Kula Kaiapuni: Hawaiian Immersion Schools

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Kula Kaiapuni, or Hawaiian language immersion schools, are an innovative program of the Hawai'i State Department of Education. Children attending these schools are taught the standard public school curriculum—reading, math, science, social studies, art, music, and physical education—entirely through the medium of Hawaiian. For the whole school day, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., the children are immersed in the Hawaiian language, and some children even attend the A+ after-school childcare program, which is conducted in Hawaiian for them. Each September, a new group of kindergartners with varying degrees of exposure to the Hawaiian language start out in the Kula Kaiapuni and, to every parent's delight, become fluent speakers of Hawaiian by Christmas.

The idea of reviving the Hawaiian language began among a group of University of Hawai'i students (many of whom were Kamehameha Schools graduates) in the early 1980s. By that time, Hawaiian was already being referred to as an extinct language, and for good reason. There were only about 1,500 native speakers remaining, the majority of whom were over the age of fifty. Daily it seemed that more *kūpuna* (elders) were passing away, and the pool of Hawaiian-speaking children on the island of Ni'ihau was shrinking, as more Hawaiian families moved to the nearby Island of Kaua'i to find work and encountered English everywhere.

Far away across the Pacific, another group of Polynesians, the Maori of Aotearoa (New Zealand), had been experiencing a similar loss of their Native language and had started Maori immersion preschools to stem this loss. The

young Hawaiians heard about the Maori experiment and went to Aotearoa to investigate. They returned to start in 1985 the first Hawaiian immersion preschools, known as Pūnana Leo, in Hilo and in Honolulu, and they enrolled their children in them.

From the outset, the activities at the Pūnana Leo were conducted entirely in Hawaiian. In order to ensure that instruction was delivered at a high level of Hawaiian proficiency, at least one native speaker was needed to teach at each preschool. How thrilled all of us were when we found that our young keiki could become fluent so quickly in Hawaiian. Noting how well the preschools worked, many more young Hawaiians soon wanted to enroll their children. The Pūnana Leo on Oʻahu usually has 100 children on a waiting list for only 25 places. Until 1989, these preschools received no state or federal funding and were totally supported by the parents, sometimes with the help of local churches. For example, the Kalihi-Moanalua Congregationalist Church provides free facilities to the Pūnana Leo o Honolulu.

As the first group of Pūnana Leo children approached kindergarten age, their parents were reluctant to abandon their experiment in Hawaiian immersion and petitioned the Board of Education and the Department of Education to set up two Hawaiian immersion kindergartens, one each on Oʻahu and Hawaiʻi. The Board agreed and in September 1987, the immersion experiment was carried on into the elementary school, with 20 children in combination K-1 classes at Waiau elementary in Pearl City and at Keaukaha Elementary in Hilo. The pioneer teachers of these classes were Alohalani Kaina and Puanani Wilhelm, who, with all of their hard work, should qualify for sainthood.

From this pioneering effort, the program has grown into a well-established Department of Education program and has expanded to three other schools—Pāʻia Elementary on Maui, Kapaʻa Elementary on Kauaʻi, and Pūʻōhala Elementary in windward Oʻahu. Each year, another grade level is added at each school, and a new class of 20 children starts kindergarten. At present, the lead schools of Waiau and Keaukaha have grades K-6, with about 120 students each. The Kula Kaiapuni on Maui and Kauaʻi have grades K-4, while the most recent site at Pūʻōhala has grades K-2. There are now about 460 children in Kula Kaiapuni statewide, the number growing every year as 100 more children start kindergarten.

Although the program is still new, the word is out, and many parents are requesting additional immersion classrooms in such diverse areas as Hoʻolehua on Molokaʻi, Hāna on Maui, Hanalei on Kauaʻi, Kona on Hawaiʻi, as well as Nānākuli and Lāʻie on Oʻahu. Only the present lack of trained teachers who are fluent in Hawaiian hampers the desired expansion.

