

PREL's Pohnpei PIRC Program Success Story

By SeNellie Phillip Singeo

This success story is my reflection on a special student, whom we'll call Sohn, as told by his teacher at Sekere Elementary School in Pohnpei, Mr. Mitaro Simina. Sohn is now in the 6th grade. Mr. Simina was his teacher in prior grades and, over the years, Mr. Simina had been increasingly concerned about Sohn's poor attendance, poor classroom performance, lack of interest in school work, and withdrawn personality. His previous teachers concluded that Sohn had a learning disorder, as evidenced by many incidents in class and with other children.

One day, Mr. Simina was determined to bring Sohn out of his shell by slowly and gently probing into his personal life. The first few attempts prompted little response. Mr. Simina spoke in-depth with Sohn's parents about their son. Their response was similar to that of his previous teachers, "We believe our son has a mental disorder, which is why he is a slow learner, and there's nothing we can do but to accept him and love him as he is our son." Mr. Simina refused to accept that justification based on his personal observation of Sohn. "I felt emotionally discouraged by what I was told and I was determined to turn Sohn around the best I could. I know this was almost an impossible mission, but I was determined to do it," he said. Mr. Simina knew there must be factors contributing to Sohn's learning disability. He also knew from his experience with Pacific Resources for Education and Learning's (PREL's) Pohnpei Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) program that the key to helping Sohn was involving and educating his parents.

For 3 consecutive years, from 3rd grade to 5th grade, Mr. Simina set times aside for short conversations with Sohn. One day, Sohn surprised him with a bonafide response to the question of why he was always late to class. "I always have home chores to do before I come to school. One of them is to feed the pigs," Sohn said. Late or early—it didn't matter to him as long as he showed up, and because his parents felt he was only attending because it was required under the circumstances, he was doing okay.

Gradually, Mr. Simina convinced Sohn, and his parents, of the importance of education and what it would mean to him in the future if he developed interest and improved his attendance and grades. At one point, Sohn said to him, "I am going to try my best to come to school on time." Little by little, as Sohn made positive contributions, the teacher would praise him. The teacher then asked other students, in confidence, to help him praise Sohn for every good thing he did. "I had to adjust my teaching approach, improve my teaching skills, be more attentive to him and other students, be on time, and main-



Photo by Maryynn Halbert

tain a positive attitude. Sometimes I almost gave up, but I had great hope something good was happening, and it was," Simina said.

Clearly, Sohn has come out of his shell a different boy and has made huge changes. Today, Sohn has one of the top GPAs in the class and is well liked in the 5th grade. He even surprises his former teachers, his peers, and his own parents. "I not only learned the importance of being committed to a vision or mission, but I also learned to improve myself while trying to improve another," said Simina. "What is so amazing about this experience is the rewarding feeling in witnessing the positive evidence of remolding another person. Sohn is like my own son now, and I think he relates to me the same way," said Simina.

I share this story with my fellow teachers and colleagues with the hope that they will take a personal interest in their students; teach their students with full commitment, sacrifice, and, most importantly, love; and not equate slow learning with mental disability. Even in the most trying circumstances, teachers should never settle for less, but always strive for betterment in their students. More than in any other career, positive impacts in teaching come from the heart.

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