

## MICRONESIA'S SCHOOL INDUSTRY

The school is Micronesia's largest industry today. It is responsible for the manufacture of trained young people—the most valuable of all commodities. At present it is processing fully one-third of the human resources in Micronesia, although it is unclear whether these products are being turned out for domestic consumption or for export. The educational industry employs almost one out of every three of the 5,000 Micronesians on the government payroll. The school is the largest single source of revenue for the Micronesian people; the combined salaries of education's 2,500 employees exceeds the income from all of the Trust Territory's exports together.

It is surprising that the school is ignored in the heated discussion of the pros and cons of foreign industry that are carried on endlessly today. Yet the controversy seems to always rage around Van Camp and Bumble Bee and Del Monte, while the significance of that louvered cement-block classroom building that dominates every village is forgotten.

But the Micronesian in the village has not forgotten. How could he? After all, the school house is the economic focal point of his community. Take, for example, the elementary school building in Onei, Truk—once featured in the Micronesian Reporter for its imaginative design and low-cost construction from local materials. If it were suddenly closed, Onei would find itself deprived of 60 percent of its total annual income. The school in nearby Patta brings in half of the yearly total revenue there. And much the same could be said for just about any other school in an off-district-center community. Last year Onei earned \$6,000 through the sale of fish and copra, as compared with \$24,000 in teachers' salaries. In village after village the school represents the largest single source of income for the community. The amount of money entering the village through teachers' salaries, which is far greater than income from productive activities, puts the school at the very center of the village's cash economy.

It is naive, then, to think of the village school as just a cultural force—either a civilizing influence or an outpost of cultural imperialism, depending on one's ideology. As long as the argument remains at this level—and it usually does—we will fail to come to grips with the real meaning of the school to most

Micronesians today. For those of us who fancy ourselves liberals to discuss educational alternatives to the white school-house—to talk of 'deschooling Micronesian society'—is hardly realistic. Unlike most countries of which Illich and others write, the school is not a drain on the national economy; in Micronesia it is the chief source of income. And no sane people anywhere in the world is likely to quietly part with its principal source of revenue without a fight.

The fact that the school is a foreign industry hardly matters at all. Its social effects on the community are barely noticed by most people. Micronesian parents beam as they watch their children parade out of the village elementary school into still another school, and perhaps another after that. The smile fades a bit when the parent realizes that his son or daughter won't be coming home to stay at the end of it all. But after sitting in a classroom for 12 or 16 years learning to appreciate all the things that he could never possibly do in his village community, who can blame the young man for not returning home? There are no Friday evening dances in Onei or Patta. Nor are there automobiles, bars or libraries. But there is a nine p.m. curfew! And also a strong feeling that the young should comply with traditional methods of decision-making, no matter how much political science they learned at Mauna Olu College.

Notwithstanding the inevitable tension between the young high school graduate and the rest of the community, some young people have in the past returned to their community—providing there is a job available. But, the evidence is overwhelming that if the proper kinds of wage employment cannot be found there, a graduate will move to another spot where he can find a job. If he fails to find one even in the district center, there he can at least console himself more easily with a movie in the evening or a cold beer.

Up to the present, several graduates have in fact returned to their communities to work for the same industry that so recently processed them—the school. This is no cause of wonder for the typical Micronesian school is admirably designed to cycle its products into this or some similar kind of work, despite half-hearted attempts to inject vocational or trade courses into the curriculum.

But schools can absorb only so many teachers. One wonders how many of those 3,000 high school graduates that are projected for 1976 will be returning to their village. And if they are unable to find work in the district center, will they

simply become hangers-on there or will they leave for greater valleys—Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco (as young American Samoans have already done in great numbers). If such a brain-drain should occur in Micronesia, after the high school enrollment has tripled, then the Trust Territory would have as much to show for its foreign school industry as it has for its foreign fishing industry—plenty of dollars in wages but very few fish for its own consumption.

At present very few people take seriously the possibility of a massive flight of the young into the district center, and from there out of district. This is probably because there have in fact been jobs in the villages for the first few high school graduates who have returned. The myth persists that the government bureaucracy is infinitely expansible and that somehow the hordes of young graduates who will be inundating these islands within two years will be able to find employment just as easily as the first waves of graduates. Hence, the average Micronesian parent continues to eagerly pack his child off to school in the expectation that he will be initiated into the mysteries of the cash economy and become a breadwinner after a certain number of years. In the popular mind—in Micronesia as in other parts of the world—the school is a factory that converts plain human beings into potential wage-earners. (This conception of the school is only being strengthened by the bandying about of such terms as "career education.") Again, therefore, the school has a primarily economic function—enabling people to eventually secure wage employment.

There is no point in reminding people that the school also breeds frustrations when the rather high aspirations of the young go unrealized. That it teaches young people to demand more of their society—from rock bands for their entertainment to padded chairs to go around in the future, and there may be many disappointed young men and women. And that, as Micronesia's fishing industry develops, the early drop-out rather than the high school graduate will be the fortunate one, for he at least will be employable.

