

# raising a child in the Pūnana Leo

## Everyone (men and women) play an important role

by Noelani Iokepa-Guerrero

*The sun is shining and the wind blows gently. It is a beautiful morning in the islands. 'Anakala stands at the piko of the school and blows the conch. The keiki and kumu gather at the piko and stand together in order. 'Anakē calls out and everyone joins in chanting in unison. At the end of the chant, 'Anakala steps forward and in front of the group addresses the keiki with the guiding thought for the day and opening pule. The keiki join in a song and 'Anakē follows the song with words of instruction to support 'Anakala's statement. The morning protocol continues with more mele. Finally, the keiki are formerly called into the classroom, and as they each walk through the door, they greet 'Anakala, 'Anakē, and the rest of the kumu with a hug.*



Dr. Noelani Iokepa-Guerrero is a Native Hawaiian with familial ties to Kaua'i, Maui, and Hawai'i Island. She earned her Doctorate in Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Southern California and her Masters in both Early Education and Elementary Education from Chaminade University. She holds a double Bachelors from the University of Hawai'i in Hawaiian Language and Hawaiian Studies. Noelani is an administrator in the Pūnana Leo Central Administration Office responsible for program oversight, support, management, and evaluation of all Pūnana Leo sites throughout the State of Hawai'i. She has been with the Pūnana Leo since 1992, first as a part-time teacher aide, and now as both a parent and Director of the Pūnana Leo program.

At the Pūnana Leo everyone, 'Anakala, uncle — a male teacher, 'Anakē, aunty — a female teacher, and the keiki, children all play important roles in the educational program of the school. Each and all are responsible for the learning that takes place and the success of the program.

### About the Pūnana Leo

Established in 1983 by a group of parents and teachers, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo ('APL) was formed. A grassroots organization, 'APL was established to respond to the dismal plight of the Hawaiian language. Just a mere 25 years ago, the Hawaiian language was on the verge of being lost forever. Through the dedicated efforts of a small group of friends with the vision, *E ola ka 'ōlelo Hawai'i*, that the Hawaiian language shall live and take its rightful place among the languages of the world and



more so as the prominent language of Hawai'i, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo was born.

As a first step in bringing the language back into the lives of Hawai'i's people, the Pūnana Leo Hawaiian medium education total immersion preschool

was established. As a few generations had passed in which the language was not passed directly from parent to child, and understanding the future of the people rests in the strength of the children, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo embarked on creating Hawaiian language *honua*, environments in preschool settings. In this lay the hope and now the reality that the language would expand into the home and eventually into the broader community.

Thus in 1984, the first Pūnana Leo preschool opened in Kekaha, Kaua'i. Today, Pūnana Leo is eleven schools strong throughout the state of Hawai'i on the islands of Hawai'i, Maui, Moloka'i, O'ahu, and Kaua'i. Pūnana Leo serves about 200 children and their families annually, about 3,600 families since its opening. Pūnana Leo is the only total Hawaiian language immersion preschool program in Hawai'i and in the world. Pūnana Leo is not merely a preschool as most are familiar with. Pūnana Leo is a way of life, a family-based program founded on the *Kumu Honua Mauli Ola Hawai'i* ('Akana, et al., 1986), the Hawaiian identity and way of our *kūpuna* (elders).

### Men in the Pūnana Leo

Men have always been a part of the Pūnana Leo family since the birth of the program. Like a *'ohana*, family, representation of both father and mother, male and female is essential. Both play important roles. Today, male staff members make up about 21 percent of the total Pūnana Leo staff population. Twenty-three percent of Pūnana Leo full-time staff is male. Men hold positions in all levels of the organization, as volunteers, substitute teachers, teacher aides, teacher assistants, lead teachers, teachers of the weekly parent class, site director, administrator, and members of the board of directors.

Eight of the eleven Pūnana Leo sites in the state have at least one male teacher

(if not two or three) in the classroom, with all eleven sites having access to a male teacher, if not a regular faculty member at least a male substitute teacher or volunteer on staff. Some of our male faculty are also parents in the program, and have come to the program first as parents and then as employees. Interestingly as well, many of our Pūnana Leo parent boards have fathers that hold leadership positions helping to guide the program. Having these male role models in the Pūnana Leo not only benefits the *keikikāne*, boy students, 43 percent of the total student population, but all students in the program — parents and children.

### Debunking the myths

Many have shown and advocated for the need for men in ECE (Piburn, 2006; Neugebauer, 2005). Nelson (2004) presents eight myths about men who work with young children. In his article, Nelson also presents literature that counters these myths. Here the Pūnana Leo presents examples from our program that contradicts these stereotypes, debunks these myths, and shows the world the importance of men in the lives of young children.

**Myth 1: "Men won't work with young children because of the money"** (Nelson, 2004, p.16)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: Pūnana Leo is a nonprofit organization. While compensation for Pūnana Leo teachers is comparable with pay in the ECE profession in the state of Hawai'i, by no means will you make your millions. Regardless of pay, the Pūnana Leo continues to get interested male applicants who want to work in the program.

**Myth 2: "Men do not apply for jobs to teach or care for young children"** (Nelson, 2004, p.16)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: In the 2006-07 school year, Pūnana Leo hired three male teachers. In the 2007-08 school year, we hired two new male teachers. Men are interested and do apply. At a recent in-service conference for Pūnana Leo staff, one of the 'rookie' teachers, a new male teacher hired at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year expressed:

*"'Ōlelo 'ia, inā 'a'ole hiki ke hana, e a'o. I ko'u mana'o, he mana'o moloā paha kēlā. 'A'ole kēlā he mana'o Hawai'i. He mea nui ke a'o. He mea nui ke a'o i nā kamali'i. 'O ia ke kumu, ua lilo au i kumu."*

Translation: "It is said, that those that cannot do, teach. In my opinion, that is a lazy way of thinking. That is not a Hawaiian thought. Teaching is important. Teaching children is important. That is why I chose to become a teacher" (Nakagawa, 2008).

