

Change, Culture, and Community in a Micronesian School

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One year ago ...

At a Pacific island school, just before lunch, grade 1 children sit in their assigned seats while their teacher reads them a story from her desk at the front of the room. They do not ask questions or comment. While the story is being told, a sudden downpour of tropical rain temporarily mutes the teacher's voice. In the dampness and ensuing gusts of wind, the three papers taped to the wall fall limp to the floor and the pages of the few books on the shelf begin to curl. At the end of the story, the children turn to the only print material on their desks, a worksheet they need to complete and have marked by their teacher. They know if they finish early they can draw and color. This familiar routine occurs within the daily 45-minute language arts block. That day, however, the teacher tries something new. Once the children finish their worksheet, she calls them to her desk, one at a time. Unsure of how they will respond, she asks them to tell her about the story she had just read to them.

At Sansrik, a Pacific island school in Kosrae, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), children enter grade 1 with a rich oral language but very little experience with print, especially in the local language (L1). One of the main tasks of teachers is to help children become literate, an obvious necessity for success in school. However, the literacy practices in this early grade classroom one year ago are what the New London Group (2000) call a “carefully restricted project” (p. 9); that is, in this case, a narrow view of literacy that has been formalized and perpetuated through established routines. As commonly

practiced, the routines often go unquestioned and are passed down from generation to generation as the way literacy “gets done.” Yet, the routine described above has the potential to create at-risk conditions that could produce struggling readers, especially those children who come to school with little, if any, preparation for learning to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It takes time to change those conditions so that teachers and parents are willing to experiment and take risks with literacy practices in their homes and classrooms. We recognize that not everyone is ready for change. Nonetheless, Allington and Cunningham (2002) remind us that in every school there is at least one teacher (and, we hope, at least one parent) ready to engage in the process of change. The teacher in the classroom described above may be that one.

Currently, a concerted effort at the federal level focuses on improving the reading achievement of all children. President Bush's initiative, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), fronts this effort and draws attention to evidence-based research in the field of reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). Much of the research attempts to better understand, and make more explicit, teaching and learning to read. The research is often situated in the context of schools that focus on learning to read in English and have access to appropriate classroom resources and regular staff development. In determining how best to teach early literacy in Pacific schools in which the language of instruction in the early grades is not English, teachers are faced with few classroom resources and staff development opportunities that are intermittent. In the Pacific, educational leaders continue to raise concerns regarding literacy achievement. In response, the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) for the Pacific is currently engaged in a five-year research project on professional development in early literacy across the U.S.-affiliated Pacific

islands. The principal and staff at Sansrik Elementary School agreed to participate in this project, committing to a process of change for the benefit of the children in their care.

This paper chronicles the first year of that change—how one school, situated in a community with dominating oral traditions and a lingering colonial past, has engaged in changing school literacy practices. Two of the authors of this paper are members of the Kosraean community and write in a narrative form that interprets their experiences as Kosraean educators living in this Micronesian island-state. The third author reorients her Western perspective by questioning assumptions surrounding what it means to educate, and be educated, in a place where parent/teacher boundaries blur and oral forms of communication are more visible than written ones.

With literacy expectations that begin in grade 1, what is the role of culture and community in changing school literacy practices? In response to this question, we first provide an overview of Kosrae today, offering a description of the geographical realities and a sociohistorical past that imposed a Western way of learning on a non-Western culture. Second, we describe how a group of teachers in Micronesia engaged in changing school literacy practices and involved the community as both resources and participants in a school change process that is moving students toward grade-level expectations.

