

THE MAZE OF SCHOOLS:
AMERICAN EDUCATION IN MICRONESIA

by

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In the early years of Micronesia's contact with foreigners, education centered around the key role of Protestant and Catholic missions, where islanders learned literacy in vernacular languages to promote Bible reading. With few exceptions most schools were church-related until the Japanese established the first public school system in 1915 (Hezel 1984:19). During the mandate period the schools stressed Japanese language with limited opportunity for Micronesians to go beyond the five grades of public school. As Fr. Hezel has noted, the most important fact about pre-World War II era education may have been, "...that schools became an indispensable part of Micronesian life...and school began to be recognized by Micronesians as an invaluable means of achieving status and other more tangible rewards" (Hezel 1984:21).

World War II brought the United States to the islands of Micronesia, and after the bloody battles ended, the Navy set up its administration of the islands. Navy government was formalized by the creation of a UN trusteeship. With the signing of the Trusteeship Agreement in 1947 the U.S. had a statement of purpose:

...the administering authority shall:

1. foster the development of such political institutions as are suited to the trust territory and shall promote the development of the inhabitants toward self-government or independence...
2. promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants...
3. promote the social advancement of the inhabitants...
4. promote the educational advancement of the inhabitants, and to this end shall take steps toward the establishment of a general system of elementary education; facilitate the vocational and cultural advancement of the population; and shall encourage qualified students to pursue higher education, including training on the professional level. (United Nations, 1947:3).

Navy policy set in effect a compulsory education system for Micronesians aged six to fourteen. The educational program was to "...benefit the many and to assure a progressive development of each community within the local cultural pattern" (Richard 1957:965). The Navy regulations stated that schools would foster and encourage native language, history, arts and crafts; would provide instruction in English language; and would provide professional training in such areas as medicine, nursing and teaching.

In creating such a school system the naval authorities felt that they needed outside assistance and they sought it in the formation of an Advisory Committee on Education. The Committee consisted of naval

personnel and persons from the University of Hawaii's College of Education and other university departments as well as educators from the Hawaii Territorial education system. The Committee, formed in 1947, set about making a plan to approach education in an island-oriented style, utilizing teaching in the vernacular in the first few years of schooling to provide literacy in the native tongue before attempting English. Teaching materials were to relate to local environment and lifestyle. Although "Dick and Jane" readers appeared in some schools, the Navy staff with assistance from Micronesian teachers, produced a "Micronesian Reader Series" and Supervisor of Education Publications Eve Grey wrote the two volume set, Legends of Micronesia. Micronesian language readers were also published.

Although much of the advice of the Committee regarding content and methodology was accepted, the Navy balked at the idea of change in the administrative structure. The Advisory Committee had its last conference in 1950 and from then on its participation in educational affairs in Micronesia declined. Dorothy Richard notes that "The recommendations of the more voluble members became increasingly unrealistic and at times highly critical of administration policies so that the initial enthusiasm of the Navy for professional advice faded" (1957:965).

When Interior took over the administration of the Trust Territory (T.T.) in 1951, the Navy had in place an educational system headed by a Director of Education with an educational administrator in each district. Americans served as principals of the intermediate schools

with Micronesian superintendents of schools and teachers in the elementary schools. Teacher-training had been a major matter of concern and the Navy had created the Pacific Islands Teacher Training School (PITTS) offering a two year program which prepared teachers for the elementary schools. In the summer, training sessions were held for Micronesian teachers already in the system. PITTS also offered a School of Communications which served to provide a nucleus of radio operators and a School of General Education for those who sought additional educational opportunities. The first Micronesian to attend a university abroad was Dwight Heine, who in 1948 attended the University of Hawaii for two years.

The U.S. Department of the Interior entered Micronesia at a distinct disadvantage. The Navy had been administering Micronesia with a very low budget and Interior, thereafter, had difficulties in asking Congress for more money. From 1951-1961, the Education Department of the Trust Territory functioned on a budget of approximately \$300,000 (Gibson 1974:11). But if Interior continually lacked funds it did have a group of creative, dedicated employees.

The first Director of Education under the Interior administration was Dr. Robert Gibson, a man with many years experience in the California school system who had headed the educational program for interned Japanese-Americans during World War II and then had gone to work as an educational advisor in Occupied Korea. Gibson came to T.T. Headquarters in Honolulu with a philosophy of education based on community needs. He

placed primary importance on relating learning to an organismic whole rather than on presenting specialized courses divorced from each other. He quickly developed the theme of island-oriented education with teaching in the vernacular as a keystone.