The Hawaiian immersion idea, however, has sparked intense debate in Hawaiʻi.[1] Much of the controversy stems from the mistaken assumption that the program seeks to completely replace the use of English with Hawaiian,

thereby educating children who will be unable to function effectively in an English-speaking world. For example, critics have expounded at length on the future inability of these children to join the international world of commerce. In actuality, however, the children enter the program as fluent English speakers and remain proficient in English while learning Hawaiian. Given that all parents in the program speak English, and that the surrounding community—whether in church or at the supermarket, and certainly on television and radio— provides ample opportunities to hear and speak English, immersion children really cannot escape English. Moreover, the parents want their children to be fluent in both Hawaiian and English and have high expectations (such as completing a university education) for their future success in an English-speaking world.

A second criticism is that Hawaiian is too primitive a language to discuss math, science, or current events. This criticism, however, shows a misunderstanding of the nature of languages. Each language is open with respect to content words, and its lexicon evolves in response to the communication needs of its speakers. Take English, for example: Forty to fifty years ago, words like *xerox*, *contact lenses*, *microwave ovens*, *icing muscles*, *laser printers*, *permanent-press*, and *velcro* were unheard of. With the need to communicate concepts such as these, the English language has had to change and grow. The Hawaiian language needs to go through such development in a shorter period of time, and Hawaiian linguists have faced this challenge by establishing a hard-working lexicon committee that meets frequently to address such needs.

Yet a third argument is that the study of Hawaiian will actually hamper the acquisition and use of English. The research evidence on immersion in other languages, however, is encouraging on this point. In the original French immersion project in Canada, where English-speaking children were taught all their school subjects in French, the children's performance on English achievement tests was comparable to that of children who were taught their school subjects only in English. Similarly, a study completed in 1988 on English-speaking children who were immersed in Spanish from grade 1 to grade 6 found that the children performed considerably above the mean on standardized achievement tests of reading and mathematics in Spanish (percentile ranks of 66 to 81) as well as in English (percentile ranks of 74 to 83).

In most non-English speaking areas—Continental Europe, Asia, Africa—multilingualism is the norm, and an ability to converse in several languages is considered to be the mark of a well-educated individual. A child in an immersion program, therefore, will have a decided advantage over a monolingual child in such a society.

Immersion schools are not a new idea; they have been in existence since 1965 and are located in many countries.[2] In Canada, immersion schools teach in French, Hebrew, Ukrainian, and Mohawk; in the United States, they are

in French, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese. In other parts of the world, we find Welsh immersion in Wales, Maori and Samoan in New Zealand, Swedish in Finland, Frisian in Holland, and Basque in Spain.

Children in all of these schools are at least bilingual and some are multilingual. How is bilingualism achieved if only one language is used as the medium of instruction? Studies have shown that children's cognitive skills develop in a similar manner in any language. When children are required to spend the entire school day in a target language (in this case Hawaiian), but hear the community language (English) everywhere outside of school, their cognitive skills develop in the normal manner and many of these skills quickly transfer from one language to another. Hence, some of the children, while taught to read only in Hawaiian, begin reading spontaneously in English, before they are given any formal instruction in English, which is delayed until the fifth grade. In immersion school studies, it has been shown that once formal instruction in English begins, all cognitive functions transfer from the target to the community language within one year of instruction in the community language, even if that instruction is for only a half hour per day.[3]

Some may ask, "Why not teach the children in both languages from the very beginning, or at least begin to teach in the children's first language by third grade?" In communities where both languages are spoken on the street and used by the media, as in some European countries, the "early introduction" (of the first language) model can be used. When, however, the immersion language is weaker in the community than the children's first language, as is the case in Hawaiʻi, the children need to be instructed for a longer period of time in the immersion language in order to develop their cognitive skills through that language. The "late introduction" model is, therefore, appropriate in these situations.[4] Otherwise, the children will not develop a sufficiently strong basis in the immersion language to maintain a near native fluency through adulthood, simply because they do not hear it enough outside of school. Evidence actually suggests that the longer the immersion language is used exclusively as the medium of instruction, the better the verbal skills will be in both languages and the higher the achievement test scores in all areas of study—math, science, social studies, and language arts. For parents interested in enhancing their child's education, the immersion method holds exciting long-term promise.[5]

