

STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

Guam Teachers Explore Using Chamorro Folklore in Schools

By Agnes R. E. Indalecio

Pacific Islanders have long passed stories from generation to generation through storytellers, chanters, dancers, singers, and storyboard carvers. In traditionally oral cultures like the Chamorro culture, these stories contain the values and accumulated wisdom of the group. In Guam, the teaching of the history, culture, language, and values of the Chamorro people used to happen at home through storytelling; now it takes place in the schools due to the growth of a westernized lifestyle. Although Chamorro storytelling at home has declined, Chamorro language, culture, and stories still exist. With the growing interest in traditional ways of teaching and learning, teachers on Guam are exploring the use of traditional Chamorro storytelling in the classroom.

Stories in the classroom provide a very effective way of bringing about verbal responses and motivation. Children always have stories to tell, and they come to school to share them with others. Stories are also natural teaching tools. In his 1994 *Journal of American Folklore* article "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity," Elliott Oring notes that traditional stories help to explain the world and people's duties in it, provide role models for worthy action, relate the predictable, establish physical security, pass on morals and traditions, and provide an enriching form of entertainment. Ancient Chamorro history and knowledge are recorded in the songs, stories, myths, and narratives of Chamorro folklore. For example, the values embraced by Chamorros, like interdependence, social position, old age, shame, competition, and nature, are embedded in the actions of characters in Chamorro cultural stories.

Teachers on Guam use Chamorro legends in a language-experience approach. One example of instruction with cultural narratives is for teachers to tell a story in Chamorro or English and ask the children to listen for the moral of the story and to retell what they heard and understood. The teacher later checks the children's comprehension by asking them to write down what they learned about the legend. The students develop their reading, writing, and listening skills, increase their knowledge about the language and culture, and develop a positive attitude toward reviving, maintaining, and using the language to communicate.

Education and curriculum in Guam deal not only with the culture of the Chamorro people, but also with other languages and ways of life. Folk stories show how different cultures respond to emotional and environmental conditions and promote a better understanding of one's own culture.

Folk literature also lays the groundwork for more complex literature. In their 1987 book *Language and Thinking in School: A Whole-Language*

Curriculum, Kenneth Goodman and his colleagues argue that children pick up the patterned story structures in a folktale through the clear-cut characterizations, the straightforward plot that requires the protagonist to accomplish a task, and the events. For example, in many Western cultures, events occur in threes, such as the three little pigs, the three billy goats, the three wishes, and so on. Children gradually acquire a literary framework or a sense of such elements in stories.

The Chamorro language, culture, history, and narratives are very important parts of the school curriculum for all grade levels. With pride in their history and culture, people forge ahead with the confidence necessary to make the bold and courageous decisions that the future will require. Children must be encouraged to keep telling the stories of their history, cultures, and people.

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Photo: Caroline Yaeoc

▷ Pacific dancers like these Chamorro performers have traditionally helped to pass oral wisdom from generation to generation.

Comments on Storytelling in the Classroom

Legends should be taught across all subjects and not only in the Chamorro programs. Legends are very descriptive; [they] teach morals and there is a lot of sense to the stories. However, this is not happening in the schools of Guam. At least at the school I am attending. (Charles Onedera, Middle School Student)

Yes, Chamorro legends should be implemented across the curriculum but so should legends of other cultures to demonstrate the differences and similarities between legends of different cultures. Legends are taught by the Chamorro Language and Culture Program teachers, emphasis is usually during Chamorro Week celebration. Legends do not appear to be significant in Guam's education. (Charlita Auinzo, Elementary Teacher)