There is no point in warning people of these things, because they are far less vivid than the economic considerations which have led people to embrace wholeheartedly the schooling industry. The policy of universal high school education that has been adopted within the last four years simply means that now everyone—not just the bright few—will be able to enjoy the benefits of the wage economy. And everyone shall leave the assembly one day in May with a piece of

paper in his hand, and they shall all find desks waiting for them in some office and plenty of canned food on the shelves, and they will live happily ever after. So ends the myth.

There are, of course, signs of stress even today. Not only the worsening unemployment situation, but the growing cultural distance between the youth and their parents. "Why don't they respect authority anymore and follow our customs?" is a lament one hears again and again. The question comes from the very same parents and legislators who so strongly endorsed the school industry and even voted for its expansion. As a teacher in one of these schools, I can only shrug my shoulders and think, "Surely you must have known!" But this is unfair, for the adults in the village who send their children to school really don't know. The more obvious material benefits of the school industry are well understood, but its culturally disruptive effects on the community—the unrealistic aspirations to which it gives rise, its widening of the culture gap between young and old, and the likelihood of large displacement of the community population—are just beginning to be glimpsed. As with most foreign industries, the immediate visible gains brought by the school obscure the less apparent—and sometimes more far-reaching—difficulties.

It is understandable that most Micronesians should want to retain their chief industry even at the risk of enormous social problems in years to come. After all the social problems might have been upon us anyway! What is more difficult to understand, though, is the naive belief that we can have the schools and eliminate the problems if only we make a few substitutions in the curriculum or replace expatriate teachers with Micronesian teachers in all haste. To entertain the hope, for instance, that insertion of a course on local arts and crafts, traditional navigation, or folklore will change the nature of the school is sheer folly. It will remain basically a school designed to prepare students to enter another school. The basket-weaving and folklore may be of some interest and amusement to students, but it will always be an irrelevant side-dish in a school whose goal is to educate the child to leave his community. After all, the success of the village elementary school is commonly defined in terms of the percentage of its pupils who have been accepted in a secondary school (usually situated out of the community). Likewise, the success of secondary school is measured by the number of its graduates who leave for still more remote parts to attend college.

No courses in Micronesian history or local culture will change this. Nothing short of a radical alteration in the nature and purpose of the school can do so. Perhaps it is not in the interests of Micronesia to do this, and we will not have to deal with the problems as best we can. But at least we will have made a great stride forward when we have dispelled the illusion that the problems created by the foreign school industry can be solved by band-aid measures. The loss of respect for traditional authorities is certainly not mended by simply teaching students the forms of polite behavior that their ancestors observed. One of the reasons for the loss of respect in the first place is that any sixth grader has learned to do things that the elder members of the community cannot do; it is precisely such arcane knowledge that makes the youngsters more valuable in the job market than his parents. The young student knows this all too well. Unless schools are prepared to drop algebra, English, and other "essentials" from the curriculum, the generation gap will continue to grow. And so will the problem of maintaining respect for traditional authority figures in the society.

But far more serious than any generation gap is the personal frustration that is sure to occur when the student is prepared for a job that doesn't exist in a kind of society that doesn't exist. We educators might flippantly tell our students that they must create their own jobs and make their own dreams of society into reality. But out of what? Yankee dollars? The foreign schooling industry in Micronesia is rounded on the American proposition that all men are free; they must all be given their say and take on responsibility for the making of decisions that shape their lives. It would be a tragic irony if the school system here were to teach its lessons well and shape young men and women who are indeed conscious of their right to control their own lives, but who find that it is simply impossible for them to do so—politically, socially, or economically.

What is to be done then? Surely it is not my place, nor that of anyone who is sincerely a "friend of Micronesia" to decide one way or the other. My purpose is only to point out the futility of pretending that if schools are changed just a little bit that the problems will go away. They will not. To heal these problems a major educational overhaul would be required. Many schools might have to be closed; and the purpose of those that remain open thoroughly redefined. The local communities, such as Patta and Onei, might lose much of the income they now

enjoy through the school industry. And after all of this, no one could be quite sure that the educational alternatives that might be tried—such as short term community-training programs mounted and supported by the village itself—would work.

In the meantime, the existing school industry continues to be a highly profitable one when measured in dollars, but a very costly one in terms of its social consequences on the community. The decision that Micronesians must ultimately make with respect to schools will be far more difficult than any decision regarding Del Monte or Continental, for the school is far more important than any of these other industries. Micronesian leaders must no longer expect the present school system to do things which it is powerless to do. I doubt whether an American-sponsored school system, even with the best of intentions, can ever really 'Micronesianize' students, and it should not be expected to do so. Neither can the school in its present form train people to live contentedly in the village on a semi-subsistence economy. Nor can the school—with its free lunch programs and scholarships and the dreams of material prosperity it fosters in the heads of the young—promote self-reliance among the young. If those are the primary goals of Micronesian leaders, then the school will have to be radically changed. This will be a painful decision to make, for the nationalization of the foreign school industry will bring not more economic benefits to Micronesia, but fewer. And yet the decision will have a profound effect on the political future of the Trust Territory.