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JUST BLOWIN' SMOKE

Just Blowin' Smoke is the 25th addition to Micronesian Seminar's *Island Topics* series. Why do people smoke? This video does a light-hearted survey of some of the reasons, and finds that in the end they're just blowin' smoke. To order your \$10 copy, write to video1@micsem.org. For a complete list of MicSem videos, visit our website: <http://www.micsem.org>

**WHAT SHOULD
OUR
SCHOOLS
BE DOING?**

FRANCIS X. HEZEL, S.J.



Three Views of the Goals of Education

What is education for? What is it supposed to produce? There are dozens of ways of viewing the purpose of education, but in Micronesia today the different responses to this question can be grouped into three general categories.

- **manpower training.** The main concern of the people espousing this goal is to help the economy take off by providing young people with the skills that will enable them to find employment, no matter how menial.
- **cultural preservation.** These people, feeling that the traditional culture is under attack by modern society, think that the first call of education is to turn out individuals who can maintain some continuity with the past.
- **academic skills.** The guiding belief here is that education ought to teach people to read and write and think. They feel that only by providing the best and brightest with what they need to get a first-rate education is there hope that some of these will return to lead their nations out of the economic desert.

Where Students Go

Before we examine more closely these different views of the purpose of education, we would do well to take a look at where students go when they leave school. There are three streams of young people today flowing to different destinations. Some are returning to the village where they live on the land; some end up in town where they seek whatever employment can be found, and still others go abroad to find work in the US or one of its flag territories such as Guam or Saipan.

At one time we might have presumed that school dropouts would tend to head back to the village, high school graduates usually cluster in the towns in search of full-time employment, and those with some college and exposure to life in the US might strike roots

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Three Paths or One?

Many people continue to view these three sets of goals as essentially in conflict with one another. They often seem to be mutually exclusive, divergent paths that education can follow, depending on the aspirations and interests of students and the society in which they are raised. Yet, when we look at them more closely within the context of Micronesian societies today, they may converge into a single broad set of goals that could embrace everyone at school, no matter what his career path or ethnic interests.

What may be needed today is a new education system that will meet new needs. We have left the 1970s and 1980s behind. Education must respond to the realities of island society today, not ten or twenty years ago. We are educating young people who, although they may seem to lack some of the public service employment options that those before them had, are presented with other choices that their forebears may not have had. Young people today may move in any of three very different directions: they may return to the village and live a life on the land, or they may live in town and look for what employment they be able to find, or they can seek their livelihood abroad. Our clientele today may move in any of these directions. They are the heirs of the global economy.

Can one mode of education fit all? It never has. Adaptations must be made—but not at the sacrifice of the basic skills that will be survival skills, wherever our young people land. While encouraging the young to reflect on who they are and where they came from, we must give them what they need to make their own way into the future.



This is the first of three education articles written in collaboration with PREL, and through PREL's financial assistance.

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abroad. But the picture is very different today. Consider these real-life examples from recent years.

- A young man who dropped out of elementary school in the 6th grade goes off to Guam to get a job in construction as a day laborer. He speaks little English and has never before been overseas. He has picked up a little carpentry from his grandfather who went to the Japanese carpentry school before the Second World War.
- A young woman has returned from Australia where she acquired her college degree. She can read and write English, but is a little uncomfortable in her Micronesian language since she is the product of a mixed marriage and has grown up speaking English. She has decided that she will remain in town and seek employment there since she wants to take care of her younger brothers and sisters.
- A young man who graduated from a private high school has lived in town for a couple of years after graduation but can find no job there. While looking for something to do, he attended a few workshops on sponges and shells and served as a teacher's aide for a while. Now he has decided to return to the village to fish and farm and perhaps find something to do to earn a small cash income.

The different streams from school into the larger world follow more complicated patterns than we might have imagined. Not only are these streams more erratic, but the needs of each of these three persons is different. The 6th grade dropout needs basic English and good work habits to make it on Guam. The college graduate might need advanced training if she is to find a government job, but she could also use some work in the local language. The high school graduate has a supportive community and land to live off, but he needs a part-time source of cash.

With all these different needs, what should our schools be teaching? English language? Strong work ethics? Local languages?



Start up business skills for those who need a part-time income?
Mechanics or carpentry?

Goal #1: Manpower Training

There are many who believe that the main purpose of education is to train young people to earn an income in the future, while at the same time contributing to their society's economic development. The key concern in this way of looking at education is to bring about prosperity both for the individual and society. Advocates of this position might say something like this: "Micronesia doesn't need eggheads, more planners and college grads. It needs people who can find jobs...who can replace the expatriates now working in the islands." A relevant education, in this view, is a matter of merely providing the skills that young people need to get jobs.

