

**The Struggle was Real:**

**The Journey - and Truth - of Founding a Charter School in Hawai'i**

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### **Abstract**

Starting a public charter school in Hawai'i is a serious endeavor that requires time, energy, resources, people, partnerships, support, and luck. This dissertation is an autoethnography of the author, Alex Teece, who is the founding school leader for DreamHouse 'Ewa Beach Public Charter School in the community of 'Ewa, on the island of O'ahu, and islands of Hawai'i. The autoethnography studies the journey, struggles, failures, and experience of beginning a public charter school in the Hawaiian Islands. The journey is eventually broken out into two main categories - the *how* and the *why* of starting a school. Analysis is conducted on over seven years of thousands of artifacts and sets of data that inform findings and eventual recommendations for those considering beginning a school, or simply interested in the journey that one might embark upon.

*Keywords:* 'Ewa, kolohe, moku, haole, kuleana, kupuna, mo'olelo, mana, kalo, wai

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Lastly, and perhaps most important, I want to acknowledge the founding children and families who started DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach with us in the fall of 2019. Before you, we were just an idea. With you, we became a school. You took a chance on us, you trusted us, and I will forever be indebted to your belief in our vision, in your children, and in what we could do together. Thank you.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this paper to the late Dr. Verlicann Malina-Wright, affectionately known as “Aunty Verlie.” Her balanced wisdom and kolohe spirit shined a light when all was dark and I am forever grateful that she took me under her wing and made me feel at home here in Hawai‘i.

**Table of Contents**

Introduction	6
Literature Review	10
Methodology	41
Data Analysis & Presentation of Findings	65
Analysis & Interpretation of Findings	91

## Introduction

### Overview

First and foremost: I am not a principal. Ever since I was young, I had this notion in my head that the head of the school, the school leader, whoever was in charge and where the buck stopped in a public school - that was the *principal*. And then there were vice principals: the henchmen. The people who carried out the principal’s deeds. These were the people that I dealt with when I was rascal in elementary and middle school. I am not one of these either and it is imperative that we get something crystal clear before reading any further: I am not a principal. People who aspire to become principals first teach for years, then they are trained specifically to become administrators, then they become vice principals, and eventually work their way into the role of principal and lead administrator of a school. Those that do well are rewarded, held up as model “administrators” of model schools, and perhaps promoted into a managerial position to help other principals follow their path. I am not one of these people and thus: I am not a principal.

What you are about to read is not a story about a school. It will not involve students or parents; it will not involve a staff or stories of the classroom. There are no grades and there will not be any school-based reports. What you are about to read is a story about the journey to start a school; a school that almost did not come to fruition and was pulled back from the ledge of non-existence so many times that I still pinch myself sometimes and ask: is this real? This dissertation is an autoethnography journey that revisits seven years of the most humbling and impactful moments of my life. It takes a new, fresh look at the people, places, exchanges, and experiences that wove together the story of starting a brand new school. And more than anything, it is the first time since this journey began in November 2012 that I have paused and asked

myself: what happened? How did I get here? And what does this journey mean for others? The answers to these questions, and many, many more, lie within. Welcome to the journey.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the social, cultural, political, and educational forces and intertwined narratives that have come together to form this journey and experience of launching a public charter school in the Hawaiian Islands as a haole, non-Hawaiian, outsider to the island of O‘ahu, to the Moku of ‘Ewa, and to the community of ‘Ewa Beach. The purpose is to revisit the years of starting this school and to explore and ask questions of the moments that came and went to form the narrative of this experience. Revisiting and asking questions will allow for a reconstructed, thoughtful, academic story to emerge from the unmined treasure chest of thousands of exchanges, pages, interactions, journal entries, e-mails, recordings, and myriad other qualitative data that exists in relation to this project. What will exist at the end of this study is a narrative to add to the body of academic work on starting a school and what it takes to be grounded in the past, present, and future, all at the same time. The purpose is to make sense of it all, to share it, and to ensure that others who may venture on this journey know that they are not alone.

### **Research Question**

The research question is this: What has been the personal journey, experience, and truth of starting a new, public charter school in Hawai‘i as a Haole, non-Native Hawaiian outsider?

This question is interpretive in nature and has driven the design and architecture of this dissertation. Because this is an autoethnography, and because the purpose of this dissertation is to explore and make sense of the experiences, situations, and conditions that have been pertinent to the six and a half year journey to launch this public charter school, this question does not seek

a definitive, one-dimensional, objective answers. Rather, the question seeks to guide and categorize the findings that are discovered and shared henceforth.

### **Research Approach**

With the approval from the University of Hawai‘i’s Institutional Review Board, this research will be an autoethnography that will collect, examine, analyze, and interpret hundreds of documents, communications, and exchanges pertaining to the starting of a public charter school in Hawai‘i. The examination and analysis of such a body of information will hopefully allow for meaning and theory to emerge that may not have been apparent during the lived experience of this information. Only through returning to and reviewing such artifacts with a new, analytical, academic eye will allow for the creation of a new narrative.

Guided by a conceptual framework and coding categories, as well as initial screening criteria in order to obtain only the most crucial, meaningful artifacts pertaining to this research question, the approach to this autoethnography is curious and progressive, with the hope that new meaning is created through detailed analysis and critical thought about the journey.

### **Assumptions**

I commit to remaining open-minded and unbiased throughout the process of research, analysis, findings, and recommendations to the best of my abilities. At the same time, I cannot help but acknowledge that I am the central figure to this autoethnography; one might point out the fact that this story flows through my eyes and narrative. It is a story of my truth. Given that mentality and the lived experience and perspective that I carry, it is important to acknowledge that I held my own assumptions about the process and experience of starting a charter school before, during, and throughout the entire process of launching this school. Because I hold those assumptions, it does not mean that I cannot truthfully tell the story of this journey. However, it



should be noted that my artifact selection, analytical mindset, and interpretation of this experience will be through my eyes and the memories of my lived experience. A fair warning to those looking for a removed, omniscient point of view - this is not it; this is an up-close, detailed, personal account of the six and a half year journey of my life with regard to starting this school.

### **The Researcher**

That person is me: Alex Teece. I am the central figure in this dissertation and the sole researcher producing artifacts, analysis, findings, and recommendations - this is a story of my life. It is also a story of the social, political, cultural, and educational forces and narratives that weave in and out of my life over the years in focus.

I would also like to acknowledge, up front, that I am not special or unique in any way, shape, or form. This is not a dissertation to call attention to myself or to label my journey as *the* pathway to starting a public charter school. This is merely the telling of a story. My story.

### **Need and Significance for Study**

The need and significance of this study began to emerge with each passing year that it took to launch this school. After about four years, it became apparent to me that this experience would need to be re-examined once it was over. Now that the school has begun, it is time to revisit and review the years of this journey with a fresh, new perspective. People would often tell me that I needed to share this story, or write a book. I don't know about a book, but I have experienced things over the past several years that can and should be told; they may add some meaning, some understanding to those who listen. This autoethnography will only focus on the years leading up to the start of the public charter school. Future papers and research will look at the actual school; however, this paper focuses only on the period from November 2012 - August 2019, which are the core years of beginning this school.

## Literature Review

### Overview and Opening Argument

Someone once told me to have an exit plan before I even started the school. At the time, this struck me as odd. How do I build trust and instill organizational values in others if at the same time I am also planning to leave? While I grappled with these competing thoughts, I came to realize something very important - this school must not be about me. This school must stand on its own. This does not mean leaving the organization without leadership, succession planning, or a vision; exactly the opposite - one must lead in a way so that all of these crucial elements may come to fruition when they leave. To care about something more than one's self, one must be able to build, grow, and eventually walk away from something that they believe in to their core. Only then can their idea, their passion, and their belief live fully in the context of Hawai‘i.

“In the context of Hawai‘i” is a key concept with regard to this dissertation and the following literature review. Founding and leading a business could be analyzed in a vacuum without the requisite, and some might say crucial, thought and sensitivity to the cultural history, societal backdrop, and background of the topics at hand. When discussing leadership in the Hawaiian Islands as a haole, however, additional care and contemplation is recommended. The complexities that are woven into haole leadership, power, and establishment are critical to understanding the ramifications of such leadership on organizations, communities, and the culture and people of the Hawaiian Islands.

This literature review will argue that haole founders and leaders must first (a) fail forward and publicly earn their way through the support and blessing of others, and (b) found and lead an organization with the goal of empowering capacity within others to take over and lead, acknowledging that true realization of the organization's goals cannot be actualized without the

departure of the haole founder and leader. This balance will be considered the *how* and *why* of starting a public charter school as a haole in Hawai‘i. Some folks refer to commitment to a cause or a community or people as measured in number of years or not leaving; however, as it will be argued in this literature review, the point is not to stay and lead from the front. *Haole* founders and leaders must understand and respect, from the very beginning, that their time at the helm is temporary and finite, and they must lead knowing this so that they can actively build a culture, organization, and group of leaders who will take over as they transition away from the entity that they have founded, grown, led, and loved. This is a must if haole engagement and leadership is to remain part of the educational leadership landscape in Hawai‘i; haole leaders must not be seen as a long-term leadership pipeline, but rather as temporary, capacity-building collaborators that must eventually fall back and allow others to take the lead. This realization has to be agreed upon and internalized at the front end of the leadership journey, before they embark, so that their place and efforts are always transparent, and have a clear, understood expiration date. This may be hard to grasp and accept for those who are so passionate about a cause or a role or organization; still, haole founders and leaders must truly internalize their place and exit in order to be welcomed and accepted as collaborators here in Hawai‘i.

### **Framing the Literature Review**

The literature review is broken into two main components: *why* and *how*. The *why* section will describe the context and rationale for leadership, the importance of indigenous leadership and education models that are sensitive to the Native Hawaiian community within the public charter and public education space, and lessons and themes of white educators in communities of color. The *how* section examines literature and theory that focuses on failure and learning from mistakes, entrepreneurship and a start-up mentality, humility and what it takes to

earn the way forward, among other elements pertaining to education start-up in the Hawai‘i context.

This literature review will help design and conduct the overall dissertation with regard to methodology, data, analysis, and ultimately recommendations. The main conceptual categories in this literature review are purposeful and integrated so that they create a coherent review, summary, and path forward for this study.

The purpose of the review is to clearly, coherently integrate voices and sources of knowledge on the overall topic of this dissertation. The literature review will also dive deeply into key subtopics relating to this autoethnography, which will allow for the audience to fully grasp and consider the argument being made.

The conceptual categories relating to this autoethnography are generally outlined as follows: charter school start-up in Hawai‘i; Native Hawaiian education in the charter school space; white people in communities of color and indigenous communities; examples and microcosms of effective haole leadership and “leading to leave” mentality; lessons learned from such journeys that underscore the importance of this type of leadership; summary, implications, and moving forward.

### **Topics of Exploration**

This section is devoted to better understanding the two main areas being explored for this literature review, why these areas are so important to this autoethnography, and how they have shaped the journey being explored through this dissertation.

The first section will be devoted to the *why* around this autoethnography. This section explores the context of starting a charter school in Hawai‘i, in an indigenous community, as a haole outsider, and literature that supports approaching this in a culturally responsible and

respectful manner. This *why* section brings public charter schools in communities of color, and white or haole educators, into focus with examples of how this has worked in the past, how it has not worked, and lessons learned along the way that may inform more culturally sustaining practices. The section does not conclusively state how to start a charter or whether this is a positive or accepted practice more broadly, rather it establishes the backdrop for the very work that has taken place over the course of the last seven years.

The second section will focus on the *how* of building the actual organization and school. This section explores literature, theories, and concepts that mainly focus on entrepreneurship in an educational context and what it took to build a new, change-oriented initiative from the ground up. Similar to the first section, the *how* component of this literature review is not a “how-to” guide of starting a public charter school, but rather a compilation of the research, frameworks, concepts, theories, and thoughts that have driven the journey. This section is juxtaposed with the first part of this literature review as it has a more Western take on starting a school, and much of the literature comes from Western academic institutions and not necessarily the local, Native Hawaiian schools of thought and knowledge that guide the first section. The importance of this approach is that this very juxtaposition and diversity of thought is what has driven the growth and development of my journey as a founding school leader. The different sections explore these different diversities of thought and paint the hybrid world that I have lived in and lead through since the inception of this idea to start a charter school in November 2012.

## **The Why**

### ***Starting a Charter School in Hawai‘i.***

The truth is that it is extremely difficult to start a public charter school. The Governor’s Blueprint for Education states, “Our public charter schools will be recognized system-wide as

models of innovation and will be recognized through Board of Education policy for their role as incubators for diverse approaches to learning” (Governor’s ESSA Team, 2017, p.23). While this is an aspirational notion that is flattering to hear, charters are expected to do the same - or more, as far as innovation is concerned - with less. The per pupil funding amount for charters during the 2018-19 school year was just under \$7,500 (State of Hawai‘i Public Charter Commission); meanwhile, traditional Hawai‘i Department of Education district schools receive approximately \$13,750 per student (Omaye, 2019); mind you, there are many embedded costs and formulas that do not make this a direct, apples to apples comparison. However, the fact remains that charter schools receive less funding, less facilities support, and far less resources from the Legislature, Governor, and Board of Education than do traditional District of Education (DOE) public schools. What this essentially means is charter schools need to operate as typical state agencies that follow all of the same procedures and policies as other state departments, yet at the same time are expected to innovate and create new strategies in order to carve out an innovative pathway forward for public education in Hawai‘i, all against the backdrop of less funding, resources, etc.

The original charter school founders and leaders might tell you that charters were established in Hawai‘i as an alternative to the larger district options that existed, and that it was a very different charter landscape years ago when charters first began in Hawai‘i (Anonymous, 2018). The schools have always been seen as alternatives, but in many ways, they also served as beacons of hope and promise for a resurgence and emergence of cultural power and survival. The founding and leading of such a school, however, requires far more than what initially meets the eye, or what is listed in the application to start a school. The Hawai‘i State Public Charter School Commission (Charter Commission) website has a section titled “How To Start A School,” on

which page resources and information is posted (Charter Commission, 2019). This is an entry point to starting the process of creating a new state agency, but does not scratch the surface of the journey or actual requirements - personal, educational, intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, sacrificial - of beginning a new charter school.

In his book “Upstart Startup”, a personal chronicle of the life of a founding school leader (and teacher, at the same time), James Nehring discusses “Five Essentials” that serve as a broad formula for success for starting and leading a school (2002, p. 34). These essentials help inform the dispositions and qualities that must be found in a school leader. Nehring lists and discusses them as Clarity of Mission, Acknowledgement of Organizational Tensions, Tolerance of Ambiguity, Hiring for Resilience, and Maintaining Perspective (Nehring, 2002, p. 35). He does not argue that these skills alone will make a great school; however, familiarity in these areas will ensure a founding school leader can navigate the organizational and human resource complexities that encapsulate the founding years of a charter school.

On one hand, raw skill and ability to lead a school is critical to start-up. On the other, there is a deeper and more spiritual side to deep, authentic leadership and empowerment of other humans here in Hawai‘i. Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua talks about this in “The Seeds We Planted” as she discusses “self-determination” (2013, p. 91) and later “creating mana through student voices,” which are both main components of Hālau Kū Māna, a public charter school in Makiki (2013, p. 205). Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua does not specifically mention Nehring’s words, but surely clarity of mission, maintaining perspective, and resilience are fundamental elements to the story of Hālau Kū Māna. And while Nehring does not specifically call to elements of self-determination, he does speak heavily about democratization of education and the importance of voice from all; children seeing themselves and their lives in the educational journey through

public school. The intersection of a Boston-based, mainland charter school and a local, indigenous charter school is perhaps more simple and obvious than one might initially think. Leadership within ambiguous, changing environments with student autonomy and success in mind are principles that one can find in charters from New England to Honolulu.

The impact, however, is the creation of a new school. School's are similar to fire houses, banks, and post offices - they are pillars of communities. As a state agency, they often represent stability, trust, and the pathway that each member of the community must visit at some point. Perhaps this is why schools are so difficult to establish and create, especially in Hawai‘i - their sphere of influence is so much greater to generations of individuals and the effect on each community is as deep as it is lasting. Schools can be viewed as the epicenter for values development, brain development, and identity formation; perhaps this kuleana is far greater than initially understood by applicants and aspiring school founders.

### ***Indigenous-Serving Charter Schools***

Charter schools that serve indigenous populations often do so with a mission and purpose in mind that speaks to the indigenous people and community in which the school is located. The schools “have emerged in response to active suppression or, at the very least, benign neglect of Native cultural perspectives within the traditional Euro-centric public school curricula” (Fenimore-Smith, 2009, p. 2). Education did not begin with these charter schools; rather, the schools were designed and built in a manner that wove existing cultural teaching and practices into the public, state- and federally-funded charter schools. Within this specific charter school space, “many incorporate Native languages and promote pedagogical practices that are congruent with the culture of the target population” (Fenimore-Smith, 2009, p. 2). Charter schools were a



way to bring the education and teachings already happening in the community into the daily occurring, externally funded, ever-more required space of *education* - a school.

It is critical to highlight the importance of Native language, culture, and tradition taking center stage in the vision, mission, and purpose of a United States-government funded school. What these schools do is “allow Native people the freedom to tailor education as they see fit, including integrating language and culture into education experiences, and refocusing on specific learning needs of native students” (Nicotera, 2013). This way of thinking supports the 2018 National Indian Education Association report on sovereignty in education, with a specific section that focused on Creating Culturally-Based Charter Schools in Native Communities. These schools are built around a curriculum that begins with “the strengths and values within a child’s home community and then flows between the known and unknown” (National Indian Education Association [NIEA], 2018, p. 25). This notion of grounding within the home community, and specifically one that is grounded in Native ways and roots, is somewhat opposite from the approach of national, federal, and state-level policy being pushed from central offices out into schools and communities. A child- and community-first approach takes into consideration values, beliefs, culture, and tradition of the school community over that of the federal or state government.

In 2002, the Native Hawaiian Education Council (NHEC) produced a draft set of guidelines for culturally healthy and responsive learning environments alongside of Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani (College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo). The document was titled “Nā Honua Maoli Ola” (HMO):

Ke Kumu Honua Mauli Ola, a Hawaiian educational philosophy, is the cultural base for which the HMO guidelines have been developed. This philosophy speaks of the mauli as

the cultural heart and spirit of a people, and the fostering of one’s maui through three piko connections within the honua environment. (NHEC, et al., 2002, p.2)

This document provided guidelines for learners, educators, schools and institutions, families, and communities, as well as a recommendations section complete with 21 individual recommendations for aforementioned stakeholders and others interested in the contents of the framework. The final recommendation states “Make the HMO document available to all indigenous groups who request information” (NHEC, et al., 2002, p.43). These guidelines are made to be shared and promulgated in the hopes that stakeholders - individuals and institutions alike - will adopt their general, generative principles in the holistic design of learning and developmental spaces for children.

Indigenous-serving charter schools share similar instructional and school culture parameters as well, given that a culture, language, and protocol are often at the center of instructional and school design. A 2002 working paper between NHEC and Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani brings into working form the key tenets of cultural healthy and responsive learning environments in the form of general guidelines. These guidelines span learners, educators, schools and institutions, families, and communities. For example, a primary guideline for learners is to “incorporate cultural traditions, language, history, and values in meaningful, holistic processes to nourish the emotional, physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of the learning community that promote healthy maui and mana” (NHEC, et al., 2002).

Standardized test scores, national comparisons, state-to-state trends, or federal policy do not serve as the core in cultural healthy and responsive learning environments; these United States-centric elements of public education land opposite the spiritual, emotional, and cultural well-being guidelines highlighted in this report.

*White Educators, Power, and Privilege*

Common to Western models of education is the type of performance-driven mindset that is focused on quantifiable, measurable, comparable outcomes to a standard, set, fixed point. This is not necessarily anti-indigenous, but it is not supportive of or culturally responsive to the types of learners that come from non-Western backgrounds. The term “reform” comes to mind when considering how many educators view improvement; the act of “reforming” a school is essentially to make changes to improve outcomes. However, as authors Valerie Lee and Douglas Ready point out in their book “Schools Within Schools,” these changes are not often designed with the student population in mind.

Very few schools consciously create experiences for their students that are associated with race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. How our schools are organized—to meet the differing needs of different students—is chiefly meant to address differences in student performance, rather than race, class, or gender. (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 157)

Often, schools create reform or improvement initiatives with outcomes in mind, and do not take into consideration the race, gender, or socioeconomic circumstances that serve as key influencing factors in the success of such initiatives. This is a very Western, top-down, managerial approach to improving academic outcomes, specifically math and reading, for all.

White educators also carry with them a privilege that is both seen and unseen. Maggie Potapchuk describes four separate types of privilege in her 2005 case study called “What Is White Privilege?” The four types of privilege examined: individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional (Potapchuk, 2005, p. 54). These privileges weave together to create the lens that many white folks, in particular white educators in communities of color, look at the world through each day; their world. This creates a dissonance between the teacher and student, or

educator and parent, as white educators operate from a place of “accumulated advantage” as Potapchuk calls it (p. 59) and live from a place of embedded, accepted privilege and beneficial circumstance.

