A FAMILY, IMMERSED

In the Walk ʻohana, the Hawaiian immersion education is a family affair.

In 1978, the State of Hawaiʻi designated Hawaiian as one of its two official languages. The state's Department of Education established the Hawaiian language immersion program, Ka Papahana Kaiapuni Hawaiʻi, in 1987. There are now 20 schools statewide offering Hawaiian language immersion education, from kindergarten to 12th grade.

The benefits of a bilingual education have often been touted, but for those who have chosen Ka Papahana Kaiapuni, using ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi as a part of everyday life is both an extension of their cultural values, and a source of pride for reviving a once-dying language. MANA sat down with Kaʻumealani Walk, a mother of five children who have all graduated from Ka Papahana Kaiapuni Hawaiʻi. She is also an immersion teacher, at Kula Kaiapuni Hawaiʻi ʻO Kahuku Academy on campus at Kahuku High and Intermediate School.

MANA: What is the biggest misconception about the immersion program?

KW: That the students are not up to par with the educational standards of mainstream academia. We've had graduates, since the beginning of the program, who have gone on to Stanford, Princeton, the University of Hawaiʻi system and others. The students are able to get into college and they will be able to do whatever they have an interest to do.

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Why did your ʻohana decide to send your children to Ka Papahana Kaiapuni?

In 1987, my husband, Kamuaʻe, was taking Hawaiian language courses and was going full speed ahead. He was really enjoying it, but realized it meant nothing if the whole family wasn't a part of it. Around that time, the DOE announced the Hawaiian immersion program, and Waiau on Oʻahu was listed as the site. My oldest son, Kaʻanoʻi, and my daughter, Kūlia, were in the first combined kindergarten/1st grade class. We'd have people look at us strangely and ask, "why are you doing this to your children?" But to us, the answer was simple: Why can't we educate our children in the language of our ancestors?

What do you most remember from those early years?

How we helped each other get our children through school. If a parent was late picking up his child because of traffic, another parent would stay with that child. If someone came in the morning and hadn't had breakfast, we would feed them. I remember how much each of the families cared for each other—they do now, too, but more so then because we were on the frontline. We were in the fishbowl.

At what point did you become an educator?

I had a degree in elementary education and stayed home after I graduated to raise the kids. But as the Hawaiian immersion program grew, the need for teachers also grew. I decided, sink or swim, I'm going to take my language courses and carry that kuleana. I know others, too, who became teachers as well because they saw it not as a career, but as a kuleana. My standards are making sure that I do the things that my naʻau tells me my kūpuna would want.

What is the biggest need for Ka Papahana Kaiapuni?

The one-size-fits-all approach does not apply to this program. When I look at these children I see doctors, lawyers, kalo farmers—they can be anything and everything they want to be. I see people who will be speaking our language. There are thousands of documents in Hawaiian but not enough people to translate them. There are specific things that need to be done with immersion and for immersion that are different from mainstream education. It's not asking above and beyond, it's just asking what is equitable for them.

What advice would you give someone who is considering Hawaiian immersion for their keiki?

Commit to learning the language as a family. Parents, grandparents and caregivers need to commit so they can help their baby in school, at whatever level they are at. It is not going to be easy, but it is possible.

Tap here for more information on Ka Papahana Kaiapuni's program

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BY CEDRIC DUARTE

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