



PREL Board of Directors

CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

Dr. Nerissa Bretania-Shafer,
Interim Superintendent of Education,
Guam Department of Education

Mr. Henry Falan,
Director of Education,
Yap State Education Enterprising Department

Ms. Patricia Hamamoto,
Superintendent, Department of Education,
State of Hawai'i

Dr. Rita Hocog Inos,
Commissioner of Education, Commonwealth of the
Northern Mariana Islands Public School System

Mr. Mario Katosang,
Minister of Education,
Republic of Palau Ministry of Education

Mr. Wilfred I. Kendall,
Minister of Education,
Republic of the Marshall Islands Ministry of Education

Mr. Henry Robert,
Director of Education, Kosrae Department of Education

Dr. Sili Sataua,
Director of Education,
American Samoa Department of Education

Mr. Casiano Shoniber,
Director of Education, Pohnpei Department of Education

Mr. Kangichy Welle,
Executive Director, Chuuk State School System

CONSTITUENT REPRESENTATIVES

Ms. Laborday Atanoa,
Teacher, American Samoa

Fr. James P. Croghan, S.J.,
Director, Xavier High School, Chuuk, FSM

Dr. Randy Hitz, Dean,
College of Education, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Hawai'i

Ms. Helen Leebey,
Teacher, Yap, FSM

Mr. John Mangefel,
Former Governor, Yap, FSM

Ms. Malua T. Peter,
Former Representative,
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Mr. Laurence Vogel,
President & CEO, Y. Hata & Co. Ltd., Hawai'i

Ms. Lynne C. Waihe'e,
President, Read To Me International Foundation, Hawai'i

Mr. Surangel Whipps, Jr.,
President & CEO, Surangel & Sons, Co., Republic of Palau

Relocation Notice

The Honolulu office of Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) relocated to Pioneer Plaza from January 2, 2003. PREL's new address is 900 Fort Street Mall, Suite 1300, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96813. Phone and fax numbers remain the same.

OUR HERITAGE, OURSELVES

The Importance of Maintaining Cultural Literacy in the Pacific Islands

By Masa - Aki Emesiochi



Photo: Joyce Kloulethead

▷ In the Pacific islands, traditional learning was part of everyday activities.

In today's world, with indigenous people heavily impacted by constant change and outside influence, it is critical that cultural literacy be sustained by being both taught in the schools and practiced, reinforced, and honored in families and communities.

Suppose students in Pacific island countries are asked to explain their cultures to people in other places. What will they tell them? Will the youth of the Pacific be able to respond to these questions appropriately, with knowledge and confidence?

Why Cultural Literacy Is Important

Traditionally, languages and cultures in the Pacific region were learned not in a formal school setting, but through everyday practice. Today, Pacific island languages are still the dominant language in the home, and the culture shapes every aspect of the lives of the people. However, because of the many changes that have taken place both in work and leisure, there is a need for schools to assist in teaching cultural literacy.

As we adapt and adopt new practices, values, and approaches from other places and other cultures, the richness and subtleties of our own language and culture are being threatened. It is true that culture is ever changing. However, as people of the Pacific who are proud of our language, heritage, and traditional ways, we believe that all our students must have a firm foundation in our languages and cultural values and a healthy view of their own identities and their world. This will allow them to make wise decisions for the future and to carry out the important job of preserving, maintaining, and promoting our way of life.

By knowing our history, we can learn from it. With a solid understanding of where we have been, what has been tried before, and what was or was not

“We Pacific educators, recognizing that outside influences are causing rapid changes in the cultural values and lifestyles of our people, believe that what is best in each of our cultures must be understood, appreciated, and perpetuated. We recognize that the very survival of Pacific island people and their cultural identities rests with our children. We believe our children are the future and that their education must instill pride in their culture and a sense of belonging to the larger Pacific community. Education must also prepare the Pacific child to acquire or adopt what is most useful and beneficial from other cultures. We are committed to the Pacific way – to sharing and working together for the future of our islands. The development of self-reliant, self-sufficient, responsible, well informed, productive, and socially mature citizens of the Pacific island nations who are proud of their heritages will be in a better position to contribute to the building of a better world.”

PREL's Pacific Curriculum and Instructional Council (PCIC)

successful, our students will have greater opportunities to carve out a better future.

Our educational systems would be at fault if they did not seek to promote and develop our students' pride in their own cultures as well as personal self-esteem. Both Islanders and people living in our islands have inherited a rich, intricate, and beautiful legacy in our cultures. If we want our young people to become initiators, problem solvers, and architects of a better way of life, they will need to be knowledgeable, confident, and proud of who they are and where they come from.

There is concern among our elders that the schools are sending back to communities graduates who behave like strangers. Currently, school texts and materials are dominated by the English language and Western values, beliefs, and lifestyles. Our students cannot be considered “well-educated” if they fumble to show respect or are uncomfortable speaking with community elders. Our goal is to have students who retain and promote traditional values, such as cooperation and respect for elders and for the environment. Homes and schools will need to work together to ensure that these values are learned.

Invariably, Pacific Islanders travel and eagerly learn from other cultures and countries. For our students to participate effectively as global citizens, they must not only respect other languages and value systems, but also be able to educate others about their islands and their ways of life. It is imperative that we nurture strong cultural identities for our students. While it will be their decision what customs and traditions they will continue in their islands, having a firm foundation in their own cultures should better prepare them to make those decisions, and at the same

time, to truly understand and appreciate the cultures and customs of people from other parts of the world.

Teaching Cultural Literacy

To succeed in teaching and maintaining home languages, schools must develop an intense pro-literate teaching and learning environment. Students must be provided with incentives to read, speak, and write in the vernacular. The primary objective should be comprehension, and teaching strategies should prioritize relevance to the students, their families, and their islands.

Much of our cultural knowledge is no longer accessible as our elders pass on from this life without having their knowledge recorded. Local efforts to preserve and archive traditional knowledge and the vernacular language are vital if students are to become truly culturally literate.

Our students and society need an educational program that is relevant. The ability to communicate effectively to one's own people about one's own reality is a basic need. The aggressive and thoughtful teaching of the vernacular language and culture should help to fill an important gap that currently exists within our societies.

As we strive to promote cultural literacy within the Pacific islands through integrated curriculum and instruction, it is critical to recognize how culture was learned and maintained through generations. Traditional learning in Palau – whether in the family, in boys clubs, in the taro patch for girls, or through arrangement between the learner and a village expert – was holistic. Learning and “schooling” took place in the context of everyday living.

Masa-Aki N. Emesioch is the Program Director of PR*TEC. ★

Why Should Culture Be Taught?

- To instill in the Pacific child knowledge and appreciation of their own cultural values, language, lifestyle, and heritage, as well as of other Pacific island people.
- To expand the Pacific child's awareness and appreciation of the common and unique elements of various cultures and lifestyles of Pacific island people.
- To enable the Pacific child to communicate clearly about the cultural values, language, and heritage of their own society, as well as the other societies within the Pacific.
- To instill in the Pacific child a sense of pride, belonging, and responsibility in promoting, transmitting, and preserving the important cultural values, languages, and heritage of Pacific island people.
- To instill in the Pacific child knowledge and understanding of the histories and geography that unite Pacific island people.
- To enable the Pacific child to evaluate and assess the impact of cultural practices.