Many of those supporting manpower training have been openly critical of the type of education that was being offered to Micronesian students throughout the past decades on the grounds that it was irrelevant. Emphasis on the humanities might be fine for the United States and other developed countries, they argue, but the islands don't have the vast choice of careers that Americans and Europeans are offered. In the eyes of the advocates of manpower training, education is relevant only to the extent that it enables young people to find jobs in a society that is still regarded as underdeveloped. They feel that if only its education system adopted a vocational thrust, Micronesia could produce employable young men and women and, in so doing, help turn around its economy.

This call for educational adjustment in the name of reality has been sounded often through the years. It is echoed even today. Parents plead with teachers to train their sons and daughters in whatever they will need to get a job. Educators look with covetous eyes on the large sums of federal program money earmarked to prepare the young for the "world of work" and ask why they shouldn't stress manpower training in the schools if that's what it takes to get the program money. Legislators and congressmen,



The dropout rate that critics of an academic skills system feared is indeed high. Between 20 and 30 percent of all elementary students leave school before finishing eighth grade. The rate is even higher for high school students: in FSM and the Marshalls more than 50 percent of all students leave school before high school graduation.

Whatever the reason for their departure, it does not seem to be the impossibly high standards of education that are forcing these students out. Those who remain in school are not only failing to reach the US norms in math and reading skills, but in FSM and the Marshalls they are performing significantly below the standards set for these island nations. In the Marshalls, for instance, test results from a five-year period in the late 1990s show that two-thirds of all students failed to meet national norms in math, English and even the Marshallese language. FSM standards have not been met since national testing began in 1995. Even in Palau, where academic standards appear to be higher, only twelve percent of all high school students could read at the US fourth grade level.

Despite the poor test results and high dropout rate, increasing numbers of young Micronesians are leaving for distant destinations to find employment. Those who are seeking their fortune abroad are not the best educated Micronesians; they include a surprisingly large number of high school leavers and elementary school dropouts. Education in Micronesia today is not simply preparing for college those who can make it and sending those who can't back into the village. It is tasked with providing basic skills for dropouts who choose to seek a job abroad as well as for potential college graduates who will return to live in the islands. It does not have the luxury to focus on the best and brightest since it is also required to offer basic skills in at least English, the vernacular, and math to people who are liable to go anywhere and do anything. In providing for all three streams of school leavers, education can less afford to be elite than ever before.





government, then at a desk in a private business. Graduates from this type of an education system will have serious problems fitting in when they return to their island, these critics maintain. Those who have been through such an education system are often dismissed as unsuited for manual work, whether a full-time job in the trades or simply clearing land for farming. Even worse, they are often regarded as de-cultured, individuals who have turned their back on their own culture, its lifestyle and its folkways, under the spell of foreign thought patterns and attitudes.

An even greater problem with this type of education, critics charge, is the number of casualties that it leaves along the wayside. If only the "best and brightest" can survive this demanding system, what happens to the lesser stars who are unable to keep up? They are destined to drop out before finishing school, becoming nothing more than detritus on what is a pathway to success for a few talented persons. In the view of "reformists," then, all are casualties—those who succeed and become cultural orphans no less than those who are spewed out before finishing school.

How Elitist Are Our Schools?

The clash between adherents of this classical view of education and those espousing more island-friendly schools is genuine. Yet, facts suggest that the imagined outcome of our academic education system is not necessarily the real one. For nearly thirty years now, large numbers of young Micronesians have been going abroad to be educated in US colleges. Despite the fears of a large brain drain and concern for cultural re-entry problems, the overwhelming majority of such students have returned to their islands and adapted successfully, it seems, to town life in the Pacific. In 1982, ten years after federal Pell grants opened the doors to US college for thousands of Micronesians, there were still only a few hundred citizens of FSM and the Marshalls living permanently in the US. The others had returned home to readjust to island living and take what jobs were available.



pressed by their constituents to show some economic progress, in turn put pressure on the schools to prepare young people to find and hold a job. All of them subscribe to the view that schooling, before all else, ought to provide a livelihood for young men and women, while simultaneously moving the national economy forward.

But Where Are the Jobs?

For all the talk about preparing young people for work, the harsh reality is that there are very few jobs available in most parts of Micronesia today. The governments are cutting back on their positions and private business has not grown as was hoped. Palau, the Marshalls and FSM are all under pressure from donor nations to economize on the size and cost of government. FSM has reduced the number of positions through a voluntary early retirement scheme, the Marshalls is going through this painful process now, and Palau is being admonished to follow suit.

