaving together their individual experiences to create a collective narrative of leadership in HFCS.⁷⁷

By integrating these Indigenous research methodologies, this study not only honored the cultural contexts of participants but also advanced the practice of conducting ethical and culturally relevant research within Indigenous communities. These approaches reinforced the study's commitment to relationality, respect, and reciprocity, ensuring that the voices and values of Kanaka ʻŌiwi principals were centered throughout the research process.

Data Collection

Three complementary data collection methods were utilized to capture the multifaceted experiences of HFCS *po'okumu*: the *po'okumu* survey, semi-structured “talk-story” interviews, and focus group discussions.

1. *Po'okumu* Survey

A survey was administered to collect both structured and open-ended responses from HFCS *po'okumu*, seven of whom self-identified as Kanaka 'Ōiwi (see table 1). The survey included questions designed to elicit demographic information, leadership values, beliefs, and challenges faced in promoting Hawaiian knowledge and culture. The results provided a foundational understanding of the participants' professional contexts and informed the subsequent interview phases.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Characteristic	Survey	
	n	%
Ethnicity		
Native Hawaiian	7	100
Gender		
Male	2	28.5
Female	5	71.5
Age		
41–50	4	57.1
61 and above	3	42.9
Years of service in education		
10–20 years	2	28.5
21–30 years	2	28.5
31–40 years	1	14.5
41+ years	2	28.5
Years as a <i>po'okumu</i>		
>1 year	1	14.3
1–5 years	5	71.4
6+ years	1	14.3

Note: n = 7 *po'okumu* (principals)

2. Semi-Structured “Talk-Story” Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their leadership journeys in a conversational, culturally appropriate format. This method aligned with Indigenous storywork practices, which value stories as treasured knowledge that connects individuals to their communities and traditions.⁷⁸ Interviews were conducted in two rounds:

○ Round 1: One-on-One Interviews

Seven *po'okumu* participated in individual interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. Conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded with participants' consent,

these interviews explored themes such as motivations, successes, challenges, and the integration of Hawaiian culture, language, and values into their leadership.

○ **Round 2: Focus Group Interview**

A focus group involving five participants was held to discuss and validate initial themes identified during the individual interviews. The focus group facilitated a collaborative dialogue, allowing participants to refine their perspectives and construct shared understandings of leadership challenges and opportunities.⁷⁹

3. **Themes Discussed**

The focus group discussions centered on key themes, including *pilina* (relationships), authentic learning environments, cultural practices, instructional leadership, and values-based leadership. These discussions enriched the study by capturing the interplay of individual and collective experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed a culturally grounded approach to uncover and interpret themes from the narratives of *po'okumu* (principals) in Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS). The recorded interviews were transcribed, verified by the researcher, and sent to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Using coding and theming processes, the study employed both inductive and in vivo coding methods, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the participants' narratives while capturing the essence of their words and expressions.⁸⁰

Coding and Theming Processes

Coding, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), involves assigning shorthand designations to various data segments, facilitating efficient retrieval and analysis. This study utilized a double-coding approach:

- **Inductive Coding:** Themes were derived from descriptive notations based on recurring patterns and concepts within the data.
- **In Vivo Coding:** Participants' own words and phrases were used as codes to preserve the authenticity of their voices and cultural expressions.

This dual approach ensured a comprehensive analysis, allowing the data to reflect both emergent patterns and the cultural specificity of *po'okumu* experiences.

Lei-Making as a Framework for Coding

The cultural practice of lei-making served as the metaphorical framework for the coding process. Lei-making involves carefully selecting and arranging flowers (*pua*) and other natural materials to create a meaningful and cohesive garland. Similarly, this study treated each coded segment of data as a *pua*, thoughtfully arranged into thematic clusters that symbolized the participants' stories and leadership practices.⁸¹

Using lei-making as a coding framework aligns with Indigenous methodologies that prioritize cultural relevance and contextual understanding.⁸² This culturally

grounded approach honored participants' narratives while ensuring that the themes were reflective of their lived realities within the Hawaiian cultural context.⁸³ Themes were constructed to highlight the interconnectedness of leadership values, practices, and challenges as expressed by the participants.

