

Nest of Voices: Early Child Care and Education in Hawaii

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Recent initiatives to revitalize Hawaiian language, culture, and values have included specific programs for children. One such endeavor is the Aha Punana, a language immersion program supported by legislation passed by the state of Hawaii. This article describes the Aha Punana Leo program as well as other culturally relevant programs and services that have focused on providing quality service to children and their families.

Quality early childhood and education programs from a Native Hawaiian perspective attempt to include the transmission of the Hawaiian world view through the revitalization of the Native language and other aspects of the culture. According to McLean (1996), the Hawaiian world view is transmitted via games, stories, songs, dance, and other forms of expression; incorporating these into formal school programs has been recently pursued and achieved through the establishment of programs and services for Native Hawaiian families and their keiki (children).

Although it had been banned from public schools in 1896, Hawaiian was the language of the territorial government into the early 1900s (Kamana & Wilson, 1996). By 1920 the language was dying; this loss continued for several decades until culture and land rights restoration efforts began in the 1960s. Hawaiian was considered an illegal language until 1986, and it was only after families lobbied that such barriers were removed. A product of this revival movement has been the establishment of diverse services and programs that aimed at bringing back the values of the culture and ties to the family (Reyhner, 2003). These programs such as the Aha Punana Leo preschools rely heavily on the use of the traditional language, thus revitalizing not only the Hawaiian language, but also the values, culture, and traditions of the people. Immersion schools are expanding throughout the Hawaiian Islands, supported by legislation that grants official status to the Hawaiian language and gives schools the right to use it as a language of instruction through the university years (McLean, 1996). However, the government does not offer additional support for the schools' advancement.

Early Child Care

In the late 1980s, following an assessment report on the needs of working families from the Governor's Office of Children and Youth (GOCY), the Hawaii Business Round Table recommended a state-subsidized child care system. As a result, the Governor established an Early Childhood Education and Care Coordinating Committee in the early 1990s to involve state and local government, business, and community leaders in the expansion of early childhood care and education (Child Care Partnership Project, 2004). This committee developed the Good Beginnings Master Plan in 1996; the following year, 10 years after the establishment of the Punana Leo schools, Hawaii enacted legislation to create the Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA), a nonprofit coordinating umbrella organization for Hawaii's early childhood system. The GBA incorporates government agencies such as the Department of Education, Department of Human Services, Department of Health, and Head Start Association, as well as the Kamehameha Schools,¹ and the University of Hawaii Center on the Family among others (State Early Childhood Policy Leadership Forum, 2004). The GBA is responsible for guiding the development of an early care and education system for Hawaii, and it endorses and recognizes the interconnection between children's physical, social, and emotional health. Such understanding encouraged the development of a comprehensive early childhood education and care system from both public and private sector leaders. In the 1990s such efforts evolved into a state-wide early childhood initiative, which has four essential components:

- Good Beginnings Councils (GBCs);
- Nonprofit Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA) for administrative support and intergovernmental facilitation;
- Interdepartmental Council (IDC) for cross-agency collaboration; and
- Service Integration Committee (SIC) of front-line workers in the early childhood community (Child Care Partnership Project, 2004).

In 2001 the IDC formed a task force co-chaired by the Superintendent of Education and the CEO of Kamehameha Schools. The main goal of this task force is to make recommendations to the IDC on a definition of school readiness and indicators and standards that will orient parents and kindergarten teachers toward preparing children for success in kindergarten. Hawaii's School Readiness Task Force adopted the Hawaii Preschool Content Standards, a set of curriculum guidelines intended to assist preschool staff in their efforts to enhance child development and school readiness. Foundational principles include the understanding that children develop in the first eight years, that the family is the first teacher and as such should have access to quality early childhood education and care of their choice (Hawaiian Good Beginnings Interdepartmental Task Force, 2002). Although quality is not clearly defined, the report mentions provid-

ing children with opportunities for having good interactions with knowledgeable, supportive adults as well as for exploring and playing in a rich environment.

The main recommendations of the study are six strategies that will help foster quality relationships and learning opportunities for all young children. The study calls for shared responsibility between the public and private sectors. Several of the report's recommendations have already been adopted, including the development of preschool content standards for center-based care, family and community guidelines to help families prepare their children for school, and a school readiness assessment tool (Hawaiian Good Beginnings Interdepartmental Task Force, 2002).

In 2004 the GBA conducted the study *Who Cares for Hawaii's Keiki in Centers?* The GBA claims that this study is the first of its kind and includes information on child care centers, parents, programs, compensation, turnover ratios, and other aspects that affect early child care quality programming and delivery. Characteristics of quality programs include qualified teachers/caregivers with specific early childhood training, adequate language stimulation, responsiveness, low ratios of adults to children, better wages, and accreditation among other variables (Good Beginnings Alliance, 2003). The report concludes with a call for the following actions to be taken in order to ensure quality early childhood programs and retention of qualified staff.

- Work closely with the Hawaii Careers with Young Children Initiative to help improve staff qualifications through increased access to higher education and specialized early childhood training and support for the state's licensing standards.
- Create a financing task force to supervise the development of a financial plan for Hawaii's ECE system in order to avoid fee increases to families while working on increased compensation for staff and reduction of staff turnover.
- Support ongoing research and planning, as well as coordinated workforce efforts towards policy and system development.
- Engage public and private funders to coordinate resources for workforce development. (Good Beginnings Alliance, 2004, p. 7)

Other Organizations and Programs

In addition to the service providers under the Good Beginnings Alliance, there are agencies and other sources for the betterment of children and their families. Some of these organizations are listed below.