Employment in Micronesia: 1970-2000

	FSM	Marshalls	Palau
1970	4,702	2,796	1,893
1980	9,760	4,108	2,665
1990	13,940	6,839	3,700
2000	13,403	7,221	7,710

Sources: census information, Social Security records

Meanwhile, the private sector in the FSM and the Marshalls, although it has seen some growth, has not developed as anticipated. The local fishing industry has been stunted and the tourist industry has not lived up to its earlier promise. The total number of jobs in FSM has decreased in the last ten years, and employment in the Marshalls has grown only marginally during the decade. Only in Palau has there been unambiguous growth, thanks to the tourist boom, but many of the newly created jobs are low-paying positions that are being filled by Asians.



To look to the replacement of expatriate employees as a major source of jobs may be an illusion. Expatriates hold about 10 percent of all the salaried jobs in FSM and the Marshalls, and over 40 percent of the jobs in Palau due to the influx of workers there in the last ten years. The jobs they hold, however, are not a promising source of employment for the future. In FSM and the Marshalls, these jobs would barely be enough for all those entering the work force during the next two years. Besides, it would not be easy to train local people to the point that they could take over the skilled positions held by many expatriates in accounting, management and the trades.

Even apart from their high level of skills, foreign workers offer other advantages. Asians can often be hired for less than local islanders, they can be more easily controlled by their employers, and they do not have the many social obligations that distract local employees from their work. Expatriates can be counted on to show up for work every day, while Micronesians may often be absent or late due to the cultural demands made on them. Consequently, local workers often do not show the consistency and match the productivity of foreign workers, thus making them less attractive to employers, whether Micronesian or foreign.

Expatriate Employees in Micronesia

	FSM (1994)	RMI (1999)	Palau (1995)
Total Expatriates	3,205	1,651	4,355
% of Total Pop	3%	3%	25%
No. Employed	1,744	570	3,326
% of All Workers	12%	8%	44%

Sources: census information

Most of the jobs available to young Micronesians today are to be found overseas. Since the Compact of Free Association went into effect in 1986, hundreds of people from FSM and RMI have emigrated to Guam, CNMI, and the US to find jobs. An estimated total of about 25,000 Micronesians, or one out of every eight citizens



Goal #3: Academic Skills

Those who espouse this view maintain that the main purpose of education is to develop the mind. They might agree that some attitudes and values can be absorbed in school along the way, but that this is secondary to the main mission of the school: the development of students' brains. There are basic skills that should receive special emphasis—literacy, mathematics, and language—but the point of education, in this view, is not simply to master these or other skills; it is to keep learning as much as possible. The traditional disciplines such as science and social studies are valued as much for the development of the mind they furnish as for the information they impart on the young person's own physical and social environment. Newer courses in such areas as computer science and business are acceptable only to the extent that they are seen as contributing to these goals.

The history of education in Micronesia over the years has been marked by continuing tension between the "traditionalists" who hold this view of education and the "reformists" who believe that the school systems in Micronesia ought to be radically adapted to the reality of life in the islands. The former, while recognizing the obvious cultural differences between the US and the Pacific islands, maintain that Islanders deserve the same opportunities to develop their mind that Americans or Japanese or Australians enjoy. Anything else would be to deny more talented Islanders—the future leaders of these island nations—the training that leaders of other nations possess. It would prevent them from "being all they can be" (to use the US Armed Services slogan) and deny their people the possibility of competing successfully with other nations in the global village of the future.

Critics of this position argue that what is appropriate for developed countries like the US is not necessarily the best kind of education in the Pacific. They argue that a school program designed to promote academic skills will produce an elitist crop of graduates who will continue their education, one school after another, and at the end of it all will only be fit for white-collar work—if not in the



During my years as principal of Xavier High School, I was acutely conscious of the need to allow culture to permeate the curriculum as well as the non-curricular areas of school life. During the early 1970s, as we attempted to overhaul the social studies curricula in the schools, we wanted the material we taught to reflect island concerns and be taught in such a way that island students might be engaged by it and respond to it. We devised ways to send students back to their parents for oral histories and other information on their communities that they might not otherwise have sought. Yet, we insisted that students do more than simply acquire this information. We expected them to process it—to compare and contrast, to analyze, to evaluate it. In this way, they were neglecting neither their cultural background and the riches it offered nor the development of the thinking skills that would serve them when they graduated.

In the end, however, culture is not something that can be taught in a classroom. Culture is picked up in the environment of the home and community; the school has the task not of teaching culture but of reinforcing it. Culture is not a subject to be learned, but an atmosphere that is exuded in everything that is carried on in the school. It is the environment in which school is conducted. Culture should condition everything that happens in the school and everything that is taught—every subject, every word spoken, every nuance. We may expect this to happen in a school in which Micronesian teachers draw on their own lived experience to advance the education of their students.