Many white educators are not equipped with the tools or mindsets to unpack the privileged existence they subconsciously live every day. While people of color likely walk through a world that imposes upon them their race on a daily basis, white people - and white educators, specifically - do not necessarily have to come face to face with their racial biases, privilege, or advantage, unless this privilege comes face to face with them. Professor and practitioner Dr. Robin DiAngelo discusses the concept of “White Fragility” in her 2011 work focusing on racial stress and how white folks deal with such a concept. She says:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. These interruptions can take a variety of forms and come from a range of sources. (2011, p. 57)

Not only do white educators face the challenging tasks of unpacking and dissecting their privilege when entering into and practicing in communities of color, but they also have to comprehend, interpret, and navigate the feelings, emotions, and behaviors they display once their racial equilibrium becomes unbalanced. This challenge, however, can also be viewed as a requirement, a prerequisite, in order to engage as a practitioner in communities of color.

While egregious acts of privilege and bias are perhaps easier to address, there is a complexity in addressing the nuances of privilege and naiveté. White educators in communities of color often take on a savior complex that they might believe justifies words or actions that might otherwise be considered offensive. Consider the concept of a “white knight” or white missionary, both intending to “do good,” but in fact, might employ silencing, controlling tactics along the way. Consider Jona Olsson’s work titled “Detour-spotting for white anti-racists” which calls attention to various acts of justification, deflecting, and control.

It is a racist, paternalistic assumption that well meaning white people know what’s best for people of color. Decisions, by white people, are made on behalf of people of color, as though they were incapable of making their own. This is another version of “blame the victim” and “white is right.” It places the problems at the feet of people of color, and the only “appropriate” solutions with white people. Once more the power of self-determination is taken from people of color. Regardless of motive, it is still about white control. (Olsson, 1997, p.4)

Of importance here is the concept of power and self-determination, and where the ultimate decision-making and direction is determined. White educators often do not realize that many of their good intentions are fraught with privilege, paternalism, and power.

Olsson’s work details eighteen common detours that individuals take away from what Olsson refers to as “our anti-racist journey” (1997, p. 2). The detours are listed in straightforward, non-apologetic language that is also accompanied by a brief reality check and consequence section that expands upon the negative impact of the listed actions and non-actions. One is someone stating that they are “colorblind” (Olsson, 1997, p. 2) or the assumption that all people are the same. Olsson goes on to unpack the assumption and privilege in a statement such

as this, as it implies that all people receive and live through the same systemic privilege and opportunity that whites do; this is the crux of the statement and term. Another is an approach that Olsson refers to as the “Teach Me, Please” approach (1997, p.6), which is when a white person puts the onus of learning and understanding how to live as an anti-racist on a person of color. Olsson points out that white people have always grown up in and lived in a society that has been racist, and that skills and learnings have been to maintain power and privilege. Essentially, society has never been non-racist. Olsson (1997) states, “For white people living in North America learning to be anti-racist is a re-education process. We must unlearn our thorough racist conditioning to re-educate and re-condition ourselves as anti-racists” (p. 1). White folks exhibit these tendencies in their lives when challenges around race, privilege, or power come in the way of their anti-racist journey.

There are other powerful works of literature that detail the depth and lasting impact of power and oppression on marginalized communities. In “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Paulo Freire describes the oppression of people of color and minority individuals, and discusses the impact of generations of discrimination. To unpack, and to change conditions, power must not be consolidated. Freire discusses power and the importance of not taking “full power” in order to mobilize a group (Freire, 1968, p.86). This concept of sharing power, or co-empowering, is important. If power is “given,” then it does not originate or is not generated from within. In fact, the act of giving someone power can still be contextualized as a disempowering act, as the power is potentially seen as something to be bestowed upon another by the initial power holder; this is not true power and this is not “empowerment.” Layer this concept with Olsson’s notions of self-determination; the “self-” in self-determination originates from within. There can be co-

determining and a sharing of how one arrives as self-determination, but the origin and beginning of this self-fulfilling must begin within one’s self, and not be given to or bestowed upon.

With regard to power, there is a difference in power as it has always been viewed, and power as it is in the 21st century. The difference between old power and new power is succinctly described in a 2014 Harvard Business Review article titled “Understanding ‘New Power.’”

Old power works like currency. It is held by few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, and the powerful have a substantial store of it to spend. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It downloads, and it captures. New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it (Heimans & Timms, 2014).

Indeed, old power is power in its most traditional, non-empowering form. As is described, it is hoarded and stored, for use on others who do not have it, or as much of it. New power is true co-empowerment in the sense that it flows and is made by many - in fact, people can create and generate their own power. In the context of white people and educators in communities of color, this lesson on power is an important one. It is humbling and for some, a humiliating experience. For some, it is the first time that privilege and power is stripped; it is the first time that whiteness works against them; and for some, is the essential starting point for a journey of service, partnership, co-empowerment, and *new power*.

### ***Haole Educators in Indigenous Communities***

Many white, haole educators may have the best of intentions when interacting with and seeking to impact an indigenous education space; yet, their mere presence has the potential to affect the autonomy and indigeneity of the space or program. Their voice, face, skin color, and

image they bring with them can, and often does, shake the equilibrium that an affinity space provides for members of a group. Dr. Julie Kaomea discusses this concept at length in a 2009 piece called, “Contemplating Kuleana,” written for the Aotearoa-based journal *ALTERNATIVE*. She states that “truly supportive non-indigenous participants in indigenous educational programmes will understand, and even anticipate, what it is their place to step forward, step back, or step out” (Kaomea, 2009, p.79). The notion of *anticipation* when it comes to non-indigenous participation and interaction with indigenous programming is interesting; it is as if Kaomea suggests that forward-thinking as an exit strategy will better facilitate and transition the impact that non-indigenous participants might bring, and actually help them in the short- and long-term. Kaomea also highlights, “cautionary tales of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which even well-intended, non-indigenous newcomers to indigenous education programmes can change a program with their dominant styles of interaction and participation” (2009, p.81). This theory is played out every day in classrooms and education spaces across the Hawaiian Islands given the mix of haole and non-indigenous educators and leaders in Hawai‘i public schools. And even though there may always be *some* level of non-indigenous participation in public education in Hawai‘i, the understanding and acceptance of kuleana is a critical component in the journey of coming to make an impact, making an impact, and then stepping aside. Dr. Kaomea highlights this acceptance by suggesting the following:

Ultimately, non-Hawaiians seeking positions for themselves or their children in Hawaiian educational programmes, whether they are vying for positions on a Hawaiian educational programme enrolment list or vying for a teacher’s attention in a Hawaiian-language, parent-participation preschool classroom, should continually ask themselves:



- What is my place in this setting?
- What is my role or kuleana here? And
- Is this the time and place for me to step forward... to step back... or to step out? (2009, p.95)

This final notion of stepping forward, stepping back, and stepping out is as much about anticipation as it is about accepting kuleana. Dr. Kaomea states, “we must determine our own destiny” (2009, p.92). This seems like a call to both indigenous educators - the “we” - and non-indigenous educators to understand the context, determining factors, importance of thoughtful, respectful, and anticipatory participation.

In 2013, an aspiring school founder in New Mexico stood in front of a group of elders and community members in a Native community. The aspiring school founder was white, and not from the community. As he spoke with the crowd, he said, “In 10 years if I am still the leader of this school, I have done something wrong” (Anonymous, 2013). It was not that he did not *want* to be the school leader in 10 years; his heart and passion was completely invested in the school’s vision, mission, and purpose. However, he knew that he had a limited, short-term role to play in the school’s founding, early leadership, and growth. If his leadership did not build a solid team and succession of leaders, either former students, parents, or community leaders, then he would have failed his overall purpose and mission, which was to co-lead an effort to build an enduring educational institution that would empower indigenous children. As a white leader in an indigenous community, he saw his work and his role as a co-founder and co-leader as a means to an end, but not *as* the end; his end would signify a transition and true lifting up of the people, community, and children that he loved. He had to “step back” and “step out”

(Kaomea, 2009) in order to live his vision and prove his words. Leaving was his final act and the only way to end his run as leader in a truly authentic way.

The issue of white practitioners in indigenous communities has been a topic of discussion and debate for decades. In 2000, Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson co-authored the book "Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage" which highlights topics from European ethnocentrism to religious paradoxes, cultural property, and constitutional reform. They state that "the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography impose rational patterns of human behavior in the same way that science imposes general paradigms on observed events" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 30). The same might be stated for public education, in that rational patterns - as determined by the dominant group in society - are applied to justify human behavior towards a non-dominant group; this justification is an act of power and a way that white educators and practitioners keep their viewpoints, ideas, rationalizations, and thinking extremely close to the knowledge and heritage that is being protected from them.

The process, then, becomes a critical element in whether or not cultural imposition is taking place, or practitioners are merely studying and engaging with another culture without the intention or affect that has so often been imposed by white, non-indigenous educators. "Research institutes, universities, and funding bodies must work creatively to find ways to strengthen the local communities' capacity to do their own research on their own terms" (Max, 2005, p. 87). This sentiment changes the role of a researcher to become someone who builds research capacity and supports the process, instead of being the lens and interpreter of the subject of study. In education, this might look like a teacher who shifts from viewing themselves as the key source of knowledge

and power to becoming a supporting, encouraging, guiding role instead. There is a change in power and dynamic that shifts practitioners from capacity-holders to capacity-builders.

***Federal, Haole Influence in Indigenous Communities: A Long History***

A similarity of federally-backed public schools affecting indigenous children exists between Hawai'i and Indian Board Schools of the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds. While there are over 100 years between then and now, the systematic and institutional implementation of public education from a federal standpoint still has impacts on child, family, home, and community.

Although federal legislation mandated compulsory school for American Indians, children could not be taken off reservations without “the full consent” of their parents. How consent was obtained at times amounted to pure coercion, even violence. At some reservations, quotas were set in terms of numbers of children to be enrolled in boarding schools, with Indian policemen giving the details of deciding which children would be sent from which family (Fenimore-Smith, 2001, p. 2-3).

This practice may have been devised in the eighteen hundreds, but it is still carrying itself out today. There are local, state, and federal policies setting attendance and truancy requirements for children, regardless of their ethnic or racial background, to attend state public schools if they are on land that had been claimed or annexed by the United States. There are numerical requirements and targets (“quotas”) set by local, state, and federal officials that determine where a child will go to school, and for how long. Western vaccinations are mandatory. Lastly, parents are to consent and give their permission for children to go to these public schools. Again, while nearly 100 years has

passed since the Indian Boarding Schools were in full effect, the system and policies governing children growing up in the United States, regardless of their racial, ethnic, or cultural background, are required to, at a minimum, attend a state- and federally-backed and mandated education program.

This is not to say there are not dissenters and innovators within the system. The article mentions, “beloved educators, such as Ellen Deloria (Lakota) and Ruth Bronson (Cherokee), made life more bearable. ‘Ruth and Ellen listened to us. They were interested in what we thought... They taught us that we could accomplish anything we set our minds to...’ recalled Esther Horne” (Fenimore-Smith, 2001, p.4). These kinds of educators and influencers made personal connections with students, and gave them authentic attention and encouragement; these sorts of educators are critical in a system that may have evolved, but largely remains similar to what it once was.

Haole school leaders who know their true place and purpose will realize that they cannot be forever; that their presence and work has an expiration date. They can be remembered and appreciated, thanked and built upon; however, their presence and leadership within the school setting must be finite in order to provide the true space and opportunity for individuals who truly belong and must lead. Haole leaders must know this going into indigenous education settings, into communities that are not theirs, into positions of power and influence - that their time is not forever, nor was it ever meant to be.

### ***White Leaders Stepping Back and Out to Create Space for Leaders of Color***

In 2013, Teach For America founder and the face of the organization, Wendy Kopp, announced that she would step down from her role as CEO and take an active role on the board

of the organization (Teach For America, 2013). The board opted to elect two new CEOs - Matt Kramer, a White man, and Elisa Villanueva-Beard, a Latina woman. Each had experience in running different aspects of the organization and the co-CEO model would ensure a smooth transition of leadership. Soon after, Villanueva-Beard became the sole CEO of Teach For America, signifying the first time that a woman of color would be the leader, head, and face of Teach For America.

This transition was monumental for an organization committed to building leaders of color through a national teaching corps and a non-profit organization committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The transition of leadership and the importance of seeing the whole are more important than individuals was captured in Wendy Kopp's May 2019 commencement address to students of the University of California at Berkeley. Kopp said:

Collective leadership asks diverse groups to maximize their differences, rather than be immobilized by them. It encourages us to come together to speak, listen, reflect, understand the whole picture, develop shared vision for the future and generate new solutions. Collective leadership recognizes that our power is so much stronger than my power. (2019)

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is as much about the people and demographics in the room as it is about who is leading, and how. Having people of color on staff is not enough; people from disadvantaged backgrounds, historically oppressed people, marginalized groups - whites leaders must settle if they find themselves atop the organizational hierarchy, directing and managing people of color. Kopp says as much through her words on collective leadership in which she deeply believes as she left her organization's top post as a strategic, symbolic, and equity-driven move that brought new, diverse leadership to the forefront.

There is value in this strategy in the short run, as it will likely earn an organization positive press with regard to diversity, and others will point to this person or organization as an active example of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But, the real justice of this move comes in the long-term. With white leaders stepping aside, or stepping out, the leadership and vision moves into the hands of the very individuals who have been affected in the first place, for good. When we talk about systemic change - real change - this pivot at a leadership level is as important as any other hiring, firing, or strategic move an organization can make. White leaders must step aside to provide growth and leadership opportunities for people from marginalized groups and disadvantaged circumstances. This is when the leadership, the work, comes full circle.

### **The How**

#### ***How: The Humbling Journey of Starting a School***

Whereas part one of this literature review was the *why* behind this journey, part two is the *how*. The humbling, scrappy, life-changing road has been one of ups and downs, twists and turns. At times, it is easy to question oneself and think: can I do this? Is this what my life was meant to be? But, the lessons of this journey have been the chapters, and as each page turns, a new, blank, fresh story is yet to be written. This section describes the ups and downs, the doubts, the failures, lessons, and inspiration that was found, and generated, in order to get to today.

#### ***Discipline for Passion, Failure, and the Journey***

In her 2019 Oscar acceptance speech, Lady Gaga (real name: Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta) said that talent and opportunity was not enough, that one must have a “discipline for passion” (Germanotta, 2019). This concept is a true x-factor for individuals who are driven beyond fame, fortune, or glory. To pursue passion and purpose, there must be a true sense of

discipline to live in and live through that passion on a daily basis, through the grind, through the ups and downs, and especially through failures that will inevitably arise.

Failure, itself as a concept, can be scary. For so many years, we were taught that failure is the end, failure is a loss, and failure is something to be ashamed of. But there is something about passion and failure that merge to create a new, developmental space for growth. Bill George (2015) calls these “Crucibles of Leadership” and sees them as essential moments of the journey of a leader. In his 2015 work *Discover Your True North*, George discusses crucible moments as difficult to see when you are in them, however they are key moments of your leadership journey that give you the opportunity to believe in yourself, against all odds, and to summon the strength and courage to persist and succeed. This is discipline, purpose, passion, and commitment all wrapped into one.

A close relative of failure is fear. The fear of failure can be crippling, and it can stop most journeys before they even begin. *How many people have not tried something in their life due to a fear of failure?* It is a fear of failing, and it is a fear of feeling the hurt that is associated with fear, failing, and experiencing life differently than imagined.

In Paulo Coelho’s classic tale, “The Alchemist,” there is a pivotal exchange between the main character and protagonist - *the boy* - and the wise, old sage that he comes across in the desert - *the alchemist*. The two are having a discussion about people being afraid to chase their dreams, because they may never achieve them or if and when they do, they may not be what they had initially imagined, which causes a sense of fear and the thought of pain. The boy says to the alchemist, “My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer” (Coelho, 1993, p. 130), to which the alchemist responds, in one of the most impactful exchanges of the entire book:

Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity. (Coelho, 1993, p. 130)

No one line has had a greater impact on my journey to become a school leader over the past seven years. Coelho writes this story to free folks from their own fears and their own doubts, and to explain that when searching for your dream, when living your passion, when believing in yourself - these are actually the moments that create the dream in the first place. In the parallel of a journey to become a school leader, it is as if the school would not exist without the journey to find and create the school; without that journey, there could be no school.

### ***Failure Momentum***

Failure is an interesting concept in the context of education and entrepreneurship. From a strict academic standpoint, failure is almost counterintuitive. Failure is an F; failure is not passing the grade; failure is the opposite of success. However, in the 1970's, an academic by the name of Carol Dweck began studying human motivation and mastery among school children, and after decades of research and publication, the "Growth Mindset" is one of the most ubiquitous terms in education (Dweck, 2007). At a glance, Dweck juxtaposes *fixed vs. growth* mindsets, essentially highlighting the importance of growth and progress over just the arrival at a fixed destination. The two different mindsets respond to and engage with obstacles, challenges, successes, and failures in completely different ways.

A growth mindset welcomes challenges as opportunities to learn; the mindset highlights obstacles as important learning steps towards mastery and understanding of a concept, while highlighting the skills and dispositions developed through the mindset and approach, as opposed to skills and dispositions developed by reaching a destination.



One way to harness the growth mindset and the idea that challenges and obstacles are in fact the way forward, is to look at examples of how constant learning and taking small steps towards success was actually the way forward from the very start. In the 2011 book “Little Bets” by Peter Sims, the company Pixar is lifted up as an example of an organization that has had to make incredible adaptations and changes to the way they approach technical design, budget, and the creation of animated movies. From budget challenges to timelines, and even employees developing carpal tunnel due to working so many hours in the studio developing animations, Pixar leader Ed Catmull said, “The measure is how we respond to the crises as they happen. We have to be comfortable being uncomfortable” (Sims, 2011, p. 45). Finding comfort in discomfort is one of the cardinal lessons of entrepreneurship and startup, as well as priming oneself for the emotional stress and weight that often accompanies failure. The entrepreneurial and life journey that unfolds for people is the most important part, and not necessarily the checkered flag at the end. Why get to an end point? Why arrive? Imagine the person that sets a plan, is not challenged, and arrives at their destination. What stories do they have to tell? What lessons have they learned?

In 1910, President Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech in Sorbonne, France. His words have become posters and mottos for a century. They also lived on my bathroom mirror for over two years and I would read them every single day, when the journey was the darkest, when the noise was loudest, to remind myself that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort

without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Roosevelt, 1910)

When I read these words, I feel affirmed and challenged at the same time; supported and called into “the arena,” where I belong. The work that is starting a public charter school is the arena, and part of the *how* is knowing that you are actually in the arena, right where you are supposed to be.

Academic and creative mind Richard Buchanan conceptualized the idea of *Design Thinking* in the 1990's as a thinking protocol that encourages iteration and change within the design process. Whereas the design of a final product is often perceived to be perfect (i.e. market ready, consumer facing), in order to get to this place, dozens (if not hundreds, thousands) of iterations must be attempted. The iPod was not created by one attempt; Pixar movies and animations were not drawn once; it is this idea that supports the notion that making mistakes is actually a key component to progress. This is the concept of failing forward.

American author John Maxwell wrote a book in 2000 called *Failing Forward*. There is one chapter in the book called “Take a Risk: There's no Other Way to Fail Forward” (Maxwell, 2000, p. 123). In this chapter, Maxwell says, “risk must be evaluated not by the fear it generates in you or the probability of your success, but by the value of the goal” (Maxwell, 2000, p. 124). No truer words could be stated about the evaluation of starting a public charter school in Hawai'i - if you evaluate a failed attempt by the fear of not opening after all of the pieces that are set in motion, or in probability in terms of the number of schools that do not get chartered, the ones

that close, or the steep odds at operating successfully, the numbers just do not add up to launch, grow, and run a new charter school. However, if the value of the goal is the driving light, and this defines the journey to open the school, then it is worth it every single minute of every single day. You have to believe in it that much.

And yet, risk and failing are not terms that are typically associated with state agencies and education; but these two concepts are, in fact, key to rich, authentic learning experiences. Failing is not the end all be all, unless it is. If one fails and sees that as the end, then it is. However, if failure is seen in isolation, and is reimagined as a moment of learning, as momentum for learning, it is one of the most powerful - and necessary - experiences for founders, entrepreneurs, and leaders. Failure can open doors of learning and experience that success cannot. You have to trust this; you have to believe this.

### **11th Hour Momentum: Getting Across the Finish Line.**

There is a balance in educational entrepreneurship and start-up that is as elusive and perplexing as it is frustrating. It is the balance of being the “squeaky wheel,” but not the “fly in the ointment.” This balance is struck with delicacy and care. Come on too strong and you waste any social and political capital you might have had; don’t do enough and you are forgotten and deprioritized. The work is as much about the hard numbers and business as it is about a human, personal call to action; an appeal of the heart. Sometimes, you can only appeal to the right people at the right time, which to me, became the “11th hour” - a time when the hourglass is running low on sand, you are on the edge of failure, and you need people to come together with energy and influence at the exact, right moment, just before the finish line.

John Kotter calls this strategy to increase urgency the “winning hearts and minds” strategy (2008, p.57). Kotter’s theory on urgency is grounded in being able to hone in on,

establish, build, and maintain a sense of urgency within your work; always. Specifically, the work of winning over one’s heart deals in “using tactics that communicate not only needs, but emotionally compelling needs,” which provide a personal and heartfelt entry point to a moment of challenge or obstacle (Kotter, 2008, p. 57). This emotional entry point is especially exacerbated in times of crises, which is where Kotter asserts that opportunity can be found.