Organizations Serving Only Native Hawaiians

Aha Punana Leo. Punana Leo, which means "nest of voices" (*Aha Punana Leo*, cited in Reyhner, 2003) are the Hawaiian language immersion programs that began with family-based preschools in 1983 and in the public schools in 1987 after Hawaii's English-only law for schools was repealed.

The programs, which are similar to the Te Kohanga Reo programs in New Zealand, rely heavily on language nests in which Elders immerse young children in the traditional language.

According to its mission statement, the Punana Leo “initiates, provides for, and nurtures various Hawaiian Language environments.... [to] find our strength in spirituality, love for our language, love of our people, love of our land, and love of knowledge” (Aha Punana Leo, 2003, cited in Reyhner, 2003, p. 3). Participation in Punana Leo schools is voluntary and requires parental involvement in the way of time contribution (to lower school costs), financial assistance (parents pay tuition based on income), attendance at weekly language sessions, and attendance at monthly governance meetings (McLean, 1996). Kamana and Wilson (1996) assert that the schools have been successful in their language revitalization, academic, and family involvement goals because part of their staff is composed of former students and parents. Success is judged almost exclusively in terms of native language enhancement.

An important and interesting aspect of Punana Leo is male representation, which is a commonality in Hawaiian ECEC as the ohana (family and community) is responsible for raising the children. Therefore, these programs provide children with the opportunity to interact with male and female caregivers.

Kama’aina Kids. Kama’aina Kids was established in 1987 as a private, nonprofit, multiservice organization in Hawaii’s child care sector. It is licensed by the State of Hawaii as a child care provider and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Its mission is “to serve children and their families by providing ongoing quality education and enrichment programs to help build a child’s sense of self, community and environment” (Kama’aina Kids, 2003).

Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE). INPEACE is a nonprofit founding member of the Native Hawaiian Early Childhood Consortium that aims to improve services in early care and education for all Hawaiian children. Further, it seeks to “improve the quality of life for Native Hawaiians through community partnerships that provide educational opportunities and promote self-sufficiency” (Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture, n.d.).

Organizations Serving all Hawaiian Children

Kamehameha Schools. Unlike state-operated programs, Kamehameha schools are privately owned. They base their early education program on the belief that children learn at their own pace with the help of their parents, teachers, and peers, as well as through direct experience with their physical and social environment. The schools aim to develop children’s potential to its fullest through addressing each child’s social, emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual needs (Kamehameha Schools, n.d.).

Tutu and Me. Tutu and Me are traveling preschool programs created to identify, recruit, and service families with financial challenges where elderly caregivers (*tutu* means grandparents) are responsible for Native or part-Native Hawaiian children (Inouye, 2005). This is done in cooperation with churches and community organizations serving the Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian community. Implementation is through a project design that provides educational and screening services to these children and their caregivers through programs that are brought into the neighborhoods of needy families and supported by organizations that have a long-term interest in the success of those children and families. The main goals of the program are:

- to establish carefully planned, developmentally appropriate mobile early childhood programs for these families in the targeted communities;
- to provide topical discussions, presentations, and activities on caregiving skills; and,
- to provide entry points/referrals into needed health and social services (Tutu and Me, 2006).

People Attentive To Children (PATCH). PATCH is one of Hawaii's child care referral agencies. It was established in 1976 as a nonprofit advocacy agency to improve the availability and accessibility of quality child care programs in Hawaii (<http://www.patchhawaii.org>). PATCH began as a grassroots effort to have a well-developed system that would offer support to parents, child care professionals, and local communities in finding, planning for, and providing quality child care (PATCH, 2004).

Build's Learning Community and HAWAII. The Build Initiative (2002) is a multistate partnership on early learning that helps construct a coordinated early care and learning system to respond to the needs of young children from birth to 5 years and their families. As a participant in Build's Learning Community, Hawaii joins with other states, national experts, and others to exchange information and to share ideas and working practices (Families and Work Institute, n.d.).

Play and Learn Groups. These neighborhood groups developed as a means of interaction between parents and their children given Hawaii's focus on families. The model is also used for incarcerated fathers and their children as preparation for reuniting as a family. In this and other community programs, community partners in targeted geographic areas are seeking to improve and expand early learning opportunities in the Sparking Connections initiative (Families and Work Institute, n.d.).

Hawaii Preschool Open Doors Project. This program was established in 1989 to assist low-income families with the cost of early care at licensed centers for their 3- and 4-year-old children. Priority is given to children with special needs (e.g., homeless, children in foster care, and so forth), those with the lowest incomes, and those close to kindergarten age.

Quality components of the project include workshops for parents and support for staff (Education Commission of the States, 2007).

These are only some of the most relevant and recent programs and initiatives; there are other proposals for developing future schemes with collaborative efforts among the diverse organizations in Hawaii. Most of them involve parents, legislators, providers, workforce, communities, local councils, and the general public.

Conclusion

The efforts and successes achieved so far in the attempts to transmit the Hawaiian world view through quality ECE programs have required the participation of community members such as Elders, parents, and administrators who share the vision of relevant and culturally thriving child development programs and services. Based on the understanding that children develop in the first eight years of life and that the family is the first teacher, families should have access to quality early childhood education programs of their choice (Hawaiian Good Beginnings Interdepartmental Task Force, 2002). Quality in such contexts is understood as providing opportunities for children to have good interactions with knowledgeable, supportive adults, as well as giving them the opportunity to explore and play in a rich environment. If this vision continues to be shared by parents, Elders, and communities, the Hawaiian keiki (children) stand a better chance of learning and living their culture.

Note

¹The mission of the Kamehameha Schools is to “fulfill Pauahi’s desire to create educational opportunities in perpetuity to improve the capability and well-being of people of Hawaiian ancestry” (Kamehameha Schools, 2007).

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