Triangulation for Validity

To enhance the validity and robustness of the findings, triangulation was employed. Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to corroborate themes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research.⁸⁴ In this study, triangulation incorporated

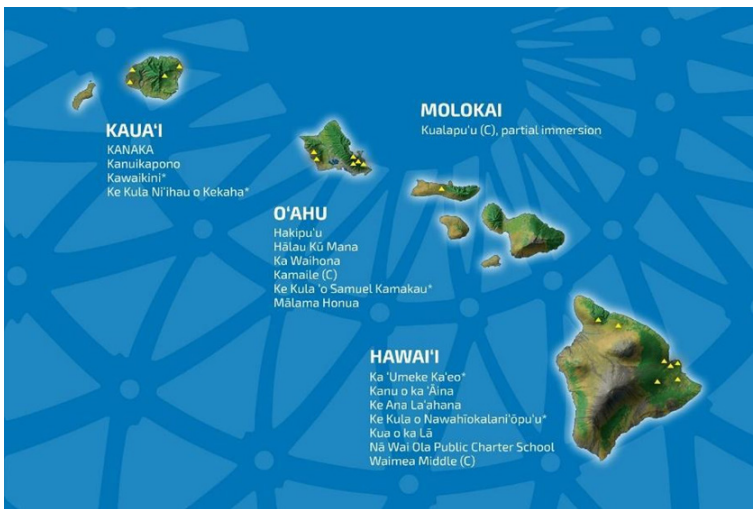
- data from the *po'okumu* survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions
- cross-case comparisons to identify shared themes and variations across participants' experiences

This process ensured a holistic and nuanced interpretation of the leadership values, practices, and challenges faced by *po'okumu* in HFCS.

Participants

Seven *po'okumu* from eighteen Hawaiian-focused charter schools participated in the study. The researcher accessed participants through personal relationships, the Kanaeokana *Po'okumu* Professional Learning Community, and other connections. Participants were provided with informed consent forms and survey links, followed by scheduling interviews.

FIGURE 2. Map of Hawaiian-focused charter schools.



Findings: Key Themes and Illustrative Examples

The findings of this study address the two research questions guiding the exploration of Kanaka ʻŌiwi principals' leadership in Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS):

1. What foundational principles, beliefs, and values guide the work of Kanaka ʻŌiwi principals in leading HFCS?
2. How do Kanaka ʻŌiwi principals actuate leadership practices in HFCS?

Through cross-case analysis, six major themes emerged that illuminate both the foundational values underpinning their leadership and the practical strategies they employ to enact these principles. The findings demonstrate the integration of Hawaiian cultural frameworks into educational leadership, shaping transformative practices and student-centered environments.

Addressing Research Question 1: Foundational Principles, Beliefs, and Values

THEME 1: *HAUMĀNA IS NUMBER ONE*

The prioritization of *haumāna* (students) emerged as a core value across all participants. This principle reflects a deep commitment to placing students' well-being and growth at the center of educational decision-making. "*Haumāna is number one*," commented one principal, encapsulating this shared belief.

This student-centered philosophy extended beyond academics, focusing on creating culturally grounded environments in which students feel safe and valued. One principal noted, "When our students are in this environment that's rooted in Hawaiian culture, they feel safe, they feel comfortable, they feel like they can be themselves." These approaches align with Kanaka ʻŌiwi critical theories, emphasizing the empowerment of students through education.⁸⁵

THEME 2: *ʻIKE, ʻŌLELO, AND NOHONA HAWAʻI*

A foundational belief for the principals was the integration of *ʻike* (knowledge), *ʻōlelo* (language), and *nohona Hawaiʻi* (Hawaiian ways of life). One principal remarked, "Every decision I make is basically foundationalized or anchored in our culture . . ." illustrating the centrality of Hawaiian cultural values in their leadership.

The principals fostered culturally grounded education through Hawaiian culture-based education (HCBE). For instance, one principal emphasized the significance of *ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi* as the "binding chord of our Hawaiian identity." These practices not only sustain Hawaiian language and culture but also serve as a framework for student empowerment and community connection.

THEME 3: *KULEANA HANA (WORK RESPONSIBILITY)*

The concept of *kuleana hana*, or a deep sense of responsibility, was integral to the principals' values. Leadership was seen as a calling to serve the *lāhui* (nation) and advocate for culturally responsive education. One principal described her role in this way: "Where am I needed? Where can I best serve?" This service-oriented approach emphasizes selflessness and a commitment to community well-being. By viewing

leadership as *kuleana*, the principals integrate Hawaiian values of service, collaboration, and accountability into their work.

Addressing Research Question 2: Actuating Leadership Practices

THEME 4: TRANSFORMATION

The theme of transformation reflects the principals' efforts to challenge traditional educational models and advocate for change. One principal posed the question, "What are you willing to change . . . and be okay with not going with the grain?"—emphasizing the need for innovation in education. These leaders embraced HCBE as a transformative tool to promote Hawaiian knowledge, language, and identity. For instance, principals advocated for curricula that teach students the true history of Hawai'i through a Kanaka 'Ōiwi lens, fostering critical consciousness and cultural pride.