Gibson's first activity was to take an extensive field trip throughout the Trust Territory. Out of this trip came a Report on Education Conditions. Observations in that document make fascinating reading today. Gibson noted in a visit to a Saipan school, for example, that American folk dances were presented. "After some persuasion," he wrote, "one of the students led the rest in singing a Chamorro song. After a few days of practice some Carolinian students presented some of their native dances. This point is important, for there is considerable evidence that the Saipanese are being too rapidly acculturated at the expense of their own culture...It seems necessary that we assist them to identify the things that are good in their own culture and help them to be not so anxious to accept our traditions and learning without regard to their fitness or usefulness" (Gibson 1951:2).

In his overall observations and recommendations, Gibson commended the Navy for creating almost-universal elementary education teacher-training, and organizing the schools. He went on to call for an integration of subject matter and to bring into the schools the experience and surroundings of the islanders, for teacher education and for the preparation of teaching materials to be done locally and mimeographed. Gibson also stated the policy of municipal support for elementary

education through taxes (which had been part of the Advisory Committee's recommendations).

The staff in the field was well-equipped to work with Gibson. Educators like Vitarelli, Ramos, King, Halvorsen and Bender showed innovation and eagerness in trying to create a Micronesian-oriented school system. Gradually, Micronesian educators, such as Dwight Heine from the Marshall Islands and the late David Ramarui from Palau, were added to the staff.

Educational programs were unfortunately continually hampered by lack of funds. In these days of million dollar budgets it is hard to recall just how tight the purse-strings were in the 1950s.

The educational administration in the 1950s continued to follow the basic pattern devised by the Navy. Each district educational administrator was responsible to the Director of Education and had a small staff of American teacher-trainers. The Education Department continued to stress indigenous participation in the schools by means of village meetings and school boards, and to work for further teacher education, usually through summer school sessions. Development of curriculum materials proceeded in each district based upon the problems, needs, values, and interests of each culture (U.S. Department of State 1958:111). The elementary schools, staffed entirely with Micronesian teachers, drew financial support from local and district funds. The High Commissioner established a grant-in-aid program for the construction of school buildings. Goals of the elementary education policy included

developing skills in communicating and calculating; training in vocational skills such as agriculture, carpentry, and weaving; improving homemaking skills; stimulating self-expression in indigenous arts and crafts; promoting better health education; imparting knowledge of the physical environment through geography and practical science, and of the human environment by teaching economic and social organization, law and government; learning about other areas of the world; developing an understanding of individual and group duties and of civil responsibilities within the immediate society and to the world at large (U.S. Department of State 1958:117).

The elementary school curriculum centered on a "core curriculum" through all the grades. The core curriculum worked with a social studies setting in which students progressed from a study of the family to local community, the districts, the Trust Territory, the larger Pacific area, and lastly to the rest of the world. For the first four years all instruction was held in the vernacular, with some English introduced in the fifth and sixth years.

Intermediate schools covered the seventh, eighth and ninth grades and followed a policy of providing vocational education for the majority and general education for a select minority of students who would go on to secondary school. The intermediate schools stressed teaching English as a second language, with more English reading materials used. Students

learned local government, general arithmetic and health education with science integrated throughout the curriculum. In all areas except Saipan the intermediate schools were boarding schools.

Those select few who went on to secondary school usually attended Pacific Islands Central School (PICS). PICS had its origins in the Navy institution of PITTS. In 1948 PITTS had moved from Guam to Truk to provide an environment closer to that which students knew in their home islands. At that point two classes—Junior and Senior—were created. Training programs for teachers moved into the district spheres and PITTS became PICS to offer a general educational program.

In 1957, PICS began a third year program and in 1959 moved to a new campus on Ponape. The move brought many changes to the PICS curriculum. The High Commissioner installed a fairly traditional American curriculum, against the wishes of the Director of Education. The new PICS opened with a staff which included two Micronesian teachers who had been educated abroad. Until the early 1960s PICS was the only government secondary school in Micronesia. It consciously served as a meeting ground for students from all the districts and played a role in the Administration's policy of furthering Micronesian unity. The few who attended PICS often moved on to become part of a new educated elite; many of today's Micronesian leaders are graduates of either PICS or the Catholic high school, Xavier.

