

MICROSOCIETY— Building Character Through Experience

BY RICHARD G. MALOON

Annette,¹ a third grader, shared a school dilemma with her mother. “I’m not sure what to do. Business has been slow lately. It’s nearly the beginning of the month, and I have taxes, rent, and a loan payment due. Yet I don’t want to lay off any employees, since they need a job.”

This doesn’t sound like a typical textbook problem, does it? At Richmond Academy in Virginia, students like Annette not only learn about values and character, but also experience them every day. Children develop such traits as responsibility, citizenship, honesty, politeness, cooperation, and stewardship in a cutting-edge program called MicroSociety®. During one 50-minute class period each day, these students work together in their own businesses, pay their bills as well as tithes and offerings, abide by laws that their self-made government creates and enforces, and learn appropriate ways to interact. The skills and values taught during the traditional part of the day become relevant in authentic, real-world ex-

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Richmond Academy teacher Robert Fetters advises two students who are manufacturing “slime” to sell in their Micro-business.

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MicroSociety—Its Origin and Growth

The MicroSociety instruction model was developed by George Richmond in the late 1960s. In a fifth-grade classroom in Brooklyn, New York, Richmond was faced with “33 barely literate, wild 10-year-olds” who just were not interested in learning. Since traditional methodologies had failed, Richmond, out of desperation, decided to work with their interests.

He sought to restructure the social system so that status would come to those who learned to think. He created an internal currency and jobs, bought consumer goods to auction off weekly, and developed real property for sale and rent. He later added businesses and a system of government.²

In 1973, Richmond wrote a book about his experiences, and interest began to spread. By the early 1990s, the MicroSociety model had gained national attention. Richmond and his MicroSociety program have been featured on a number of television shows and magazines. The

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Micro-pastors study together in preparing their sermons.

number of schools adopting this program has been doubling every two to three years during this decade (presently more than 230 schools across the U.S.) and shows no signs of slowing.

In part, it owes its success to its flexibility. Some schools start slowly, with the number of participating classrooms increasing each year as teachers see the success of their peers. Other schools immediately initiate a school-wide plan. Variables, such as the level of involvement of each grade, the amount of autonomy the students initially experience, the length of the Micro-class period (although almost all are one hour a day), and the ground rules for participation are negotiated by each school's staff, administration, and students. Most Micro-schools utilize some sort of democracy, yet one school opted for a constitutional monarchy. The value of the internal currency varies greatly, from a strong Micro-dollar to a wild, inflationary economy. Regardless of the diversification, students in

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Margie Ham, a Micro-mentor, helps a student manage the warehouse and keep accurate records.

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Students apply mathematics concepts in shopping, baking, and serving food for the MicroSociety.

these schools are consistently showing tremendous growth in standardized testing as well as maturity in understanding themselves and the world in which they live.

Essential Elements of a MicroSociety Program

Despite diversity, there are common elements to this dynamic approach. All MicroSociety programs have their own focus or goal. Richmond Academy's focus statement, for example, centers on doing all to the glory of God. Within this broad goal, the students and teachers develop and prioritize personal goals, such as students' feeling responsible for each other. Other common factors call for an environment with (1) private and public property that students may own, maintain, rent, improve, and/or sell; (2) markets for goods, services, labor, information, and capital, to which students have access; (3) an internal currency that is the sole medium of exchange and value within the school's MicroSociety; and (4) public agencies, private ventures, and non-profit/charitable organizations—all of which are eventually (if not initially) managed and owned by the students.

Several strands (comprising the acronym TEACHH) organize all of the activities:

- *Technology* is interwoven into all of the other strands, employing tools and computer applications similar to those

used by their real-world counterparts.

- *Economy* includes banking, a stock market, employment experiences, entrepreneurship, and the development of goods, services, and marketable skills.

- *Academy* provides opportunities for learning of skills and information that are directly related to specific jobs; such classes may include law school, police academy, accounting, banking, software

the quality of life.

