

Kauanoe Kamana

The school principal champions Hawaiian immersion education

By Vicki Viotti

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 28, 2011

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Punana Leo means "nest of voices," and at its start, the infants-to-preschool education program conducted all in Hawaiian was seen as that kind of a haven —; a place where tots immerse themselves in the language at the feet of their elders.

But baby birds do fly eventually. Kauanoe Kamana, 59, one of the two first scholars to earn a doctorate specifically in revitalization of indigenous languages, hopes to see the fruits of Hawaiian immersion education over more than three decades.

Namely: The revitalized language will be heard with increasing frequency as it once was in the past: spoken by those in public agencies and private businesses, overheard on the streets of communities statewide.

That can happen, she said, because more graduates of what's now called the "Hawaiian-medium education" system are going on to college, into jobs and simply getting on with their own family lives. The students emerge with a distinctly Hawaiian world view, she said, which is what the champions of native language

revival truly want.

"When we talk about language, we're not just talking about grammar and pronunciation; we're talking about the application of Hawaiian thought and behavior that comes through on a day-to-day basis. And this kind of understanding is what we want to grow within young children."

Kamana grew up while Hawaiian was considered a dying language —; at Kamehameha Schools, she studied French.

At the end of a long road, she and husband Pila Wilson are dedicated to its renaissance, she as principal of Hilo's Ke Kula O Nawahiokalaniopuu elementary school, he as a University of Hawaii-Hilo professor.

The newly minted Ph.D. was recognized by Gov. Neil Abercrombie at Monday's State of the State address. Kamana underscored her appreciation for the support state officials have given the language by changing the law to enable it to be taught in public schools.

"There's no other state in the United States that has this kind of support for their own language," she said. "We have a lot to be proud of, and we have a lot more work to do."

QUESTION: Didn't the Punana Leo program for preschoolers have a kind of overlapping history with New Zealand's immersion program?

ANSWER: The Kohanga Reo started around the same time that the Punana Leo started, in 1982-83, the exception being that for every Punana Leo that we opened, they opened 100. So they really exploded very, very quickly. Because of our laws and our building codes, we couldn't just open up places in a way that

they were able to. So we moved at a slower rate. ...

Those years, when we think about the Maoris and Hawaiians, we had the same kind of concerns about language death and how that simple idea of bringing babies and kupuna together, and just do whatever you have to do to get it done, we had the same spirit and determination about doing something about language.

Q: How would you describe the benefits of the Hawaiian language renaissance?

A: The core, the center of understanding about language and its relationship to culture and people, is that the more secure people are with who they are, where they come from, in determining their world view, the more productive they will be within their community —; and they are able to achieve anything, individually or in the collective. So the Hawaiian language belongs to Hawaii, and the culture is deeply rooted within the language itself. ... By involving children, young people, adults in this kind of education, then you are actually connecting history and the Hawaiian sense of identity and connection to place. This is what language does.

Q: So you believe this has a more general benefit to the community?

A: Part of the Hawaiian world view is really to think not so much "How it's going to benefit me," but more "Why I'm supposed to be taking care of that" —; rather than, "Gee, what am I going to get out of it?" See, that's a different way of thinking.

Q: In the beginning, wasn't there a problem supplying the teaching materials?

A: OK, so maybe I should say that today, Hawaiian-medium education reaches from infants up to the doctoral level; also that Hawaiian is a language of business in particular places as well. So it has moved beyond the school. It is also the

language of homes once again, with young people raising their children in the language. The issues of curriculum materials remain, but they evolve; that is, what kind of curriculum materials do we need at this point in history? ... What kind of issues involving testing need to be addressed that did not need to be addressed before? ... I don't think it's different from any other kind of school, or any other kind of language.

When Punana Leo began, (former lawmaker and schools superintendent Charles) Toguchi enabled us to begin within the public school system. Then he said, "But we cannot produce any materials."

