

## Revitalizing Harmony in Village and School Relationships

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The relationships between Alaska Native people and the schools have often been adversarial. This may be due to Alaska Natives' mistrust of the outside educational system and its practitioners. For too many years the schools did not acknowledge the different ways of knowing and ways of making sense of this world extant in the villages. Instead, another way of making a life and living was espoused by the newcomers.

After making a visit to Alaska in the 1880s, Sheldon Jackson approached the United States Congress for money to educate Alaska Native people. The money he received for this purpose was very limited so he approached religious organizations to establish schools, many of which were associated with the church-run orphanages that sprung up after the viral epidemics. In their minds they were doing God's work, with the very best of intentions. However, they were also carrying out the assimilation policies of the times, in which Alaska Native students were to lose their Native language and ways of making a living. After many years of experiencing this type of education (under both church- and government-run schools), Alaska Native people began to recognize that schooling in pursuit of the American Dream was a largely unattainable goal made up of empty promises. As a result of this bifurcation of purpose, many of the teachers who served as the purveyors of the new knowledge through the schools never became a part of the community in which they taught. This split has contributed to the debilitation of the villages to the point where many villagers have abdicated their educational responsibilities with an attitude of "Let's leave things alone, they know better." In this way, the educational system has failed Alaska Natives and, in turn, Alaska Native people have contributed to that failure. So, what can be done to overcome this legacy of adversarial relations between school and community?

In the not-too-distant past, when newcomers came into Alaska Native communities, they were welcomed as visitors and made comfortable. The Alaska Native people shared their food, homes and knowledge about the surrounding flora and fauna. They shared the arts and skills of hunting, trapping and survival in a sometimes harsh environment. They found some of the early newcomers had left behind their individualistic and competitive world in search of another way of making a life and a living—one compatible with Alaska Native peoples' inclinations. These newcomers grafted themselves to the lifeways of the community in which they settled and became a part of it. They allowed any feelings of superiority to dissipate in the wind. However, they were followed by another group of people some of whose goals and motivation were driven by a different mindset—that of ambition and greed to gain land and take natural resources for attaining riches.

The original host-visitor relationship was broken asunder and the Alaska Native people found themselves thrust into smaller and smaller pockets of land differentiated by artificial boundaries and restrictions. This was now a conqueror and conquered relationship. The Native people found themselves struggling for survival in their own land. They found themselves subjected to new laws, values and institutions. They experienced new diseases and poverty, as well as the language, arts and skills that were now being taught to them. The Native peoples' perception of harmony in life practices which upheld the recognition that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts was disrupted. This is a sad commentary for a people who were once self-sufficient and practiced a spirituality that edified this harmonious way of life and making a living.

More than a century has elapsed and it is time to reexamine the relationship between community and school in rural Alaska. This recognition was brought about by a recent trip to New Zealand of Alaska Native educators and our subsequent participation in the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) held in Hilo, Hawaii in August. At every Maori marae (meeting house) that we visited in New Zealand, the protocol of welcoming the visitors was performed. On the first day WIPCE, the Hawaiian people performed a traditional welcoming ceremony for the 2000 guests who came to the Islands to attend the conference. All of these were awe-inspiring experiences that engendered a feeling of being a part of the host community and confidence in knowing what would be expected of you as a visitor.

The Maori marae and many of the Hawaiian settlements have become bastions of indigenous spirituality, philosophy, identity, language and values. Because these ceremonies are so steeped in spirituality, there is a feeling of respect for place, people and

all that they have and stand for. These are places where real teaching and learning can take place because they are working for the good of the community with spirit and feeling.

Why don't Alaska's villages do the same for incoming administrators and teachers? It is time we take the initiative and get involved in providing a more holistic education for our children. This can only happen when we change the adversarial relationship between the village and school. We must realize that we cannot expect the school to raise our children. This has been happening for too long and the result has been a school that is too often a battleground between teachers and students, as well as with the parents and villagers. The time is ripe for putting the statement, "It takes a whole village to raise a child" into practice. Let us briefly suggest how a process like this might begin. It is up to each of you to do the rest.

No matter where Alaska Native people come from, they have had a way of welcoming the allanret—the visitors. We should revive these practices, starting with welcoming the principals and teachers who come to the village to help in the education of the children. They are with us the greater part of the year and spend much of their waking hours with our children. So it is only fair that we make them feel welcome. These welcoming ceremonies must include local speech makers. The Alaska Native speakers should include (in general terms) what is expected of the administrators and the teachers. The principal and teachers can respond by briefly stating what their philosophy of education is, what and how they meet the expectations of the villagers and to ask where they may need help themselves. It is important that everyone come to mutual terms on what can be done to improve the education of the village children.

The same appreciation should be accorded those Native educators who have chosen to obtain a higher education to acquire a teaching certificate. Those who return to the village should be treated with a similar welcome, in a manner that is well endowed with love, care and nurturing to help them become successful teachers. There should be no expressions of jealousy or alienation shown toward these individuals. Villagers should allow the spirit to act as the mediator to elevate these Alaska Native people who have taken the risk of failure, suffered through times of depression or bewilderment, confronting insensitive administrators and faculty and experience financial hardship to gain access to the profession of teaching. Alaska Native educators have a willingness to excel and they know the village situation well—thereby earning our support.

These acts of harmony and compassion contribute to the healing process on all sides. Villagers need to participate in board meetings to clarify any questions that arise, let the participants know what is being accomplished to meet village expectations and what needs further work. This must be done with honesty and in accord with Alaska Native values. Compassion, cooperation and teamwork have always been the hallmark of Alaska Native hospitality. This must be resurrected to function as an organism with all its parts working together for the good of the whole village. It is admirable to note that this is already being done in some villages. This is where synergy really begins to kick in with each part working for the good of the community and thus making it stronger than its individual parts. The ways of Alaska Native people may become the model for the future.  
*Tuait, piurci.*