THEME 5: KAIĀULU (COMMUNITY)

Community collaboration emerged as a critical leadership practice, positioning schools as hubs of cultural preservation and community engagement. A principal emphasized, "It's not just working together, but it's also building relationships with our community to support our school."

Examples of *kaiāulu*-centered practices included partnerships with organizations such as Ola Hui to provide health services and community resources. Principals also played advocacy roles, lobbying for policy changes to promote 'ōlelo Hawai'i and culturally responsive education.

THEME 6: DEVELOPING KUMU (TEACHERS)

The development of *kumu* was seen as essential to sustaining HCBE and achieving educational excellence. Principals supported teachers through professional development programs that integrated Hawaiian cultural values into their pedagogy. For instance, one principal enrolled all teachers in the Ka Hale Ho'aka program to deepen their understanding of Hawaiian educational philosophies. Principals fostered collaborative environments in which teachers felt valued and empowered. One principal noted, "We design a fulfilling work environment by listening to our *kumu* and integrating their knowledge and skills into our shared vision." This emphasis on teacher development aligns with broader transformational leadership practices.

Cross-Case Analysis

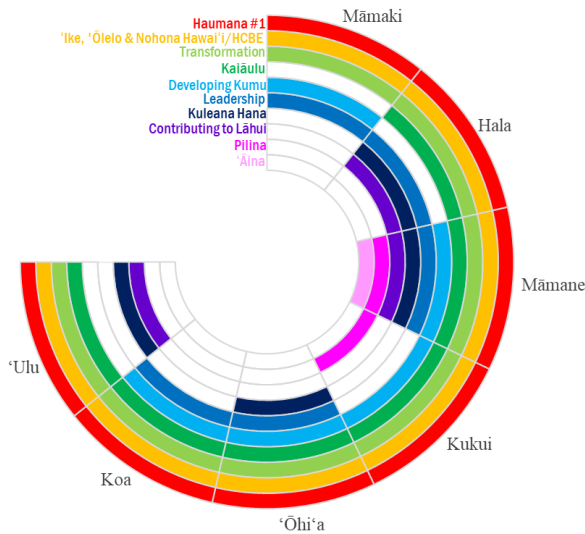
To provide a comprehensive view of these themes, a cross-case analysis matrix (Table 2) highlighted their prevalence across individual cases. The analysis demonstrated the interconnectedness of the principals' values and practices while capturing variations in how they were enacted across different school contexts.

TABLE 2. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS MATRIX

Actuating Leadership Through	Principal 1	Prin. 2	Prin. 3	Prin. 4	Prin. 5	Prin. 6	Prin. 7
<i>Haumāna</i> Is Number One	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
‘Ike, ‘Ōlelo, and <i>Nohona Hawai‘i</i> /HCBE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transformation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Kaiāulu</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Developing <i>Kumu</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Leadership	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
<i>Kuleana Hana</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
Contributing to the <i>Lāhui</i>		✓	✓				✓
<i>Pilina</i>			✓	✓			
‘Āina			✓				

Figure 3 visually represents the interconnection of themes across the cases using a spectrum display or wheel format. Each theme (e.g., *Haumāna*-centered learning, *Kuleana Hana*) is represented as a segment or ring, and each principal’s contributions are visually mapped within these segments. This provides a clear, at-a-glance understanding of how themes overlap and where variations occur.

FIGURE 3. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi leadership cross-case spectrum graph.



Summary of Findings: A Narrative Perspective

This study highlights the critical role of Kanaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) principals in leading Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS) as transformative spaces for cultural revitalization, community empowerment, and educational innovation. By addressing two key research questions, the findings reveal how these principals are not only guided by foundational Hawaiian values but also enact leadership practices that align with cultural and theoretical frameworks to advance educational sovereignty for Kanaka 'Ōiwi communities.

The findings draw on multiple theoretical frameworks to illuminate the complexity of Kanaka 'Ōiwi leadership. Kanaka 'Ōiwi critical race theory (Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit) provided a foundational lens to understand the ways these principals integrate *aloha 'āina* (love for the land), *mō'okū'auhau* (genealogy), and *kuleana* (responsibility) into their leadership practices. For instance, the principals' commitment to implementing place-based learning and environmental stewardship curricula reflect their dedication to fostering students' relationships with the 'āina. This aligns with Wright and Balutski's (2016) emphasis on Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit as a tool for resisting colonial educational models and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems.

