

# Aloha, Hoosier! A Pen-Pal Activity in the Third Grade

Raymond Callahan and Kam Chi Chan

**Aloha e Max [Hello, Maxine].** *Aloha Kakahiaka!* [Good Morning!] How go things at Punahou School? My *Na Manu'ula* [Red Birds, i.e., students] are hard at work with the unit. We have been learning about our local community, and today we start looking at Hawai'i. Tomorrow we will start learning Hawaiian language. The *haumana* [students] are very excited and this *kumu* [teacher] is ready to teach it to them. *Mahalo no kou ho'okipa* [Thank you for your help] with this unit. I would have never guessed that a veteran teacher would be so willing to work with a student teacher. I just find it amazing....

—Ray, Coolspring Elementary School, Michigan City, Indiana, March 1, 2006

**Aloha e Ray.** Wow!-*maika'iloa!* [Very good!] I'm impressed with your efforts. Your '*Olelo Hawai'i* [Hawaiian language] is pretty much on the money! All of our culture box items are in class now, and we are now in the process of writing our first notes to our pen pals. *Na Kukui* [my "Kukui Trees"] —I've named my students for the plant which is a symbol of knowledge] are so excited. Will mail those sales ads that you requested too. We're aiming for early next week to get all of these things to you....

—Maxine, Punahou School, Honolulu Hawai'i, March 1, 2006

Ray, a preservice teacher in Indiana, and Maxine, a 35-year teaching veteran in Hawai'i, set up a pen-pal program for the third grade students in their respective classrooms, 4,000 miles apart. This pen-pal program, used in conjunction with children's literature and community and technology resources, brought about memorable learning experiences.

In this article, we focus on Ray's perspective, how he used pen-pal communications to enhance his third grade students' understanding of the concept of community, and to deepen their appreciation of community resources. To begin with, we give a brief overview of Ray's experiences of setting up the

pen-pal program. Then, we describe how Ray used pen-pal communications to make the study of community exciting and meaningful to young learners. Last, we present some concluding remarks on the use of pen-pal communications in an elementary setting.

## Setting up the Pen-Pal Program

Ray was assigned to teach in a third grade class at Coolspring Elementary School in Michigan City, a rural area of Northwest Indiana, for his sixteen-week classroom teaching placement in the spring of 2006. In order to learn about the students and the curriculum before teaching, Ray visited the class once a week during the fall. Among the class of

26 students there was only one child of ethnic minority background, a Hispanic American. Most of the students had only limited exposure to the non-mainstream culture. So Ray decided to bring some meaningful cross-cultural experiences to students, to make his students' learning experiences of community as concrete and relevant to real life as possible. He wanted to prepare his young students to be citizens of a culturally diverse nation, to engage with a larger world of human experience.

Inspired by an article in *Teaching K-8*, Ray sent an e-mail message to a teacher in Hawai'i.<sup>1</sup> According to the article, this teacher had devoted an entire year to Hawaiian studies with her third graders at Punahou School in Honolulu. In his e-mail message, Ray expressed his interest in learning about Hawaiian culture and setting up a pen-pal program between Punahou and Coolspring.

After further e-mail correspondence, Ray was put in touch with Maxine Nu'uhiwa, another third grade teacher at Punahous School who is also a *kumu* (teacher) of Hawaiian ancestry. Ray communicated with Maxine regularly and started learning about Hawaiian language and culture.

Working collaboratively with Maxine (who has 35 years of experience in education), and with the support of Coolspring teachers and staff, Ray was

able to set up the pen-pal program that he had envisioned. He developed a plan for a standards-based, integrated unit of study about community that used pen-pal correspondence as a key student activity. Throughout the unit's seven-week period, students in the two states compared geographical, economical, and cultural aspects of their communities. The title of this unit is *EA'o Mai Ma Ke Kai* [Come Learn by the Sea], a name decided upon by Ray's students in a class meeting. Guided by Indiana Content Standards and NCSS Curriculum Standards,<sup>2</sup> the unit lessons aimed to encourage students to find answers for questions such as: How do the ways of life of people living in Michigan City differ from people living in Honolulu?

What are common characteristics and differences between the two cultures?