The challenge in the school today is, rather than reducing culture to a single program or two, to weave it into every part of the curriculum and into the policies of the school. Elements of traditional culture such as oral history and language need not be neglected, but they should be taught in such a way that they are consonant with the other goals that education serves: literacy and higher thinking skills, for instance. In this way education will be building on the past to lead students into the future.



of the freely associated states, were living abroad in 1998. Most of them have left their island within the last fifteen years to seek the jobs that they can not find at home.

Estimated Total Emigration by 1980 and 2000

	Palau	FSM	RMI	Total
1980	2,500	500	0	3,000
2000	6,000	14,000	5,000	25,000

Sources: Micronesian Seminar

What Job Training Is Needed?

Businesses are often willing to provide the specialized training that applicants need for those few jobs that turn up in Micronesia. Restaurants, stores and bars do their own training, as do the companies that hire people to prepare tuna loins for shipment to Tokyo for the sashimi market. Even those applying for more technical positions, such as telephone repairmen, can learn the skills needed for their new jobs through the company that hires them. What, then, must an applicant know and what skills must he or she have in order to get one of these jobs? A woman who owned a bar on Guam employing several Micronesians once told me that the qualifications for employment at her place were simple: employees had to show up for work on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. A businessman on Pohnpei remarked that he would only hire females. Why? Because they are more dependable than men, he thought.

There may be instances in which job recruits need some specialized training, but these seem to be rare. Generally, employers seem to be looking for someone who is dependable, who knows how to put in a full day's work, and who can learn things quickly. Employers seem to downplay the importance of work skills when they suggest that they can generally teach the employee what he will have to learn to perform his job. What they emphasize are the work habits of the new employee and his or her ability to learn new things. To prepare for the world of work, in other words, students must learn how to work and they must learn how to learn.



In view of the economic realities in Micronesia today and the poor job prospects everywhere except Palau, young people who want wage employment can either create jobs for themselves or, as most often happens, leave for places where jobs await them. The crowded airports in Pohnpei on Sunday evenings, with thirty or forty garlanded young men and women standing around bidding goodbye to their families, suggests that an ever larger number of people feel they must leave for Orlando or Kansas City for employment. These waves of emigrants, however, are made up not just of degree holders but of high school and even elementary school dropouts. Surveys of migrants in Guam and Saipan during the 1990s have shown that the migrant communities in these places have only one-third the percentage of college degree holders that the FSM has. Even those Micronesians who work construction on Guam have usually had almost no previous training.

The recruiters who contract Micronesians as attendants for elder homes, as plantation workers in the Maui pineapple fields, or at Sea World are not looking for skilled employees. Like local island businessmen, they are looking for persons who possess a good attitude toward work, basic reliability, and the readiness to learn new things. In the labor market today, employers seem willing to provide all the rest. Workers also need a certain amount of adaptability, especially when they are traveling abroad to look for jobs. In short, potential workers need a good basic education to prepare them for the world of work.

Goal #2: Cultural Preservation

Many Micronesians today believe that culture is the most important thing to be learned in school. Culture and language ground our identity, they argue, and so the culture and language should have pride of place in the school curriculum. This is all the more critical in a day when the traditional culture seems to be under attack from the forces of modernization on all sides. Since formal education, powerful western institution that it is, is believed to represent one of the main threats to culture, the school should be tamed and used to educate the young in their traditional culture rather



than wean them away from it. The local language should also be made a priority, even if this means de-emphasizing English.

Culture is surely an essential dimension of any legitimate education. But if we hope to understand the relationship between education and culture, we will have to look more closely at what culture is and is not, not to mention the ways in which education can respond to and serve culture.

Culture should be understood to mean the living culture that is found in the islands today, not some historical relic that is preserved in a jar on a museum shelf. The culture of a people is always a living and changing thing—something that today includes not just the oral narratives and chants of the past, but also automobiles, VCRs, grocery stores, gas stations, and paychecks. Culture includes any of the practices, beliefs and attitudes that a people hold—those that can be traced back centuries like canoe construction and traditional navigation, as well as those adopted from abroad in recent years like ear studs, baggy pants, and tastes in rock music. If education is to embrace and respond to the culture, then, it must take account of the many different elements in the culture, new and old.

Culture should be understood to mean the living culture that is found in the islands today.

Certain parts of the culture may seem especially symbolic of a people's identity and history. Navigation or weaving, for instance, can be regarded as especially representative of the atolls of the central Carolines. The ritual of pounding and serving sakau or other ceremonies to honor chiefs might be distinctive of Pohnpei. Legends and oral history probably play an important part in the traditions of every island culture. Some of these elements can be incorporated into the curriculum, providing they can be taught in a way that allows for the development of thinking skills and other tools that the student will need to grow. Otherwise, they remain curiosities that can impede the student from learning what he really has to acquire so as to adjust to today's world.