While many people avoid the discomfort and pain that comes with various crises, if they can be managed, they can in fact create and facilitate critical opportunities. Kotter does mention, however, that “assuming that crises inevitably will create the sense of urgency needed to perform better” is a mistake, as is “going over the line with a strategy that creates an angry backlash” (2008, p. 136-137). Crises can be managed to be opportunities, but can also turn into disaster. It is this fine line, this balance, that must be struck in order to continue the momentum and urgency generated at the end of the road, end of a chapter, and right before the entire train comes off the tracks (you can pick one of the dozens of metaphors for this situation). The 11th hour is truly when momentum was generated, when deals were done, and where this charter school project was born. The project, and problem, has to mature and incubate, ripen, enough to get the attention of the very people who can solve it; too early, and you haven’t put in the work. Too late, and, well, too late. The 11th hour is the time when the critical momentum is generated. It is the scariest, most dangerous place to be; but, it is also the most necessary.

### ***Earning Your Way***

In addition to being disciplined, failing forward, and gaining the momentum that often comes when deadlines are close and anxiety is high, is a humility and approach to the work that you do that is grueling, grinding, and earned. In one aspect, to earn something is to be wholly

justified and worthy of owning or being entitled to it; you have earned it. There is honor and integrity in earning something.

In the book “Shantaram,” author Gregory David Roberts discusses earning his future as he recaps a conversation he had with a group of people in a small, Mumbai tea bar in the mid-90’s. Roberts quotes a girl he is in love with, Karla:

I think we all, each one of us, we all have to *earn* our future,’ she said slowly. ‘I think the future is like anything else that’s important. It has to be earned. If we don’t earn it, we don’t have a future at all. And if we don’t earn it, if we don’t deserve it, we have to live in the present, more or less forever. Or worse, we have to live in the past. (2003, p. 195)

The concept of earning your future, of having to earn it to deserve it, is very applicable in the world of entrepreneurship and education, especially in the context of a project that is so passion- and purpose-driven. The progress from vision to reality is often one of earning; earning is deserving, and to be worthy of earning a reality, one must invest all of themselves into their purpose, passion, and project. Earning your way forward is humbling; it is the pathway that one must take to fully be worthy of the outcome of their journey. To deserve the future means you will not live - or be stuck in - the present or past.

### ***Being the Journey***

The journey to starting a public charter school has moments of intense loneliness and confusion; moments of excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty all swirling around like a storm, often leaving you in an uninhabited, barren space between where you are now and the vision that you have for a different reality. Brené Brown calls this the wilderness. In her book titled, “Braving the Wilderness,” Brown closes:

The price is high, the reward is great... there will be times when standing alone feels too hard, too scary, and we'll doubt our ability to make it through the uncertainty. Someone, somewhere will say, 'don't do it, you don't have what it takes to survive the wilderness.'

This is when you reach deep into your wild heart and remind yourself: I am the wilderness. (Brown, 2018, p. 208)

Brown's work, for years, has centered on vulnerability, empathy, fear, and other emotions and other characteristics that are not often - in the mainstream - associated with leadership and courage. Her work has uncovered blind spots in leaders around the world, and has encouraged people to follow their hearts and become one with their own journey and purpose. The quote "I am the wilderness" closes a book about finding one's voice, which is quintessential on a journey to begin a new school centered squarely on a vision. Being the journey means to completely give oneself to the vision, values, and belief of the work, and in the case of Brown, "the wilderness." This act, as Brown argues, allows for one to be freed from the doubts and fears of others, and become the journey that is leading them closer and closer to their true purpose, which is living a vulnerable, free life of authenticity and truth. This is essential to beginning a charter school in the Hawaiian islands, where authenticity and truth are about the only currencies that matter before the school is launched. You are nothing more than your word. Your promise is everything.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

The conceptual framework that has emerged from this literature review is broken into a 2 x 2 that essentially codes data as "how" data or "why data," and further categorizes artifacts into "headwind" and "tailwind" buckets.

<b>Conceptual Framework 2x2</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>Why</b>
<b>Headwinds</b>		
<b>Tailwinds</b>		

Essentially the conceptual framework will be used to organize findings, analyze, interpret, and bring overall meaning to the myriad of qualitative data that will be selected for the purposes of this study, and break this data out into four major categories. This categorization will allow me to directly address the essential question driving this literature review.

### **Bringing it all Together**

This literature review was broken out into two major conceptual categories: *Why* and *How*. The primary goal of orienting the review of literature around these two themes was to examine documents, artifacts, and academic work that pertains to haole educators in communities they are not from, doing educational and leadership work, and the effects - both positive and negative - that come with such work. The literature brings together the contextual backdrop of chartering and indigenous-serving public schools in the Hawaiian Islands with the culture and tradition that deeply affects education across the Hawaiian Islands.

The literature review then pivots inwards to examine white, haole leaders in the context of education and leadership in Hawai‘i, and the various challenges - and opportunities - that come with such a dynamic. Literature that examines white leaders in communities of color, stories of integration and acceptance, as well as stories of struggle and challenge highlight the journey that one goes on when seeking to begin a community-serving and community-affecting institution such as a school. The *why* section concludes with a critical topic of white leaders stepping back in their leadership role to create space and truly honor the authentic, diverse perspectives of community members and leaders. This notion is the cornerstone of the

autoethnography and ultimately the north star for the personal leadership journey that will be more deeply examined in chapters to come.

From here, the *how* focuses on the changes and disposition of mind, heart, and soul that are necessary in order to travel on this journey. Literature, quotes, speeches, and material that focuses on discipline, passion, commitment, and belief are the core elements that undergird the work that has taken place personally in this process. Two big areas of focus and examination are (1) failure and its importance in the process of earning the way towards a charter school launch, and (2) the increase of energy and project momentum as critical and project-destroying deadlines get closer (11th hour momentum). Lastly, stories and lessons around humility and becoming part of the process, actually seeing the journey as the work itself, close a portion of this literature review that has come to define this charter school project.

Linking *how* and *why* through a review of literature has made a significant impact on the way I look back upon my journey. Every day I sit in *how* and *why*; if there is no *why*, I do not know *how* - if I can't figure out *how*, it is harder for me to sustainably live my *why*. This review of literature, concepts, insights, wisdom, and similar experiences has now set the stage for my methodological approach to review, collect, analyze, and synthesize data from years and years of being on the journey to starting a public charter school in the Hawaiian Islands. It is on this foundation that the next steps of this autoethnographic journey continue.



## Methodology

### Introduction & Overview

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the journey of starting a public charter school in Hawai‘i through autoethnography.

The methodology chapter is organized in alignment with Bloomberg and Volpe’s Roadmap for Developing Methodology Chapter: Necessary Elements as laid out in “Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation” (2008, p. 67). Beginning with a sample of research and the information informing my research questions, the chapter will offer a complete overview of design, methods, approach to data analysis and synthesis, and address various ethical, credibility, and limitation issues that will affect this autoethnography.

The research lends itself to this qualitative, autoethnographical approach because this research has been lived; it is part of my life’s history; it is part of my lived experience. This approach is most appropriate for inquiry because the inquiry is looking back into authentic, real-life, lived events that have occurred. The events and context surrounding this research project topic have unfolded over a number of years in a genuine, original, raw manner that have produced a narrative that has yet to be examined and explored in a detailed, purposeful, methodical manner. Returning to the past seven years to search for broader, deeper meaning, in conjunction with cultural, political, social, and other meanings and understandings will allow for the generation of a narrative that is analytically, synthetically, and authentically recreated. Again, this dissertation focuses on the journey *to* start a public charter school, not the operation of or growth of the school. Everything in this dissertation comes from before the school actually begins.

The strengths of approaching this dissertation as a qualitative inquiry, through autoethnography, are many. Primarily, the unique stories and complexity that exists within many of these artifacts can be more deeply explored by investigating the qualitative and complex nature of each artifact, without the emphasis on solving a problem or binding the journey into a concise study. The nature of the artifacts involved - transcripts, e-communication, applications, reports, journaling, and associated documents - require analysis and synthesis that seeks to capture intent, meaning, and room for interpretation; the entire dissertation is a reexamination and exploration of a lived experience - it is a story that must be told through words.

### **Research Sample**

The research sample is a vast compilation of documents, e-communication, applications, reports, pictures, recordings, transcripts, and other pieces of data that serve as the artifacts for this dissertation. These artifacts have been compiled over the course of a seven year journey of starting a public charter school in Hawai'i. The sample includes, but is not limited to:

- Founding documents and strategic materials compiled prior to and throughout planning the architecture of the charter school;
- All internal e-communication between founding team members (school, non-profit, advisors, donors, stakeholders);
- Charter application documents, reports, and communication associated with chartering process;
- Personal conversations;
- Meeting notes, reflections, and documentation;
- Journal;
- Pictures, frameworks, and abstract items representing elements of the charter school;

- Personal notes and feedback;
- Adversity and challengers.

The pool from which these artifacts are drawn is designed using the following inclusion criteria:

- Between November 2012 - Present;
- Contain language, reference to, or direct connection with starting a public charter school in Hawai‘i;
- Official documents associated with the charter school commission and application cycle;
- Team communication;
- Ongoing dissertation journal.

The selection of the research sample is bound to these artifacts within the aforementioned inclusion criteria because of their relationship to the journey of starting this charter school. The questions that were asked to guide selection of data from the hundreds of information-rich exchanges, presentations, reflections, and documents that hold immense amounts of qualitative data and information are as follows:

- Does this information pertain to or create a heightened awareness of any given situation?
- Is this information “potent?” (i.e. does it have power, influence, or effect on this story)
- Does this information have chronological or time-sensitive importance with relation to Charter School Commission deadlines, milestones, or action items?
- Does this information generate, or have the potential to generate, momentum with regard to our work?
- Is this information related to or oriented around a “roadblock” or challenge that we are facing as a charter school start-up operation?

Using the questions above as a screening tool allows me to pore over thousands of data points to sample only those pieces of information that are pertinent to the focus of this dissertation and autoethnography. This sampling strategy allows the autoethnography to take form through examining and exploring the world of artifacts that has created the evidential basis of this journey.

### **Setting**

The setting of this research is primarily the island of O‘ahu, and specifically the community of ‘Ewa Beach - predominantly Filipino and part-Native Hawaiian, generations of families that have ties to plantation and pre-plantation eras, and home to some of the oldest *mo‘olelo* about the early, early voyagers and settlers of these islands (Hoakalei Foundation, 2014). This community serves as the backdrop for and start-up location for the charter school. However, the journey to get to ‘Ewa Beach and the charter school included many other places, communities, schools, and locations of interest. Because this autoethnography is a story of the journey to start the school, that story weaves together various settings. The following are the primary settings that drastically impact and affect the autoethnographic experience:

- ‘Ewa Beach, HI
- Honolulu, HI
- Cambridge, MA
- Northampton, MA

It is within these settings and spaces that the autoethnography experience was born, and that the journey of starting this school unfolded. From community to academic spaces, Charter Commission meetings to the State Capitol, and all the way back to my original hometown of

Northampton, Massachusetts, the pillars of the charter application were conceived, written, edited, denied, accepted, and lived.

Beyond physical settings, there are spaces that do not necessarily pertain to exact location, but rather space in the notion that they hold and have different meanings and require different thinking and interaction. For example, the Campbell-Kapolei complex is an ecosystem of district schools and administrators that focus on upholding the traditional Department of Education (DOE). In contrast, the charter school community may serve and lead from within the complex, but the conversation surrounding charters is very different than that of the traditional DOE, although both eventually fall under the Board of Education (BOE). Conversations, thinking, and lived experience within DOE spaces is very different than charter spaces, even though this may be taking place in the same geographic location.

Another example is the summers that I spent writing elements of the charter school in my original hometown of Northampton, Massachusetts. Located 5,800 miles from the eventual charter school community (‘Ewa Beach), Northampton served as the backdrop for dozens of official documents and hundreds of pages of strategy, theory, and elements of the charter school. Every morning amidst a quiet, hipster coffee shop in my old hometown, I sat and wrote about the levers of this charter school that would bring to life our vision and reality. The connection between where I was from, and what I saw in the future was never as powerful as it was from those coffee shop mornings, and many of the elements lived in the charter school today come from a small, rural, farm town nearly 6,000 miles away from our founding site.

Lastly, the setting of this study and autoethnography is a setting of opportunity. What I mean by this is that our charter school plan was not developed in the context of a saturated charter school market or schools that are doing the things that our mission aspires to achieve.

Our setting, perhaps non-physical in nature, is a setting or opportunity and what could be, which in and of itself creates a new frontier of possibility for our school to explore. It is a meta-physical setting at the intersection of vision and hope, and space where imagination, opportunity, possibility, and optimism combine to create our platform on which we launch this school.

The site was selected primarily because members of the founding team felt educationally and emotionally connected to the children and families of the ‘Ewa Beach community. Many of the founding team members had thoughts or were currently teaching or serving in ‘Ewa Beach public schools, and many of their personal educational journeys had begun through the Teach For America (TFA) program. TFA is a teacher leadership and development program that focuses very heavily on equity and justice for children who are caught in a larger system; the program helped instill in each of the founding team members aspirations of educational equity, empowerment for our children, and justice for those being left behind. Had it not been for this program, I likely never would have come to Hawai‘i, and might never have been involved with public education; TFA gave me my start, and has instilled in me the fire and drive that fuels me today. Given the opportunity within Campbell-Kapolei schools, the formative teaching experience of the founding members, the commonality of TFA within the group, and the commitment to the children and families of ‘Ewa Beach, it seemed that ‘Ewa Beach was a natural and potential-filled site for this school.

### **Main Participant**

The main participant of this study is me, Alex Teece, the author and main character of this autoethnography. This autoethnographic journey is an exploration of the social, cultural, educational, and political forces that have woven into the fabric of this story, and this exploration centers on piecing together these forces and experiences that have made this story - this journey.

In addition to me, there are key stakeholders such as my team, key advisors and mentors, donors, educators, families, elected officials, state and local officials, former students, and community members. For the purposes of this study, these individuals will be grouped into three primary groups: (1) believers, (2) active opposition, and (3) passive opposition. This is essentially the folks who helped support and breathe energy into this project (*believers*), the folks who stood in the way or added negative energy and took away from the project (*active opposition*), and those people kind of passively passed us off or worked to maintain the status quo (*passive opposition*). While there are other groups that could be formed, for the purposes of this autoethnography, and the selection of data, these are the three main groups that will be examined and discussed.

### **Selection**

The selection of the research sample was based on purposeful consideration of unique factors, information, and context. The purposeful strategy used for this qualitative project is referred to as “Theoretical” or “Theory-based Sampling,” a process through which Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) describe as ongoing:

Selection is ongoing: Sampling begins purposefully. The research analyzes data, and as the theoretical framework emerges, the researcher decides from whom to collect more data next. Sampling is thus an evolving process guided by emerging theory. (p.191)

The nature and makeup of the sample is tied together with one common thread: the information is particularly relevant to the process of launching a public charter school. Of the thousands of interactions, emails, people, documents, and moments that have been part of this journey, only now, looking back, I can pull from a trove of countless artifacts to lift up and highlight the experience with an emphasis on my dissertation’s core theory and thought line. In the moment, and during the experience, it was not always clear which of these pieces of

information would eventually be part of the most important, or most influential. But now, as I look back and connect the dots of this journey, it is not difficult to pull those artifacts, those people, those moments that truly had a fundamental impact on this project and need to be examined in the context of this dissertation.

In conclusion, the research sample is a combination of artifacts that have been selected using theory-based sampling in the context of and connection to this project. These artifacts and their interconnectivity will help illuminate the complex, personal, and at times excruciating journey of starting a public charter school in Hawai‘i. An emergent sample will likely lead to emergent findings, and it is now time to explore what types of information will be vital to exploring this journey.

### **Overview of Information Needed**

There are seven years of information that exists that could add to the exploration of this project. Much of this information exists in the emails, Google folders, personal computers, notes, journals, texts, logs, and applications that pertain to starting this school. The overview of information needed will be structured into the following categories: Contextual, Demographic, Perceptual, and Theoretical. This structure will support a description of the types of information that I will be looking for and hope to find through my analysis and findings.

The contextual information will help describe the culture and environment of the setting, which is both the ‘Ewa Beach community where the charter school will ultimately exist, but also the charter school community of which the school will eventually be a part. The culture and environment of each have influenced the design and evaluation of this charter school project. Our behavior and growth as an organization has been at the intersection of our own organization’s history, development, and approach, and also the charter school and public



education landscape of the islands over the course of this journey. Information that describes elements of our context will help readers understand the backdrop of where this school evolved.

Demographic information will be considered with regard to community, charter landscape, stakeholders, and opposition. It is important to understand the people, backgrounds, and general history of those people that have been either directly involved or indirectly a part of the development of this school.

Perceptual information will combine ideas, viewpoints, and opinions of members of the aforementioned communities that will inform how this charter school is viewed from the outside. This perceptual information will help paint a picture of what comes to mind when charter schools, ‘Ewa Beach, our charter school project, and our group come to mind. While these are viewpoints, and not necessarily objective facts, the perception of our work is an important element of who we are in, with, and to the communities we have mentioned.

Lastly, theoretical information will come from various literature and sources of knowledge that already have information and understanding on not only charter school development, but also the ethnographic elements of educational entrepreneurship. This will provide support for the interpretation, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations that emerge from what follows in this dissertation. Because this journey has been unique and the story has yet to be written about this school, through my eyes, it is important that existing literature and sources of knowledge augment and support the direction that this dissertation takes.

### **Research Design Overview**

There are seven years of journaling, e-mails, charter documents, media clippings, recordings, exchanges, and internal documents - literally thousands of potential data points. To go through *every* single artifact would not serve the point of sampling and extrapolating a

narrative grounded in a solid base of data. Therefore, targeted samples will be taken across the constellation of qualitative data points that exist in an effort to find a narrative that exists across the backdrop of community, charter, social, cultural, and political context. The systematic approach to data collection will follow the review of aforementioned artifacts with a simple, straightforward coding system applied in order to re-organize and group qualitative data points across data segments. This coding system will allow for a synthetic narrative to emerge that bridges people, settings, time, and circumstances, while giving voice to the confluence of elements that have affected this journey.

Given the literature review is divided into *why* and *how* segments, the methods used will help illuminate the importance of why a flexible approach is maintained in the research phase of this dissertation - it is not yet known what narratives will emerge, and the authenticity of inductive reasoning will be maintained by my ability to modify or change the design of this qualitative research approach. Furthermore, the literature review concerning this project has been ongoing and emerging as the project has evolved. Whereas the project began a non-approved charter school, pre-journey, non-informed by the personal changes and experiences I have had - which is the core of this autoethnography - it is now a reflection on the experiences that have combined to result in the successful launch of a public charter school. Lastly, the conceptual framework that has emerged from the literature review left open the evaluation of myself and this project, to be responsive to the varying degree of impact and gravity that artifacts, to be researched, have had on this journey, and ultimately this dissertation.

### **Data-Collection Methods**

The main data collection methods used to drive this autoethnography are document review, critical incidents, and life history. As this dissertation is an autoethnographic journey

back through the development of the school, the work of triangulation between each of these key methods is important to gain a balanced, diverse understanding of the data that is being collected, reviewed, and analyzed.

Document review is the primary method. The data that exists within the personal journal entries, e-mails, charter documents, media clippings, recordings, personal exchanges, and internal school design documents have occurred in the natural setting of designing and launching this school; they were not engineered or manipulated as part of this study, but rather lived and stored to revisit at a later date (now). The artifacts provide context and build a composite picture of the environment through which this school was created.

Critical incidents are those moments that have, upon looking back, served as key events and details of this journey, and now provide rich opportunity for reflection, re-engagement with the facts and perceptions of the moments, and will allow me to offer personal meaning and interpretation to such elements of this experience. At the time, they may not have been seen as critical; but now, looking back over the experience, they must be honored as crucial, pivotal moments of the journey to start this school.

Lastly, the life history of participants, mainly myself as the author and the main character in this autoethnography, will serve as a backdrop for retrospective information and review, will provide an opportunity for in-depth responses, and will encourage me to intertwine the meaning of my own experience with the meaning of the school launch. I am part of the inquiry process, but also the center of the process as the autoethnographic author.

The rationale for using these methods goes back to the literature, and the review of literature. The how and why of starting this school - the two main categories of the literature review - pull from literature around the identity of school leaders, impact of haoles on indigenous

education and culture, the leadership tools and context of starting a school, successful education environments, among other ideas. Because of this approach within the review of literature, the methods needed to collect data must be aligned to the information, incidents, and experience that exist from this lived process. The story to start this school has already been lived - it just has not been written. In order to write this story, in order to collect the data necessary to analyze and create forward-looking notions, the methods must triangulate data and perception to create meaning; these selected methods join together congruently and coherently to do just that.

