Educating Across Cultures: The Alaskan Scene

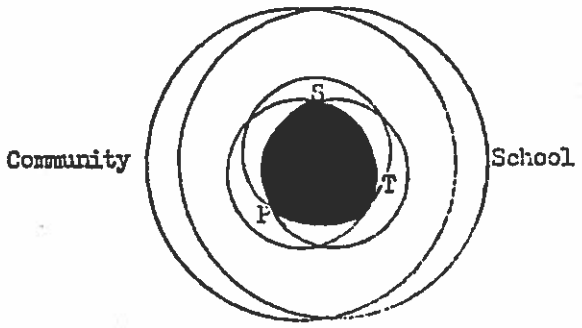
by Ray Barnhardt

No education issue in Alaska today is treated with as much concern and as little understanding as the role of the school as it relates to the Native people in the State. Those persons who see the school as a facilitator in the process of assimilation find it extremely slow and cumbersome in carrying out such a role. Those who desire to use the school as a means to perpetuate the traditional native culture find it limited in application to only superficial aspects, such as native arts and crafts, history, and some language. Those who take "the best of both worlds" approach find it difficult to design a school program which will reconcile the attitudinal and behavioral expectations inherent in the "dominant culture" with those implicit in the cultural framework of the native community.

The typical response to the above dilemmas has been, and continues to be, a patchwork of programs designed to respond to particular needs, but usually lacking in overall coherence or continuity and sometimes incompatible with programs already operative at the same time and location. The lack of a coherent framework for dealing with educational issues in rural Alaska is partially due to the ethnocentric nature of "schooling" as an educational process. The vast majority of educational literature is derived from and focuses on a unicultural environment. As a result, the issues usually are viewed only from the school's perspective rather than as an interaction of two cultural systems, one reflected in the school, the other in the Native community. The uniqueness of the problems are disregarded in the search for underlying similarities.

In order to explore the role of the school as it relates to the native people, it is necessary to conceptualize the components that are involved and the conditions under which they exist. The following diagram is intended to bring into a common perspective the various issues of concern to people involved in Native education. It is offered as a way to view the conditions that exist, not as an explanation of their existence.

The diagram pulls together five principal components in the education process: the teacher, student, parent, school, and community. Under ideal educational conditions, the diagram appears as follows:



The two large circles represent the socio-cultural milieu of the school and the community. The three smaller circles represent the experiential domains of the teachers, students, and parents. The complete diagram represents the interrelationship of the various components. The size of the circles, however, is not intended to represent the relative influence of the various components. An underlying assumption is that the greater the degree of congruence (overlap) of the components, the greater the opportunity for meaningful and coherent educational development. The extent to which the components overlap represents the potential for experiential continuity and conceptual integration as a result of their interaction.

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Ideally, under perfect enculturational conditions, the socio-cultural milieu of the school and the community are identical. The customs, beliefs, values, behavior patterns, and conceptual orientations exhibited in the school (formal education) correspond to those exhibited in the community (informal education). Consequently, the experiential domains of the teachers, students, and parents also are identical. They all are oriented to the same cultural milieu so they share a common background of perceptual and conceptual experiences. They see things, think about things, and behave in similar ways. Therefore, they are able to engage in productive interaction and communication and move toward mutually comprehensible and agreeable goals. Under these conditions, education is a consistent, constructive and cumulative process.

Application of the Diagram

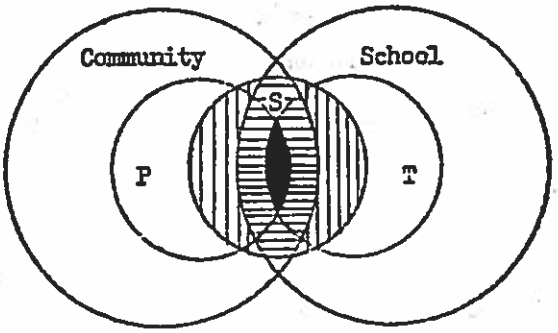
No school-community situation can be expected to fully exemplify the ideal. Most schools in typical "middle class" American communities, however, are intended to reflect to a large degree the socio-cultural milieu of the communities they serve. The curriculum and the organizational structure of the school are designed around the needs and expectations of the community. The teachers are usually products of a cultural environment similar to that of the students and parents. Diagrammatically, the various components are positioned to represent a large overlapping area (as designated by the shaded area in the above diagram), indicating a high potential for positive educational experiences. Whether or not the potential is achieved depends on the willingness and effort of the individual participants, and the effective utilization of available resources. It does not depend on the compatibility of the behavior and value orientations of the participants since these are presumed to be congruent.