In order to ensure that the Hawaiian immersion program is producing results similar to immersion programs in other parts of the world, the Department of Education has hired University of Hawaiʻi experts to review the program annually and to assess its successes and weaknesses. These evaluators have consistently praised the Kula Kaiapuni for student achievement, teacher creativity, and parent participation.[6] Not only are the children mastering another language, but they are at grade level with their peers who

are instructed only in English. Most gratifying is their high level of enthusiasm for school and for learning: According to parental reports, the children beg to go to school even when they are sick and cry when it is time for summer vacation. With *such glowing accounts* that contrast so sharply with the high dropout rate for Hawaiians in regular public school programs, parents feel the program is very worthwhile.

The Department of Education's annual review has also identified problems: a lack of textbooks, readers, and classroom materials written in Hawaiian, and a shortage of qualified teachers who are both fluent in Hawaiian and certified by the Department of Education for elementary school teaching. Each year parents and administrators worry about who will be the new hire.

When the Board of Education approved the Kula Kaiapuni in 1987, instructional materials in the Hawaiian language had to be prepared hastily before classes began, and ever since, the struggle to keep up with their demand has been constant. The Department of Education has contracted Hale Kuamoʻo at the University of Hawaiʻi-Hilo to translate math texts and faculty members in the Hawaiian Language Department at the University of Hawaiʻi-Mānoa to translate basal readers. The Department has also asked fluent speakers of Hawaiian in the community to translate or write texts. In addition, Hale Kuamoʻo in Hilo has created new reading materials in Hawaiian with original illustrations.

In spite of all these efforts, teachers have borne a heavy burden of translating materials for their students. Parents have helped greatly in this effort, organizing monthly sessions to cut and paste Hawaiian translations into dismantled English picture books and then to reassemble the books. Such translations require an ongoing effort to convince major American publishing houses to release their copyrights and allow translations of their books to be published in Hawaiian. Clearly, the production of instructional materials in Hawaiian is one of the challenges the program must face if it is to continue.

Perhaps because of the shortage of teachers and curriculum materials, Department of Education policy planners have been reluctant to provide more support for a program, no matter how successful, that requires so much money to service a relatively small number of children. Citing other pressing needs throughout the public school system, the scarcity of Hawaiian textbooks and teachers, and a lack of knowledge about the immersion method, the Department has argued against the expansion of the Hawaiian Immersion Program.

In response to this position of the Department of Education, Hawaiian immersion parents have organized themselves into strong parent support groups at each Kula Kaiapuni and throughout the state. They regularly lobby their representatives on the Board of Education to vote for expansion of the program and against the Department of Education's recommendations to limit immersion schools. The parents have adopted the following goals for the Hawaiian Immersion Program:

while teaching how to do a math problem, during art instruction, during physical education. This form of thinking aloud can benefit even fluent speakers because it models how language can be used to guide behavior and problem solving and because it gives students a deeper experience with the concept.

Demonstrations. Demonstrations are similar to labeling actions. One may think of labeling actions as a way to teach *procedures* for doing things, whereas demonstrations and enactments help to convey *concepts*. The distinction is often blurred as in the above example, in which the student learns about the concept of perimeter by carrying out various actions. However, many concepts are independent of specific procedures, and in order to convey their meaning, one has to think of what kinds of demonstrations would promote their understanding. For example, to demonstrate the meaning of *every other* you cannot point to a single thing or go through a specific procedure or sequence of actions. But you could do a number of demonstrations: You could take a calendar (assuming the class is familiar with calendars) and show what *every* day means by pointing to every day on the calendar and then what *every other* day means by pointing to day 1, 3, 5, 7. Since it is always important to give multiple examples in developing word meaning, you could add other examples, such as pointing out *every* child and *every other* child.