Where are the two communities located on the globe?

How far is it from Indiana to Hawai'i?

What social problems do the two communities face?

Why do many common household goods cost more in Hawai'i than they do in Indiana?

### Culture Boxes

During the course of the unit study, Ray's students communicated with their Hawaiian pen pals through three exchanges. Each pen-pal communication had its unique theme associated with particular learning activities and objectives that met various state and NCSS standards.

The first communication between classrooms was a "culture box exchange." Students brought items to class that they thought represented their culture or community. These items included pictures of snowy landscapes, family photos, things they made themselves (such as toy jewelry and Sculpy clay figures), and community booklets (such as recreation guides and programs for events like the Fourth of July). Before composing the culture box, students shared their selected items in circle groups.

Then each student wrote a short letter introducing him- or herself to a pen pal of similar age in Hawai'i and describing the importance of the selected item. Ray collected the items and short letters into one package, then mailed this culture box to Maxine.

While waiting for a Hawaiian culture box to arrive in return, Ray taught several lessons that integrated literacy and social studies. These lessons provided students with children's books, expository texts, and Internet resources to explore the similarities and differences between Hawai'i and Indiana.

About two weeks later, Ray's students received a Hawaiian culture box. Inside were different types of sand, various forms of seashells, pictures of students' families, origami, and colorful necklaces. Maxine also sent Ray a piece of Hawaiian cloth, newspapers, lei(s), a CD of music composed and recorded by her son, sales ads, Hawaiian chutney [relish], and notes explaining the significance of each item.

Ray encouraged students to study, examine, and analyze the items sent by their Hawaiian pen pals. With the Hawaiian cultural artifacts and community resources in hand, students were able to compare and contrast the Hawaiian and Indiana communities on a personal level. For example, in one of the integrated lessons involving economics, literacy, and math titled "It's Costing Too Much," students were asked to hypothesize why a certain item or resource might cost more in some states than in others. Students then used information gathered from sale ads in Indiana and Hawaiian newspapers to contrast various prices of goods in those two states. Last, the teacher provided some books that explained why some common goods that people use every day cost more in Hawai'i than they do in Indiana. (Main reasons include the fact that many goods have to be imported to Hawai'i, tourism has raised prices, and key agricultural products cannot be grown on the islands.) These learning activities provided students with an opportunity to use community media to

study how people compare benefits and costs when they make choices about living in different communities, an activity suggested by Indiana Social Studies and Literacy Standards.<sup>3</sup>

### Letters, and More Questions

The second communication was the exchange of a personal thank-you letter. Each student wrote a letter to thank his or her pen pal for sending a specific item. In the letter, students also asked questions about the item they received. For examples, students who received a cultural artifact such as origami (an item created through the Japanese craft of folding paper) would ask their pen pals the history of the artifact, the reasons he or she selected the item, and how the artifact is important to people in their culture. (Students discovered that a quarter of the population of Hawai'i is of Japanese descent.) Students who received sand and shells asked where, when, and on what occasion the item was collected. (The volcanic sand of Punalu'u Beach is black.) Students who received pictures asked about who or what was in the picture and where and when the picture was taken. This project of writing a thank-you letter not only met several Indiana Literacy Standards, but also helped students develop social inquiry skills. Because of their interest in learning more about the item selected and sent by their pen pals, students were motivated to formulate questions and to collect data that helped them learn more about a Hawaiian community. Upon the receipt of their pen pals' responses, students were excited to evaluate and analyze their letters and to draw conclusions from their findings. As educators James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks have said, doubt and concern cause the inquirer to formulate questions in the model of social inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, doubts and concerns raised by the items they received motivated Ray's students to inquire about their pen pals' community.

### Postcards, and Gratitude

The third communication was a con-

cluding mailing of postcards. Ray's students sent postcards that either represented Indiana or the community of Michigan City. On the postcard, each student wrote a short farewell note to his or her pen pal, although some expressed an interest in keeping in touch over the summer. In the process of selecting and sending these meaningful postcards, students were once again provided an opportunity to explore the unique characteristics of their own state and community.