- The *Heart* strand keeps everything in the proper perspective and provides a balance between the soul and the mind.³

In Adventist schools, the Heart strand constitutes the foundation and the unifying theme for the MicroSociety. Some students become involved in pastoral care, evangelism, and Bible studies. Most, if not all, participate in prayer and tithing. More importantly, they learn to conduct themselves as Christians in every aspect of their activities; this necessitates a daily faith relationship with Jesus.

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applications, and arts and crafts.

- *Citizenship and Government* involves activities and attitudes that help students develop into responsible citizens and public servants.

- *Humanities and Arts* encompass appreciation of the arts and of varying cultures, philanthropic endeavors, and non-profit organizations aimed at improving

Virginia Supreme Court Justice Elizabeth Lacy administers the oath of office to Robert Phanord, Richmond Academy's first MicroSociety prime minister, while Potomac Conference Superintendent Gary Temple looks on. Virginia Deputy Secretary of Education Wil Bryant also attended the ceremony.

into the traditional academic part of the day and conversely, integrates academics into the Micro-class period. MicroSociety activities blend well with students' class work. A Bible class on Jesus' compassion for the multitudes had more impact when students reflected on how they appreciated the unselfish caring of one of the Micro-leaders.

During the MicroSociety time, a plethora of teachable moments await the teacher. Consider the Micro-government leader who was in trouble with his con-

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A student attorney questions a witness while the Micro-judge listens carefully to the testimony.

stituents for mishandling an election. Rumors surfaced that he would quit, and the teacher quickly had a private discussion with him to consider the problem, possible solutions, and their consequences. The “mayor” decided the best alternative was to admit his mistake and apologize. Although this was somewhat unnerving, he not only cleared the air and corrected the decision, but also regained his peers’ confidence.

One of the unique features of the program is establishing meaningful contacts with working adults. Schools collaborate with community partners—parents, business people, and government workers who provide technical assistance.⁴ Lawyers conduct law school and discuss cases with their Micro-colleagues. Bank managers train students to run a bank. Police, congressmen, court justices, and other public officials furnish wise counsel to aspiring public servants and a responsible citizenry. Personnel from bookstores, pet shops, craft stores, and department stores provide materials and assistance in establishing appropriate procedures, personnel management, and customer service. Pastors guide their Micro-ministers into sensitive pastoral care and evangelism.

Changing the Paradigm

Another hallmark of MicroSociety is that it creates a paradigm shift: Learning actually becomes student-centered and student-driven. Teachers do not run the society but rather mentor the students to run their own program successfully.

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Teachers and other involved adults adjust their roles from dispensers of knowledge to guides and advisors.

When given the opportunity to make their own decisions, students frequently will solicit advice from adults. A young business woman who made a verbal contract later wanted to void it for a more attractive offer. When asked for his opinion, the teacher introduced her to relevant Christian principles and guided her to discover for herself the value of honoring one’s promises. She stayed true to her word and felt satisfied with her decision.

Under these conditions, students become self-motivated to learn and grow while pursuing their own interests. They determine what they need to know and how to access the necessary information. The percentage of on-task behaviors in the MicroSociety is extremely high, frequently exceeding traditional approaches.

A New Approach, Not a New Concept

While Richmond Academy’s approach is creative and fits the needs of schools approaching the 21st century, it certainly is not based on a new concept. These

ideas were expressed a hundred years ago by Ellen White:

Even in seeking a preparation for God’s service, many are turned aside by wrong methods of education. Life is too generally regarded as made up of distinct periods, the period of learning and the period of doing—of preparation and of achievement . . . Cut off from the responsibilities of everyday life, they become absorbed in study, and often lose sight of its purpose. . . . They have so long dealt with the abstract and theoretical that when the whole being must be roused to meet the sharp contrasts of real life, they are unprepared.⁵

MicroSociety schools bridge that gap between learning and doing. Children learn to take responsibility in this program and also at home by doing such simple things as turning the lights off to save electricity.