**Myth 3: "Men who teach children will leave the profession for something else"** (Nelson, 2004, p.16)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: Of the current Pūnana Leo male faculty, about 30 percent have been with the program for over 10 years (which is almost half the age of the program altogether). Some have been in the program long enough to see their own students they taught at the Pūnana Leo graduate from high school, go to college, and come back as Pūnana Leo teachers and fellow colleagues in the program.

**Myth 4: "Men who teach young children are gay"** (Nelson, 2004, p. 16)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: There is no information on the sexual orientation of the men who work in the Pūnana Leo. However, we do know that many of the male staff are also fathers in the program whose own children are either in the program now or have been in the program in the past.

**Myth 5: “Men who work with young children will sexually molest them”** (Nelson, 2004, p.17)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: In the history of the Pūnana Leo we have never had any instance of this sort. While the controversy of touch is a heated debate for some in the profession, in the Pūnana Leo *honi* and *pūliki* is a way of life in the family. Aloha is always appropriate.

**Myth 6: “Men are not nurturing or patient enough to work with young children”** (Nelson, 2004, p. 17)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: Some of the best teachers I know are men. They bring a different nurturing, a male perspective and *‘ano*, to the classroom that is necessary. The children listen, react, respect, and love their *‘Anakala* just as much as they do their *‘Anakē*.

The relationship between student and teacher at the Pūnana Leo is a strong one. Not unlike the relationship of parent and child. In one instance, *‘Anakala* moved to another island and transferred from one Pūnana Leo to work at another. The *keiki* at his old school missed him a lot. To keep the connection, the children would call him on the phone at the other school just to talk to him and ask how he was doing. Like a *‘ohana*, a strong bond between *keiki* and *kumu*, teacher at the Pūnana Leo develops and is nurtured for life.

**Myth 7: “Men who teach young children can’t make it in other professions”** (Nelson, 2004, p.17)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: On the contrary, many of the men of the Pūnana Leo have worked or simultaneously work in other occupations. We have men who teach at the university, are musicians, work for the airlines, work for the hotel industry, as some examples.

Interestingly, to make ends meet due to the high cost of living in paradise in Hawai‘i, many choose to work a second job rather than leave the Pūnana Leo altogether.

**Myth 8: “Men are not wanted or needed to work with young children”** (Nelson, 2004, p.17)

Pūnana Leo example of truth: At the Pūnana Leo, we recruit and welcome both men and women. We understand the important roles everyone (male and female) plays in raising and educating the child. Pūnana Leo parents and families equally value the male teachers at their sites. They are happy and grateful for the men that teach at their Pūnana Leo. As a prime example, funding to send the eight men representing the Pūnana Leo at this year’s World Forum on Men in Early Childhood Education came from parents and parent boards who support and appreciate the male teachers at their sites.

In the Hawaiian perspective, everyone in the *‘ohana*, everyone in the community plays an important role in raising the child. “All of the *‘ohana* members, from great-grandmother down to the sibling only two years older, were the child’s teachers” (Puku‘i, 1972, p. 49). All are important in the lives and education of our children. At the Pūnana Leo, we see the bigger picture. We understand the greater purpose. It is not merely teaching. It is about raising a child, raising a family, raising a nation.

For more information about the Pūnana Leo, please visit [www.ahapunanaleo.org](http://www.ahapunanaleo.org). Mahalo.

## References

‘Aha Pūnana Leo. (2005). *Ke Kahua Pūnana Leo: A Template*. Paper

presented at the 2005 World Indigenous People’s Conference on Education.

Cunningham, B., & Dorsey, B. (March/April 2004). Out of Site but Not Out of Mind: The Harmful Absence of Men. *Exchange*, 156, 42-43.

‘Akana, K., Kauahipaula, E. Kamanā, K., Kanahē, E., Kawaiāe‘a, K., Ka‘awa, M., Kimura, L., Silva, K., & Wilson, W. (1986). *Ke Kumu Honua Maui Ola*. Hilo, HI: Hale Kuamo‘o.

Hewes, D. W. (March/April 2005). Men’s (and Women’s) Role in ECE: Perspectives from our shared past. *Exchange*, 162, 53-57.

Nakagawa, C. (2008). Hilo: Pūnana Leo Hālāwai Nu‘ukia.

Neugebauer, B. (January/February 2005). A Manner of Speaking. *Exchange*, 161, 88.

Nelson, B. G. (November/December 2004). Myths About Men Who Work With Young Children: Male caregivers need acceptance and support. *Exchange*, 160, 16-18.

Nelson, B. G. (2002). The Importance of men teachers: And reasons why there are so few. MenTeach.org. Minneapolis, MN.

Piburn, D. (March/April 2006). Gender Equality for a New Generation: Expect Male Involvement in ECE. *Exchange*, 168, 18-22.

Puku‘i, M. K., Haertig, E., & Lee, C. (1972). *Nānā I Ke Kumu: Look to the Source* (Vol. 2). Honolulu: Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center.

Puku‘i, M. K., & Elbert, S. H. (1986). *Hawaiian Dictionary*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.