From the earliest days of the American Administration in Micronesia a few students were sent to institutions outside the Trust Territory. For many years the Medical School in Fiji prepared Micronesian medical

officers. Some Micronesians attended tertiary institutions in the Philippines and the connection with the University of Hawaii that began with Dwight Heine continued.

Trust Territory policy had students return home after two years of education abroad lest long exposure to American culture make re-entry to island society difficult. At first the T.T. sent one student per year from each district on scholarship; this became two and then three, only to move back down to two with budget cuts. Many of the early students took a few courses geared towards their needs in jobs back home rather than focusing on a standard degree program.

One of the interesting early experiments encouraged by Dr. Gibson was the training of a community development officer for the island of Kili in the Marshall Islands. A Marshallese, James Milne, worked with Dr. Leonard Mason in a special program of reading, discussion, and independent study as well as some course work, all tailored to fit the requirements of the situation on Kili (Gibson 1959:222). For most Micronesians, however, attending a University meant coursework, and as the years passed, the two year limit was lifted to allow for regular degree study.

At first, Micronesians who came to the University of Hawaii attended the University High School to improve their English and gain additional course work background. When the UH became concerned about the time needed to prepare Micronesian students for University coursework, it was suggested that Lahainaluna School on Maui be used as an appropriate

intermediate situation for Micronesian students. Gibson and Halvorsen investigated the site and were pleased with the agricultural emphasis and the helpful attitude of the faculty. To Gibson, any Micronesian student could find some study of agriculture useful, regardless of his specialization. It then became the pattern for a student to spend a year or two at Lahainaluna followed by movement into courses at UH Manoa.

It should be mentioned that during the 1950s, large numbers of Palauan students attended George Washington High School on Guam. These students went on their own through arrangements with sponsors who gave them room and board and pocket money in return for light housekeeping or babysitting chores. The T.T. Education Department kept an eye on the situation and had the Educational Administrator from Palau do a study of Palauans on Guam. The findings showed that most students adjusted well and that few difficulties arose in the sponsor relationship. But the increased turnout for Guam disturbed T.T. educators who felt that schooling in the home environment was more relevant to Micronesian needs. Attention again focused on Guam late in the 1950s when the T.T. began to look towards the College of Guam as a close-to-home site for providing Micronesians with advanced studies.

There was never a complete agreement on the proper course of policy for education in Micronesia and the changes in the PICS set-up in 1959 heralded an entire shift in educational emphasis in the 1960s. The coming of the Kennedy administration and a new High Commissioner brought an expansion of the education budget. The Accelerated Elementary School

Construction Program (AESCP) began with an approximate budget of \$3,000,000. A large part of the funds went to the construction of state-side type schools equipped with American contract teachers. The aim was to bring English to the entire educational system. In words echoing the Solomon Report, Dr. Gibson writes that a high official in the Administration informed him that the Education Department, "must play a larger role in preparing Micronesians for 'finally becoming American citizens'" (Gibson 1974:11).

This brave new world of big budgets and huge programs eclipsed the island-oriented community education Gibson represented, and in 1964 he retired from his Trust Territory position. Proponents of the new emphasis could point to much support from Micronesians who had for years been clamoring for increased English in the classrooms. To Micronesians, English and further education meant the chance for government jobs and a secure future for their children; there was even some feeling that Americans were withholding English instruction to keep Micronesians from advancing. The promise of the schools extended as the 1960s saw the creation of high schools in each district and the T.T. moved towards universal education through secondary school. Money for scholarships to attend college grew by leaps and bounds. In 1950/51 eighteen Micronesians went abroad for schooling; by 1960/61 the figure was 132; in 1970/71 it grew to 664 and in 1978/79 (the last T.T.-wide figure available) there were over 2500 students away at college (U.S. Department of State 1950/51, 1960/61, 1970/71, 1978/79 statistical tables).

Within Micronesia efforts to create institutions of higher learning produced the Micronesian Teacher Education Center (MTEC) on Ponape which evolved into the Community College of Micronesia with a two year program which then became part of the present College of Micronesia system. In the 1970s, the Palau vocational program pinpointed its efforts with the building of the Micronesian Occupational Center (MOC). The long-established School of Nursing continued in quarters on Saipan but medical students eventually went off to U.S. medical schools rather than to the Fiji program. Federal programs entered Micronesia with dollars for such programs as school lunches and work with the aged. Education had become a huge and growing concern.