ORAL KOSRAE: A REMOTE STATE WITH A COLONIAL PAST

Kosrae is one of the four states within FSM, a political jurisdiction framed through long years of negotiations between leaders from the U.S. federal government and Micronesia. Kosrae appears on a world map as a dot at 6 degrees north latitude and 163 degrees east longitude. A very small volcanic island of approximately 42 square miles, this remote area is inhabited by close to 8,000 people. Although the island was sighted earlier by the Spanish, outside contact with Kosrae was actually initiated in the early 1800s by the French. This contact did not leave much in terms of literacy except documented knowledge of Kosrae that was made available to the outside world. In 1852, a Christian mission ship anchored at one of the island's harbors, marking the beginning of the influence of the missionaries—the most influential outside group in the history of Kosrae. Through the introduction of the Bible came the concept of literacy. Thus began a great change in Kosrae's language and literacy practices. Based on the English version brought by the missionaries, a Bible was translated into Kosraean and printed. In addition, a mission school was established. Its curriculum included training for church leadership, Bible study, and English. Before that time, people learned by watching and listening to elders and knowledge was passed on through storytelling, chants/songs, and dance

(some of these practices were discouraged by the missionaries and therefore no longer exist).

Legacies from two of four colonial periods are evident in Kosrae's school system today. Japan (1914–1945) was the first to establish schools that included grades 1–3 (B. Benjamin, personal communication, August 19, 2002). The curriculum included Japanese language and culture, physical education, and singing. After third grade, the system became selective, sending certain individuals to Pohnpei, a nearby island, or elsewhere to continue their learning. Formal schooling was something new to Kosraeans. Although many began education in some type of formal system, not everyone had the opportunity to experience it. In later years, formal education became a reality for all school-age children in Kosrae.

When the Japanese lost control over the islands to the United States in 1945 after World War II, a new administration was brought to Kosrae. Along with it came tremendous changes. First, Kosrae was administered by a military government. As a result, Admiral Spruance, the U.S. commander of the aircraft carrier that battled at Midway, put out several orders, including, "Each administration is to start schools and employ islanders as teachers as well as use Americans" (Segal, 1995, p. 165). From this order, the educational system in Kosrae was patterned after the U.S. educational system. Also resulting from this order was the Pacific Island Teacher Training School (PITTS) located in Guam. Thus, many Islanders became teachers and schools were established throughout Micronesia, including Kosrae. The first public school, headed by Rose Mackwelung, was established. With the creation of teacher training centers and schools based on the U.S. educational system came an abundance of teacher training and classroom materials in English, a tradition that continues today.

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, SCHOOL, AND THE PACIFIC CHILD

Kosraeans strongly believe in disseminating information through oral communication. Information and skills are passed on from generation to generation through oral traditions such as storytelling. Because of this, when children enter grade 1, they have already developed strong listening skills. Emphasis on the oral and not print is evidenced by the few print resources available to home, community, and school. Many teachers believe that this impacts literacy learning. For example, children who enter first grade often do not know letters and their sound correspondences. Due to the lack of print materials, children have little exposure to reading before entering school. Also impacting early literacy is the general tendency for parents to defer to teachers in the areas of academic teaching and learning. In other words, the school, not the community, is presumed responsible for teaching formal

literacy skills to children. While this is a common expectation, some parents do want to contribute to the literacy learning of their children or help them before they enter school.

Community/School Connections

Many parents consider entry into school a transition to a more broad-based community and a wider range of opportunities for learning. They believe that the teacher's responsibility is to know and help each child extend and develop. This requires the support of the school's leadership and the local community.

In this particular island school, almost 90% of the enrollment includes residents of a small community of interconnected lives. Through family and community activities, these students know each other prior to school entry. And, in most cases, they have knowledge of the cultural norms learned at home, including the importance of respect, relationships, and responsibilities. They enter school already having a connection amongst themselves, caring attitudes, and respect for people and school properties. Their sense of family and belonging create school culture. Teachers and students connect easily, not only because the principal and some of the teachers are members of the students' community, but because of their home learning experiences.

Children's home learning is informally structured, and the parent/teacher role is a shared responsibility among family members ranging from the very young to the elderly. In a culture that values the extended family and kinship, the parent/teacher role is quite extensive. It includes almost the whole community creating an environment that fosters interactive communication and oral language development. These family and community members hold the knowledge of the cultural elements of community life and the extensive vocabularies in relation to the environment. They value this knowledge, passing it on orally with variation depending on the generation.