When the socio-cultural milieu of the community deviates from the prototype out of which the American school system evolved, the congruency between school and community diminishes. The presence of a school in a culturally different setting (as in rural Alaska) introduces an interaction system involving alternative sets of values and behavior patterns with varying potential for congruence. These conditions usually are characterized by terms such as cross-cultural, multi-cultural, inter-cultural, or trans-cultural.

Regardless of the educational goals of the school in such communities, the overall relationship of the diagrammatic components is the same. Whether the teacher is oriented to "cultural preservation" or to "assimilation", his efforts can be represented as the confluence of two modes of thought and behavior. Both orientations assume dominance of one cultural system over another. In either case, the success of the teacher's effort is affected by the compatibility of the particular modes of thought and behavior represented in a particular situation.

Schools in the Rural Native Communities of Alaska

The schools located in the rural Native communities of Alaska represent situations involving the interaction of different sociocultural milieus. The relationships of the various components with regard to these schools and communities are illustrated as follows:



Although variations in the patterns of interaction of certain components exist amongst the various schools and communities, these variations are insignificant with regard to the impact of the overall configuration on the educational experiences of the students. The shaded area, where the cultural milieu of the school and community and the experiential domains of the teachers and parents converge in relation to the educational experiences of the students, designates the limited potential

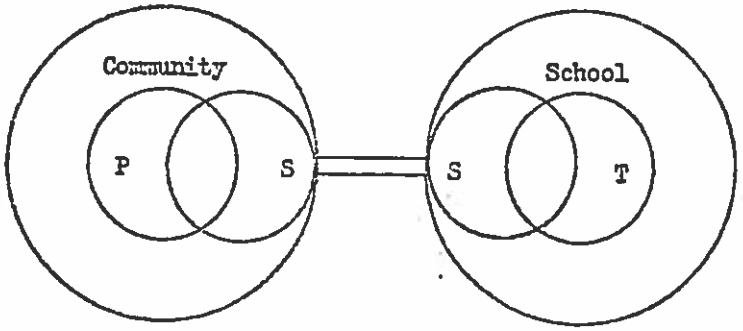
for positive, integrated educational experiences. The horizontally lined area represents students' involvements other than those provided by coordinated parent-teacher efforts. These include peer-group associations, interaction with parents in relation to the school, and interaction with teachers in relation to the community. Although these various involvements are assumed to be consistent since they are within the cultural framework of both the school and community, the burden of compatibility rests on the students. Such involvements may or may not lead to a coherent whole, depending on each student's ability to integrate the various experiences.

The two vertically lined areas represent those aspects of the native students' experiential domains that are not directly compatible and that can not be integrated into a consistent whole. These consist of socio-cultural forces that have their origin in separate cultural milieus, and that often are in mutual opposition. The areas represent the attitudes and expectations of the parents and the teachers, regarding the students, which are derived from different life styles and different world views. These divergent aspects of the students' experiential domain contribute to an ambivalent conceptual orientation, and discontinuity and disharmony in the students' educational development.

The majority of the issues in rural Alaskan education can be classified into the vertically lined area. The root of most problems can be attributed to the differences in conceptual understanding of the issues, based on the different cultural perspectives of the school and community.

Urban Schools and Boarding Schools for Alaskan Natives

A third configuration of the diagram is needed to represent the experiences of Native students attending urban-based schools or boarding schools outside their home community.



