

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CHUUK

Local History Is Key to Community Involvement

By Rodrigo Mauricio

Family and community involvement is vital to school improvement. However, Pacific communities worry about institutions like schools that are imposed on them from outside. Although they are deeply concerned about their children's education, families worry that schools undermine local cultures. They worry that curricular activities promote competition instead of collaboration and individual instead of group decision-making. These values and behaviors are contrary to local cultural values. They oppose what people know and teach their children.

This is not the only barrier that PREL's Pacific Communities with High-performance In Literacy Development (CHILD) project must overcome in order to obtain community support for school improvement in early reading literacy. Many families in Pacific communities did not attend school under the current education system and are not familiar with teaching strategies used in formal school settings. They view formal schooling as a foreign concept. But these families are the experts in the languages, cultures, and history of the people whose children are the program's early readers. To promote community collaboration, the education community needs to recognize the importance of involving local experts and utilizing local expertise in the development of literacy skills, culture, and history.

Sapuk Elementary School in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, faces many challenges. The community has been reluctant to provide the help the school needs due to Sapuk history. One event in particular created feelings of distrust. The community struggles with these questions: "Who are the people that come in?" and "Where will they take us, where will we end up?" These questions are deeply rooted in the wounding experience of the Sapuk people's displacement and exile during World War II.

In the late 1800s and 1900s foreign

colonial powers administered the Pacific islands. Micronesia underwent administration by the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese, and the U.S. In the 1940s, Micronesia was under Japan. Chuuk was amongst the sites selected and fortified for Japanese military use.

The Japanese needed the villages of Mwan and Neauo on Weno Island for military installations, so they asked permission from the traditional chiefs of those villages. The chiefs refused to grant permission. The traditional chief of Sapuk, Chief Samuel, was not represented on the council. Hence, a decision was made to evacuate and relocate the people of Sapuk to Udot Island, roughly 15 miles west of Weno Island. Chief Samuel and his people were not informed about the decision.

On August 6, 1940, the Japanese soldiers came to Sapuk and ordered

everyone (men, women, children, old men, and old women) to evacuate. Evacuees were allowed to take a *firoski* (a bundle of clothes wrapped in a large piece of linen). They had to leave all other possessions: homes and personal belongings, farmland, domesticated farm animals, pets, and most importantly, their faith, the roots of their lives and hopes for the future.

As Chief Samuel tried to intervene, the people witnessed the cruelty of a Japanese official beating their most respected traditional chief. Those who witnessed the evacuation described it as "a disturbing and deeply wounding historical event in the lives of Sapuk people. The wailings of hundreds of men, women, and children could be heard for miles into the neighboring village of Epinup, like the cry of death as if many



Photo: Jennifer Padua

▷ Sapuk community members chant the "Sapuk Anthem." Learning and demonstrating respect for Sapuk history was a critical step in gaining community support for school improvement.

people had died all at once.” That day people were put on a tugboat and sent off to Udot Island. Today the people of Sapuk remember the saddest day for Sapuk in what is called the “Sapuk Anthem,” a chant/song composed in 1992 by Reverend Weit Kin.

The people of Sapuk were uprooted from their land. When you pull up a plant that has taken root in the soil, like the *sakau* plant, you uproot it from its connection in life, the soil, and you remove it from its own resources in the environment. Similarly, when you uproot innocent people from their homes, from their land and soil, from their social and cultural connections, and place them on unfamiliar land, they are mentally and physically disoriented. The people of Sapuk were disconnected from the lives they knew and they became hopeless. During exile in Udot, some of them assimilated, while some died of loneliness for their beloved Sapuk.

In 1943 a Japanese businessman, Mr. Ueda, who had married a Sapuk woman, made it possible for the people to return. They had lost their property, but started

a new life in Sapuk, a life with a bitter taste of outsiders. Today, the survivors continue to tell the oral history of their sad lives in exile and record it in chant or song. In 1998, the Mayor of Weno issued a proclamation designating August 6 “Sapuk Evacuation Day.”

When Pacific CHILD began its work with Sapuk Elementary School it was hard to involve families in school activities due to their feelings of distrust. And those issues are not easily spoken in public because the culture values respect. At the initial meeting, the community sang their most important chant, but it didn't mean much to ignorant ears.

A learning team was charged with putting together a school improvement plan beginning with a profile. Members of the team included school staff, teachers, and local education specialists. The team members identified areas for the profile and discussed the school improvement process. They then went into the community to identify learning priorities in the areas of language, culture, and local history. The team learned Sapuk's history and traditional leadership struc-

ture. They realized that the current curriculum did not support community values. The community continued to sing their chant, in this direct way saying, “This is what we see as important for our children to know.”

Local history is key to community involvement at Sapuk Elementary School. Learning Sapuk history established common ground and made it possible for Pacific CHILD staff and the community to work together. Writing the history of Sapuk, converting it from the oral to the written word, is a step in collaborative efforts toward local literacy development. The history of Sapuk, as expressed by the community in the chant, will become part of important school curriculum materials to be developed. By recognizing the value of local history, PREL learned about local knowledge and local communication styles, and made a crucial connection between home and school that set the stage to support school improvement work.

Rodrigo Mauricio is a Program Specialist for the REL's Pacific CHILD project. ★

SAPUK ANTHEM

Lyrics collected and composed by Reverend Weit Kin

Uruwoon Saan Sapuk Ngeni Udot

Atong ononinen ach kewe newo, non ewe mwuun Sapan,
Toou non riafou seni Sapuk ren, kapunien ar we ompu.

Chorus: Su-seni Napinomw taratiw Winipis,
Kechiweiti niewe Neewech woune Sapuk.

Ra nanen waata nupwen ra apisek,
Ar repwe toou chinap mwan, fefin aat,
Nengngin toou non kechiw pwun mii, urufutuk.

Kechiwan winima me orun Apinupw,
Ar nefeufeu ngeni chingke ar ra nii,
Neur we samol ese fangeta fan iten, aramas.

Ra tarongaw fetan nemanan Udot,
Ra nennen mei mwara, ar anenneni,
Ika ie epwe mwaran atiw ar ngeni, non nenian.

Ita fisefisan pwe pwun eew pisek,
Ach sipwe amwara, ren ach kewe,
Peias non pwaunun Udot ar repwe, tori nepwunun Sapuk.

History of the Sapuk People's Relocation to Udot

Sad and heart breaking our ancestors were during the Japanese Administration, evacuated from Sapuk with great sorrow because of the forceful and deceitful ways of our *Ompu*.*

Chorus: Leaving Napinomw, going alongside Winipis, crying
over Neewech. Mother Sapuk, I'm in pain!

They were talking and complaining without hope when carrying their belongings for the evacuation, old men, women, boys and girls, leaving with crying hearts because it was against their wills.

Crying as if they were crying over a dead person on the seashore of Apinupw when seeing with their own naked eyes, the cruelty of the Japanese officials beating their respected traditional chief who never betrayed or gave up his people.

They were abandoned and wandering upon Udot, their faces were like the faces of beggars, begging for someone to take them into their homes.

Wishful thinking that the soul of Udot is an item so that they can carry it over their shoulders back to the soil of Sapuk because it contained the graves of our people. Mother Sapuk, I'm in pain!

*The council responsible for making the decision to evacuate Sapuk.