Yet, how is literacy learning addressed at this school? While parents and teachers play an essential role in making text comprehensible for children (Bus, 2001), many "Pacific island families say more often that they do not know how to help their children in education" (McNaughton, 2001, p. 49). For too long, parents have leaned on the presumed expertise of teachers, assuming that the school will provide an adequate education in literacy for their children. Many parents, while competent in oral storytelling, are not familiar with reading and feel insecure in literate tasks. At this school, teachers and parents are learning to share their knowledge of how, for example, parents and children can participate in joint story reading.

Literacy in the Local Language

Kosraean is the language of home and school, at least until transition into English in grade 3. It is a strong, thriving oral language that effectively addresses communication needs and cultural teaching, with little need for print-based communicative events. What then is the relation between oral traditions and literacy learning in Kosrae? Few would argue that oral language has a role in literacy development. Watson (2001) concurs and argues that children need early experiences with oral and written language that engender conversations about word meaning and interpretation—those speech events that elicit discourse patterns, such as inquiry and causal explanation, relevant in literate traditions. For oral language to influence literacy development to a greater extent, such literate traditions need to be elicited in oral communicative events. How oral proficiency in Kosraean supports early literacy and how literacy in the home language supports the later learning of English are questions that continue to be raised by teachers and parents at this school.

Children from oral traditions engage in valuable family literacy activities. Expertise is gained through many practices, such as reciting texts (McNaughton, 1995) and explaining objects of interest like shells found on the beach (Watson, 2001). One relevant literacy tradition, a lasting colonial legacy in the Kosraean community, is reading the Bible. As a text-based communicative event, Sunday devotion is centered on signification and interpretation of events from the religious text. An expectation to read the Bible, to say what one knows or has learned from the text, and to be able to describe and explain what was read are literate traditions that began with missionaries more than 200 years ago. Through these practices, community members, including children, engage in literacy development. What made learning to read in Kosraean so challenging in the past was that the Bible, a sophisticated and complex text, was the first and only book from which many Kosraeans learned to read.

More recently, technology and other text sources have contributed to increased availability of print materials in both Kosraean and English. The number of printed Kosraean myths and other locally developed stories children hear, read, and tell is greater than before. A library service, located at the high school in Kosrae, is part of the broader FSM library system. It is a place that children visit regularly, borrowing reading materials in Kosraean and English.

A Pacific Island School on the Move

Sansrik Elementary School was chosen by the Kosrae Department of Education (DOE) to be involved with the REL in a five-year research project on improving early literacy called Pacific Communities with High-Performance in

Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD). As members of the Pacific CHILD staff, we joined the principal to inform the school staff of the decision to place this project at their school. The purpose of the project was explained, followed by an opportunity for teachers to ask questions and raise concerns. The staff had previously identified the need to address literacy at their school, and after learning that the project was research-based and would focus on professional development in early literacy, they agreed to participate. While there is always resistance when any new ideas or changes are introduced, especially when projects are predetermined by the DOE, any verbal suggestion of hesitancy or resistance would indicate a lack of respect in this Pacific island context. Teachers complied with the decision and did not voice any concerns. In later meetings, when school staff became more familiar with the project and with us, the Pacific CHILD staff, they began to ask questions. Although they expressed their apprehension about starting something so intensive and far-reaching, they committed to the project.

In an attempt to develop this deeper awareness and build important relationships, we provided a more detailed presentation of the project and suggested a possible process for improvement. The attendees were unsure of the project, since the process for change that was outlined appeared to them to be demanding. A similar improvement effort had taken place in the Kosraean school system. Comments such as, "Well, it is just another new thing that will eventually fade out," were made by at least one central office staff member during this early stage. Mindful of this initial hesitancy, the site-based Pacific CHILD staff continued with the start-up work.