Furthermore, transformational leadership theories enriched the study's understanding of how these principals act as change agents within their schools and communities. These leaders challenge conventional educational norms and advocate for Hawaiian culture-based education (HCBE) as a strategy to both improve academic outcomes and instill cultural pride in students. One principal described this work as "teaching students the true history of Hawai'i," highlighting how their leadership extends beyond pedagogy to systemic advocacy for decolonization.⁸⁶

The findings also reflect the principles of culturally responsive leadership, which emphasizes aligning educational practices with students' cultural contexts.⁸⁷ The principals consistently demonstrated this approach by centering *haumāna* (students) in their decision-making processes and fostering inclusive, culturally safe learning environments. One principal stated, "*Haumāna* is number one," underscoring a shared commitment to honoring students' identities and aspirations.

Six major themes emerged from the cross-case analysis, illustrating how these principals integrate foundational Hawaiian values into their leadership. The first theme, *haumāna*-centered learning, exemplifies the principals' commitment to prioritizing students' well-being and growth. By creating culturally affirming environments, these leaders not only foster academic success but also cultivate a sense of belonging and self-empowerment among students. This practice aligns with Kahakalau's (2002) assertion that culturally grounded education honors students' unique identities and helps them thrive.

The integration of 'ike (knowledge), 'ōlelo (language), and *nobona Hawai'i* (ways of life) emerged as another critical theme. Principals infused their schools with Hawaiian cultural values and traditions, creating learning experiences that were both academically rigorous and culturally relevant. For example, principals emphasized 'ōlelo Hawai'i

as the “binding chord of Hawaiian identity,” illustrating their dedication to sustaining the Hawaiian language as a core component of student and community identity.⁸⁸

In addition to grounding their work in Hawaiian cultural values, these principals embraced transformational leadership practices to challenge entrenched educational systems. They advocated for innovative models of education that emphasized Hawaiian knowledge, language, and identity, often questioning staff and stakeholders, “What are you willing to change . . . and be okay with not going with the grain?” These practices reflect Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi’s (2006) concept of transformational leadership, which prioritizes systemic change through collective vision and collaborative action.

Collaboration with *kaiāulu* (communities) was a recurring theme, as principals positioned their schools as hubs for cultural preservation and community engagement. Through partnerships with organizations like Ola Hui, principals ensured that their schools addressed both educational and broader community needs, such as hosting weekend health clinics and providing financial literacy resources. These efforts underscore the relational nature of Indigenous leadership, where collaboration and reciprocity are essential to success.⁸⁹

The professional development of *kumu* (teachers) also played a central role in the principals’ leadership practices. Recognizing that teachers are key to sustaining HCBE, principals invested in opportunities for *kumu* to enhance their cultural and pedagogical skills. One principal enrolled her teachers in the Ka Hale Ho’aka professional development program, ensuring that their instructional practices aligned with Hawaiian educational philosophies. This emphasis on teacher development reflects Santamarías’ (2011) argument that culturally responsive leadership involves empowering educators to effectively serve diverse student populations.

Finally, the theme of *kuleana hana* (work responsibility) encapsulated the principals’ sense of service and advocacy for their communities. Leadership was seen not as an individual pursuit but as a collective *kuleana*, or responsibility, to uplift the *lāhui* (nation). Principals articulated their roles as deeply connected to their cultural identity, viewing their work as an extension of their duty to serve and empower Kanaka ‘Ōiwi communities.⁹⁰

These findings contribute to the scholarship on Indigenous leadership by demonstrating how Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals navigate the complexities of leading HFCS while addressing systemic inequities. By integrating Hawaiian cultural principles with transformational and culturally responsive leadership practices, these principals offer a model for reimagining education systems in ways that honor and empower Indigenous identities. The study not only expands the application of Kanaka ‘ŌiwiCrit in educational contexts but also provides actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to promote equity and cultural revitalization in schools.

Future research can build on these findings by examining the long-term impacts of HFCS leadership practices on student outcomes and community well-being. In addition, comparative studies of Indigenous leadership across cultural and geographical contexts could further illuminate the unique and shared strategies employed by Indigenous educational leaders in advancing sovereignty and self-determination.

CONCLUSION

This research offers a pivotal step toward understanding the leadership practices of Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals in Hawaiian-focused charter schools (HFCS). At its core, the study reveals how these leaders intertwine Hawaiian cultural principles with innovative leadership strategies to advance culturally grounded education for Indigenous students. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Kanaka 'Ōiwi critical race theory (Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit), transformational leadership, and culturally responsive leadership, this work highlights the critical role of Indigenous leadership in fostering educational sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and systemic change.