The school and the community are separate entities representing different cultural milieus. Virtually the only connection between what occurs in the school and what occurs in the community is provided by the students' periodic movement from the one to the other. The parents seldom interact with the school; the teachers seldom interact with the community. The students are provided with two distinct sets of experiences originating from mutually exclusive cultural systems. The task of synthesizing the two sets of experiences into an integrated and meaningful whole is left to the students.

To achieve satisfactory integration, the students must learn to accommodate two different conceptual frameworks. If they are unable to achieve the critical synthesis they must either abide by one framework at the expense of the other, or face the consequences of conceptual disharmony. If the students are given a choice, the most reasonable alternative for them is to hold to the cultural patterns from which they emerged. Consequently, the educational efforts of the school are tolerated but never accepted or conceptually internalized.

Instead, a third cultural system is formed as the teachers and students develop a consistent pattern of non-interaction based on mutual expectations derived from past experience. The Native students are expected by the teachers to have certain deficiencies and display certain behavior patterns usually incompatible with the goals of the school. The teachers, therefore, establish certain response patterns to accommodate the situation. The students follow the same pattern with regard to the teachers; eventually, a mutually agreed-on system is developed whereby each of the participants "do their own thing". However, when the results of the educational program are evaluated and the students are below national standards, the accusation of failure is directed to the students - not the school.

Toward Mutual Understanding

The discrepancy between the two latter diagrams and the ideal configuration of school-community and teacher-student-parent interaction patterns is apparent in the lack of significant overlap, indicating the differences in cultural milieu and experiential domains under these conditions. Three means of reducing the discrepancy are possible: the parents and students can shift their values, beliefs, customs, behavior patterns, and conceptual orientations to accommodate those represented by the school; the teachers can shift their efforts and goals to accommodate to the background of the students; or, a combination involving mutual accommodation can be worked out.

Since the goal is to achieve compatibility of educational experiences, any of the above means can accomplish that task. However, the three means are not equally realistic. Although the Native people can no longer maintain an independent existence oriented to "the old ways", they also cannot be expected to abandon their heritage and assume a life style often inconsistent with that heritage. Even if they wanted to, they could not automatically switch to a different conceptual orientation without residual effects of the previous orientation.

Non-Native teachers, likewise, cannot be expected to comprehend the complexity of the relationship between the school and a Native community on the basis of their background and standardized training. They cannot switch conceptual orientations any more than can the Native parent or student. In addition to their own ethnocentrism, they are caught in a system that allows them to operate only in prescribed ways. The physical isolation of the schools and teacher housing illustrates this point. Rarely do the teachers move beyond the classroom in an effort to improve the quality of education.

The most reasonable approach for bringing the school and community closer together is to increase mutual understanding between the various participants in the educational process. This may be accomplished by enhancing the interaction and flow of communications through reciprocal involvement of the participants in the alternate experiential domains and cultural milieus. Community members can become involved in the school and teachers can become involved in the community.

Native Teachers in the School

The presence of local community members in the school, particularly as teachers, represents the most logical means of encouraging greater school-community understanding. However, such an approach is not as simple as it first appears. If the community members are thrust into the rigid structure of a traditional classroom and are not allowed to establish alternate patterns of interaction and communication, their experience as Natives is of little value and may even be detrimental to their efforts as "teachers". If their training has so inoculated them with the stereotypical attitudes and expectations of a "teacher" that they are unable to establish a free-flow of communications with their students in their own mode, they have little more to contribute than the teacher from "outside". Native teachers must be allowed to approach the students and "classroom" on their own terms if they are to use their expertise as Natives effectively. As representatives of the community, they can blend the formal aspects of schooling with the informal aspects of child-rearing in the community. But to do so requires a freedom of movement beyond that usually associated with strict formal education. The community becomes the classroom, and the classroom reflects the community.

In the training and on the job, Native teachers must be accorded the flexibility to make extensive deviations from standard curriculum and structural patterns. School policy and objectives must be expanded to allow for new and different means and ends with regard to educational attainment. Thus the concepts of teaching and schooling themselves must be called into question if such a transformation of attitudes and expectations is to occur.