It was agreed that parents should be informed of the project. A date was set for the meeting and invitations went out to parents and other interested community members. In order to maximize the potential for participation, refreshments were provided. Without food we could not expect a good turnout in Kosrae; it is a customary cultural practice. More than 60 parents attended the meeting. The Pacific CHILD site-based staff supported the principal in his explanation of the project to the parents during a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting. The PTA president's verbal request for support from all in making the project a success was an important milestone. Most of the parents present were very supportive, saying that they saw the project as a positive addition to the school.

Since the school already had established school/community connections, this project nurtured and strengthened the ties between home and school. Involving the community in conversations and professional dialogues that led them to creating a vision and setting goals was important. Parents welcomed opportunities for workshops and sessions that made what happens in the literacy classroom more visible and accessible.

Such new experiences excite parents and motivate their children. One mother shared:

After learning from the workshops, I tried to act like a teacher for my children. I schedule TV time and make their study time mandatory. I sit and help with one and then with another. At one time I was making the sound of one letter and my child giggled and said, "that's not how my teacher said it" and he sounded it out, giving the drag on the "mmmm."

This mother's story reflects the strong connection between the child and the teacher. In the work sessions, parents shared how their children viewed the teacher, but not the parent or any other adult, as always being right. The mother shared her anecdote even though this change was viewed in her house as unnatural and discomforting. Her husband later supported her by reinforcing study time and participating in helping the children with their homework. Changing home literacy practices in support of the school is difficult work. This parent took a risk and, while it was uncomfortable initially, she began to change her practices. Her husband also became involved, strengthening school/community connections for the benefit of his child's early literacy.

Parents participated regularly in school meetings. One need at the school was for various materials developed in Kosraean. Wanting to remain focused on changing their classroom practices through professional development, teachers suggested that this was one area where parents could become more actively involved at school. Recognizing the expertise of parents was important; they could serve as excellent resources when given guidance and opportunities for more involvement in their children's literacy learning. Parents were invited to spend time in the classroom to become familiar with literacy routines and expectations that could be extended at home. We also held workshops for parents to share literacy experiences with each other and create print materials in Kosraean intended for early reading classrooms.

During an evening meeting hosted by the school, the parents and teachers began brainstorming to develop the school vision. It was a new process for the group, and the parents in particular became actively engaged. Some shared their belief that students need more than academic knowledge; broader educational goals for children can be a shared responsibility between home and community. This was an unexpected and welcome turning point for the community and the school. Previously, it was understood that a clear delineation existed in education between the roles of teacher and parent. The conversation began to include collaborative sharing of ideas. One community member offered his definition of a knowledgeable person within the Kosraean context: "He can think and do things with his head; he can use his hands to do things; he has respect/care for others; he knows his culture, and understands the cultural norms which often guide his good behavior."

Teachers and parents talked about the importance of working together to achieve their shared vision for the children at the school. Together, teachers and the community co-

constructed their expertise (McNaughton, 2001), developing a shared understanding of what it means to educate children through the exchange of ideas and stories about their experiences as teachers and parents.

What was not known initially was that the school was organized departmentally—for example, one teacher was assigned to teach reading to all primary children (grades 1-3). Questions therefore arose during the first year: How do teachers understand their work in relation to reading? Do they think that teaching children to read is the sole responsibility of the reading teacher, or do they think that every teacher is a reading teacher? Evidence of the principal's rethinking the best practices for literacy instruction came in his eventual decision to move from departmentalized classrooms to self-contained classrooms in the early grades. While the departmentalized approach was requested by the central office and favored by many of the teachers, the principal recognized that literacy instruction is the responsibility of all teachers. The site-based staff worked hard to develop a close working relationship with him and to support his decision. As a result, self-contained classrooms are now present in the lower grades.

The principal strengthened relationships with staff and extended his knowledge of literacy and early reading by visiting classrooms, observing the teachers with a reading "eye," and engaging in conversations with them about their work. Teachers must be aware of which students are ready to change and be able to support them in taking risks and experimenting. Therefore, the careful placement of teachers is also important to the progress of the school.

