

# CURRICULUM IN THE REGION

## Curricula Must Incorporate Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices to Be Relevant

By Canisius T. Filibert

Education would be much easier if classrooms operated like restaurants and bistros that serve gourmet dishes. Imagine for a moment that your classroom was such, and all you had to do was manage a staff of part-time teachers and teacher aides, and oversee the routine in the kitchen. Students enter your classroom, place their order, and 'voila,' instant quality curriculum cooked to perfection and taste. Unfortunately, curriculum is not cooked this way, nor would it pass approval if it were. The true reality of curriculum development is an all too cumbersome task, which often is far removed from the reality of the learner and the teacher.

For us in the northern half of Oceania, our educational systems cost thousands of dollars every school year to keep up with educational trends. K-12 curricula reflect much that trickles down from U.S. mainland pedagogies. In fact, for years the design of curriculum in schools has been based on non-native ideals and notions. The whole plate of curriculum gourmet dishes is prepared and cooked by chefs who know nothing of the shores of the Pacific islands nor the vast cultural tastes, language flavors, or indigenous knowledge.

In Micronesia, where most schools are assessed as low performing and 99.9% of students speak the local language, curricula must incorporate indigenous knowledge and cultural practices familiar to island cultures and practices to be relevant. The one-size-fits-all notion of education can no longer be acceptable. With so many cultures and languages, each entity has to tailor its curriculum to fit local values. For example, in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), native Chuukese speakers have to know the appropriate language form for the correct audience and situation. The lore of proper word choice and gestures is lost when children enter schools, for it is not part of the language arts curriculum. On the island of Kosrae, in the FSM, speakers are regarded highly if they know and use local

proverbs in their oratories; yet this skill is not taught in schools. In the Republic of Palau, the indigenous levels of language competency from least competent, chetechem, to expert, dachelbai el mendedcheduch, are grossly ignored while descriptors such as 'fluent,' 'non-proficient,' 'language deficient,' or 'limited English proficient,' have become normal in the vocabulary of local educators.

On the island of Guam, school children are not taught that the best times for hunting and fishing are during the first five days of the first quarter of the new moon of every month.

School books and lessons do not teach children that food—for most of the peoples and cultures of Micronesia—was not simply for consumption, but was also used as a means of barter and exchange, and gifts. The art of storytelling is now on the verge of extinction, and invaluable oratorical skills are dying with each passing generation. Although there have been efforts to indigenize the curriculum, much that once was a vital part of living for Islanders is now lost. Current efforts underway can only be termed as localized curriculum, but they barely scratch the surface of indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies. The functionality of indigenesness gives way to the disfunctionality of modernness. Volumes of knowledge that have been passed down orally through generations will become lost if not reincorporated and revived through a rethinking process. If curriculum is to be effective in our

schools, then it needs to be designed appropriately to reflect and foster our unique ways of thinking and understanding. For curriculum to be relevant and for Micronesian children to achieve to high standards, indigenesness must become the norm for learning and teaching.

*Canisius T. Filibert, Manager, Territories and Freely-Associated States Education Grant Program, can be reached at [filiberc@prel.org](mailto:filiberc@prel.org).*



Photo: Nancy Lane

▷ Teacher Rose Lawrence demonstrates how to incorporate traditional Pohnpeian weaving into a class curriculum.