Drastic changes in the education program in the Trust Territory had been spelled out in the policy and the planning efforts of the 1960s. In 1967, High Commissioner Norwood said, "...it shall be the responsibility of the Government of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands to set educational standards and to support an educational system which will enable Territory students to develop educationally to a level comparable to U.S. standards" (Pearse 1970:43).

In the 1950s educators had looked to create a specifically Micronesian education which would be different from and not comparable to American schools. A range of planning studies emphasized the new outlook. In a study of feasibility for T.T. use of the Samoan-type educational TV set-up the authors stated that "...the success of...educational development will depend upon the speed with which they

(Micronesians) are able to use the English language. In other words, the learning of English is the most basic and significant item of educational development" (National Association of Educational Broadcasters 1967:11). In statements like this there was no room for the former stress on indigenous language use.

The 1960s were a prime time for planning documents. Nathan Associates had been commissioned by the T.T. to do an economic development study in 1965 and by December 1966 the report was done. It called for seeking capital, management, and labor from outside the T.T. whenever local supplies limited expansion. In the area of education the Nathan report saw a need for a more intensive effort in teaching language and basic mathematics. The major suggestion, however, was for vocational education. The authors said that vocational education had been "...almost completely ignored" and that it "...must become a major part of the total education effort of the Trust Territory" (Robert R. Nathan Associates 1967:13). The Nathan report was criticized for leaving the people out of the development picture. As then educational administrator Pete Hill stated, "...it would appear that significant participation by Micronesians in development...would be limited to hewing wood and hauling water" (Hill 1967:4).

A Stanford Research Institute group who developed an education plan for Micronesia at that same time also criticized the direction of the Nathan report, and recommended that Micronesians participate in the defining of educational training objectives. The Stanford team observed

that such objectives "...need to be closely suited to unique Micronesian needs, rather than stress U.S. equivalency as they have in the past (Platt and Sorenson 1967:1). The report cites secondary education as top priority and pointed to the expected severe manpower shortages for college trained personnel. Vocational needs were highlighted in the proposal for an Occupational Training Center (which did emerge as MOC) and interestingly, a call for a Territory-wide college prep school resembling the original PICS concept.

The Congress of Micronesia entered the arena of education planning and examination with work such as the 1968 Senate and House Committee report on education. Committee members described a shortage of AESCP-type classrooms. The Committee also underlined the policy of providing free universal education through the twelfth grade, and criticized the Education Department for its focus on the lack of job opportunities after graduation. "The Administration," the Committee said, "maintains that the standard of secondary education can best be maintained by limiting the enrollment...The end result...will be to intensify the shortage of skilled manpower which is already felt in some districts, and the lack of a trained educated labor force will make very difficult if not impossible the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Nathan Report" (Congress of Micronesia 1968:4-5). Micronesian leaders continued to exhibit faith in education as the road to progress and prosperity.

AESCP had had four years of expenditure when the T.T. re-examined the program and decided that the efforts should be modified. The new version in 1967 had children learning to read in their local languages with English taught through the TESL method. Peace Corps Volunteers trained in TESL were used throughout the school system. At the University of Hawaii, important work on island orthographies, dictionaries and grammars went on with Micronesian collaboration. In the 1970s further funds for language work came with the bilingual program (Trifonovich 1974:106).

In 1974, the Congress of Micronesia examined an HEW report on the programs going into the Trust Territory. This time, the Congressmen involved showed concern for the graduates of the T.T. education system by calling for the study of manpower needs and for a formulation of long-range educational policies. The report suggested that scholarships be tied to manpower needs. Education, the authors wrote, should "...create self-identification as Micronesians, to enhance national unity, to emphasize traditional and cultural values, and to include political education" (Tun and Sigrah 1974:11). But the study went on to state, as had the Congress' 1968 report, the urgent need for additional classroom spaces in the elementary and secondary schools. At the end of the report Representative Joab Sigrah sounded a note of caution regarding federal programs, saying that he feared they might "...encourage further defection by Micronesians from traditional to western ways of problem-solving" (Tun and Sigrah 1974:21).