Starting with One Teacher

School change begins with one teacher in one classroom (Allington & Cunningham, 2002). The classroom teacher described in the anecdotes that begin and end this paper is one such teacher. She was willing to experiment with new ideas. She did not always feel successful, but she shared her learning when others inquired. When we asked why she kept the children in rows at the onset of the project, she first cited disciplinary reasons. But as she began to reflect on what she knew about her students and attend to their varied needs, she soon realized that she wanted more flexibility and movement in her classroom. Rows no longer met her needs as a teacher.

We shared with her various seating arrangements, including the possibility of using a mat as a gathering place for children. This initiated a conversation with community members, who agreed to weave a mat using the abundant coconut fronds on the island. Curious about using a mat in the literacy classroom, two mothers asked to join the activities. Their participation in a school literacy event helped them make important community/school connections and may have encouraged them to rethink how to engage in literacy events at home with

their children. And while children do still sit in rows for some periods during the school day, this teacher has begun to open her literacy classroom to varied groupings and other ways of being and becoming literate.

In the classroom described at the beginning of this paper, the primary print activity upon entry to grade 1 was drawing a picture from the story. In professional development activities, the reading specialist introduced three key reading components to the teacher: Read Aloud, Shared Reading, and Interactive Writing. A Read Aloud activity was modeled. The model included asking questions at key points before, during, and after the story.

The ensuing discussion on the role of questions in an oral culture as a way to elicit prior knowledge and help children learn to make predictions led to rethinking this literate tradition. The conversation explored integrating local knowledge of storytelling, specifically the cultural importance of listening and not interrupting the story. It was decided that the teacher would experiment with listening through her new knowledge of Read Aloud procedures. We stood by and coached her, learning with her about a unique Pacific island tradition that matters. Much learning has yet to be done about the impact of combining two traditions in this way. The importance of this example is that the teacher reflected on what she brought to her new learning and was willing to risk integrating local knowledge with literate traditions for the benefit of the Pacific child.

We explored with the teacher what it meant to have a print-rich environment in the classroom. We discussed why there were very few L1 print materials posted on the walls. In a humid climate with tropical rains and gusting winds, holding materials to the wall was a particular concern. But with new techniques using string and clothespins and a substance called Fun-Tak, teachers began to hang student-produced and other print-rich materials on the walls. While there is still much to learn about text appropriateness, differentiated print, and how to use these materials in reading events, the walls now display various teacher, community, and student-generated print. Other conversations about how books are organized and used within the classroom encouraged this teacher to put the few books she had in baskets and let the children decide how to sort and label them in a meaningful way. It was a starting place for organizing a classroom library that children could manage and care for.

In this literacy classroom, the teacher knew the basal text she was using was inadequate and thus sought our support for more materials. Parents heard her call for help and wanted to be involved. Materials development workshops were held in the evenings. Immersing the parents in their own literacy through writing poetry was the first step. Other materials that reflect cultural traditions, such as Kosraean chants, songs, rhymes, and stories, are being developed for use in the early reading classroom. Though the activity provided classroom

resources, a more important result was to bring the community and school together for a common purpose—strengthening and deepening their understandings of oral and literate traditions.

Our purpose in providing professional development at this school is what Andrews and Rothman (2002) call “connect[ing] professional development to professional practice” (p. 2). Teachers participated in decision making for a school action plan. From their suggestions came individual and small group experiences that focused on modeling and follow-up coaching in the classroom with “real” children. Teachers said they wanted to learn from each other as well, so time was set aside for them to share new learning with colleagues committed to this process. Not everyone participated initially. At this school, only one teacher began to shift her practices. Soon, others became interested in what she was doing. Now we experience many conversations taking place amongst colleagues at this school in Kosrae.

LESSONS LEARNED

Two activities that initiated change at the school were: literacy projects with the community and teachers to increase the number of L1 print resources for the primary grades and engage in literacy activities, and engaging in cross-grade conversations on such topics as rethinking how reading should be delivered (as a subject or across the curriculum) and end-of-year grade expectations for writing. In the Table are highlights of two important lessons we believe all schools can benefit from.

