**NAVIGATING TO EXCELLENCE**

 PREL Conference Keynote Address

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 Francis X. Hezel, SJ

Introduction

Most of you have navigated quite a distance to get here, so I'd like to add my personal welcome to those official salutations you've already received.

If the purpose of the keynote address is to focus our attention on major themes, I'd like to speak to three themes that I feel are implicit in the title given to this year's PREL Conference: "Navigating to Excellence."

First is "excellence." That is our expected destination. It's where we want to go in education--excellence and nothing short of it. Mediocrity in all its various guises represents a voyage only half completed--a swamped boat or a crash landing on the rocks, if you will.

Then there's the familiar metaphor of "navigation". I presume that the image is of negotiating the voyage by a sailing canoe rather than a sloop or ocean-liner or purse seiner. The metaphor is a cultural one and assumes that learning must be shaped by the culture.

Finally, the image presupposes that people are working together as a crew. Sailing, like educating, is not a one-person operation, as we all know. Therefore, I'd like to say something about the colleagueship in education.

The Context Today

In the 1840s and '50s, when whaleships stopped at these islands, the ship captains often found themselves short-handed after a couple weeks lying off shore. Some of their crew, weary of the long and tiring voyage and certain that they had found Eden, jumped ship and hid out in the interior with their girl friends. Fortunately for the ship captains there was no shortage of volunteers to take their place. Young men from Kosrae, Pohnpei, Guam, and other islands in Micronesia signed on as hands. They didn't mind the prospect of hard work. They were looking for an adventure. So they were given names such as Kanaka Joe or John Brown, and went out to see the world. Some never returned, of course, but those who did brought back stories enough to regale their fellow islanders for years with the wonders they had seen and experienced. I think of the Kosraean, for instance, who tried to explain snow and ice to people who had never seen these things.

Pacific Islanders have strong ties to their island, as we all know. But they are also wanderers, adventurers, people who have used the sea--and in recent years, the air--as a highway to the great beyond. (Isn't that what you happy travelers are doing right now, after all?) When I first came to Micronesia in 1963, I heard of any number of young men who signed on ships as deck hands or oilers or wipers. They would return periodically to tell friends about the night life in Osaka or Kobe or Taipei.

Colonies of Yapese outer islanders--"remattaw," as they call themselves--who had lost their bearings in storms made their home in the Philippines by the end of the 17th century. Others went to Saipan a century later to repopulate that island, which had long been deserted.

If you think that these are historical flukes, just look at the record since then. Tiny Eauripik with just a little over 100 inhabitants has sent people off to become cowboys in the Marianas, technicians in California, and presidents on Pohnpei. American Samoa has become famous worldwide, thanks to ESPN, for its contributions to professional sports: football, rugby, baseball, and even sumo wrestling. But it has also given the world art designers, media personnel and politicians. Today there are many more Samoans in California and Hawaii than in American Samoa. Palau had a late start but is beginning to catch up. One of every three Palauans now live outside their own island group--some very far outside. And the rest of Micronesia is moving in the same direction, just in case you haven't noticed the influx into Guam. But you Guamanians have no reason to be smug about all this, since the last US census put the number of Guamanians in the US at well over 30,000.

Pacific Islanders are travelers. It was this wanderlust that brought them to these islands in the first place, and they have demonstrated the desire to travel ever since. This trend could be reversed, but that's not likely to happen.

We educators ought to take special note of this mobility. After all, it helps define our educational goals. If you thought that your job was over once you've helped people get out of school and back to the farm or fishing boat, look again. Increasingly the job of education in these islands is to prepare young people for a place in the larger world. It is to equip them with what they need to launch into new careers in new places. I wouldn't have said that twenty years ago, or even ten years ago. I wouldn't have wanted to. But the facts are obvious. We who thought that it was enough to provide the basic skills for a slow-paced life in a familiar village will have to redraft our educational programs.

Educational Excellence

More and more young and even middle-aged islanders are striking out for new destinations. Will they go unprepared for what they will meet when they get there? How about those who choose to remain in Micronesia? Will they be prepared to deal with the tourists who we hope will be coming in greater numbers to provide the economic base for these changing economies? Will we be preparing young people for tomorrow? Or for yesterday?