Each method has been used in earnestness with the experience that has been lived. For document review, many of these documents came into existence prior to even beginning the dissertation journey, which ensures that they occurred in a natural setting and have come together in an unaltered way to create authentic meaning; their review is primarily done through pulling from the thousands of points that already exists and re-entering them into the sphere of thinking and consideration from the archives in which they currently exist. The *how* is simply by pulling them, like books from a shelf, or files from a drawer, and reading and re-engaging with the information with this new purpose and perspective that has been developed through this dissertation. Using the critical incident and life history methods were similar in that I have to look back and consider the moments, events, and experiences that have happened and put them into context given where the school is today. Looking over critical events and moments will allow me to contextualize their impact on the whole, and an examination of my life history is primarily practicing retrospection, critical thinking, reflection, and inquiry in an attempt to extract meaning and relive the experience in my mind and as part of this story.

Each method was developed due to its natural alignment with the function of the method, meaning that the information within this data is most aptly collected through the methods that

exist in this dissertation. As a qualitative review of my life, it is a natural starting point to have life history and a review of critical incidents be a central theme in collecting and organizing pertinent information. Likewise, a majority of the charter school construction has been documented as part of the design, application, and development of the actual school; there exist thousands of documents to pour over, select, and review - this data was generated in a natural setting which strengthens the authenticity of the narrative which will emerge.

These instruments were field tested through various opportunities to examine documents that had been produced, review and articulate incidents that led to critical turns in the charter school development, and the retrospection and reflection that comes with journaling, discussion, mentorship, and other opportunities to explore personal life history. After each engagement with the data through these methods, it became clear that these methodologies were crucial entry points towards organizing and collecting qualitative data from the trove that exists.

The data was recorded and safeguarded using, but not limited to, the following methods:

- Secure e-mail, mobile, and other digital communication;
- Private journaling;
- Document collection and submission that had selected viewing access and privileges;
- Images, video, and other multimedia captured and stored in password-protected locations;
- Voice recordings located on a single device;
- Any and all printouts will be stored diligently and destroyed at the end of analysis.

Each artifact of qualitative data has been captured in its natural setting and stored with purpose and security so as not to lose the authenticity of how, when, and why this data was generated or maintained.

Lastly, the confidentiality and anonymity of data has been preserved by redacting all names, exact locations, and identifying information that could jeopardize this review. Furthermore, any people or places that were involved are either given pseudonyms or anonymous titles, unless their involvement is part of widely available or promulgated public information. Lastly, as this is an autoethnography and only one person is designing, writing, editing, and reviewing the material (other than the dissertation committee), all data and associated documents and artifacts are at all times only in the hands of one person. The confidentiality and anonymity of data is extremely important in this dissertation.

These methods shed light on the *how* and *why* of this life-altering experience, which is core to understanding the working answers to the core research questions and overall focus of this dissertation. The methods align to the reason for this dissertation; they are channels to better understand the personal experience from the autoethnographic point of view, providing me with entry points to connect cultural, educational, and political contextual elements to my story through bringing to light authentic qualitative data through these methods.

Important to review and acknowledge are also the strengths and weaknesses of each method. The document review is powerful because it allows me to comb through the number one qualitative data source that has been consistent since the beginning of this project: documents. There are literally thousands of pages across thousands of documents to choose from to review and incorporate into this study. The challenge, and perhaps the weakness, is that selection will be somewhat subjective in nature, meaning, there is not a systematic way to incorporate every

single document that has come into existence with relation to the charter school over the past seven years.

The strength of reviewing critical incidents is that they have had such a drastic effect on the trajectory of this charter school that their review, consideration, and connection to perception and personal meaning are so important to the narrative that emerges. Not all moments are the same; not all perceptions of a given situation are the same; it is crucial to engage in how critical elements served as catalysts - or immense obstacles - in the context of starting this school. The weakness of this approach is that I, as an autoethnography author, choose the critical incident, and that is again subjective in nature. Perhaps with a full review of different events from different perspectives could a more balanced and holistic review be generated; however, the critical incidents considered in this dissertation will be from my perspective alone, which could be perceived as limiting in nature.

### **Life History**

The life history is the core of this autoethnography. Discovering new information through retrospection and thinking critically about the meaning of this charter school development is literally the reason for this dissertation. The past seven years deserve inquiry and another look; they deserve a critical eye and consideration in the context of historical, cultural, political, and educational forces and events. It is only through such data and data collection that this autoethnography can be told. Once again, this perspective is limited, and weakness could be that I am telling this life history and story through my eyes alone. This will be noted and considered as I move forward. The combination of these specific methods allows for triangulation of a story and series of events that would not be re-told had it not been for this dissertation and the data collection methods that align to the format of this study.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Data analysis took a simple, but effective form, and aligned to the working *how* and *why* sections of the literature review in a way that allowed me to categorize, analyze, and synthesize data in a new way throughout chapter four.

The process comprised taking *how* and *why*, and adding a term of “headwind” and “tailwind” to each category; headwinds were those forces that slowed me, us, and our school down, and stood in the way from us moving forward towards our goal; tailwinds were boosts of energy and support from small and big wins alike, people, grants, deals, and anything else that helped move the school forward. Each area then had two-three sub points that supported the general direction of the *how* or *why* headwind or tailwind, offering further detail and explanation of the main point.

Within the meat of chapter four are data points, artifacts, examples of quotes, facts, and information that support the subpoints, and support the *how* or *why* headwind or tailwind - this is the full breakdown, the true inductive nature of this autoethnography. It is essentially the explanation and grounding fact in why I see the past seven years the way I do, and perhaps illuminate this story in a way that I could not do alone, with just my voice. Through others, through categories, through a broad examination of dozens and dozens of data points, the arguments make themselves and set this autoethnography up for key learnings, recommendations, and further areas of exploration.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As the principal investigator and author of a qualitative research dissertation that spans nearly seven years, it is imperative that safeguards, confidentiality, and other protections are in place to ensure not only the right of participants, be them active or passive, but also to honor the



integrity of the journey and the process of collecting these narrative elements and telling a story, which is what this autoethnography is at its core. Roles, statuses, and cultural norms around the collection of data and the purpose this data serves in this data have been considered and have been a focal point throughout the personal journey of this dissertation.

As I am telling this story, and weaving together facts, details, information, and perspectives through my eyes, the narrative that is created must be one of moral character and integrity. Within this dissertation, my view and telling of this story is final in a way, as the research, writing, analysis, and findings will be in one, autoethnographic voice. Because of this fact, it is crucial that I discuss my sensitivity to, awareness of, and consideration of ethical issues that might arise due to my autonomy and authority over the narrative that is being created.

In an effort to take the necessary steps to address these issues, and to honor the sensitivity that exists with social science research, steps have been taken to protect all human subjects and to ensure anonymity and protection of personal information and details related to participants and actors in this qualitative study. As this dissertation is a study of my journey, and all human subjects involved in the past will retain their autonomy and anonymity, informed consent is only required by me, the author. All elements of the qualitative research have already happened, and thus do not require new or expanded consent.

Lastly, the institutional review board of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa has examined and reviewed this dissertation topic, approach, and protocol. Because there are unique considerations that apply to qualitative research, this is only a starting point for ethical considerations. I have set for myself the highest ethical expectations and standards to ensure that people, organizations, communities, stakeholders, and bystanders have their autonomy and anonymity protected and reserved.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is at the heart of this autoethnography. Given that the researcher and participant is essentially the same person - me - the phenomenon studies, and story told, must be one of truth. But in a life story, one that is written through the eyes of one particular person, set of circumstances, and life experience, what is truth? And to trust the truth is to trust someone's perspective and perception of life events and experiences that have happened around them. In an effort to underscore the importance of trustworthiness in this dissertation, issues of credibility, dependability, and transferability will be discussed.

In terms of credibility - does my lived experience match the *perceptions* of my lived experience? In other words, as I look back at the seven years of starting DreamHouse, can I tell the story as it was lived, with authenticity and veracity. Am I able to accurately represent what I thought, what I felt, what I did through this journey? In an effort to highlight actions and evidence to support such validity, the following evidence is presented in discussion and appreciation for the necessity of credible actions, protocols, and methods:

- a. First and foremost, I have to acknowledge my bias towards this research. I lived the research, I lived the experience - this is *my* story. Telling it comes from a deep place of lived experience through my eyes and through my personal journey. This has set up a situation where I am telling my own story, which was nearly seven years of highs, lows, wins, challenges, and moments - this autoethnography is a self-reflection that will be subjective in nature, while integrating key, objective elements of qualitative data that has been compiled.

- b. My involvement in the field was through a lived experience of starting this charter school; my entire world revolved around being in this project as a participant, leader, and stakeholder - the project became part of my identity. My understanding of the phenomenon comes from personal, first-hand experience over the course of nearly seven years and is this first-hand experience, which is the focus of the study, is the foundation on which my understanding of the actual situation lies. I was in it; I did it; I lived it; now I study it.
- c. One major question of trustworthiness is my own interpretation of my experience - the way that I apply my perspective to a re-telling of the details, facts, and happenings as I saw them. As this is an autoethnography, a majority of what I do through this dissertation is an interpretation of my own life experience, so a corroboration of details and information from different sources is provided as the basis of the next chapter. Credibility of my work is in fact a review of my own credibility as a practitioner, which is why triangulation of nearly all findings is crucial to the believability of my story.
- d. Beyond triangulation of data, the triangulation of methods is equally as important. From digital documents, Charter Commission submissions, thousands of pages of application materials, personal journals, phone calls, memos, recording, news clippings, and more, the artifacts that comprise the data analysis universe have been sourced from multiple methods in an effort to effectively corroborate the findings and narratives that emerge from chapter four.
- e. Some of the most important artifacts are those that actually support a narrative that this charter school should not have been started, and that I am not the right leader for such an effort, and that this school would actually cause harm or hurt the public education system.

These elements actually challenge the narrative that I am writing about my journey. They actively seek to invalidate and prevent the journey, and they are as important to the journey as those artifacts that have served as guideposts and a light through this process.

- f. As I am the researcher and subject, it is important that my committee, specific members of my EdD cohort, and non-committee advisors and critical friends offer critical feedback to me on how I understand and share data artifacts, findings, and ultimately conclusions. I could get lost in an echo chamber of re-telling my story the way only I see and understand it, as opposed to analyzing the deep trove of qualitative data at my fingertips to authentically and credibly create findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
- g. Similarly, my EdD cohort and non-committee advisors provide a sounding board and group of thought-partners to review analysis and check assumptions that may be driving my findings. Given the personal and qualitative nature of my dissertation, there is increased need to have multiple perspectives. These perspectives will help support all other measures in order to enhance the credibility of my approach, work, and voice as a practitioner.

Similar to issues of credibility are issues of dependability, meaning, how am I actually tracking my data collection and analysis; is there a means to review the fundamental data artifacts that are driving my study? The answer is yes, and here are two main methods to ensure this.

- a. Data was collected authentically and without bias, as much of the data collection for this dissertation in fact came before I even knew about or applied to the EdD program. This data is in the form of paper, electronic, and digital recording, and it has and will be available for review and dissemination.

- b. Leaning on similar, and different, individuals and groups mentioned in the credibility subsection, it is also imperative that others review, code, and analyze various data artifacts to enhance inter-rater reliability. The validity of coding and my interpretation of data will be imperative for the findings and recommendations that are produced.

Lastly, the transferability and application of my work to that of another context or set of circumstances is important as well. This study should allow for adaptation and application across communities, while taking into consideration appropriate changes in sites.

- a. The descriptions of data and experience must be rich with language and meaning to provide an accurate, meaningful depiction. The experiences that were lived through this study, even prior to it being a study, are full of meaning and relativity, and the opportunity to share will be infused with vignettes, vivid descriptions, and reality.
- b. Furthermore, the detail available is extensive; the details of this story are what will bring it alive, make it relative, make it transferable, and will hopefully ensure it is appreciated by those who truly want to understand the journey in its most vivid and real form.

Trusting the researcher... the practitioner... the storyteller... is perhaps the most critical element of an autoethnography. Given the power of perception and portrayal lies in the same hands as the person with the opportunity to tell the story, the alignment, corroboration, and verification of experiences and truths must be present as a critical element to the foundation of this project.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are some conditions that may weaken the study. The question of limitations of this study may be answered differently depending on who you ask and their background, their view of charter schools, their disposition towards haole educators - particularly those who do not have

a deep history of experience in public schools, in the community, or in educational leadership positions - and many other factors. But, in an effort to acknowledge the limitations of this autoethnography, my research, and my storytelling as a practitioner, this section is important.

- Qualitative research is, by nature, more subjective than plain, dry, numerical, statistical, quantitative research - it just is. This subjectivity opens the door to interpretative dissonance away from essential facts and truth. This is why inter-rater reliability, triangulation of data collection, peer debriefing, and a strong, active committee are so important.
- I am white. I am Haole. I am not born and raised in Hawai‘i, I live in Kāne‘ohe, and I have a (413) area code in my phone number. I name this as a limitation to call out this element of my identity, to acknowledge it, and to move forward in my work with this element on the table and out in the open.
- My teaching experience was all of two years in a local, public middle school and I lost my job after two years due to “*furlough Fridays*.” I did not study teaching or education in undergrad, and my certification program was alternate, abbreviated, and non-traditional.
- Because I wanted to start the charter school, because I am the founder, because I am the participant, the researcher, and the autoethnographer all at the same time, there is bound to be a biased lean to my work, be it conscious or subconscious. Various checks can be put into place to correct for this, but the telling of this story and its truths will be through my eyes, through my voice, and through my lived experience.
- Lastly, there are over seven years of possible data points that could be part of the constellation of artifacts informing this project. The selection of certain data elements is,

in and of itself, a subjective task. This study then is in a way limited to the selection of artifacts, which is driven by my understanding and actions.

I understand that my autoethnography, even though it is my lived experience and my truth, does not get a pass when it comes to credibility, reliability, validity, and trustworthiness. This acknowledgement of limitations is to solely state that my story, my journey, and my understanding of and retelling of my journey may not in fact resonate or transfer to every other context. This is okay, as long as readers and practitioners walk away from my autoethnography feeling trust, truth, and belief.

### **Chapter Summary**

The methodology section begins with an overview of the contents, and importance, of describing the approach to this autoethnography, data collection, analysis, and the future chapters of this dissertation. An explanation of how and where the qualitative data would emerge from, as well as the context, setting, and multiple backdrops for this research project, explains the delimitation and bounds of the overall study. There is a brief discussion of the information needed as part of this autoethnographic study and the design of the approach to research, which essentially explained that this research was collected and created through authentic, lived experience. There is an extensive review of data collection methods and channels through which qualitative data made it into the realm of consideration for this project, as well as the importance of an extensive review of such data, critical incidents, live history, and other key elements.

The chapter concludes by exploring, in depth, the various issues and focal areas around ethics, trust, and limitations. Ultimately, this chapter set out to serve as a road map for how to proceed further through future chapters of the dissertation while also considering the various challenges that arise through a qualitative research projection and dissertation that has a singular

voice from participant to researcher to story teller. It is my hope that this chapter helps orient readers into the critical and exciting work of data analysis, which will be the beginning of the shift in this dissertation from research, literature, and planning analysis, to actually analyzing and creating meaning for this journey.



## Data Analysis & Presentation of Findings

### Introduction

Now, it is time to tell a story. After seven years, and however many pages of dissertation, it is time to tell the actual story of starting this school. And while this is my story, and this is my compilation of artifacts, data points, and information, the story that is woven together here is one of truth. It is my truth. It is my experience and perspective of starting a public charter school in Hawai'i and it will hopefully help answer the research question(s) that were posed so many years ago when starting this academic journey of a dissertation.

The chapter will be organized in a way that flows from research question to my hypothesis to quotes and direct artifacts that support my hypotheses as aligned back to research questions. The seven year journey to begin this school was saturated with thousands of data points. From these thousands of data points, hundreds and hundreds were selected. It was not until a conceptual framework was born from the literature review that a coding and organizational structure emerged to find meaning within the myriad data. From the *how* and *why* of starting a school came the idea of headwinds and tailwinds - which of these hundreds of qualitative data points represented positive energy and support for the journey; and which of these hundreds of artifacts represented the road blocks, obstacles, and opposition.

Over the course of many, many days and weeks, the artifacts made their way into their respective buckets and from seven years and thousands of data points became stacks of qualitative data points that would then paint the way forward towards themed meaning. The themes that emerged will be presented as hypotheses, supported by select data points, and nested under research questions and subquestions. Below is a findings roadmap that will help illuminate the way forward through chapter four.

Research Question: What has been the personal journey, experience, and truth of starting a new, public charter school in Hawai‘i as a Haole, non-Native outsider?

## **How Headlines**

### ***Hypothesis 1: How Tailwinds (+) Part 1***

Starting a charter school takes exhausting discipline, focus, commitment to learning and becoming knowledgeable in a vast array of topics and pertinent areas, and ultimately just doing it and learning from the failures along the way.

- Internal team planning and organization creates the foundation of the school;
- Resilience and poise in the face of danger is everything;
- External supports, programs, and developers are all agents of the process;
- Knowledge of official charter and non-profit documents is non-negotiable;
- The media and amplification of the message, plan, and team is required.

### ***Hypothesis 2: How Tailwinds (+) Part 2***

A charter school that is led and started by a haole, non-indigenous educator will not begin unless external validation through community leaders, indigenous leaders, elders, kupuna, and trusted voices sign off first and own it across the finish line.

- Others' (leaders) support is critical in the waning moments of opportunity windows;
- Small steps and a fail first, fail forward mindset creates a momentum chain and earns “failure equity” and the humility and trust needed to pass and start the charter;
- The charter school comes alive through others.

### ***Hypothesis 3: How Headwinds (-) Part 1***

Many people along the way will tell you not to try and start a school because of... fill in the blank. By combing through the most excruciating experiences that have been obstacles,

challenges, and mountains that needed to be overcome, a few areas rose above all others. The few that follow are, dare I say, necessary challenges (let's not call them "evils") that help prepare you for the charge of actually running and managing a state agency; of actually becoming the leader of the school. The issues in this hypothesis are issues of management with regard to the state agency that we founded; these are not necessarily issues of leadership. They are far more dry and technical than that.

- The compliance, law, bureaucracy, and "red tape" of starting a state agency in the State of Hawai'i;
- Permitting, Occupancy, and the County of Honolulu with regard to the facility;
- The Charter Commission and all that comes with Hawai'i's only charter authorizer.

#### ***Hypothesis 4: How Headwinds (-) Part 2***

Hypothesis four is about leadership. Hypothesis four sheds light on the challenges of how to start the school while focusing on aspects that require adaptive and responsive leadership, and not just management; hypothesis 4 is about the personal journey of leadership that must occur, develop, and evolve in order to meet the needs of starting a school. Where hypothesis three and four differ is that three spells out what is needed to start a school - there is a certain bar, it is spelled out, and while difficult, it is technical and clear; it exists. What is required of leadership to start a school is not clearly laid out; it is more vague and referred to conceptually and aspirationally; the bar is not set, the path is not clear, and the "what is needed checklist" does not exist. The *how* to start this school and what stood in my way from a leadership level findings are as follows:

- The answer "no;"
- The status quo of public education and the forces of the system;

- The poker game of starting a school: knowing when to fold, when to bluff, when to call, and when to go all in.

## **Why Headlines**

### ***Hypothesis 5: Why Headwinds (-) Part 1***

I had to tell myself, often, that it is not everyone’s work to start a charter school. People who heard the vision, the plan, and understood, perhaps still disagreed for one reason or another. It is these people who must be acknowledged and honored, but still disagreed with. Their energy and alignment is not to the vision.

- Local principal disagreeing with the approach;
- Local elected leader claiming they “stopped” our project.

### ***Hypothesis 6: Why Headwinds (-) Part 2***

Lastly, and most dangerously, people closest to you sometimes will serve as the most influential detractors to your vision and project. Trust, relationship, and affiliation having already been built, sometimes it can be these very people who have intimate knowledge of your passion and dreams who insert themselves as energies and forces that would serve to derail your efforts.

- Charter Commissioner working to privately sway fellow Commissioners;
- Massive financial loss due to a bitter, past relationship of a former board member.

### ***Hypothesis 7: Why Tailwinds (+) Part 1***

From the *how* of starting this charter school, to the *why* of starting the school, this transition goes from external, “how-to” factors, to the inner journey of why I personally felt so driven to spend seven years of my life founding this school. The first hypothesis has to do with external voices channeling their energy, belief, approval, and realization in this project and the potential it holds; these voices and people have walked alongside of me since 2012 and inspired

me to push forward, to keep going, and to never, ever give up in the face of struggle and challenge. They may have said it directly, or not; however, without them, I would not have been able to start this school. This, I am sure.

- Assurances and belief from those I trust and appreciate;
- The voices, promise, and potential of children.

### ***Hypothesis 8: Why Tailwinds (+) Part 2***

Finally, and perhaps most important with regard to understanding and truly knowing why, the inner voice and compass is as powerful as any factor involved with starting this school. The voices and people surrounding me were crucial; however, if I didn't believe in my own mind, in my own heart, that this was the journey that I absolutely had to be on, then the school would not have happened. This is the part about my own conviction; my own drive; and my own fire.

- Clarity of purpose and personal alignment of vision, values, beliefs, strengths;
- The excruciating, rewarding grind;
- The power of the heart.

Each of these findings are broken down and further amplified with artifacts and data that has been collected since November 2012. The experiences and correlating impact related to each one of these artifacts are what drive the hypotheses that have been generated, inductively, over the course of seven years. The next several pages offer data points that will eventually lead to the findings and recommendations in Chapter 5.