TABLE
Lessons Learned

Changing One Pacific Island School's Literacy Practice	
Lesson 1:	Readiness for change must include developing trusting relationships and a willingness to learn together as a team. It requires a strong leader—a principal or teacher who is ready and open to new ideas, willing to learn with the staff and community, and committed to creating the conditions for change. It also requires at least one teacher willing to take risks and experiment with new ideas in the classroom.
Lesson 2:	Community members and staff have expertise that need to be shared. School literacy, based on literate cultural traditions, must be understood in terms of the oral language and literate experiences the child brings to school. When parents and teachers share this knowledge, a closer community/school connection is made in support of the Pacific child.

Lesson One: Readiness for Change

Much has been written about the importance of strong community support in engendering a shared respect for education, especially when a school engages in change (Chalker, 1999). Developing relationships and learning to work in partnerships with colleagues and the community is important in any context, but is situated uniquely in the particular sociocultural expectations of this Pacific island school. The principal, in Micronesian cultural tradition, is the leader. The creation of a leadership team without the principal is culturally inappropriate and communicatively difficult. As principals are the ultimate authority of the schools, they must always be kept informed of teacher discussions in order to make decisions in the best interests of the schools. In Kosrae, the principal has a key role in nurturing important relationships and in the process of creating the conditions for school change.

Lesson Two: Sharing Community/School Expertise

For children to become effective readers, the process must begin early, long before they enter school. Family, community, and culture are significant factors in the ways children are socialized into literacy events; this is especially true in a rural context in which oral cultural traditions are the norm. Attending to discourse patterns found in literate cultural traditions in both oral and literate events at home and in the classroom will move children closer to grade-level expectations. The importance of community/school relations and their interactivity cannot be underestimated. Ultimately, when parents and teachers come together, share expertise, and learn from each other, children are the ones who benefit most.

CHANGING LITERACY PRACTICES

One year later ...

The children gather in the corner of the room on a mat that community members have woven. Two parents join them on the mat. The teacher is about to read a story. Before she reads, she has the children look at the cover of the book and asks them to tell her what they see. Her questions trigger personal responses, as the children begin to connect their life experiences with the picture on the cover. The teacher is specifically observing two children and records their personal responses. She tells the class the title and asks them to guess what the story is about. As part of the Kosraean story routine, they must listen carefully to the whole story. At the end she asks them if their guess was similar to the story she just read. Suddenly, the rain pours on the tin roof, making her voice almost inaudible. Several papers waver momentarily from the gusts of wind but remain secured to the wall. The books, organized in labeled

baskets, show evidence of curled and tattered pages, more from use than from the dampness of the rain. While still on the mat, she prompts the children to extend meaning beyond the story. The bell rings and the school day is over. She encourages the children to continue the reading conversations at home. A few minutes later, she runs out of her classroom to a meeting with the other primary teachers, ready to share the literacy practices she is trying out in her classroom.

Moving early readers toward grade-level expectations is not easy. Difficulties in Pacific island schools may often seem insurmountable, and “educators may be tempted to throw up their hands and write off schools as a foreign innovation incompatible with island culture and its management style” (Hezel, 2002, p. 38). Yet, in at least one island classroom, a teacher, with the support of her school and community, is willing to take risks and experiment with new ideas. Slowly her literacy practices are changing. Children are beginning to incorporate new forms of knowledge, based on oral and literate cultural traditions, into their expanding repertoire of language and literacy experiences. No longer a restricted project, this classroom offers distinctive literacy learning opportunities. The interplay of oral culture and text-based communication—oral language influencing and being influenced by literacy—has invoked a pedagogical gift: the cultural promise and risk of educating Pacific children.

Pacific island schools, such as this one in Kosrae, work toward informed literacy practices that are built on what matters in language and literacy to the school and community. Hezel (2002) comments, “Formal education, once grafted from an alien plant, has taken root in island Micronesia and bears rich fruit in at least some places” (p. 39). We believe this Pacific island school in Kosrae has the potential to be such a place.

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