Recently, I saw an effective demonstration of the meaning of blockade when fifth-grade students were studying the Civil War and were learning how the North blockaded the South. The teacher drew an outline map of the East Coast and an outline of the coast of Europe (the students labeled the parts of the map: North, South, Atlantic Ocean, Europe). He then drew a line across the Atlantic to show the route by which the South shipped their cotton to Europe. Finally, he drew the ships moving in from the North to block off the South's access to their trade route. This took less than five minutes, yet it gave the children a vivid experience for the meaning of blockade during the Civil War.

And how would you get the meaning of *personification* across? How about dressing up as a pencil, introducing yourself as "I am a No. 2 pencil!" Then talk about your life as a pencil, squeezed by children's grubby fingers, stuck into a pencil sharpener, thrown into a school bag with books all over you so you're afraid you're going to break at the waist, but how it's all worthwhile when you feel those wonderful ideas of a child going through your lead core and onto the paper.

To summarize this section, we may not always have the necessary picture books or props to help students understand, but we can always draw, demonstrate, or act out. Using such extralinguistic cues in our instruction will make our lessons more real and lively and help students understand and remember the concepts we want them to learn—whether the student is a native speaker of the instructional language, an immersion student, or a student learning English as a second language or second dialect.

language in the Department of Indo-Pacific Languages at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and Warner was one of the founding members of Pūnana Leo. Kahulu Palmeira is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Second Language Acquisition. I teach Hawaiian history and culture in the Center for Hawaiian Studies, also at UH-Mānoa. Except for No'eau Warner, we all have children in the program in the two lead classes at Waiau Elementary; hence, we feel the urgency for addressing program needs as we see seventh grade approaching very rapidly.

Working with the parent group at Waiau Elementary and with the Board of Education, the O'ahu group has proposed that the problems of curriculum development and teacher training could best be resolved by establishing an institute at the Mānoa campus within the Department of Indo-Pacific Languages. This institute would support the Kula Kaiapuni through research and curriculum development and would work in conjunction with the Hale Kuamo'o at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo to produce high school teaching materials. Moreover, we recommended establishing the O'ahu K-12 Kula Kaiapuni program adjacent to or on the Mānoa campus (which is situated on Ceded Lands), to create a Hawaiian immersion laboratory school, similar in conception to the English-speaking laboratory school already in existence.

This plan has several advantages. First, it puts curriculum developers in close contact with the main Kula Kaiapuni. If each of the 800 students in the Hawaiian Language Department at Mānoa were to write a simple story in Hawaiian every semester, there would be at least 1,600 new stories written each year. In addition, students who are interested in becoming immersion teachers could work at the Institute to produce more complex materials and could gain field expertise before they start to teach. Advanced students could reformat the extensive Hawaiian newspaper archives and the excellent collection of Hawaiian language publications in the University's Hamilton Library and, in this way, provide appropriate texts at the high school level.

Second, the plan would give students who are interested in teaching in the Hawaiian Immersion Program easy access to classrooms for observation—and participation—teaching experiences. Within the University's Hawaiian Studies and Hawaiian Language departments, we presently have 120 students who wish to teach in the Hawaiian Immersion Program. Potential immersion teachers, such as university students who major in Hawaiian language and education, could assist in the laboratory school's classrooms and in the after-school (A+) program as part of their training. At the same time, they would become more fluent in Hawaiian, since the best way to learn any language is to be immersed in it: We have seen great gains in Hawaiian proficiency among our teacher trainees when they participate in the classrooms at Waiau Elementary. However, the great distance—a 1½-hour bus ride (one way!)—between the Mānoa campus and the Waiau campus has severely hampered teacher training.

The mainstay of the Kula Kaiapuni is the parent support. Hawaiian immersion parents are often described as superparents; many regularly drive their child 40 or more miles a day from home to school and back, attend the monthly cut-and-paste sessions to aid in the production of books, personally lobby the legislature for crucial funds, and participate in annual fundraisers at each school to supplement the teachers' budget allotted by the Department of Education. Moreover, many parents study Hawaiian in night classes, after working hours, in order to encourage their children's efforts. Who are these parents? Where do they come from? Why are they so committed to this program?