And we said, "We'll work on it, on our own, we'll get our own teachers. All we want is a way to start up."

Q: Are there subject areas that present any particular challenge for teaching this way, such as teaching other languages?

A: We recognize here at Nawahi within our own genealogies we have a connection to other countries. There are particular countries that are closer to us genealogically than others. But the respect for that difference is part of Hawaiian thinking, to recognize your own kupuna as coming from different places.

Q: How do you prepare families for entering Hawaiian-medium education? Are some more suited to this method than others?

A: Hawaiian-medium education, with Hawaiian being one of two official languages of our state, is a choice that people have in Hawaii. So people who choose to come to a Hawaiian-medium school have an understanding of that. They may not know entirely what that means for them until they get in there, but they have an idea of what that is. We interview before they come in to make sure they can talk about things so that they understand what we are about, what this kind of education is about and what we look forward to, what we expect of students. At Nawahi, we

have all of our faculty, all of our staff and administration, we all use Hawaiian as the language here. So when people come, that's clear to them. Also, we have weekly meetings for families where we use Hawaiian and learn Hawaiian; they learn Hawaiian also. It's very inclusive; they know what the objectives are and what our big goal is when they apply.

Q: Is the progress of the students being tracked after graduation?

A: We are working on setting up a system to do that better. We've begun doing that here at Nawahi, and I think other schools are doing that as well. We have a 100 percent graduation rate here; we have 80 percent of them going on to the university or community colleges following up graduation. And some of them go on to private schools, others to public schools; some of them get into the work force, some of them begin having their families. So I think it reflects our community —; we have a high percentage of those who do continue into higher education. ... There are those who go into the service as well, and a lot of them when they come back to Hawaii they do come back to school and come and visit, let us know how they're doing. So we're very, very pleased with the outcome and what they're doing.

Q: Is there any adjustment students must make who go on to college? Do they find English-language education a bit of a jolt, once they've left this nurturing community?

A: It can be for some of them, yeah, for some of them more than others. But I think that what they learn is —; we've seen some of those students go off to college and come back. We just had one of our students in engineering, aeronautical engineering at UC (University of California) Berkeley, I think it is; he came back and he did a presentation here on a project he was doing in the summertime. And one of our university professors said, "Oh, I would like to have him come up and speak with our students up at the university." He gave a presentation there on his work. And one of the students there at the university asked him, "Oh ... did you feel prepared to go on to your chemistry and calculus, and did you have those kinds of courses there at Nawahi?" And so he said, "Well, what I learned at Nawahi was I can do whatever I'd like to do." Interestingly

enough, I think that's what the governor said in his speech: When people know themselves, they can do anything. ... There are students who go on to the university and they need to practice a little bit more in particular things; it may be English, it may be in math. But a lot of them, just because of the way Hawaiian-medium education has evolved over time, they know what it's like to do it on your own, without following the majority of people.

Q: Is there a next step in this movement?


A: The school is one context of Hawaiian language education. The language has to get within the whole community: in private business, public business, within organizations that are out there that use Hawaiian as a medium of communication. So with young people coming out of this kind of schooling, you're going to have more of them entering fields of study; also more of them creating their own businesses, and then deciding to utilize the language in that way.

Q: So the goal for revitalization would be to hear more Hawaiian spoken on the street?

A: Right, right. Because at the core of Hawaiian education it is the Hawaiian world view. At the core of Hawaiian education is the Hawaiian language. ... You are acquiring a world view that is rooted in Hawaiian culture. And that world view is a global world view. And I think sometimes people get confused about Hawaiian being very limited ... insular. And no, it's not. And if we look at our kupuna from the 1800s, a lot of traveling around the world, a lot of education away in foreign countries. It's just part of our nature to go out and learn, and then come back and make sure we are contributing to our own community. That's the Hawaiian world view we are interested in attaining. And I think that if people understood that's what Hawaiian-medium education is about, I think they would find themselves embracing it much more.

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