## How Data

### *Hypothesis 1: How Tailwinds (+) Part 1*

The *how* of starting this school with a lens on what worked and what influences moved the work forward is the section that, ironically, was generated last. There was no “how to” guide in the beginning, just the “how not to” and “what hasn’t worked in the past” stories and guides.

The very beginning of the school is created from conversations and back-of-the-napkin, Google Document, draft form notes and ideas. The internal thinking, planning, and organizing becomes the very foundation of the school.

“Our children participants, when resourced and given the opportunity, can influence decision-makers in our community. Parents feel their child will achieve more in school given their leadership experience.” (Teece, 2013)

Academics; character and leadership; 21st century skills; community and identity; these four elements are at the heart of the DreamHouse Matrix that was originally designed in August 2019. (Teece, 2019)

Resilience and poise in the face of danger is everything. Balancing the necessity of the 11th hour with the reality that the entire project is on the line demands a toughness that is only built through the experience. It requires resiliency in the imminent moments; it requires patience over the long-term.

“Alex Teece, a co-founder of DreamHouse who will serve as the school’s director, said he was humbled by Thursday’s decision” (with regard to the charter passing at the Commission); “The school’s founding team - which includes former public school teachers - unsuccessfully applied for a charter last year before returning to the commission with what they described as an improved application.” (Kalani, 2017)

“No news” (with regard to waiting on a massive retailer to sign off on temporarily allowing our charter school to be part of Laulani Village with days to spare prior to the Charter Commission deadline). (Personal Communication, 2018)

There are myriad programs, fellowships, coaches, and supporters who are critical to the how portion of learning the necessary components to opening a charter school in Hawai‘i. There is no central “starting a charter school in the Hawaiian Islands” fellowship or developmental path, but if one pieces many different opportunities and experiences together, there becomes a fabric that comes together, as threads would in a quilt. There is no limit or exact science as to how many developmental opportunities are required to get to opening a charter. However, the power and push in each of these experiences is vital to being the person, and leader, needed in order to build a charter from scratch.

July 18, 2015, Jacksonville, Florida, Leadership For Educational Equity Venture Fund and Fellowship Weekend for Teach For America alumni: “Ho‘ohana (intent), Ho‘omau (perseverance), Alaka‘i (leadership), kuleana (responsibility), ka la hiki ola (optimism),

‘ohana (family)” (listing and reflection of values through leadership development as part of being a new venture leader, educational entrepreneur, and equity-focused community servant). (Teece, 2015)

“Your kuleana is to leverage your experience... your education... your opportunity... your access... in service to and in partnership with others” (letter from Alex Teece to Alex Teece in September 2015 during an Outward Bound Professional activity in association with the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School). (Teece, 2015)

“Craft a vision → Call to action → Encourage experimentation → Small wins, big stories → Scale what works” (The Hacking Process through the Stanford Design School’s SCHOOL RETOOL school leadership and innovation program). (Teece, 2017)

In addition to the will, the way, and the supporting wisdom of those programs and empowering developmental programs is the need to actually know the how - the official charter application, the law, the non-profit structure, and building every aspect of the school and associated elements, from scratch, is so, so important. There must be deep institutional knowledge of the core structures of building a school, non-profit, and organization - a business - from scratch. This *how* comes from years of listening, learning, and insatiable curiosity and hunger to know more.



June 4, 2013: “Pursuant to Act 130, 2012 Session Law, the Charter School Administrative Office is the designated staff of the Commission; the mission of the Commission is to authorize high-quality public charter schools throughout the State” (Act 130 and Act 131 offered legal guidance for the guidance and transition of charter school law from the Charter School Administrative Office (CSAO) to the Charter Commission (the Commission). (Charter Commission, 2013)

State of Hawai'i Department of Taxation: “REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE FOR PERSONS GRANTED EXEMPTION FROM GENERAL EXCISE TAXES UNDER SECTION 237-23, HAWAI'I REVISED STATUTES” (the affiliated non-profit - DREAMHOUSE, INC. - became effective on June 3, 2014, over five years before the charter school opened its doors to children and families). (State of Hawai'i Department of Taxation, 2002)

“Pursuant to Section 302D-14.5, HRS the failure to complete the pre-opening assurances within the allowed two-year start-up period will result in DreamHouse being considered an approved charter applicant that has withdrawn its application” - official letter dated August 15, 2017 from Chair, Applications Committee, State of Hawai'i Public Charter School Commission. (Charter Commission, 2017)

Local media and amplification of wins takes a small win, and small message, and creates a louder, brighter headline that can be shared and linked to create positive engagement and

energy. This energy helps buoy and carry the start-up through the lethargy and viscosity that surrounds different stages of start-up and entrepreneurial journeys.

“DreamHouse gains approval to start up in Ewa Beach with opening set for 2018.”

(Kalani, 2017)

“Charter school finds temporary Ewa Beach home; Ewa Beach is getting a brand new public charter school next year.” (Larson, 2018)

Launching the school required intense discipline and commitment to becoming knowledgeable about a wide spectrum of topics and issues, but it did not hurt when momentum was built from the voices of others. This is where the tailwinds of how shift from mechanical and managerial, to leadership-oriented and personal.

### ***Hypothesis 2: How Tailwinds (+) Part 2***

A charter school that is led and started by someone who is not from here will not begin unless external validation through community leaders, indigenous leaders, elders, kupuna, and trusted voices sign off first and own it across the finish line.

There are moments in the start-up of a charter school where the voice of the founder, the aspiring leader, is no longer enough. Only the voices of proven, respected, trusted leaders can and will be heard. At these points, only the strength and truth of the relationship will create the necessary chorus of supportive voices to champion this project and keep it alive. Signed letters and testimony from a sitting United States Representative (Tulsi Gabbard) and an esteemed Native Hawaiian leader (Dr. Michael Chun) certainly helped build that foundation.

“Please accept this letter of support for the DreamHouse Ewa Beach community charter school initiative. Alex Teece recently presented his team’s vision and implementation plan for DreamHouse. My staff was delighted to note the initiative is well grounded in local educational experience and partnership with the Ewa Beach community.” (Gabbard, 2016)

“The team has worked extensively with and from the community, demonstrating the experience, passion, commitment and teamwork needed to move this initiative forward successfully.” (Chun, 2017)

The notion of earning buy-in, trust, belief, and momentum through failure became evident in the darkest days of the start-up. Moments of challenge, struggle, and setback were actually the moments when I was able to be most vulnerable, share our hard truths, and point the way forward to a more optimistic, earned future.

“Starting a school from scratch is really difficult; it is a complex, ever-changing landscape that we must adapt to; we wouldn’t be here with all of the steps we’ve taken.” (Teece, 2018)

“The plateau of disenfranchisement leads to the launch of the iLAB!” (from “THE TRUE JOURNEY OF DREAMHOUSE” one-pager that graphs the journey from pre-charter to post-charter and highlights the application, denial, facility obstacle, and the challenge of

inserting an additional year of start-up while trying to maintain momentum, buy-in, and belief; January 2018). (Teece, 2018)

The charter would ultimately come alive through others; the voices and thoughts of others, but most importantly through the voices and engagement of children who we always said were “actually doing” the work of the leadership-focused charter school (as in, they are doing the work, they are developing as leaders, etc.).

“I learned that I can be confident.” (Leadership Camp Student Participant, 2018)

Again, only through the voices of others would this charter school come alive; only through listening to and channeling a special chorus of voices, would we move forward.

### ***Hypothesis 3: How Headwinds (-) Part 1***

How to start up a charter school, a state agency, in the State of Hawai‘i, is part management, part leadership. The following data points help illuminate the technical, management issues that stood in the way of launching and getting off the ground.

A colossal and ever-deepening issue of ours was the expertise and knowledge of various laws, compliance measures, statutes, bills, and policies that exist in the universe of creating a state agency. Knowing how to address issues, who to engage with, what the process was, when these things were due, how to complete, and how to essentially remain in general compliance was a daily challenge and often not brought to our attention until something was critically wrong or our non-profit status was in jeopardy.

“Not Compliant” (08/25/2017 Certificate of Vendor Compliance issued by the State of Hawai‘i State Procurement Office with regard to the missing or non-compliant A-6 form due to the Internal Revenue Service; not compliant also means ‘the entity is not in compliance with the requirement and should contact the issuing agency for more information.’) (State of Hawai‘i State Procurement Office, 2017)

Missing: General Excise / Use forms G-49 from 2014, G-49 from 2015, G-25 from 3/2016, G-25 from 6/2016, G-25 from 9/2016, G-25 from 12/2016, Corporate Income forms N-30 from 2014, and Corporate Income forms from 2015 (August 10, 2017 State of Hawai‘i Department of Taxation ‘Tax Clearance Denial Letter’ sent to an old address on file, delivered to our non-profit board months later). (State of Hawai‘i Department of Taxation, 2017)

“This is to inform you that on June 19, 2012, the following bill was signed into law: SB2115 SD2 HD2 CD1 RELATING TO CHARTER SCHOOLS. Act 130 (12). (Gov. Msg. No. 1232 dated June 19, 2012 from Governor Neil Abercrombie and set from the Executive Chambers). (Abercrombie, 2012)

“Kalaeloa Heritage Park Annual Report” and Findings (January 3, 2018 Hawai‘i Community Development Authority Regular Meeting). (Hawai‘i Community Development Authority, 2018)

One of the most crucial aspects to start a charter school, and ‘charter school enemy #1’ is finding - without the help of any state agency - a proper and suitable facility to begin the charter school. This is not aunty’s backyard; this is not uncle’s garage; this is not the church basement that doesn’t have an approved ramp or active, approved, inspected, certificated sprinkler systems - this is a full-on, approved, Certificate of Occupancy carrying, educational usage designed and approved by the City and County of Honolulu space.

“DreamHouse charter school delays opening... DreamHouse Ewa Beach public charter school is postponing its opening until August 2019 because it wasn’t able to secure a facility in time to launch this fall” (Essoyan, 2018).

“DreamHouse Ewa Beach is a public charter school coming to O‘ahu. It recently received a \$567 thousand grant from the U.S. Department of Education to help fund programs and pay teachers, but before the school administrators can put that money to use they need an actual school” (Larson, 2018).

“Conditional Use Permit (Minor) for all uses requiring a Conditional Use Permit (Minor)... in the BMX-3 District” (City and County of Honolulu Department of Planning and Permitting (DPP), 2019).

Lastly, and perhaps the most important “how to” to figure out, is navigating, working with, working through, answering to, arguing with, defending against, influencing,

understanding, satisfying, and ultimately convincing the state’s only authorizer - the State of Hawai‘i Public Charter School Commission - that you, your team, and your plan deserve a shot.

“She is trying to convince other Commissioners not to vote for you; she said ‘they will fail as a school.’” (Anonymous, 2017)

“This letter will serve as your formal notification of State Public Charter School Commission’s decision on August 11, 2016 to deny the application for DreamHouse Ewa Beach for the 2015-16 charter school application cycle” (Charter Commission, 2016)

“Moved to deny the charter school application for DreamHouse Ewa Beach” (2016-17 charter school application 2.0, denied initially by the evaluation team). (Charter Commission, 2017)

“Go up as a team; stay together” (personal note handed to me during the Charter defense). (Anonymous, 2016)

All together, these were some of the most excruciating, technical, complexities of the entire process of starting this school. At times, I would say to myself, “this is a test; this is so difficult, confusing, and frustrating, that it must be a test.” So many of those tests were bureaucratic nightmares that persisted, one after another, throughout the entirety of the launch process. But, there were more than just managerial challenges; there were leadership challenges as well.

***Hypothesis 4: How Headwinds (-) Part 2***

Beyond checking boxes and meeting Commission standards, aside from the facility requirements from the City and County, as well as learning as much as possible about applicable laws, statutes, bills, ordinances, and overall compliance as a state agency, comes leadership. Management of the technical aspects is not the same as leadership. There were tremendous leadership challenges that arose in the how to start DreamHouse, and some of the most challenging are highlighted below.

One challenge was remaining appreciative and open to the “no” answers and discouraging interactions with potential partners, funders, and sites; Hawai'i is a small place, and getting bent out of shape because not everyone under the sun was willing to help us was not a sustainable route. It was important to remain calm in the face of the dozens of “sorry we can't help you” responses and sentiments we heard.

“It is my sad duty to inform you that the Board of Directors of the Kalaeloa Heritage and Legacy Foundation (KHLF) has voted unanimously to end its conditional commitment to DreamHouse 'Ewa Beach and abandon the proposed sublease.” (Kalaeloa Heritage and Legacy Foundation, 2018)

“Just wanted to send a quick note of thanks for everything over the past many months. I trust and respect you and your leadership of the church.” (Anonymous Pastor, 2017).

“We regret to inform you that we are unable to provide funding...” (First Hawaiian Bank Foundation, 2017)



“Your organization was considered ineligible.” (United States Department of Education, 2017)

“After thoughtful review, the Board did not approve your application.” (Clarence T.C. Ching Foundation, 2017)

“The Foundation’s executive officers and program staff have reviewed and given careful consideration to your request and have decided to decline it.” (The Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, 2017)

“We regret to inform you...” (Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, 2016)

“I regret that your request was denied.” (Hawai‘i Community Foundation, 2016)

The status quo of public education and its forces and actors are a powerful *how* to overcome as well. In Hawai‘i, you must not point out a person responsible; it is safer to have a vague reference to some macro-elements so as not to come across disrespectful, arrogant, or uninformed.

“Unfortunately, even if we are losing our 6th graders to Ewa Makai Middle School next year, we have plans for the classrooms and I informed Alex we weren’t able to accommodate his request.” (Anonymous Principal, 2018)

“Meanwhile the evaluation team said Dreamhouse academic and organizational plans met the benchmarks, but its financial and capacity plans were lacking.” (Kalani, 2017)

“Why don’t you work for an existing school; we already have middle schools in ‘Ewa Beach, we do not need another one.” (Anonymous, 2017)

The work of starting a public charter school is similar to a game of poker. Playing, calling, bluffing, folding - the cards are our odds and the strategy we are employing. In moments it has been important to play tough and call, to put the other “players” in this game on the spot; in other times, it has been important to fold, to acquiesce, to acknowledge that we do not have the stronger hand. All of this in a psychological match that plays itself out through phone calls, e-mails, and news stories.

“With new school year approaching, Ewa Beach charter school awaits approval from retail giant.” (Larson, 2019)

“On another matter, we’ve seen the recent KITV article... We are disappointed that DreamHouse did not consult with us first before going to the media.” (Anonymous, 2019)

Again, leadership is different from management. The technical aspects of managing a state agency are different from the leadership necessary to start one; it is important to know the difference.

## **Why Data**

### ***Hypothesis 5: Why Headwinds (-) Part 1***

My work was to start a charter school. Even if the vision was explained, that didn't mean that everyone had to agree, or even support. Sometimes, these people who on the surface, or even to your face were supportive, were the ones that - behind the scenes - working against the effort.

“We are the flagship middle school in this community. If you want to change education, you should go through the principal training program and change the system from within.” (Anonymous, 2018)

A local elected leader once mentioned to a cultural community leader that he was the reason that the Honolulu Fire Department reversed their decision to allow DreamHouse to operate at the abandoned ‘Ewa Beach Fire Station on Pohakupuna Road. (Teece, 2018)

You know what they say: keep your friends close, and those who may not be your friends, keep them even closer. Sometimes it is difficult to know who is who. There definitely were people who openly opposed our project and our work; these people were easier to spot than those who made their business and their impact in the shadows.

*Hypothesis 6: Why Headwinds (-) Part 2*

The most dangerous energy is that that is a current, under the surface, behind the scenes, and influential to those decision-makers that affect the trajectory and future of the project. The two examples below are from individuals who had previously, publicly supported the effort of our team to start a charter school. These individuals invested time and energy to work to derail our effort to start our school. Their efforts served as headwinds to our work to open the school, but did not stop us altogether.

“She was trying to get other Commissioners to agree with her and change their vote; she said that ‘they will fail; the school will fail and we cannot approve it’ in a closed-door meeting with other Commissioners; do you know what she has against you or the school?” (Anonymous, 2017)

“After discussing with the board, unfortunately, we are going to have to reverse the decision and cancel the grant you were awarded.” (Anonymous Foundation Board Member, 2019)

Again, there were individuals along the way who had previously supported our efforts, publicly, and to our faces, who set in motion nearly catastrophic events that nearly crippled our ability to launch our school. These are the people who are the most dangerous; these are the forces that must most closely be understood and protected against.

*Hypothesis 7: Why Tailwinds (+) Part 1*

Why someone chooses to start a school is a personal decision that is factored on many forces and decisions. There must be, however, external voices and people that breathe energy into the decision and the journey, from all ages, perspectives, and life experience.

One thing is clear: without a chorus of champions that see and believe in you, there is no way to make it through the darkness, make it through the struggle, and see through, to the starting line, opening a school for the very first time.

“Congratulations on your abilities to manifest positive outcomes and experiences for yourself and secondly for all the fortunate people within your sphere of influence. Way to use your powers for good. Keep practicing heading your inner guide; it will keep reminding you that you are indivisible from the whole. You are such a beautiful soul. Keep doing your thing” (Anonymous, 2016)

“I think this is part of the process where you are being tested, both as a team and as a man. And you have been tested before, but this is a little different... This past year, as we were flanked by students with Yale, Stanford, and Harvard as their undergrads, I will admit that I wondered how I would stack up. But, within this sea of Ivy, there were several people who stood out to me for their work ethic. And you were at the top of this list... It's what makes you strong when you're tested. And we pray not for an easy life, but that we may be strong.” (Anonymous, 2016)

“Dear Alex, watching and witnessing your team come together to testify today was truly inspiring. I know your school and your vision for education in Ewa will come to be - whether it's in one year or two, you will get there. The community of Ewa will be so lucky to work with you and your team when the time comes. Today might not have been a triumph, but I also know it isn't the end. You showed everyone who you are and who your team is and the school you will be... I've never been more proud of your leadership - you were humble, authentic, and prepared for everything today. Hold your head high and take a moment to celebrate what you've built. I can't wait to see it come to life.”

(Anonymous, 2016)

In addition to the people who have encouraged me to find the voice inside to keep going, the children involved with this process have had a lasting and crucial impact on why this work started in the first place. Their voices, their insights, their potential is deeply embedded in why this journey has been so important.

“What I learned to respect (the) land around you. Also I learned that you need others to help you succeed.” (Anonymous Leadership Camp Student Participant, 2019)

“(Identity is) What people see in you.” (Anonymous Leadership Camp Student Participant, 2018)

“Leadership to me is when someone brings people together.” (Anonymous Leadership Camp Student Participant, 2018)

“Thank you for being a guiding light, mentor, and friend.” (Anonymous, 2018)

These are the very words that served as guideposts in the dozens and dozens of notes, letters, reports, and feedback loops that came across my eyes and my mind - these were the voices of people - mainly children - that rose above all others.

***Hypothesis 8: Why Tailwinds (+) Part 2***

Without the inner drive; without the inner conviction; without the burning fire of desire to achieve a goal (in this case, the school), goals and achievements might still remain out on the horizon. There must be an insatiable desire to pursue one’s passions and dreams; otherwise, the vision may not be realized. One’s inner compass must be aligned with the passion, purpose, and fire that burns inside; the alignment and clarity of these things determine the journey and the outcome.

“The secret ingredient is wanting it badly enough.” (Meier, 1995, p. 38)

“My why is because I have put in a position to do something special; to use all of the tools and experiences that I have been afforded to make a difference. It is in the community of ‘Ewa Beach why my next leadership step will take me, and I will go there with a full heart, a clear mind, and an intentionality unlike I have ever felt before.”

(Teece, 2016)

An appreciation for the struggle is important as well; one must find themselves at home, at peace, with the ever-changing grind that is starting a school from scratch. The odds are long, the days are endless, and the experience excruciating at times. But if you feel alive during these moments, these challenges can serve as fuel and conviction for your purpose.

“You committed; you set yourself to a goal and committed to it; people see that.”

(Anonymous, 2019)

“Dear Journal: Heart palpitations; pit in stomach; hives; sweating in the middle of the night... This is the norm these days as all things keep moving forward, yet, a question still remains on the facilities side of things. We are so, so close to the edge.” (Teece, 2019)

“Dear Journal: People will never know how close we were to the fire. What it means to put everything on the line. Every single thing is on the line to win this.” (Teece, 2019)

“Dear Journal: Rockefeller; you have to be Rockefeller.” (Teece, 2019)

And finally, the clarity of purpose and alignment of resources, energy, support, purpose, passion, skill, and vision have to be there; these must be aligned for a project like this to evolve and succeed.



“Dear Journal: Think bigger; bias towards action; fail forward and learn; start small.”