Let me try to translate this into my personal vision of a program for educational excellence.

1) Language competence. Competence not in a single language, but two languages, including English, and in some cases three. I hope you don't think that I am being lingua-centric or neocolonialist when I say that one of the most useful skills young people can learn is competence in English. Some years ago there were three or four world languages; now the race seems to be narrowing, to judge from what we have just heard from the announcer's booth at the Olympics in Atlanta where competitors were introduced in French and English. Road and railway signs in Japan are printed in Japanese and English, I noticed on my trip there a few weeks ago. Even Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia--countries that comprise the area once known as French Indo-China--have recently switched to English as its second language. I am told that my own Jesuit Order, which once held its international congregations in Latin and since the decline of that language in church circles has employed English, Spanish and French through simultaneous translation, will be using only English in its next congregation.

But all this is not about whose language is better and richer than whose. Neither am I suggesting that we weigh the value of English against that of the local languages. Both are essential. My point is only to suggest that for educators to deprive students of either an international language (perhaps even the international language) or their own tongue is to deprive students of vital skills they need now and will need in years ahead. Let our language program be honest bilingual education, unhampered by vain disputes over what language is more deserving of classroom emphasis.

If anyone has any doubts of the relevance of a genuine bilingual education, look at the record of those who got an early start under the US Navy after the war. The Amata Kabuas, Andon Amariachs, David Ramaruis, Tosiwo Nakayamas, Joe Tenorios were those who knew English at that time or could learn it quickly.

2) Offer a strong basic education. Don't get entranced by the educational frills. Don't fill up on pupus and neglect the staples: fish and rice. Or to put it another way, don't overload the curriculum with neat-sounding but frivolous extras while neglecting to provide the very skills that students need most. The way I put it at an education symposium here on Pohnpei once was: "Do more by doing less." Focus on the tools that the young will need for their future life--their life anywhere.

What are these basic skills? They certainly include the three R's: reading, writing and 'rithmetic--otherwise known as literacy and computational skills. But they go beyond this. They include the ability to process information, compare and contrast, analyze and make sound judgments. This gets into the domain of what educators call higher level thinking skills, in which many of our students are sadly lacking even after they finish their studies. These are the very skills that the young need in order to learn how to learn.

This advice may fly in the face of today's conventional educational wisdom, which urges that we allow for seven or eight different basic kinds of intelligence (artistic, kinetic, etc) and make adjustments in our curriculum accordingly. So be it. We can't provide everything for everyone, but we can offer a basic toolbag that our students can add to as they continue their education, formally or informally.

3) Trust in the ability of the young, once having mastered these basic skills, to find their way--to navigate to their own goals. About twenty years ago, we had a freshman at Xavier High School who wanted to fly planes. He knew that even before he entered Xavier. We didn't offer aeronautical engineering or flight training. We simply tried to teach him to read and think; and his post-secondary education did the rest. Now he flies planes, as he has always wanted (although not the Proud Birds with the Blue Tails).

4) Education is not responsible for providing jobs, although it can certainly help train young people for employment. When government leaders or educators see education as nothing more than manpower training, they fail students. In the consecrated phrase that I use again and again: Education should be preparation for life, not just livelihood.

We Jesuits run a vocational school on this island--and a good one, I might add. But if it ever became a factory for producing mindless blue-collar employees, we would close it immediately. School is a place to learn survival skills, and the most important survival skill is the ability to think, no matter where our graduates live and what they do. We're proud that the graduates of PATS can build and design houses, know what to plant and how to make things grow, and can take apart and fix internal combustion engines. But we're even prouder that our graduates have developed their heads and hearts while acquiring these important skills. They have evidently been able to navigate to different destinations to apply the skills they learned. Some are building schoolhouses and churches in the outer islands; others are working for private industry and the government in the state capitals; still others have found jobs in Hawaii, Guam and California. All are a credit to the school.