The questions and worries over the role of education had led earlier that year to a conference organized by the Catholic Micronesian Seminar. The conference was titled "Education for What?" Educators from across Micronesia gathered and discussed the purpose of their work. Fr. Hezel from Xavier High School on Truk explained the need for such analysis, saying, "Let us not pretend that we can simply speak of 'good education' without considering those for whom the education is intended, the kind of society in which they live, and the goals of the people as a whole" (Conference on Micronesian Education 1974:7). At the end of the conference a tension had emerged between the two views of education. For some participants education served to prepare students for the modern world and inevitable changes; others saw education as a means of preparing students for living in a relatively stable traditional island community. The range of differences expressed in this 1974 meeting continued to divide opinion in the 1970s and '80s.

The Congress of Micronesia again examined education in a House of Representatives report in 1978. The Committee began its report with an introduction quoting Dr. Douglas Harlan's report on the College of Micronesia. In that document Dr. Harlan says that Micronesians are discovering that obtaining an education does not guarantee a job. He says, "...if the consequences of the present system are to be avoided, Micronesia's schools must be oriented to prepare young people for satisfying activity in Micronesian society, whether wholly or partially within the money economy or wholly outside it" (Congress of Micronesia

1978:5). Dr. Harlan posed the choice for Micronesia of either severely cutting back the education system or of putting it on a new track. The Congressmen made some attempt at this in their report by recommending that scholarships go only to the best of students and that these recipients be required to study in fields coordinated with Micronesian needs. The Committee also called for increased community involvement in the schools, in words which would have been familiar to the educators of the 1950s.

With the achievement of education through secondary school for over two-thirds of Micronesia's high school aged youth, the question of what would happen to the increasingly large number of graduates has continued to perplex educators in Micronesia. Fr. Hezel studied the "education explosion" as it applied to the Truk area and commented that, "...the proportions of the high school boom in Truk are simply staggering, far more so than the population explosion in the district that has aroused such serious concern" (Hezel 1978:3). Even more impressive was the increasing numbers of students going on to college; the growth had zoomed in the early 1970s when Micronesians became eligible for U.S. Federal education grants for the economically and socially disadvantaged. As college students returned to Truk they were absorbed into a growing economy, but as greater numbers went off for further education, doubts arose over the ability of the area to provide jobs upon their return. CETA funds provided an answer in the '70s but as Hezel points out, there may not be another such economic miracle. While high school graduates

generally move back to their home areas (over 60% of Trukese graduates went back to their home islands) the question is whether or not college graduates will be able to return to village life. If not, Hezel suggests that we may see a "brain drain" situation in Truk. This study of the education explosion in Truk may well be applicable to the other areas of Micronesia on a somewhat reduced scale. Education cannot be separated from the problems of economic development and social change; as Dr. Gibson pointed out in the early 1950s, educational programs must be approached in an interdepartmental fashion. Despite attempts over the years to relate schools and manpower needs, to tie education to community aspirations, Micronesia has always lacked communication and a firm connection between administrative departments.

Examining the history of education in Micronesia lends itself to reflection on the earliest period of American involvement in the schools of the Trust Territory. Even as the education explosion brought problems and perplexities to Micronesia, the bilingual and bicultural programs were "re-discovering" the principles set forth in the 1950s, and the idea of community education based on the needs and culture of the people emerged once again. Most of the writing on Micronesia dismisses the bicultural efforts of the 1950s, and presents the period instead as a time of stagnation, when the U.S. kept Micronesia in a protective "zoo".

Actually the years from 1951-1961 saw some of the most innovative and creative thinking yet applied to education in Micronesia. This is not to say that the 1950s were a sort of golden age to which we can attribute

all virtues. Problems certainly existed. Lack of funds, lack of cooperation between departments, high staff turnover, and low pay for indigenous teachers contributed to the hinderance and sometimes demise of programs. Educators deeply committed to teaching in the vernacular and to fundamental education also faced opposition from many Micronesian parents who, from the very beginning, saw in the schools an avenue of success for their children. Many Micronesians demanded increased English language teaching in the schools and a "standard" curriculum which would facilitate movement to U.S. universities. But as Micronesia ponders the problems of unemployed graduates who may not fit back into the island cultures they left for further studies, the time may be ripe for a return to the island-oriented, community supported schools of the past. The concept of self-sufficiency so often a part of the ideology of the 1950s has great political implications in the Micronesia of the 1980s.

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