Mrs. White also wrote, “Every youth should be taught the necessity and the power of application. Upon this, far more than upon genius or talent, does success depend. Without application the most brilliant talents avail little, while with rightly directed effort persons of very ordinary natural abilities have accomplished wonders.”⁶ MicroSociety teachers have found this to be true, especially the teachers of a Micro-school in Orlando, Florida, where a girl with an IQ below 70 wanted to be a business owner. In spite of initial teacher reluctance and much red tape, she started her business, hired a straight-A math student as her accountant and tutor, and learned math through her business’s finances. By the end of the year, she became the most successful entrepreneur in the school. She attributed this to making the best line of products and treating her customers nicely.⁷

MicroSociety students certainly reason and judge for themselves, whether they are judges, jurors, attorneys in court, legislators carefully weighing issues, pastors searching for effective evangelistic methods, business owners prioritizing needs and wants, or engaging in a myriad of other experiences.

Questions Frequently Posed

- *Will MicroSociety address the needs of the 21st century?* Yes, if one reviews the goals and preferred curriculum prac-

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**The assistant
Micro-bank
manager
teaches a teller
about customer
service.**

tices in the North American Division's Curriculum Futures Commission. MicroSociety addresses these goals and also provides the learning styles to be emphasized—experiential, problem-based, and cooperative.⁸

• *Why does MicroSociety stress work in the grown-up world?* Richmond, creator of the program, contends that it is only in this century that children have not been involved in authentic work that made a valued contribution to the family. While not wanting to repeat the child labor problems of the past, Richmond notes that we have turned childhood into a leisure class where the values of responsibility, giving, and a strong work ethic are often missing." Besides this, Micro taps into a child's natural way of learning about the adult world—through play.

• *How do we fit a Micro-class period into an already overloaded schedule? Won't it take away some of the learning time?* By taking a few minutes off of each period, the teacher can easily make time for the Micro-class. What time is lost from the traditional classes is easily compensated for by the integration that the Micro-program brings about.

• *Isn't this approach too difficult and potentially overwhelming?* The key to success in MicroSociety is its flexibility. Start small, and let it grow. Richmond Academy's MicroSociety started as one half-hour class a week. The next year, it expanded to one half-hour a day. The third year, the program went school-wide as parents and teachers saw its success. The Consortium of MicroSociety Schools provides for every need in establishing a MicroSociety.

• *Does this approach encourage greedy capitalism?* Many experiences invalidate this view. One fourth-grade boy, upon learning that his rent check had bounced, decided to sell his share in the

Micro-entrepreneurs are various ages. Third-grader April Minnick ran a thriving Hair Ware store.

struggling company of which he was a partner and found a good job that paid enough to cover his bills. Two business owners had to deal with an embezzling employee. They cared so much for her that they forgave her and reinstated her employment. She has been faithful ever since. MicroSociety provides a safe environment to learn, experience, and grow as a Christian when the consequences are not as serious as later in life.

Perhaps the story that best illustrates this point happened at Lowell's City Magnet School. As Richmond and others gave several visitors from the community a tour, they met one of the school's "millionaires." The young owner spoke of his experiences, and then a local college professor asked: "I can see why kids get excited about getting rich, but how do they learn about morality and ethics?"

The student's answer went right to the heart of the MicroSociety program. "My first job," he said, "was a bank teller. In that job, I got to know my customers. I would talk to them. If they looked sad I would ask them what was bothering them. And we'd talk, real friendly like. I found that if you treated your customers right they become loyal customers. Years later, when I started my button business, my bank employees became my most de-

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voted customers. Being trustworthy and friendly is good business. . . . most of the kids in the program know the difference between right and wrong. How can you be a successful business person if you aren't good to people?"¹⁰

For more information about MicroSociety®, contact:

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MicroSociety offers conferences, in-house training, support, books, handbooks, and materials to help you maintain and establish a successful program.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Children's names have been changed to protect their privacy.
2. George H. Richmond and Carolyn King Richmond, *The MicroSociety® Handbook* (Philadelphia: MicroSociety, Inc., 1996), pp. 8, 9.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-22.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 265.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
7. Richmond and Richmond, *The MicroSociety® Handbook*, pp. 40-44.
8. FACT-21 is a report of the North American Division's Curriculum Futures Commission.
9. George Richmond, *The MicroSociety School: A Real World in Miniature* (Philadelphia: MicroSociety, Inc., 1997), pp. ii, iii.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. iv, v.

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