(Teece, 2018)

“Build rapport, illuminate problem, share vision, explain how, invite to join us.” (Teece,

2018)

Passion, purpose, and alignment; the clarity of the personal call within the heart and mind must exist, clearly, in order to fuel the work. This must come from within; the fire of passion must burn hot within.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented eight different hypotheses broken out across four domains nested underneath the two core elements of the theoretical framework: *how* do you start a charter school, and *why* do you start a charter school? It was my intention to share the headwinds and tailwinds of this journey - those forces stood in our way, and those that helped us along. By revisiting seven years of data, artifacts, journaling, recordings, and experiences with a pure “did this help, or did this hurt” question in mind, it made the effort of sifting through myriad data less complex. By categorizing for or against, and how and why, the data found its way to a specific space in the hypothetical, inductive reasoning that helped reconstruct the seven year journey in a data-driven, codified, theoretical framework grounded, academic manner. This was the purpose of the whole dissertation - rebuild the journey through data analysis, hypothesis, and eventual findings, understandings, and recommendations. These final three elements are what await in the next chapter, in which I will lay out how these findings layer on top of my own experience and

provide insights on all that was found. This analysis and interpretation will set up the recommendations and conclusion.

## **Analysis, Interpretation, Implications, & Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

And now, we are here. After seven years of starting a school, and three years writing about it, we are here: the “what does it all mean and why in the world did you take so much time thinking and writing about this” chapter.

Remember though, the research question: What has been the personal journey, experience, and truth of starting a new, public charter school in Hawai‘i as a Haole, non-Native Hawaiian outsider? This autoethnography focused more so on the journey itself, and less so on the school that was created. The writing of this dissertation actually began while on the journey, so, in a way, the process of thinking about, designing, and writing the dissertation was the final step in opening the school. One could say that without the dissertation, the school never would have opened; and without the school, I would not have written this dissertation. The interlinkage and correlated nature of both endeavors has led me to this chapter - chapter five - where all of the writing, all of the literature, all of the data, quotes, people, artifacts, and experiences take shape in the form of making sense of, and telling a story that has formed itself.

Also remember, the purpose of this dissertation: to explore and better understand the experiences, situations, and conditions that have been pertinent to the seven-year journey to launch this public charter school. The research question and purpose were never to arrive at a definitive, one-dimensional, objective answer. If that is what you were looking for at this point, I am sorry - I don't have definitive findings or conclusions, and I surely do not have definitive answers to the questions that I posed some years ago at the beginning of writing this story. I do, however, have literature, findings, and experience through which to tell a story. That story culminates here, in chapter five, as the final chapter of this story. For now.

## Summary of Findings

Chapter four, and the overall data hypotheses were nested in four major domains of my conceptual framework, across two major categories: *how* and *why*. Within *how* and *why*, the findings were broken into forces and energy that was either negative or obstructed the path to start this charter school (headwinds), and into forces of support and positive encouragement, energy, and moment forward (tailwinds). This categorization approach allowed me to design and analyze hundreds, if not thousands of data points and stay within a structured, straightforward conceptual framework. This structure supported a clear, logical, relevant approach to analyzing data and reporting findings.

Now, the analysis of data has been completed, the findings have been produced, and it is time to analyze findings and make further, more meta-analytical sense of these findings beyond simply reporting them. Now is where a deeper, interpretive narrative will guide the construction of further meaning into the working understandings and elements of an answer to my research question. This narrative will be organized and categorized under headings that align to the conceptual framework, but also weave in literature review elements and data collection from across findings and cases.

First, the headwinds of *how*, and the forces that literally were in the way and held back this charter school project from a structural and procedural point of view. These are the compliance-related, bureaucratic, system status quo, and “poker game” elements of beginning a school in Hawai‘i. Our *how* headwinds.

Next will be our *how* tailwinds and all those lessons, knowledge, and people that helped this school from a charter school start-up level; these are the moments, learnings, and windows

of opportunity that literally made the difference between this being an idea to start a charter school and a soon-to-open charter school. Our *how* tailwinds.

At this point, we pivot to *why*. Why start a charter school? Says who? Why you? We begin the why section with why not, and the forces that sought to offramp, detract from, and stand in the way of a successful launch. These are the naysayers, the establishment, opposition, and the voices that get inside your head and work to stop you from pursuing your dream. Our *why* headwinds.

But, we must reach and land on the most powerful driving force of this entire dissertation and journey - *why*. Why are you doing this, why are you so committed to start this school, why will you not give up, and why is there a fire burning deep within you not letting you fail? These are the people and voices that come out of nowhere when you need them the most; the quote that you hear at just the right moment; the faces and voices of children who you have made a promise to; the power of your values and your heart; the rewarding, excruciating pain of the grind; the clarifying sense of your values and beliefs through the process. This is the engine that never quits; this is the voice in your head to tell you to keep going; this is the feeling in your heart to never, ever give up. This is the *why* tailwind. And this, in my humble opinion, is the key to starting a charter school.

### **Analytic Category 1: Why is it so damn hard to start a charter school in Hawai‘i?**

#### ***Overview of Two Key Themes***

The central focus of this analytical category is the headwinds of *how*, and the forces that literally were in the way and held back this charter school project from a structural and procedural point of view. These are the compliance-related, bureaucratic, system status quo, and poker game elements of beginning a school in Hawai‘i.

From all of the findings and data, two key themes emerged as I looked back and explored why this journey has been so hard from a *how* standpoint. The being the complex ecosystem of law, bureaucracy, authorizing, permitting, and navigating the start-up process for a new charter school in the State; these are challenges of management of the process, and technical, information-based obstacles. It is clear what they are, although it is cumbersome and non-friendly to the entrepreneur seeking to start a new school. The theme is about leadership, and poker.

***The Ecosystem of Bureaucracy: Life Gives Life.***

So, the ecosystem of bureaucracy when starting a state agency from scratch - I feel like this could be a dissertation all on its own. In fact, this was the strongest, most challenging headwind that I faced. It was so persistent. It had no emotion. It was always, always there. The key, though, was not obfuscating or meandering around the ecosystem of bureaucracy; the key was to become part of the ecosystem, albeit temporarily. To learn from, feed off of, thrive within, and achieve life in an ecosystem, an organism must find its place in that ecosystem. That is exactly what I found myself having to do when it came to navigating the complex layers and maze of laws, authorizing, and structure that exists when it comes to starting a new state agency; especially one that deals with kids. And even at that, there were so many times that I can't remember when I found myself, and our team, coming up short over and over again. Remember the denied application? Remember the vote to end the journey of DreamHouse? Remember the report that stated our team, our experience, our dream, did not meet the standard for necessary capacity to start and lead a school? These were the strong, persistent, emotionless headwinds.

Do you ever get that feeling like the winds are against you? That, no matter what you try and do... no matter the years, the team, the money, the support... that somehow the forces in the

universe are just not aligned to your efforts. Over and over again it seemed that the State Public Charter School Commission was simply not having it; not believing in our team, capacity, plan; not seeing what could be possible with DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach. Individually, we were close with and engaged with individual members; however, the ecosystem of application to Commission staff to applicant review team to Applications Committee to full committee... it felt as if the process was stacked against the opening of a charter school with our team, leadership, and plan.

It didn't help to hear through the "coconut wireless" network of the island that this process was on purpose; that the Commission did not want any new charter schools; that a cap on charters or a pause on authorizing was the direction that we were heading towards; in fact, just after we re approved, the Commission went into a three-year period of "revising" the application process and has not chartered another school since. If a charter applicant does get approved in 2020, they will not be able to open until 2022 given the new, revised statute. That means, effectively, a 2017-2022 ban on new charters after DreamHouse. Perhaps those coconut wireless rumors had some legitimacy, but we snuck in just in time?

The irony of this situation is that the Commission was seen as being in the way, but the Commission was the path to our school. Groups came out to announce that they would be opening up as a new chartering authority, if approved by the Board of Education (which still hasn't happened). Charter applicants cried foul and called out an unfair, political, laborious process just to get approval to be the school they so desperately wanted, and felt prepared to be. All the while, we just continued to grow and thrive as part of our ecosystem. Pre-opening assurances layered with fundraising hurdles, facilities targets, and rigorous benchmarks to meet the deadline for opening in the 2018-19 school year. In a twist of fate, the same Commissioner

who had voted for the denial of our charter argued for us to have an extension to find a facility; talk about ecosystem love. Organisms supporting organisms. We found ourselves with no facility in December 2017, which meant we had to add another year to our pre-opening timeline. It wasn't until a year later, in December 2018, with our backs against the wall, would we finally sign a lease (that still yet had a contingency in it) to save our charter, meet our final possible date that we could obtain a signed lease for a facility, submit it to the Charter Commission, and move forward in the pre-opening process. Again, the ecosystem holding us to strict deadlines and processes, but also giving us life by illuminating the pathway towards a successful, prepared open.

Even with the facility, can you imagine the gauntlet of state, federal, local, and “other” agencies that need to sign off and bless your project before you can move forward in opening a school. And, even when you approach each respective agency, somehow you were supposed to ask them first, preemptively know their questions, and when scolded and told to do it again on blue paper with black ink, and not white paper with blue ink, to smile, nod, and say you will.

I write this section a bit tongue in cheek not to criticize the maze of agencies and departments that must be found (there was one place that we had to visit that took us three separate tries and locations to find) and applied to, but rather to comment on how engaging with each agency actually prepares you for the patience, coordination, and forensic nature a state administrator (school leader) must exemplify once they are actually at the helm and responsible for such decisions, with their own state agency (the charter school). Such was the case with a seemingly innocuous question, buried in the agenda for the Kalaeloa Region of the Hawai‘i Community Development Authority, and the Kalaeloa Heritage Park Stockpile Task Force, which was to vote on whether or not to accept findings and recommendations from the Board.



It may not seem like it, but the answer to that question, within the action items section of a regular meeting agenda for the Kalaeloa Business section for the Hawai‘i Community Development Authority on Wednesday, December 6, 2017 at 11:30AM on the second floor of a discreet, unnamed brick building at 547 Queen Street would seal the fate of our fall 2018 open. Before this meeting, I didn’t even know what HCDA stood for. Then, when I realized that the facilities partner we sought to engage with was “under” the Hawai‘i Community Development Authority (HCDA), I realized that attending meetings and testifying on items, building relationships with Authority Members, better understanding their processes, oversight, and priorities would be just as important as writing sixth grade math curriculum, recruiting teachers, attending community functions, working on our logo, finding and securing grant funding, and the other 150 things that a charter school founder might think of each day. My bedside table was littered with a litany of obscure post-it notes and reminders: Budget meeting for City Council, Wednesday, 9:30AM, City Hall... Neighborhood Board Meeting Thursday night, 7PM, ‘Ewa Beach Library... Opening Day of Legislature... Charter Commission meeting... recruitment event at UH... application due to ensure the Department of Health can approve food preparation. You can imagine the confusion and worry that my fiancée went through as she tried to connect the dots and make sense of why I was at so many different meetings, asking so many different agencies for their blessing, applying and re-applying and then re-re-applying for permits, waivers, extensions, and approvals, and all-in-all frantically trying to figure out how to navigate the complex, confusing maze of agencies and layers that make up the bureaucratic ecosystem that holds the key to becoming a charter school in the State of Hawai‘i.

At one point, I was trying to figure out how to change the occupancy code for a fire station - a FIRE STATION! In one of the many binders of notes and reminders, I had written:

“Call the Chief,” referring to the Honolulu Fire Department Chief who, at the time, I believed, would offer his blessing which would ultimately clear the way for our occupancy of the ‘Ewa Beach fire station as our start-up school facility. A month later, when a staffer for a City Council member called me to tell me that instead of our charter school, the Department of Ocean Safety was going to store their jet skis in the parking lot, you can imagine my exasperation. Moments like this, the hundreds it seemed that I had, defined the roller coaster two years of start-up that followed the year of exploration, two years of preparation, and two years of applications.

Remember, of course, that all of this was in the context of the entire charter school ecosystem learning how to interpret, adapt to, and conform into the new charter school law - ACT 130. A simple note from the Governor to the Legislature (as mentioned earlier), read like this: “This is to inform you that on June 19, 2012, the following bill was signed into law: SB2115 SD2 HD2 CD1 RELATING TO CHARTER SCHOOLS Act 130 (12).” And that was it; just like that, two sentences, and all of a sudden a brand new charter landscape emerged.

This bill contained all the necessary language to add teeth to and change the charter school system from the “wild west of chartering” (per one, anonymous school administrator) to a government-owned, charter contracted, tightly managed process. The Governor signed this bill and new charters, which only six have opened in the last eight years, had to figure it out. Like any state agency, those already engaged in the process had to adapt; but, for new entities, it was almost as if the playing field was no different than before - it was the first time that we would understand, apply, and navigate the system.

When I write about how hard it is to start a charter school in this state, and I refer to the bureaucratic ecosystem, and I highlight how important it is to temporary become a living, thriving member of that ecosystem to emerge from it, alive, I do not want to diminish the efforts

of countless individuals that hold together our systems of government. I am highlighting not only the struggle and complexity of it all, but also the importance of being part of it. Those who stand up, call out, and cast judgment on the very agencies they need support and approval from, are the same people who do not become part of the ecosystem, survive, or emerge from the experience with what they came for in the first place - a charter to run a school.

The larger context here contains more than just the law and various systems that interplay. The larger context pertains to the large, mainland companies that have excessive power with regard to facilities decisions by local landlord; the pressures and energies that hold the status quo in tact; the timeline that has been set that seemingly is too short when time is needed, and too long when urgency is a factor; the mirage of potential and viable options, and people who offer “have you thought of...” and “why don’t you try...” recommendations; the funders who say they will offer funding once the school is chartered, but the charter that won’t get approved until funding is committed; the Department of Permitting and Planning employee who shares that “it can not be done with regard to that timeline;” the Excel spreadsheet of 40 facilities possibilities that range from churches to old restaurants and second floors of City & County community centers; the pastor who said, “sorry, we do not believe in your vision,” and community leaders who said, “I wish we could.”

What I kept telling people who were frustrated, disappointed, and disheartened with the line-up and relentlessness of “no’s” that came swiftly after doors of opportunity were opened, was that, “not everyone is starting a charter school.” It took years to realize that the odds weren’t stacked against us specifically, they were just stacked. It took years to realize that to go through the process to open a charter school, you had to be part of the process - invested, committed, and respectful of the people and systems in place. It took years to realize that ecosystems exist to

create life, not to kill it. Once I realized the way out of this process to start a charter school was to go through it, to believe in it, to be part of it, to help improve it, and to add life to it, was when the winds changed and the ecosystem gave life to DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach.

### ***The Poker Game of Leading a Charter School Start-Up Effort***

I will start by saying that I am not a good poker player. I never have been. I have always been decent in math, but odds and playing the odds, betting, reading others in a card game - you are best to find someone else to handle your money if you want to survive in a game of *Texas Hold ‘Em*. That is not to say that I don’t like trying to play. I have always enjoyed being put in situations where your heart starts beating faster, you become alert, your stomach starts to churn, and you truly, unwaveringly feel alive. This was the final two months, May - June 2019, of getting through the pre-opening assurances set forth by the Charter Commission.

On May 1, we were supposed to have our Certificate of Occupancy, per our pre-opening assurances (a series of dates, deliverables, and benchmarks that must be met in order to move from a pre-opening charter school to an operational charter school in start-up). We did not have this. Time to read the Charter Commission and see whether or not they would extend our start-up period and allow us additional runway to make good on our promise to open our school in August, just three short months away. One Commissioner, on a short phone call prior to the meeting, told me: “You need to be very, very clear on what the timeline is for the Commissioners; you are running out of time” (Anonymous Charter Commissioner, 2019).

It wasn’t that the Charter Commission wanted us to fail; exactly the opposite. They knew how hard we had worked; they knew the years that went into opening this school; and now, right at the finish line for pre-opening assurances, we were facing our most difficult hurdle yet, and the hourglass was running out of sand. In the poker game that we were playing, there was no

room for bluffing, no room for playing cards that we didn't have - we were now playing against the clock and the final, ultimate element of opening our school - the Certificate of Occupancy. Without this Occupancy document, the Commission would not approve our exit from pre-opening assurances, and our seven year effort to start DreamHouse would come to a screeching halt and failure, less than a month out from our blessing (that was already scheduled and promoted), our summer leadership camp (which would be the first time that 100 families and children would join DreamHouse in it's official capacity as a public charter school), and our start of school. Everything would end.

From the other side - the Commission - it may have seemed like we were in over our head, that our cards were not as good as we said they were, that we were going to run out of time, and that we would lose the pot (all the money in the middle). We could tell people were getting nervous as the calls, texts, and e-mails from Charter Commission staff and Commissioners themselves poured in... "Are you going to make it?" ... "We need this before June 30, there is no extension, this is it" ... "You got this. We know you will do it." The moment you look across the table and see the other, final poker player push all their chips in the middle - in June 2019, this was our "all-in" moment. We went all in for June 2019.

Then came the Department of Permitting and Planning (DPP), the most challenging and complex agency that we had come across yet. We had engaged with folks from DPP in March, April, and May, but there had been little to no movement on our permit application, plans, comments, review, and occupancy requirements. While DPP serves a critical, vital role in the development, preservation, and future of our islands, this was the moment where the poker game went on tilt (in serious favor) towards DPP. They held everything in their hands and without them, without their blessing, without a miracle, we would land on June 30 without a Certificate

of Occupancy, the Charter Commission would drop the death knell, and DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach would disappear into thin air. Literally, just like that.

Mid-June 2019 became the highest stakes of the seven year start-up effort. With two weeks left to go, our application at DPP sitting in queue waiting its turn (over a month away from official review), the Charter Commission perhaps readying their statement of “DreamHouse’s failure,” and over 100 people on-island for my wedding (did I forget to mention that my wedding was on Friday, June 21, 2019, and this entire time I was planning, preparing for, and hosting my wedding on the North Shore of O‘ahu for over 150 people?), it came down to one final hand. That hands started with a text at the beginning of that week from a government relations specialist, who happened to be a friend: Wednesday at 9:00 with all stakeholders, can?

This was the moment that everything would ride on - a final, critical meeting with DPP leadership and all relevant and necessary stakeholders. With DPP on full tilt (seemingly having the better hand, and nearly all the chips) and controlling our destiny, there was nothing else that we could do but show up and lay *all* of our cards down on the table and just hope that they played.

And lay our cards down, we did. We did not fold; rather, we played our hand open. The DPP meeting would align parties and clear up miscommunications; it would paint a pathway to the Certificate of Occupancy, and with just 11 days until our charter would be gone forever, we were engaged, energized, and committed to playing the cards we had. Five days later, on Monday, June 24, 2019, we received our Certificate of Occupancy - a whole six days to spare.

No one tells you how to play these poker games: when to hold your cards close, when to play the other person’s hand, when to go all in, when to lay your cards on the table and play them

open-faced. One of the reasons that starting a charter school in Hawai'i is so damn hard is that these rules of the poker game of charter school start-up are not written; nowhere will you find the "how to" guide of when to make these moves, when to change hands, when to fold, when to lay down. No one coaches and walks you through; no one you are playing with lays down their hand to show you and help you along. The odds are not in your favor, as charter start-up applications and success ratios would tell you, and at any time, a state agency, city agency, commission, board, committee, or stakeholder can go on tilt and completely change any of the momentum or hope that you had for your hand, game, or what is in the middle. For us, what we pushed in the middle was seven years of starting DreamHouse; we pushed our five-hundred-thousand dollar federal grant, our 22-person team, our 11 new jobs, our five-year-old non-profit, our personal reputations, and our livelihood - we went all in because we believed that we had the winning hand against the clock and against the odds. It ends up that we did.

Make no mistake - poker is a game of risk, timing, and at the end of the day, a little bit of luck. In our case, some might say it was a lot of luck. I just like to think that the stars aligned for us at that moment in time, but the truth of the matter is that the odds are long and there are many who came before and after us and had to fold their hands. The poker game of starting a public charter school in the State of Hawai'i is one that few enter, and even fewer win. A "how to" guide may open up pathways and opportunities for groups of educators and community leaders to know when they draw a winning hand, how to play it, and when to go all in.

**Analytical Category 2: The intersection where discipline, resilience, humility, and champions meet.**

*Overview*

This category is dedicated to tailwinds, or things that helped get our charter passed, past pre-opening, and launched in August 2019. A huge part of our success is due to our team, the people who joined this effort years ago, and have stayed with DreamHouse up until now. However, given that this is an autoethnography on my personal journey and experience, much of this chapter will focus on the internal, personal struggles and successes that occurred over the course of starting this school. This is not to discount or mitigate the impact of others, rather to synthesize and focus on the personal, autoethnographic elements of launching this school.

Internally, discipline and resilience were the two core pillars that drove me. They are not the drivers for everyone who start schools, but for me, for DreamHouse, for what was required to keep this school alive, I found myself in a place of intense discipline, urgency, and commitment to my passion, which was not letting this school fail.

Externally, having humility and engaging champions was just as important. Someone once shared with me that if you are going to be a leader, people need to want to follow you; otherwise, you are just walking along and leading yourself, alone. Humility, appreciation for others' voices, welcoming team and new perspectives, listening, being patient when required, listening some more, and building strong relationships with those around me that I know hold the key to not only my success, but most importantly the success of DreamHouse, matters; in fact, these parts of my journey were some of the most important. It was through others, through humility and champion of my leadership and our school vision that our journey ended at the



opening of Hawai'i's newest charter school. Without humility, without champions, there is little to no chance that a charter school can open and thrive in the Hawaiian Islands.