### A Sense of Connection

Helping young children "develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world"<sup>5</sup> has continued to pose an enormous challenge to teachers who work in a predominantly white, middle-class setting.<sup>6</sup> White students who live in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods usually have little regular, substantial contact with people who have backgrounds and experiences that are very different from their own.<sup>7</sup> It can be difficult to motivate young children in a culturally homogeneous classroom setting to fully engage in learning about culturally different communities.

The pen-pal communication appeared to give Ray's students a sense of connection to people who are different from them in various respects. They were motivated and excited to see the culture of Hawai'i through the eyes of their same age pen pals. By interacting with Hawaiian students through exchanges of the culture box, letters, and postcards, Ray's students were able to relate the Hawaiian culture to their own community, culture, and life, and to begin to explore issues facing the multicultural world they live in. One teaching moment Ray has always been proud of was when his students unexpectedly questioned why all the Hawaiian characters "look alike" in cartoons of *Lilo and Stitch*. The students were able to notice the implicit, subtle stereotyping of a minority group in a well-known Disney movie

because they were provided an opportunity to see some firsthand pictures of a Hawaiian community sent by their pen pals. Popular media is the dominant means by which society receives its "racial messages," and teachers can be unwitting conduits for the perpetuation of racial stereotyping. On the other hand, individual teachers can present appropriate instructional materials and select learning activities that raise students' culture awareness and reduce racial stereotyping.<sup>8</sup> With the resources provided by their pen pals, as well as information provided by quality books and websites, Ray's students were able to take a comparative approach to the study of culture and community.

### Caveats

Whereas pen-pal communications can motivate student learning and enhance students' understanding of culture and community, teachers should be aware of possible pitfalls when organizing pen-pal exchanges in an elementary classroom setting. It took six months for Ray to set up and prepare the pen-pal program. Although Maxine and Ray came up with a list of exchanges between the pen pals, they were not able to fully complete all the activities on the list because of time constraints and parent concerns. For example, since both Maxine and Ray had several parents who did not sign the consent form, they were not able to use videotaped messages and web cameras. Teachers who consider a pen pal project should be aware that this teaching method takes some time and effort. However, as shown by the above example, the excitement of a pen pal exchange can challenge students to engage in higher-order thinking, inquire with original questions, and be culturally aware and curious.

### Staying Curious

Good teachers are continuous life-long learners. We want our students to also continue their journey of learning. Ray strongly believes that the pen-pal program is a tremendous asset in the ongoing learning process especially when

it comes to learning about other cultures. The comparative approach to the study of community and culture "is the gateway to higher-order thinking and in-depth knowledge. Comparison allows students to grasp the tremendous variety of differences among families, neighborhoods, and communities around the world."<sup>9</sup> Because of the pen pal activity, students were highly motivated to study their own and their pen pal's communities. They were eager to find out the differences and similarities between two communities. They learned about homes and family members, traditions, languages, foods, geographic locations, physical systems, community resources, and economic factors. If Ray's students stay curious about people that are in some ways different from themselves, their knowledge and understanding of community and culture will continue grow, and the world may be a better place for it. ☰

### Notes

1. Katherine Pierpont, "Mahalo, Kumu," *Teaching PreK-8* 36, no. 1 (August/September 2005): 58-61.
2. Indiana standards, [www.doe.state.in.us/standards/](http://www.doe.state.in.us/standards/); Social studies standards published by NCSS are summarized at [www.socialstudies.org/standards](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards).
3. Indiana Literacy Standard 3.4.4 and Indiana Social Studies Standard 3.4.8, respectively.
4. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, *Teaching Strategies for the Social Studies: Decision-Making and Citizen Action* (New York: Longman, 1999), 68.
5. National Council for the Social Studies, *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), vii.
6. Amanda E. Lewis, "There Is No 'Race' in the Schoolyard: Color-Blind Ideology in an (Almost) All-White School," *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 4 (2001): 781-811.
7. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
8. Timothy Lintner, "The Savage and the Slave: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and the Teaching of American History," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 29.
9. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2005), 147.

**RAYMOND CALLAHAN** is currently a fourth grade teacher at Gary Lighthouse Charter School in Gary, Indiana. **KAM CHI CHAN** is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Purdue University—North Central in Westville, Indiana.