

REL Pilot Project Teacher Named CNMI Teacher of the Year

By Evelyn Ooka



Acelia Dela Cruz is a 5th grade teacher at Tanapag Elementary School in Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Acelia teaches a 5th grade self-contained classroom. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), all teachers in the CNMI must be highly qualified to teach in the classroom. A highly qualified teacher (HQT) is one who has passed both Praxis I and II. Acelia is one of six teachers in her school who is considered a HQT.

When Acelia was selected as the CNMI Teacher of the Year, I was not a bit surprised. I began working with Acelia in August 2006, when her school was chosen to pilot a model the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific was developing. We held weekly Structured Learning Team (SLT) meetings with another pilot teacher to share successes and challenges. Classroom observations and post-observation conferences were conducted bimonthly. Classroom demonstrations were modeled to support the work on improving vocabulary instruction, reading comprehension strategies, and using cooperative learning structure.

Acelia immediately began implementing the model for improving reading comprehension for English learners. Her teaching instruction started with explicit teaching of vocabulary words on a particular lesson. She provided demonstrations of the com-

prehension strategies. Then she had students participate in an interactive activity by working together as partners or in small groups on clearly defined tasks.

Acelia's teaching methodology took a 180-degree turn when she became involved in the REL pilot project. As a 6th grade science teacher, Acelia enjoyed the hands-on approach to instruction she learned in the professional development program. Before the program, her vocabulary instruction had consisted of assigning students to define vocabulary words and use them in sentences. She had struggled to teach reading comprehension, and her students had struggled to learn it. The day she became involved with the REL pilot work was the day she began to see her students' reading comprehension come alive. Now, they think actively as they read. They monitor their comprehension by asking questions when they don't understand. They restate difficult sentences or passages in their own words. She has credited the explicit vocabulary instruction and comprehension strategies with improving students' reading comprehension.

The students' positive attitude toward working cooperatively with each other became evident. Students work together to understand content-area texts, helping each other learn and apply comprehension strategies. Students are now part of a learning community in which all members take responsibility for their own learning and also for one another's learning.

Acelia's principal, Frances Ulloa, believes that the project model was one of the determining factors in her being selected as the CNMI 2006 Teacher of the Year. The principal has witnessed 5th grade students who rarely spoke or participated in class now engaging in oral conversation more openly. One of the judges for the CNMI Teacher of the Year came to observe Acelia teaching. She commented that she was impressed with how Acelia was teaching vocabulary words explicitly and saw full student participation. She further stated that it was an excellent process for teaching limited- and non-English speakers, because many English words have multiple meanings.

Acelia's involvement with the pilot project has been quite positive. She talks story with her colleagues about the pilot work, sharing her own successes and challenges. Her classroom is always open to her colleagues for observation in vocabulary instruction, teaching comprehension strategies, and use of cooperative learning structure. Her students' confidence level has improved in terms of actively participating in class discussion and activities, including limited- and non-speakers of English.

Acelia is a "mover and a shaker" in her school, as well as in her community. She is a risk-taker and is persistent in ensuring that every student is actively involved in the learning process. She leaves no child behind.

Evelyn Ooka, Specialist, PREL, may be contacted at ookae@prel.org.