5) Don't be ashamed of tracking students. Tracking may be a dirty word in educational circles these days, but it's a reality nevertheless. We had it in my high school in the '50s, and it's still very much a part of the landscape, in case you hadn't noticed. To its credit, PICS (the Pohnpei public high school) has offered different programs to students of differing abilities.

Someone once said that the worst kind of unfairness is to treat those of differing abilities as if they were equal. Somehow we must offer programs to challenge our best students, while not neglecting the needs of those who are not as academically gifted. Special programs for the talented and gifted were a feature of our education programs in the late '70s and early '80s. Once these programs go out of fashion, you can be sure that parents will look for the fast track in other ways--private schools or Mid-Pac in Hawaii, for instance. Tracking may go out of fashion from time to time in educational circles, but it will always pop up in other ways. And so it should, because without it we will never be able to get the most out of our best students while offering realistic and attainable goals to more limited young people.

Education as Cultural

But some of you are getting uneasy, I sense. Perhaps you think that I am slanting this prescription for education towards the modern society. What about the local culture? you might be thinking. Doesn't it deserve a place in the curriculum?

That brings us to the second theme: culture.

Culture is undeniably important. So much so that it should not be given a place in the curriculum, if by this we mean that it is consigned to a few hours a week. US schools don't offer courses in American culture. Japanese schools don't offer an elective in Japanese culture. Why should Micronesian or Samoan schools do so?

Culture is not an add-on. It's not a little offering in basket weaving, or in the use of the respect forms in the language, or in legends associated with place names. Culture is not merely the subject of a class; it should be the ambience, the context in which all learning takes place. It should determine the way the school is run, how discipline is administered, and when students have days off. It should be the spirit imbued in every course in the curriculum, not just a curricular appendage.

The 1970's, as I recall, were a period when everyone was trying to adapt the curriculum to the Micronesian cultures. We had a Micronesian math program, the PALM project and other efforts to produce island-related literature. Others were doing work to create science units for the islands, and a number of us were designing what we thought were more appropriate history and social studies programs. Then most of the funding dried up, so work stopped. Do we still make efforts of this sort today? Or have we perhaps settled for stateside curriculum packages, resigning ourselves to a mere add-on course in culture?

My impression is that many of us are settling for too little when it comes to culture. Only if the education system is permeated by the culture can students have the take-off point they need to navigate to other parts of the world to do other things. They need to establish firm bearings in their own culture in order to adapt to other cultures in the future.

Educational Partnership

The last theme is brought out in the phrase "Pacific family" and implied again in the metaphor of the sailing image. The supposition is that educators are working together as a crew, each contributing to the effort in his or her own way. This grand educational voyage is not to be like the first trip of the Hokulea

to Tahiti, which was marked by quarrels among the crew and even a fist fight or two. Relations were so bad that the Satawalese navigator refused to return with the vessel, choosing instead to fly back to Honolulu.

In an enterprise such as we are describing there can be no wasted effort on bickering, no grandstanding, no blaming one another for failures in which we all share.

If we are to achieve the ambitious task that we have mapped out for ourselves, we will have to work together. Not only that, but forge new links between the various groups who have an interest in the education of young islanders. These groups include teachers and administrators in the schools, parents and others in the local community, curriculum specialists and other personnel at the state level, and legislators and those at the top echelon of the government. If we can't do this, what right do we have to speak to our students of cooperation and interdependence?

Conclusion

The educational task in the years ahead is complex. We are trying to ground young people in their own cultures, but equip them with the skills they will need to sail beyond the horizon if they choose to do so. It will require patience, courage, hard work and a lot more. But if we do this, we will have earned the gratitude of a generation or two of adventurers and travelers. We will have given them what they needed to navigate successfully to new shores or perhaps back to familiar ones.

I must end by expressing my admiration for what you folks are doing. You are educators--those committed to developing what politicians keep calling our nations' most valuable resource: young islanders. You are molding young minds and hearts. Is there any more valuable work than this? Some of you have rejected better offers of easier jobs to make a lasting contribution to your societies. You have my admiration and my prayers. Godspeed, good luck, and thank you.