Non-Native Teachers in the Community

The second means of enhancing school-community understanding is to increase the involvement of non-Native teachers in the community. To achieve a genuine understanding and acceptance between the teacher and the Native community, however, requires more than their exposure to each other; it requires more than factual or inferential knowledge; it requires a sensitivity to a wide range of subtle and complex factors that affect the various participants' perception of each other.

"Mutual understanding" implies a consensual recognition and acceptance of the worth and dignity of the individuals or groups involved. The Native parents and students must be accepted for

what they are, not for what they once were or for what they "should" be. An appreciation of Native people because they are descendants of the "noble savage" or represent a "vanishing breed" offers little consolation to contemporary Natives. Likewise, to express an interest in helping Natives because of "their impoverished and decadent condition", on the assumption that they need to be raised to a certain white man's standard, only contributes to the problem rather than alleviates it. To attempt to make a Native into an artifact of a romantic age, or a prototype of contemporary middle-class white standards, is to disregard the unique qualities of his present existence. Teachers must be willing to learn as well as teach, in situ, if they are to respond to contemporary circumstantial needs and be able to accurately assess the impact of what they teach.

Such an approach to school-community understanding requires a conceptual transformation similar to that required if a Native is to be allowed to teach as a Native. The teacher must break out of the mind-set that establishes him as the sole proprietor in the educational training of Native children. He must recognize his status as an outsider and be sensitive to the differences that exist between himself and the students, rather than placing all the emphasis on the superficial similarities. Even if he takes the extreme position and openly pursues a course of indoctrination to white ways, he reflects a clearer perception of his position than if he blindly pursues a traditional teaching style. Once the teacher recognizes his position relative to the students, parents, and community, he can pursue a course of action which will enable him to offer a cumulative rather than subtractive educational experience. Such an approach infers a greater understanding and involvement of the community with regard to the school. The one is a natural consequence of the other.

The Community as the Classroom

Whether a Native is teaching in the school or a white teacher is involved in the community, the central issue is to improve the communications and increase the compatibility between what is taught in the school and what is learned in the community. Although the conditions described above are intended to illustrate how teachers' (in) sensitivity to socio-cultural differences can affect their teaching, such vicarious accounts cannot adequately prepare a person for actual immersion with the issues on a face-to-face, day-to-day level.

If teachers are to establish more than a superficial relationship with the community, they must move beyond the traditional classroom. They must strive to view themselves as they are viewed from the perspective of the community; to listen to what they say as it may be heard by the community; to establish goals in harmony with the real-life circumstances in the community. Instead of trying to raise the students to a prescribed percentile level, the teacher should strive to help the students learn something today they did not know yesterday. The students will then be assessed on the basis of where they are, not where they should be.

The teacher--white or Native--who has the incentive and freedom to explore the educational environs with his students will not restrict his endeavors to the formal classroom. He will make the community an integral part of the classroom, building the educational framework around local needs and resources. Students will learn in the presence of and in cooperation with the adult members of the community.

By extending the classroom into the community, the schooling experience becomes meaningful and additive in terms of both the teachers' and the students' needs. The teacher becomes better acquainted with the community and thus can better assess the implications of his efforts. The students are treated to a schooling experience that coincides with their extra-school experiences. Formal and informal education are blended into a coherent, integrated whole.

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Treaty Signatures Questioned

July 11, 1973

YELLOWKNIFE, N.W.T. (CP) -- A special hearing into Indian claims on 400,000 square miles of the Northwest Territories was told Tuesday that some signatures on the two controversial treaties could be fraudulent.

Rev. Rene Fumoleau, a Roman Catholic missionary who has researched the history of Treaties 8 and 11, said most of the Indian signatures on the documents were a simple X.

He told Mr. Justice Morrow of the Northwest Territories Supreme Court that three of the marks on Treaty 8 were "too firm and straight," unlike the other Indian signatures which were shaky.

Father Fumoleau, who has lived with Indians in the Territories for 20 years, said he has researched the treaties and supporting documents in the National Archives in Ottawa and looked through extensive Anglican and Roman Catholic records.

The hearing is to determine whether the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories can register with the land titles office a caveat--or legal declaration of their interest--against the lands they claim.

The brotherhood represents about 7,000 natives in the Territories.

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