Having established Hawaiian-medium programs from preschool through graduate school, Hawai‘i has the most developed movement in indigenous language-medium education in the United States. This movement has as its beginning, and still its most quickly moving stream, the partnering of government and community resources under the leadership of the non-profit ‘Aha Pūnana Leo. While the ‘i’ini—the dream, the heartfelt desire for language revitalization—is familiar to many indigenous people, what is often unfamiliar is the specific actions taken by groups such as ours in proceeding from such a dream toward actual language revitalization. We hope that the following information on ‘Aha Pūnana Leo programs may be useful to others who share our deep ‘i’ini for continued language life and trust that anything not useful will be put aside.

The leadership of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo consists of a board of unpaid volunteers who are Hawaiian-speaking educators seeking to revitalize Hawaiian as the daily language of their own families and communities as well as of others pursuing the same goal. These educators, we among them, have strived to reverse what has for decades been the standard philosophy for integrating Hawaiian language and culture into education. In the standard philosophy, Hawaiian language and culture are seen as something to use in facilitating achievement of the actual priority goal: academic parity with the dominant society for a “poorly performing minority group.”

The philosophy that has brought our movement most of its success establishes the priority goal as the continued existence of strengthening the Hawaiian mauri, or life force, which allows for the continued existence of a Hawaiian people. The ‘Aha Pūnana Leo sees academic achievement, especially achievement higher than that of the dominant society, as an important tool in reaching that priority goal. But high academic achievement in and of itself is not the goal. The success of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo has been the development, organization, and strengthening of what it terms honua—environments where only Hawaiian is used and the Hawaiian mauri is fostered. These honua presently include schools, offices, personal relationships, and homes. For the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo, these honua are essential for the continuation of communities that greatly value a common identity stretching generations into the past and which is being prepared to stretch generations into the future.

Described below is the current core involvement of the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo—its base system of Pūnana Leo language nest preschools, its three model K–12 schools, and its support system, including administration, curriculum development, human resource development, telecommunications, scholarships, and site development. Besides the above programs, ‘Aha Pūnana Leo current core involvement includes its consortium with Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo and work with Hawaiian language teachers elsewhere, especially some in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and various Hawaiian-language immersion schools. The consortium with Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikōlani extends Hawaiian-medium education through graduate school and provides a key link for the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo to additional resources.

Because this configuration of ‘Aha Pūnana Leo core involvement is part of a larger interrelated Hawaiian language movement in which the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo participates, other Hawaiian programs will be included in the discussion when...
mutual influences are especially important. The full range of Hawaiian language programs in Hawai‘i, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. We will begin with some background information and proceed to the primary focus of this essay, which is the development and delivery of Hawaiian-medium education through the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo and Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikolani. We will then close with some of the philosophical beliefs that have sustained the ‘Aha Pūnana Leo and played a role in its success.

BACKGROUND

Hawai‘i’s history has placed Hawaiian in an especially strong position for language revitalization. As detailed in Wilson 1998a and 1998b, Hawai‘i’s primordial base is that of an isolated island chain distinguished and united by a unique Polynesian language and culture. Its initial century of sustained contact with the global expansion of European culture was as the Hawaiian monarchy, a multiracial nation using Hawaiian both as a lingua franca and as an official language of government. The past century has been roughly divided in half between a period as an American territory and one as an American state. Through the entire 20th century, however, Hawai‘i has been politically controlled on a local level by multiracial speakers of either Hawaiian or Hawai‘i Creole English who identify with the indigenous culture. Thus, through all these periods of history, Hawaiian has been accorded special legal status.

In spite of these advantages, Hawaiian has suffered political persecution and the effects of low sociocultural associations. Indeed, Hawaiian has a native-speaker profile worse than that of many other languages indigenous to the United States. For example, a recent count of traditional native-speaking elders born before 1930 by the ‘Ahahui ‘Olelo Hawai‘i, an organization that holds an annual conference of Hawaiian-speaking elders, resulted in nearly 200 (Hailama Farden [president of ‘Ahahui ‘Olelo Hawai‘i], personal communication, 2000). This figure is less than 0.1% of an estimated 220,000–240,000 Native Hawaiians now in Hawai‘i and less than 0.002% of the island population of some 1,000,000–1,200,000. A number of these elders could be described as semispeakers who are actually more comfortable in English than in Hawaiian. Yet one small isolated island—Ni‘ihau—has retained first-language-dominant fluency in Hawaiian for all ages for its entire population of 134, with strong multilingual Hawaiian fluency also in its satellite community of about 287 on the neighboring island of Kaua‘i, and others located elsewhere in Hawai‘i and the world numbering about 76 (‘Ilei Beniamina [Ni‘ihau community member], personal communication, 2000).

In 1981 Richard Benton, in his study of the status of Pacific Island languages, predicted that Hawaiian would be the first Polynesian language to be totally replaced by a European language. Yet today Hawaiian is in a better position than many other Polynesian languages which are being replaced by English, French, and Spanish. The Ni‘ihau population is growing and regaining language domains that were being lost at the same time that it is expanding into new uses. And there is also now a new non-Ni‘ihau category of young native speakers. These consist of some 20–50 children under the age of 18 who have been raised in homes where Hawaiian is either the sole or a major language of interaction between children and second-language-learner parents. Of course, the Hawaiian of these children is even more threatened than Ni‘ihau Hawaiian since they all are part of neighborhoods and extended families where everyone else speaks a form of English. The development and strengthening of this new population, like the strengthening of the Ni‘ihau population, is closely related to increased attention to the Hawaiian language in education.

Hawaiians have long identified language shift with schooling and the forced closing of Hawaiian-medium educational institutions at the turn of the 20th century. The first generation of Hawaiian parents whose children were affected by forced English-medium education frequently insisted on the sole use of Hawaiian in the home and scolded their children for using English with other Hawaiians (Ka Leo Hawai‘i, oral interviews). They also made efforts to maintain Hawaiian-medium education in the Sunday school programs of the Hawaiian-medium churches that they controlled, maintained Hawaiian-language newspapers, controlled electoral politics through their language, and campaigned to restore Hawaiian-medium education (“Olelo Hawai‘i,” Ka Puuhonua [Hawaiian newspaper], 20 January 1917).²

Efforts through the schools to reverse the loss of Hawaiian began in the 1920s with second language—style courses legislated by the Hawaiian-controlled territorial legislature, then through the legislatively mandated inclusion of elders in schools in the 1970s, and most recently by Hawaiian-medium immersion education, which began in the 1980s with the Pūnana Leo. At present, every student in the Hawai‘i public school system learns a few Hawaiian terms (beyond the many they already know from Hawai‘i Creole English) in required courses in Hawaiian culture and history as well as in a greatly weakened elder-resource teacher program in the elementary schools. In 1998, perhaps 2,500 students were enrolled in at least one Hawaiian language course in public and private high schools annually, with another 2,500 at the college level. An additional 1,850 were enrolled in Hawaiian-medium education classes from the preschool level through high school.

Contemporary Hawaiian-medium education at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo began when we were hired in the late 1970s to establish a bachelor of arts degree in Hawaiian studies. The university agreed to our stipulation that if we