### ***Discipline & Resilience***

People will tell you to follow your heart; follow your dreams. I agree with this; you should. But, what is missing from these hopeful, happy lines is the reality that in order to follow your passions, dreams, hopes, future, you must be ready to go into the most lonely, scared, darkest, coldest places, in order to emerge out the other side, on a pathway towards your future.

These were nights over the course of the 2018-2020 two-year pre-opening assurance phase that I would wake up, in cold sweats, walk into the bathroom at 2AM, turn the lights on, look at myself in the mirror, and through blurry eyes, begin practicing the lines that I would have to tell my founding team, our board, donors, and families who had signed their kids up for DreamHouse that we would not be able to open and that we were sorry - that I was sorry; that I had let them down. Imagine, with my fiancée sleeping in the other room, I practiced and imagined the doomsday scenario and wanted to place myself there, just to get a taste of what might be required of me.

I would journal about my experience because I realized that I had to let out my anxiety somehow while also projecting calm and clear leadership. No one tells you how disciplined you have to be to survive and thrive in a charter school start-up situation. Whereas I had weighed close to 220 pounds heading into our 2017 rewrite of the charter, now, in 2018 and 2019, I weighed just 185. Whereas I was once active and social in networking groups and young professionals clubs, happy hours, and social events, I now locked a laser focus on dates, deadlines, and deliverables to get our charter out of pre-opening. Not until I was actually full in

it, had gone all in (see category 1), and put every part of my personal, professional, and family life into this project did I truly know what was required.

Being resilient and disciplined starts to carve away parts of your mind, body, and spirit that are not true to your hopes and dreams; the noise of other, worldly things and lives, alternate pathways, relationships, and what-ifs, they all begin to take a back seat and lose focus. In front of you, at all times, is the immediate next step and goal that you must achieve in order to make the future matter. One quote that drove me is from the book “Shantaram,” and it reads:

I think the future is like anything else that's important. It has to be earned. If we don't earn it, we don't have a future at all. And if we don't earn it, if we don't deserve it, we have to live in the present, more or less forever. Or worse, we have to live in the past. I think that's probably what love is - a way of earning the future. (Roberts, 2003)

What I love about this book, and this quote, is that it puts your future and your destiny in your hands. With a mindset of “I have to earn my future,” I was no longer limited to or governed by others' view or limits as to how I had to proceed with my own personal and professional career. My next steps and “how to” start DreamHouse became an internal drive and fire that was lit and fueled by commitment to my passion, discipline of practice, resilience in the face of hardships and setbacks, and a view that I would have to earn every single step along the way.

Consider this fire and drive, and how it affects others - specifically, my team and those closest to this project. One of the chapter four findings related to the importance of a sound, developed, committed team. Consider also the mentor saying to me years earlier that unless

people wanted to follow me, I could not be a leader - I would just be a wanderer, on my own. My team had to have similar knowledge and understanding of the process as I did, as well as the passion, fire, resilience, and commitment to see this process through. The balance, of course, was recognizing that not everyone was full-time, all-in, completely centered and focused on this project like I was. We had volunteer board members, part-time committee members, supporters, advocates, and stakeholders, but I was the only person who had given up my job and put my entire personal and professional life on the line for this school. Everyone else maintained their jobs, lives, families, and balance - which at the end of the day was very, very important. While I was going through the throes of this charter start-up, the people and network that was around me was as solid as ever.

- When our charter didn't pass, and I had just gotten back from grad school, I signed up for Medicare, became a substitute teacher in 'Ewa Beach, and I slept on the floor of someone's living room on an *Aerobed* for three weeks until I found an apartment;
- Someone gifted me airline miles in order to fly to see my family;
- I spent Thanksgiving, Easter, and other holidays at my friends' family's houses so that I was not alone;
- I didn't pay for room and board on a professional development trip because my hanai aunty knew I didn't have any money;
- People took off work, stayed up late, gave up weekends, and stayed by my side as we rewrote the charter.

It was the team that gave me energy, and it was me that led the team. We were symbiotically connected out of necessity and appreciation for one another; them to me for my

passion, commitment, dedication, and resilience to this project, and me to them for their support, partnership, devotion, and belief that it could and would be done.

The internal journey of starting this school required me to dig deeper than I ever have before in my life, and it wasn't until I fully submerged myself in the grueling, humbling, grind of starting this school did possibilities begin to appear and line up. The doors that were opened, put in front of me to walk through, were earned through relentless belief and commitment to this project, and that is one thing that I must harp on and shed light upon. Without a deep, serious, and unwavering commitment that it can be done, then the charter school start-up efforts will fall short every single time. If you give up now, what about when you have a team, kids, families, and a school; what then? The process, the journey, the loneliness, the hardships, struggle, doubt, and darkness - it is all a test to see if you are really, truly committed. Giving up validates the gauntlet; succeeding makes you a believer in the importance of its rigor. It is a balance that can only be struck while you are walking the narrow, narrow road between success and failure. And in my case, and in the case of starting this school, only when you are on that narrowest of roads, and darkest of paths, that you find the light and fire within yourself to keep going towards your dream of opening a school. These are the moments that validate you, your struggle, and make you feel alive.

### ***Voices of Champions & Balanced Humility***

It is July 13, 2017. I am sitting in the front row of the Public Charter School Commission's hearing on the second DreamHouse application (first version had been denied and failed a year earlier); an application that had been given an initial vote of no confidence and a recommendation to deny from the Evaluation Team, and a deferral from the Applications Committee. So, as a final stand, I had reached out to three people to testify: Dr. Michael Chun,

former headmaster of Kamehameha Schools; Dr. Walter Kahumoku III, Title III grant manager at the University of Hawai‘i at West O‘ahu; and, Dr. Peter Hanohano, former Charter School Commissioner.

Each went up and testified with essentially the same message: “We got them. We know they are young; we know they have a ways to go in order to open this school; but, give them a shot. We got them.” Commissioner Roger Takabayashi publicly voiced a motion to the board: “I motion to accept the recommendation of the Evaluation Team and deny DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach.” Not one Commissioner leaned forward to their microphone; not one Commissioner seconded the motion to bring it to a vote. Motion died with no second.

Commissioner Takabayashi says, with a chuckle: “Okay; it looks like that motion isn’t going to pass. I motion to approve pre-opening assurances for DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach.” Another Commissioner seconds, and with two Commissioners who had professional relationships with members of the applicant team abstaining, as well as the chair, the vote is made and recorded to approve DreamHouse application.

Five years of work; thousands of pages of materials; hundreds of people, letters, calls, and dollars of support; everything came down to about two, hyper-tense minutes, during which a motion to deny failed, a motion to approve passed, and just like that, DreamHouse clears one of the most stringent, difficult hurdles of moving from an applicant group into an approved public charter school in pre-opening status.

While one might point to our applicant team’s long and tiresome journey to get to the point of approval as the most important part of the process, that was only the first, say, 95% of the journey. The final 5%, which cannot be substituted or made up, is the involvement of champions to get across the finish line. I honestly believe that it wouldn’t have mattered if we

had 10 more board members, \$100,000 more dollars, a better lead on a facility, or the large backing of some mainland charter corporation - without the voices and commitment from these highly respected, local leaders, all of whom happened to be Native Hawaiian, we would have failed again at passing our charter application and creating DreamHouse 'Ewa Beach.

Champions are people who can speak to your cause and your mission, sometimes in ways that you personally cannot given your proximity and bias, and whose voices are heard clearly and is respected. Champions champion your cause, literally. They drive the point home. They sell the core message and the belief. Their words resonate and linger.

One of the gentlemen who testified shared to the Commissioners that the children, families, and community of 'Ewa Beach deserve no less than our new school. Imagine if this was me saying this to a group of Charter Commissioners? It would have come across as arrogant, unfounded, emotional, perhaps irrational, biased, and self-serving. Less than what? Less than a school whose charter application failed once and is now on the brink for the second time? I can imagine all kinds of questions that would suggest that a statement like this might not be received well by a group of Charter Commissioners. But, that it came from the former head of Kamehameha Schools, from a respected leader in the Hawaiian Islands, from someone who is a leader in the Native Hawaiian community and is Native Hawaiian himself, it carried a completely different weight. This is the gravity and weight that only a champion can bring, and this was exactly the weight that was required in order to get the charter passed. Without this weight, matched with our plan, timed at exactly the right moment, it is plausible to assume that our charter would have once again failed. But, in the most dire of circumstances, at the most desperate of times, only relationships that had been built, trust that had been earned, converted into the voice of the champion overseeing the final, critical steps across the finish line.

Aside from the presence of a champion, although related, was the concept of humility that built our charter. And not just humility for humility's sake, but true, honest, authentic, balanced humility throughout the team. Someone once told us that we needed more Native Hawaiians on our team, that it could not just be a group of white guys. However direct and blatant this may have sounded at the time, it was crucial advice that would go on to shape the diversity of our team, and the way that our organization would be perceived. It wasn't a "group of white guys," but rather a diverse, balanced group of individuals with different perspectives, backgrounds, and ethnicities. At the same time, someone also told me to not be too humble as it might come across as inauthentic. Again, a balance that needed to be struck in authenticity, and truth. My truth was that I had an edge and a gritty nature that had come to earn me the reputation of someone fighting to start a charter school against long odds, with little funding, lack of experience, a novice team, in a community that I was not from, that did not already have a charter school. Humility is expected and appreciated, as long as it is authentic. It is the same as empathy, humor, or any other personality trait or characteristic - it must be authentic. It has taken me years to understand this, and many failed relationships, friendships, and a lack of true understanding of myself; it has taken mentors, family, and believers; it took graduate school, a failed charter, and countless hours of better understanding what authentic, balanced humility would look like as I emerged as a founding school leader of DreamHouse 'Ewa Beach.

What I have realized is that listening and welcoming others to speak is crucial. Not just in times of criticism and finality (i.e. final charter meeting vote), but in times of community and calm as well. The years of listening at neighborhood board meetings, coffee hours, talk story sessions - those are all times that I did not need to speak; I just needed to listen. But then, when it comes time to speak, it is important to not lose the grit, edge, and audacity that has authentically

driven me to reorient my entire life, personally and professionally, around launching and leading this school. Not being too humble, in my case, in the instance of believing that DreamHouse could succeed, meant earning the moments that I could scrap and fight for the school in the face of adversity, long odds, and criticism. It meant that when it came time for me to speak, I could do so with the grit and directness that may come across as non-humble had it not been for the years of listening and earning these moments. The team, relationships, champions, and balanced humility are all ingredients that go into getting this charter school to pass the Charter Commission. Without the setbacks and learnings, without the years of learning and understanding, without the team and people that truly made this idea come alive, both during the planning period and at the final finish line of the Commission, this school would have always been just a dream. Instead, it is DreamHouse, it is real, and only through the voices of champions and balanced, authentic humility could it have happened against the long odds it faced. It is because of others' belief, and sharing of that belief, that we exist; and it is because of our own authenticity to ourselves, and our own beliefs, that we are here to lead this school into the future.

### **Analytical Category 3: The Opposition.**

#### ***Overview***

Make no mistake - when you try something new... when you go against the grain... when you challenge the status quo and lift up a different approach to doing things, you will be challenged, and there will be opposition. There are many people who have one way or another caused this project, this school, and this dream to delay, or suffer in a way. They have been part of this journey, and this section is not a time to go after anyone, to name people, or to change the tone of this dissertation; these people, in their own right, may have been standing up for what they believed; speaking their truth. My truth is that their presence and involvement with starting



this school made this journey difficult; at times, excruciatingly hard. Maybe they did it for a reason. Maybe their energy and involvement with this project always had a purpose.

As this is a dissertation, and an academic piece of work, I must respect the integrity and truth that has gone into this autoethnography up to this point, and I will not name names, I will not name organizations, and I will not purposefully bring shame or dishonor to anyone associated with starting this charter school; that is not my intent. It is my intent, however, to shed light on some of the most challenging personal, political, and people-oriented struggles of this journey; it is my intention to remember those moments; it is my intention to share some of the most powerful, most painful experiences that I went through in starting this school.

Some people were passive in their opposition. These were people that were obstacles in the journey; they did not mean harm, but they had their own agenda and their own views, which did not coincide with or support our charter school start-up effort. I would often say that, "it is not everyone's work to start this charter school;" these are the people who did not see starting this school as their work, they chose to be on the sideline or to lightly dismiss or discount our efforts, but they did not go out of their way to hurt the effort.

On the other hand, there were some people that were part of this experience that expended energy and resources to either set back, or stop the school from happening. Their efforts and energy set the school back in time, energy, resources, and emotion. We lost people. We lost funding. We lost facilities. These people were valid, very real challenges that we had to overcome in getting this school off the ground. Their energy and impact on this project is difficult to reflect up, is complex and entangled in nature, and still adds a layer of confusion when thinking about all of those who worked so hard to support the school - their juxtaposition

of intention is still hard to fathom. However, they are part of this journey, and deserve space in this autoethnography.

### *Passive Opposition*

When I began this journey, for one reason or another, I thought everyone was going to help me. I thought everyone was going to help us. I thought: We are starting a school, to help kids, in a community that is overcrowded, with parents who are asking for it - how hard of a sell is that? I was naive. I was overly and blindly optimistic. What I came to realize is that everyone has something to lose, no matter what. Everyone has a stake in your situation one way or another, and even when you feel like your idea adds value, creates a better situation, adds to the pie, even creates a bigger pie, people will often look at what they have to give up or what they lose. They will actively weigh this on the other scale, opposite of your idea and premise.

“What about the kids who are LGBTQI... or whatever; do you allow them in?”

(Anonymous Pastor, 2018)

What I realized is that each person has their own way of viewing and interpreting the world. In this case, a Pastor, whose work is to speak truth to God and lead his congregation. He has nothing against me, our school, my team, or our vision; he takes issue with the fact that we might have a student who identifies as LGBTQIA+ and that we will welcome that student into *his* house, the house of God, which would violate his values. Again, not overtly against our school, just more committed to his mission and purpose. The downside to this misalignment of values: a schoolhouse that sat empty on church property each week would not be the founding site of the school, even though it was in the heart of the community that we both wished to serve.

It wasn't that people were going out of their way to get in the way; they just were. It is just the nature of starting something brand new and having this idealistic, trusting, biased view that everyone you share your idea with is somehow going to back or support you. If they didn't want to partner with us; if they weren't mission and vision aligned; if we tried and tried again to work with them, but they still weren't budging, showing up at meeting, returning our phone calls or e-mails, then these were people that we would simply, amicably part ways with. Active opposition was a little different though.

### ***Active Opposition***

Active opposers are folks who use energy, networks, resources, power, and influence to work in opposition to our goal of starting a school. In the seven year journey to found a charter school, there are bound to be people that actively, aggressively, politically, personally work against you. Not just your school, but you. They play a significant role in the challenges of getting the school to become a live, public charter school. Again, as mentioned before, and by the very nature of trying and starting something new, these people will exist; it is a given.

What is so tricky about these people is that they aren't obvious. People that you truly believe will support you and your cause, or maybe have before, sometimes become your scariest and most pressing nightmares; all of a sudden the tides have shifted and you are fighting, against these people, to survive. The elected leader who confirmed a meeting with you at the 'Ewa Beach McDonald's, only to not show up, and later be quoted as saying "we stopped them from getting the fire station as a facility." The Charter Commissioner who stands up in front of a crowd of teachers union members on the mainland, a month before he is to vote on your charter, and states, publicly, "if I have anything to do with it, no new charters will be passed in Hawai'i

this year.” The fellow public school principal who, on one occasion takes your business card and suggests a partnership, only to turn around and say, “we don’t need any new schools in this community.” There are people out there who, if asked, may not publicly come out against you. But, in the shadows, their energy and impact can completely stall and jeopardize your progress. There are a handful of individuals who nearly brought down our entire charter school; they pushed our team and our mission to the edge of the abyss. For the uneasiness they caused, for the nights I stayed up worrying about them and their shenanigans, I must endearingly, and with a bit of cheekiness bring them in here and write them up just as I would anyone else. They have earned a spot in this dissertation. They are part of this journey.

**“They will fail.”**

You never want to get a text message the night before you go to defend your charter application, for a second year in a row (after failing the first year), that tells of a Charter School Commissioner actively lobbying against you by sharing their premonitions that your school will fail and that other Commissioners should not vote in your favor. It was not that surprising, to be honest; I did not expect outright support from this person. However, I did not expect active, negative energy and pressure on others not to support us.

There could be no one closer to the decision-makers and people we needed to support us; there was no one more influential; there was no one more dangerous than this Commissioner at the 11th hour, the night before our charter was to be voted upon. I almost wish that they had just come out publicly to say they don’t support us. Behind-the-scenes, closed door influencing is the most dangerous kind though. You cannot see it. You cannot speak to it. You are not even supposed to know that it exists, and if you find

out, often you are sworn to silence and secrecy. That is the trade-off: you get to know, but you cannot do anything about it.

My lesson, and an essential finding from this analysis: do not blindly trust anyone to hold and believe in the same vision you do. Have respect for them, but absolutely, do not blindly trust and rely on someone who may stand in the way of you and your goal (in this case, our team and our goal of getting our charter passed). They will not frame it that way; they will not come out and say, "I want to stand in front of these people and their goal." It will be much more disguised and dangerous than that, perhaps: "I believe in these people and I want what's best for them; I don't believe they have the adequate people, support, or resources in place to be successful, and I want them to be." This was one of the greatest, and most challenging lessons that I had to learn as part of this process - watch your back, and know that anyone, literally anyone, can have their own agenda.

### **Blindsided.**

Close your eyes and imagine this with me: you are on the eve of starting your charter school, and an ex of one of your board members calls on their private school friend network who sit on a foundation board and lobby them to pull \$90,000 of committed funding from your charter school. And they do. Even searching back in my e-mails for this message starts to make my stomach churn.

"The board of directors of (The Foundation) were recently made aware of allegations involving a current board member of DreamHouse. Due to these allegations we are currently investigating internally. Because of this we are unable to finalize the grant approval until our investigation is completed and our board of

directors has approved its findings. At this time we ask that you do not rely on any funding or incur any costs or expenses in relation to (The Foundation) grant until our investigation has been completed and you have been notified.”

(Anonymous Foundation, 2019)

On July 17th, 2019, three days before the scheduled blessing for our new public charter school, I received this e-mail at 11 o’clock at night. I had been called the night before from one of the foundation board members and had an offline, confidential call regarding the matter. I remember mentioning to the board member that I saw this to be a personal issue, a bad break up between a board member and an ex, and that this board member was willing to resign so as not to confuse personal with professional or philanthropic. It just so happens that we, DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach, had a letter of support from the ex that they had written the year prior. However, in the current situation, that letter of support holds no water or weight against the backdrop of a nasty break-up and deep, personal connections in a small funding community. We never saw it coming.

I am sure you can imagine what that decision was. I woke up that morning, at 3AM, and had a feeling in my gut - I knew we were going to lose the funding. In the week after this July 17th e-mail, our non-profit board member had stepped down from their five-plus year commitment to starting DreamHouse, we had lost \$90,000 in funding that had already been committed to our charter school, and everyone was on complete edge as to whether or not this situation would make itself larger than a group of private school friends who were on this foundation board, and reach the papers, news, and perhaps hurt the school. It did not, and it was time to move on. However, this lesson, of

being completely blindsided, stays with me in the journey to start this school. It has taught me to always, always expect the unexpected.

**Don't Take Anything Personally.**

Because it isn't. As I look back at the hardest of times during this seven-year journey, and layer on all the e-mails and conversations and artifacts from chapter four, in this particular section, I see that nothing anyone has done is personal. Even if it seems personal; even if someone says, "this is personal" - it isn't. It just isn't.

When you take it personally, you are admitting you believe in it. Only when you take it personally it becomes true. When you take something personally you "take ownership" of that thought and at that point, it does become yours. (Ruiz, 2018)

Ownership of the ill will of another is believing in it. If I believed in the things that I heard over the past seven years, this charter school never would have started. It is not that I did not listen or believe in anything; just the opposite. I believed in people that believed in me; I trusted them and believed what they said, what they felt. And for those that didn't, or opposed this project, I chose not to take personally what they said, what they meant, or what they felt. Every day, every minute, every moment spent buying into those that sought to stand in our way would have been a step backward and not in the direction of starting this school. That is what I convinced myself and that is what I lived. Every day, every minute is precious and important in the journey to start a school, and everyone has a role to play. Those who opposed our project and our work, even opposed me, offered that natural tension and pushback that has strengthened our team, our commitment to this project, and offered valuable lessons along the way. I am grateful

for the people and experiences that have pushed me, pulled me, shaped me, and guided me along the way. Without them, all of them, I would have been lost a long, long time ago.

**Analytical Category #4: Find your fire. Find your North Star.**

***Overview***

When I was young, maybe 9-10 years old, I used to go to Northern Vermont every weekend with my grandparents to take part in a developmental downhill ski racing program. Participated for five years total, and then my grandfather passed away. While other kids my age were going to birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, and playing on popular traveling sports teams in my town, I was 250 miles north, near the Canadian border, spending half the weekends of the year with my grandparents.

I often reflect on these times as being some of the most formative and influential of my life. As I look back over the course of my life, nowhere did I have the time spent with people who were so much older than me, who carried so much more wisdom than I did, and who taught me how to be. These years, so formative and influential in nature, gave me tools and perspective that I still call upon today in my role as a school leader, husband, friend, brother, son, and man. It is where I learned how to be a gentleman; to shake people’s hands and look them in the eyes (something my father instilled in me as well); to listen and engage, politely, while minding my manners; to open doors and carry coats for elders; to make new friends and join together in family, community, and fellowship.