Most Kula Kaiapuni parents are of Hawaiian ancestry, although there are some non-Hawaiian parents who choose to place their children in the program. All are welcome to share in the work and are treated as part of the ʻohana. Parents come from every walk of life, from university professors and high school teachers to fishermen and farmers, from lawyers and police officers to musicians and construction workers.

What all of these parents have in common is a great and abiding love for the Hawaiian language. We share the perception that the language is on the brink of extinction and will disappear from the face of the earth unless a new generation is raised speaking Hawaiian. The thought that the language of our ancestors, spoken in Hawaiʻi for 2,000 years, might die, and with it, the deeper knowledge and poetry of our ancestors, arouses our emotions and deserves a passionate response. Many parents know of the role that the former policy of the Department of Education played in suppressing Hawaiian language; our parents were beaten and demeaned in school for speaking Hawaiian.[8]

For many of us parents who speak or are learning to speak Hawaiian, there is a joy and satisfaction in knowing how our ancestors thought; for the world as perceived by a Hawaiian speaker is vastly different from that of an English speaker. Although most Hawaiians of the past two generations have been raised and schooled entirely in English, the speaking of Hawaiian touches an ancient cord in our hearts; we understand who we are and the cultural reasons for our actions in the midst of the foreign society in which we must live. In the past, when criticized for speaking our ancestral language, we became ashamed of who we were; now we rejoice in the language, and we and our children are proud of our Hawaiian ancestry.

No matter how long it takes for the plans for the laboratory school and the Institute to be realized, we are determined to offer our children a high school education through Hawaiian immersion. We believe that our ancestral language can only survive in this way. We are convinced, moreover, that the immersion method is an excellent learning strategy, in general. If, for lack of money and cooperation from the Department of Education, we have insufficient Hawaiian texts for the first set of children who reach seventh grade, we will proceed with partial immersion, using textbooks in English and discussing

them in Hawaiian. We know that we will achieve our goals eventually and that we will have enough books for all the grade levels, even if it takes ten years to develop them.

The Kula Kaiapuni have caught on like wildfire, and it seems as though every Hawaiian community wants one. Though we wish to satisfy all of the Department of Education subject requirements, we also see in our immersion schools the opportunity to investigate innovative teaching strategies and curricula. In the curriculum committee of the Advisory Council, we are planning for the Kula Kaiapuni a quality curriculum that is culturally and environmentally based, incorporating traditional and contemporary knowledge of the Hawaiian people and that of other peoples of the Pacific. Here is a chance to make a difference in the education of our children and the generations to follow!

Footnotes

[1]See the series of articles written for and against Hawaiian immersion in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* on January 14, 1989; February 26, 1991; March 5, 1991; February 7, 1992; March 24, 1992; and April 4, 1992.

[2]Genesee, F. (1983). Second language learning through immersion: A review of U.S. Programs. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 541-561.

[3]Genesee, F. (1983). Bilingual education of majority language children: The Immersion experiments in review. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 4, 1-46.

[4]Genesee, F. (1990). *Learning through two languages*. Cambridge: Newbury House Publishers.

[5]Chaudron, C., Gibson, R., & Long, M.H. (1992, February). *Testimony in support of Hawaiian immersion presented to the Hawai'i Board of Education*, pp. 1-7. Chaudron is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of ESL (English as a Second Language); Gibson is Director of the Hawai'i English Language Program; Long is Professor in ESL as well as Chair of the Ph.D. Program in Second Language Acquisition. All are at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa and are experts on immersion teaching methods.

[6]Slaughter, H.B., Warner, S.L.N., Palmeira, W.K. (1989, November). *Evaluation report for the second year of the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program; a report to the Planning and Evaluation Branch, Department of Education, State of Hawai'i*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i-Mānoa.

[7]Report of the Hawaiian Immersion Advisory Council submitted to the Board of Education meeting of September 25, 1991.

[8]Kimura, L. (1983). *Native Hawaiian culture*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1, 173-223