Central to this study is the concept of *ea*, a Hawaiian term embodying sovereignty, life, and breath, which is deeply connected to both political and spiritual liberation. For Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals, *ea* reflects their commitment to reclaiming control over their educational systems, ensuring that schools serve as sites of cultural resurgence and empowerment. The practice of *aloha 'āina*, or love for the land, is inextricably linked to *ea*, emphasizing that sovereignty is not only political but also rooted in cultural and spiritual practices that sustain community well-being and identity.

The findings underscore that Kanaka 'Ōiwi principals operate within a complex intersection of Indigenous knowledge, educational innovation, and community advocacy. *Haumāna*-centered learning emerged as the cornerstone of their leadership, reflecting a deep commitment to honoring students' identities, aspirations, and well-being. Through the integration of 'ike, 'ōlelo, and *nohonā Hawai'i*, these principals foster environments that celebrate Hawaiian identity while preparing students to navigate a globalized world. This culturally affirming approach challenges dominant educational paradigms, offering a model for decolonized schooling that honors the lived realities and histories of Indigenous communities while advancing the broader vision of *ea* in education.

The study also revealed how these leaders actuate their values through transformational practices, such as fostering *kaiāulu* (community) collaboration, supporting *kumu* (teacher development), and embodying *kuleana hana* (work responsibility) in their daily work. They view their leadership as a calling, deeply rooted in service to their *lāhui* (nation) and driven by a sense of *kuleana* to ensure the success and empowerment of their students, teachers, and communities. This dedication aligns with Wright and Balutski's (2016) assertion that Kanaka 'Ōiwi leadership is inherently relational and transformational, shaped by the dual goals of cultural perpetuation and systemic equity.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

The theoretical implications of this study expand the application of Kanaka 'ŌiwiCrit, situating it as a powerful framework for examining Indigenous educational leadership across K–12 contexts. By illustrating how Kanaka 'Ōiwi principles such as *aloha 'āina*, *ea*, and *mo'okū'auhau* inform leadership practices, this study contributes to the growing discourse on decolonizing education and highlights the transformative potential of Indigenous frameworks in challenging systemic inequities. Most important, the articulation of *ea* within this context underscores the urgency of reclaiming educational spaces as vital arenas for cultural survival and sovereignty.

For practitioners, the findings provide actionable insights into culturally responsive leadership. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals’ emphasis on *haumāna*-centered learning, teacher development, and community collaboration offers a replicable model for creating inclusive and affirming educational environments. Schools seeking to implement culturally grounded practices can look to the strategies employed by HFCS principals, including professional development programs that empower teachers to integrate cultural knowledge into their pedagogy. These practices exemplify *ea* in action, as they restore the rightful place of Indigenous knowledge systems at the center of education.

On a policy level, this study underscores the need for systemic support of Indigenous education initiatives. Policymakers must prioritize funding and resources for Hawaiian culture-based education, recognizing its role in fostering academic success and cultural empowerment. In addition, the advocacy efforts of HFCS principals to integrate ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i and place-based learning into school curricula highlight the importance of policies that affirm Indigenous languages and knowledge systems as central to educational frameworks. These policy actions are crucial for advancing *ea* in education, ensuring that Indigenous communities retain control over the narratives and practices shaping their children’s futures.

A Call to Action

This study ultimately positions Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals as exemplars of culturally grounded and transformational leadership. Their work serves as a reminder of the power of education to perpetuate culture, foster community resilience, and inspire systemic change. By prioritizing Indigenous values and practices, these leaders not only support their students and communities but also challenge broader educational systems to reckon with their colonial legacies. The inclusion of *ea* as a guiding principle enriches this narrative, framing educational sovereignty as both a goal and a process rooted in relationality, cultural identity, and the interconnectedness of land, people, and knowledge.

As educational systems worldwide grapple with issues of equity and inclusion, the leadership practices of HFCS principals provide a compelling blueprint for advancing culturally responsive education. Future research must continue to build on this foundation, exploring the long-term impacts of culturally grounded leadership on student outcomes and community well-being. Moreover, cross-cultural studies can further illuminate shared strategies among Indigenous leaders globally, strengthening the collective effort to create equitable and empowering educational systems.

In honoring the work of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi principals, this research reinforces the transformative potential of leadership rooted in *aloha ‘āina*, *kuleana*, and *ea*, as well as a profound commitment to the *lāhui* (Hawaiian nation). It is through such leadership that education becomes not only a pathway to individual success but also a means of advancing collective sovereignty, cultural vitality, and justice. Ultimately, *ea*—as life, breath, and liberation—remains the essence of this work, affirming the enduring relevance of Indigenous leadership in shaping a more equitable and culturally connected future.

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