One year, the ski area changed its name. For as long as I had remembered, it was called Burke Mountain. Then, suddenly, under new ownership, it became “Northern Star.” I remember being frustrated, curious, and confused at this decision. My grandfather and I would go out on nighttime walks in the snowy fields under the frigid Canadian skies and beautiful, bright stars,



and I remember asking him about this new name. He said, “look north; see if you can see the northern lights.” I remember staring, many nights onto the calm, distant horizon of the snow covered hills of where Vermont met Canada, losing myself in the distance, the beauty, and the calm of where the dark horizon met the sky. I remember seeing how bright the stars were and at times, catching a glimpse of the green and blue magic that would dance across the sky, known as the northern lights. I can see these lights in my mind, and I can see these lights in my heart. I revisit my childhood and the people that made me who I am. And as I close this final chapter of my dissertation with “why” I chose to commit the last eight years of my life to starting this school, it is my heart that I share. This is where my secrets lie; this is where my why, and the belief and hope that others have invested in me goes - to my heart. The books and degrees, the lessons learned, the how - that is all in my mind. The why, and the people and voices that have come alongside of me on this journey - that is in my heart. Welcome to the final, most intimate, most personal moments and learnings that I have come to know since beginning the effort to start DreamHouse. I saved them for now. I saved them for you. I can’t promise that they will ring true for everyone, nor will they unlock the path forward to starting a public charter school in Hawai‘i - I cannot promise this. But, what I can promise, is that without this element, without the internal drive and the people that brief life, love, and hope into your work, there would never have been a charter school. I owe this journey to these people. I owe DreamHouse to the people that were the *why tailwinds*, and the voices that told me never, ever give up. It is because of you that I am here; that we are here.

### ***Part 1: Voices of Belief***

The people that gave me the critical feedback necessary to develop; the people that reached out when I was in the deepest, darkest, most difficult of places in this journey; the

people that pushed me to think bigger and never give up; these are the voices of belief. There are people who used their words, their mana, and their relationship with me to push me and to encourage me that if I did not give up, if I kept going, what I was driving for was just around the corner.

Don't give up. Seriously, don't give up. (Anonymous Charter Commissioner, 2017)

Ironic that a Charter Commissioner, in private, when the transcript wasn't on, would say to me the exact thing I needed to hear in the moment when I needed to hear it the most. When you need to hear something the most is often when you are in the midst of your greatest challenges. Bill George calls these moments of darkness Crucibles of Leadership in his 2015 book "Discover Your True North." George says,

"Crucibles will test us to our limits... it is the hardest to cope with crucibles when you're in the midst of them, as you feel so much pain that you cannot see the lessons that come from the experience. To navigate through a crucible, you need to believe in yourself and your purpose in life and summon the inner strength and courage to endure" (George, 2015, p. 62)

But, what about the times that you cannot find the inner courage, or your inner voice is silent, no matter how much you listen. No matter how much guidance and direction you seek from within, you feel like your tank is empty and you are running on the fumes of dreams and hope that is exhausting itself. It is somehow these moments that someone, a voice, a person that

perhaps you did not expect, comes into your life, crosses paths with you, and says the exact words that you needed to hear.

Nothing new, but I hope you know how inspiring that is (your work ethic, drive, and perseverance). I saw it and many of us talked about it. It’s what makes you strong when you’re tested. And we pray not for an easy life, but that we may be strong. (Anonymous, 2016)

Like I said, exactly at the right moment, someone reaches out and shares with you that you are good enough, that this too shall pass, and that all of your hopes, dreams, and intuition is not lost in this moment; to keep going; to know you are in a crucible moment; to stay the course. And, it is not up to us as entrepreneurs and charter-school-starters and aspiring, emerging leaders to look for and wait for these things to be said to us. It is up to us to commit, wholeheartedly to our mission and purpose, and to know that when we are at our very weakest, someone will come along and pick us up. We have to have that hope and that trust to know that at just the right time, the right person and the right words, at the right moment, will be there.

In November 2016, I moved to the Bay Area for a one-month leadership internship at a charter school, while also living with my sister who was expecting at the time. I went to build skills, perspective, and experience that would help me along the way with the charter school. What I didn’t know is that dinner with an old college acquaintance would lead to a relationship, a romance, a proposal, and ultimately my wife. I shared with someone that Stephanie (my wife) has truly pushed me and shown me what it means to be a man of my word, a husband, and a future father. Without her, and without her high expectations for my leadership, my actions, and

my word, this charter school would never have happened. I met a life partner in November 2016, while taking a step away from the place that I would eventually return to continue my journey, and continue the work of starting this school. Again, not looking for or waiting, but welcoming the moment, the person, and the impact in order to guide me along the way.

Lastly, and key to the purpose of this dissertation, this journey, and my mission is the children who I am committed to serving through this school. It is crucial to always keep them in mind, their voices, their *future* voices, and the image that you have in your head of them succeeding and living their best life and chasing their dreams. I have this picture of three sisters who used to come to our leadership camps two hours early, in DreamHouse shirts, ready to go for the day. Two ended up coming to the school (the third is already in high school). In the picture the three of them are planting kalo as part of one of our leadership excursion to Hoa ‘Āina Farm in Mākaha. The picture shows all three of them, in matching shirts and jeans, with matching DreamHouse hats on, planting the young kalo bulb in the soil before watering it and stepping back to admire their work. I see this picture and I hear their voices in my head - take care of us, watch us grow, help us grow and flourish into the kalo plants that will take care of and feed our community and islands. I hung this picture over my desk for months and when times were hard, when the road was dark, I looked at this picture and heard their voices - don't give up, we will grow, stay with us. We must listen to these voices, because they are the voices that will keep us committed and hopeful on the journey. They are the voices of belief, and they will help you find your way and believe in you as you find your way.

### ***Part 2: Your Inner Fire.***

And finally, when all the lights dim, and the music stops, and you are alone, by yourself, at 4AM, staring into the bathroom mirror, with no one to see or hear you but yourself, you have

to ask yourself - do I have what it takes to get through this? Do I believe, so deeply, that I will not stop until we reach the starting line of officially launching and leading this school? Do I commit, beyond friends, family, and all other things in life to making this happen? If the answer is anything less than a resounding and unrelenting yes, then I cannot say starting and leading a charter school is the right work for you. For me, and for this journey, this was the light that stayed on when all others were dark; this is what the fire that burned through every storm we went through - it was the fire within.

Your inner fire is something that only you, and you alone, can find, light, and fuel. For many of us, we are still searching for it; we have not truly found that inner, burning passion that drives us. But, when you find it, you know; and others know too. After a performance to my graduate school class on the mainland in 2016, a friend slipped me a note:

There you are. (Anonymous, 2016)

I still have the note.

People know when you are burning bright, driven by an internal, insatiable desire to fuel and burn that fire bright, to shine and light the way not only for you, but for others. The fire burns with truth and authenticity. It burns with radiance and passion. People feel it. They believe in it.

In all of the artifacts and things that I held on to, from the notes and voicemails, to pictures and moments that have etched themselves into my memory, there was a theme that wove through the voices of others. They told me to never stop burning, to never stop fighting, and to shine as bright as I could to make this dream happen. They knew that I had found myself on a

journey that had ignited a fire that would never stop burning, and would grow and glow to illuminate the way towards starting this school.

I did not know this fire at the beginning of my journey. I did not know that I would feel, so deeply, the call to start a public charter school in 'Ewa Beach, O'ahu, Hawai'i. There is a famous story written by Paulo Coelho called the Alchemist, through which he tells a story of a boy that went on a search to find a man who could turn things into gold. There comes a part nearly two thirds into the book where the boy has met up with the alchemist and has an exchange that has come to be one of the most powerful, influential paragraphs of any book, or any story, to affect my life. Here is a longer version of the quote that was referred to earlier in the literature review:

“My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer,” the boy told the alchemist one night as they looked up to the moonless sky. “Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity.” “Every second is an encounter with God,” the boy told his heart. “When I have been truly searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous, because I’ve known that every hour was a part of the dream that I would find it. When I have been truly searching for my treasure, I’ve discovered things along the way that I never would have seen had I not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve.” (Coelho, p. 130, 1993)

This story, his journey, and this passage is the story of my life. The entire journey of starting the charter school has been me searching for my treasure. For years, before I truly committed myself, I was afraid that I would suffer, be humiliated, be embarrassed, or fail. My heart was afraid. It wasn't until the fire was sparked within, that I began to realize that every moment of the journey was a moment that needed to happen. Years ago when that fire began, the true journey began. The lessons unfurled themselves right in front of me. Leaving a job; losing some close friends; running out of money; leaving for graduate school; not getting the charter; meeting my future wife; getting the charter; being delayed a year; and ultimately opening the school. Each moment was a treasure that I discovered along the way because I was unabashedly, unwaveringly committed to finding my treasure, which was the school opening. The journey was necessary, and the fear of failing, and suffering, was the worst by far, just as the alchemist had said.

Your inner compass must point north towards the horizon and the northern lights that will light up the sky of your life. Your inner voice must tell you, convince you, to never, ever give up. You must surround yourself with the voices and energies that will breathe life and hope into your journey, and keep you on your way, even when the road ahead. Then, and only then, will a fire inside of you spark. And, when it does, nothing will be able to keep it from shining and illuminating the pathway ahead towards your treasure, and towards your dream. It does for me, and I can only hope that it will for you.

### **Revisiting Chapter One: Purpose & Research Question**

Remember that the purpose of this study, as laid out in chapter one, was to study, examine, and immerse myself in the social, cultural, political, and educational forces and intertwined narratives that have come together to form this journey and experience of launching

a public charter school in the Hawaiian Islands as a Haole, non-Hawaiian, outsider to the island of O‘ahu, to the Moku of ‘Ewa, and to the community of ‘Ewa Beach. I set that purpose in December 2016 when I applied to this EdD program, before I was accepted, before our charter was approved, and before I was a school leader. I knew there would be a point to all of this; to revisiting and sitting in the journey I had gone on to start DreamHouse. I am so glad that I did.

The journey has changed and evolved even over the course of writing this dissertation, which began at the outset of the doctoral program in June 2017. But, the artifacts span years and date back to a time before I ever knew I wanted to complete this program, and long before I had established the purpose for this study. However, the purpose is what has not only guided me in this dissertation, but in starting this school. I knew that I would have to come back and explore the experience, and in that reflexivity, I realized that every moment of living the journey to start this school was actually living the study that I would later look back upon. It was a powerful juxtaposition of trying to start the school, and also living as the subject of this autoethnography and study, caught in between doing, and studying, the journey to start this school. The purpose has always been to make sense of it all, and in a way, this final chapter does that for me. It highlights what has always been important, it sheds lights on the challenges and struggles that I wish I had known more about, and it gives me food for thought for future studies and publications with regard to this topic. And isn't that the point? To commit to the journey, to live it, to write about it, to study it, and to share it? That has literally been the last three years of simultaneously living the start-up of this school, while also writing about, studying, and actively trying to make sense of it all.

In some ways, my research question lives on past this study. I am still on a personal and professional journey of starting this school. As the years go on, perhaps the question might



evolve to looking at the experience of *leading* the school, and one day, of *leaving* the school.

There are powerful lessons and learnings on the horizon if I am open to living them as I have the last seven years. I hope I am.

### **Summary of Chapter Five: Interpretation of Findings**

Chapter five has by far been the most refreshing and invigorating to write. It was almost as if I had waited for five years to tell a story, and I had finally researched how to tell it, found the things that I wanted to share, proved them, and then added my perspective to it all. The complex nature of telling your own story as autoethnography requires you to wait, though; you need the first four chapters to set up chapter five, or else you are just telling a story that is not grounded in the excruciating, time intensive, open-minded, open-ended journey of the dissertation. It requires discipline and commitment to the practice. It requires you to wait, and wait I did.

I waited to tell you about the ecosystem of law, bureaucracy, authorizing, and permitting that one must learn about, master, and navigate in order to earn a charter from the state's only authorizing body for new charter schools; the cumbersome, grinding process that took nearly four years from application to the day our first students walked in the doors of DreamHouse. I waited to tell you about the game of poker you must play with powers that be; the requirement to hold firm with a good hand when you know their cards, and also to lay down and fold when it comes time to bow to the system of power and tenure that power brokers and keyholders in this system hold. It is a game of timing and risk; a game that takes you to the very edge, rolls the dice, and lays your odds on the table for others to determine. I waited to tell you about the people and influences that worked behind the scenes and stood in the way of our dream; at one point friends, turned to opposing forces, and who served as some of the most influential powers to

push our project to the brink of never becoming realized. And I waited to tell you about the voices that ignited the fire within me that burned until the day our first students walked in the front doors of DreamHouse for their first day of class.

Chapter five is told by waiting to present your analysis of the years of data, as I did, that serve as a constellation of artifacts and data that traverse the people, places, and circumstances that served as the backdrop for this charter school. This analysis of course flows through a prism that is carefully crafted to illuminate key points and data that will serve as the voice of your dissertation, all built upon a foundation of others' voices as compiled in the literature review. The chapters build upon one another and weave together to unlock the lessons and learnings of chapter five. Without the first four, this final illustration of findings cannot be written. The process to get here lends credence to the manner and truth through which the story of chapter five is told. And for me, without the seven years of data and artifacts, without the journey that I lived, and without the school to show for it, perhaps it wouldn't have been a story at all. Instead, it is my life's journey, an autoethnography that weaves together times that were excruciating, people who let me down, people who lifted me up, and an inner voice that has become so clear, that I will never, ever be the same.

Chapter five is my version of the events that I have lived, my telling of the story, through my perspective and the lived experience of my life. As was detailed throughout, there are many different ways that this story could have been told, and perhaps, different conclusions could have been drawn. However, I have done my very best to stay true to the disciplined practice of this dissertation, acknowledge the variance of perceived reality given my positionality, reflexivity, and self-awareness, and tell the lived experiences of my life with authenticity and truth. It is my

hope that people who read this dissertation and walk this journey with me can see and understand this through these chapters, through this story, and through this journey.

## **Conclusions**

Through this autoethnography, it was my hope that revisiting the past seven years of starting DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach Public Charter School would illuminate learnings and lessons that I did not, and perhaps could not, learn along the way.

Through the examination of literature, design of a simple, but specific methodology, and review of thousands of artifacts, I was able to emerge from months of analysis with findings that led themselves to interpretations and ultimately to conclusions. The major findings and conclusions align to the same four categories as laid out in the methodology, analysis, and interpretation, and are as follows: (a) starting a public charter school is incredibly difficult; (b) launching a school requires exceptional discipline, humility, and external support; (c) there will *always* be people and forces in the way of your dreams; and (d) the inner fire, and courage, will empower you to succeed.

### ***Starting a School is Incredibly Difficult***

It is no wonder that it took us over seven years to launch DreamHouse ‘Ewa Beach. Part of me is convinced that it doesn’t have to take this long; but part of me feels that it takes as long as it needs to take. A major finding here is that starting the school requires knowledge across an incredible array of fields, professions, and disciplines; it can not just be a group of altruistic, well-meaning educators on the weekend talking about beginning their own shop. A well-designed, well-equipped, highly capable team must be assembled in order to conquer the task of applying to and receiving a charter, as well as making it through the pre-opening assurance phase to open. Conclusion: do not apply to start a school in Hawai‘i unless you have that team.

***Prerequisites of Discipline, Humility, and a Deep Network of Support***

Somehow, these three fit together. Discipline requires humility to submit yourself to the cause; people won't support you if you are not humble. A major finding in the journey to start DreamHouse was that leading this effort required a commitment and recommitting to the cause on a daily basis. At no time could this be a side project or hobby - it had to be my life. It required sacrifice, humility in the face of setbacks, and establishing relationships and a deep, integrated network that supported not just me and my team, but the mission. These interwoven pieces were crucial and seemed to build upon one another in a way that fueled this school. Conclusion: be humble in the face of setbacks, continually recommit to the mission, and wholeheartedly establish authentic, lasting relationships around the mission and your commitment to the mission.

***Watch your Back, Don't be Surprised, and Don't Take it Personally***

There will be people who are opposed to you, your work, your mission, no matter how noble and just you feel your cause is; these people exist, they are real, and they are a threat to your dream. A major finding throughout the course of this study was that no matter how far ahead we felt we had gotten from challenges or problems that people posed to us, we would have to face them one way or another. There are some people out there who will seek to find their own justice through you and your project, which could stop you from your mission and dream. Our work, of course, was to win the hearts and minds of people to support our mission and cause. However, just know, that not everyone is trying to start a charter school, and their own perception of justice could be at your expense. Conclusion: watch your back; keep an eye on your mission; don't let surprise surprise you; and do not ever take anything personally.

### ***Shine Bright***

The final and most powerful moment of writing this dissertation, and of being on this journey, was realizing that the answer to all of this lay within me; within my mind, within my heart, within my soul. Realizing, through the empowering and igniting words of others, that my inner drive and fire would inspire this project and bring life to this school was truly an ignition of my dream. The major finding here, from combing through dozens and dozens of notes, transcripts, journal entries, and letters, and posts: do not ever give up on your dream; do not ever give up on yourself. And that is the conclusion: in order to shine bright on and for others around you, you must listen to and believe in the words that are breathed into you by champions and people who believe in you to always, always shine bright, let that fire burn, and never, ever give up on your dream.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this journey, the literature, findings, analysis, and conclusions of this autoethnography, I would like to humbly, collaboratively, offer recommendations to the following groups of people: (a) fellow organisms of the bureaucratic ecosystem, (b) charter applicants teams, and (c) haole, non-Hawaiian educational leaders. These recommendations are not prescriptions, nor are they absolute; they are empirical observations that may offer light at some point along our journey forward, together.

#### ***Recommendations for Fellow Organisms of the Bureaucratic Ecosystem***

People, organizations, agencies, Commissions, and the “powers that be” should consider:

1. Considering their roles in supporting and spurring innovation and creativity in a series of state systems that are notoriously hampered by bureaucracy and inefficiency; what got us

here will not necessarily move us forward, and we need new, innovative, creative, forward-looking solutions and ways of thinking to move us forward in the world;

2. You are leading, living organisms in an ecosystem of interdependent people and organizations that make up our public education system in the islands - know that your actions, leadership, and effects impact people and organizations far beyond your scope;
3. Visit, immerse yourself within, and better understand the people, organizations, and places you hold accountable - it will better inform your mind, and your heart;
4. Give life to new organisms - our ecosystem will only evolve and flourish if we give life to new people, organizations, and places that are seeking life.

### ***Recommendations for Charter Applicant Teams***

Teams of individuals who are interested in applying for a charter in the State of Hawai'i should consider:

1. Be better than you think you need to be; it will matter in the end when every inch of your plan and team are under the microscope;
2. You speak to your weaknesses and growth areas and have others speak to your strengths, not the other way around - this too will matter when you are up against the grain of the process that is meant to grind you down;
3. Focus on the pipe, not just the water - we all know that everyone is in it for the kids, but make your living in the details, the plan, the team, and earning legitimacy through proving you know how to build the school that will take care of the precious wai.

### ***Recommendations for Haole, non-Hawaiian Educational Leaders***

Haole, non-Hawaiian educators who find themselves in leadership positions in indigenous communities should consider:

1. It is not about you - it never was, it never will be - remain a finite component, bound by time, limited in existence, so that you may be forgotten, but your work might be accepted and remain past your tenure;
2. Know when to step forward, step back, and step out, per the wise words of Dr. Julie Kaomea - know that a time will come when you must leave to lead;
3. Listen, with your head, and with your heart - there are things that you may earn the privilege to hear, and if you do, hold on to them with your mind, heart, and soul;
4. Surround yourself with wise, Native Hawaiian mentors - I cannot tell you how influential this has been on my journey as an educator, as a haole, and as a man - surround yourself with people who will guide your heart and shape you to the person you need to be;
5. Listen to and follow you heart - if your heart is true, if your intentions are pure, and if you follow all of the dos and don'ts of being a haole in an indigenous community not your own, then do not listen to or heed the word of naysayers and cannot doers - follow your heart, follow you dream.

### ***A Final Thought***

When the noise of life around you calms; when the voices that have sought to empower you sink in; when the fire within you is ignited; what journey do you find yourself on? For me, it was the seven-year journey to start and lead DreamHouse 'Ewa Beach Public Charter School. I am not a principal. I am not a hero. I am not an award-winning educator or a once-in-a-lifetime leader. I may not be remembered for what I did here, nor is that what matters. What matters to me, and why I wrote this autoethnography, is to encourage you to let others in who seek to ignite the fire and flame within you - the fire and flame that has the power to change others' lives. When you do, you will begin your journey. It may be a journey like mine, looking out over the

horizon of the snow-covered hills of Vermont searching for the northern lights; or, like the boy shepherd in “The Alchemist,” looking for his treasure. You may find yourself searching, looking, and listening for the answers and the courage to find your way forward. Trust your heart, look inward, and you will find the answers - you will find your courage. Light that flame, shine bright, and illuminate the way forward for yourself, for others, for our islands, and for our world. Let us shine bright, together.



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