

PD IN THE RMI

Expanding Horizons: Empowering Teachers to Grow Professionally

By Hannah Lafita and Jennifer Padua

Over the past 4 years, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) reading specialists have been supporting professional development (PD) efforts in early reading at Delap Elementary School (DES) in Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). The DES teachers collaborated to determine which areas of study they wanted to learn more about and how these topics would be learned.

Research has shown that when teachers are an integral part of the decision-making process, they feel more ownership and motivation to learn. During the last 2 years of the PD project at DES, the teachers spent more time working in their grade-level groups with the reading specialist (RS). The working relationship among teachers became stronger as they continued to share their work with each other.

When a focus was agreed upon, the RS shared ways in which they could learn about their selected topic. Each group had a lead teacher the RS worked with. She facilitated conversations on how they could help support each other and challenged their thinking by asking reflective questions. By request, the RS supported individual teachers by modeling a lesson or strategy in class. As teachers became more confident, some began to model lessons for other teachers. For example, a second grade teacher who was new to the teaching profession and was not involved in the project from the beginning observed a first grade teacher doing a daily message. In another instance, a third grade teacher helped another with the English language basal. Prior to and after each observation, both teachers discussed the purpose of the lesson, the skills and strategies targeted, what he or she learned, and what would be the next step. As her role evolved, the RS became more of a support person who would accompany a teacher to observe colleagues demonstrating lessons or cover a classroom while teachers observed one another.

Consistently meeting in grade-level groups made it easier for teachers to form relationships with each other. Conversations included topics such as data analysis and changes they were observing in their students.

As teachers became comfortable with their new learning and confident with implementing strategies in their classrooms, their desire to grow professionally increased. They continually reflected upon their learning and sought information independ-

ently. Conversations occurred beyond their grade-level meetings and with other grade-level teachers. The teachers' willingness to share their experiences expanded outside the school.

For the past two summers, two DES teachers presented effective instructional strategies they had learned to a group of Head Start/kindergarten teachers.

In December, another teacher worked with a group of ladies from the Marshall Islands Library Association (MILA) on reading strategies.

In July, a group of DES teachers conducted a workshop at the Pacific Educational Conference in Majuro, RMI. Though some



Photo: Susan Hanson

▷ PREL Reading Specialists provided PD for teachers at Delap Elementary School.

of them were nervous about presenting to a larger contingency of educators from throughout the Pacific, they encouraged and supported one another knowing the importance of the message their presentation carried. One teacher commented, "I feel good about presenting because I would like to share my learning with others. It will also be a good learning experience for all of us."

Over time, the PREL staff have seen the teachers evolve. Contributing factors that fostered this growth were allowing teachers to make decisions about what and how they wanted to learn, forming relationships, continually supporting their efforts, and challenging their thinking.

The PD project conducted by PREL staff at DES has come to a close and the teachers have agreed to expand their PD on their own. A first grade teacher commented, "It is important for us to meet because we can learn from each other. We need to talk about the students' needs and how we can help them."

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