

FIELD-BASED EDUCATION FOR ALASKAN NATIVE TEACHERS

by

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In the following paper I will attempt to reconstruct the conceptual and operational evolution of a program for the training of Alaskan native teachers. I will describe the first six years of the program's development, focusing on those aspects that reflect consideration of the unique cultural environment in which the program operates. I address these issues from the perspective of an academic coordinator for the program since its inception. My formal training is in anthropology and education. To the extent that a native point of view is expressed in this paper, it is a product of my interpretation of that view as a non-native, and should be judged accordingly.

Background

The program, known originally as the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (or ARTTC), was established in 1970 as a four-year experimental program with the primary purpose of training native elementary school teachers. The original proposal specified that the training would be field-centered, and that it would meet the usual requirements for a Bachelor of Education degree and an elementary teaching certificate. Under a somewhat ambiguous administrative arrangement involving two universities and the State-operated school system, three staff persons (one representing each of the above) were hired and charged with implementing the program. Eleven training sites were established in rural native communities around the State, each with a team of four to eight undergraduate students (primarily native) and a full-time, certificated "team leader."

Under these conditions, we (the three program staff and eleven team leaders) set out to produce teachers. We began planning for a six week orientation program that was to prepare everyone for the years ahead. As we proceeded, however, we gradually realized that our task was not going to be simply a matter of applying the latest teacher training techniques to this particular group of students, thus producing a new and improved breed of teacher for rural Alaska. With this realization, we found it necessary to step back and ask ourselves a few basic questions:

1. Why train natives to be teachers?
2. What is a "native" teacher?
3. How do you train "native" teachers?

Why Train Natives To Be Teachers?

Our initial response to the question, "Why train native teachers?" was to point out that nearly every recent study and report on native education in the country recommended such action. In addition, there was the political pressure from the natives themselves to become a part of the action. But that didn't answer the basic question, "Why?" It soon became obvious that we were moving into relatively uncharted territory and the only landmarks we could see were a few untested assumptions, such as:

1. A native teacher will be better able to assess and respond to the learning needs of a native child. This assumption presumes that similarities in cultural background between teacher and child will improve communication and thus foster greater mutual understanding and learning.
2. A native teacher will provide a model with which native students can identify, thus motivating them to achieve greater educational success. This assumption presumes that a native teacher will acquire status in the eyes of the native community.
3. A native teacher will remain within the State and acquire greater cumulative teaching experience which will result in a broader and deeper understanding of local educational processes. This assumption is sometimes viewed as “parochialism,” but it addresses the very real problem of transiency.

We proceeded with these as untested assumptions, because the State had too few practicing native teachers to provide any basis for determining otherwise. We, then, had to explore another question, “Why have so few natives become teachers in the past?” On the basis of our own training and experience, we were confident that the native students possessed the necessary capabilities to become teachers, so the easiest response to the question was to blame “the system. Only a few Native students were coming to the universities for an education, fewer were enrolling in teacher training, fewer yet were completing a four-year degree program, and of those who did complete a teacher training program, only a small number returned to a native community to teach. But blaming the system did not satisfactorily resolve the question either. So again, we had to postulate some ideas through which we could determine how best to proceed with a program that was supposed to address this particular problem. Our assumptions were:

1. The university campus, as a detached and somewhat impersonal learning environment, contributed to the low academic achievement rate of native students. Coming to the university was a one-way street for many native students. A successful campus experience required familiarity with and adherence to a wide range of socio-cultural patterns, many of which were not compatible with the attitudinal and behavioral skills required for survival in the village. Thus, a native person who learned to survive on campus often was no longer satisfied with, or acceptable to, his home community.
2. The teacher training curriculum did not address the needs of students desiring to teach in a physical and cultural environment different from the unidimensional, ethnocentric model around which most teacher training programs were designed. Contemporary teacher training curricula placed a great deal of emphasis on preparing the teacher to assess and provide for “individual differences.” Students were saturated with a psychological perspective of learning and teaching, derived largely from the study of individuals and small groups within Western society. While such training may have been useful, and even necessary, it did not provide an adequate perspective for assessing and responding to the needs of children in rural native communities. Their individual needs had to be assessed within the context of the broader social and cultural environment within which they existed.

Assuming then, that native teachers would provide a unique and desirable service to rural native communities, and that the detachment of the campus experience and the inadequacy of the teacher training curriculum were partially responsible for the limited number of such persons, we now had a rationale and some points of departure from which to proceed on our evolutionary journey.

What Is A “Native” Teacher?

We did not proceed far, however before we realized that in order to develop and operate a teacher training program we had to have some idea of what we were trying to produce, or at least a direction in which to move. We had an alternative to the campus setting, in that the program would be largely field-centered, but we could not develop an alternative curriculum until we had some idea of the kind of

teacher we wanted. We could have taken the traditional teacher training curriculum and delivered it to the students in the field, on the assumption that such an approach would at least succeed in placing some natives in the teaching profession. But this approach would not capitalize on the unique strengths the students might possess as natives. Worse yet, it might even destroy some of those strengths.

On the other hand, we could deviate from the traditional curriculum by defining the teachers' role in the form of "competencies" and judge the students' teaching ability on the basis of "performance criteria" assessed in terms of "measurable behavior." In this way we would at least have some flexibility in developing the program. But defining the competencies required for a "native" teacher, proved to be an elusive endeavor, for no prototype existed. The handful of teachers of native descent in the state had all gone through a traditional teacher training program and were barely distinguishable from other teachers. In addition, no one prototype of a teacher, native or otherwise, could possibly satisfy the diverse cultural and educational needs of the rural native communities. We were also concerned about becoming too bound up in the mechanics of a strict "competency-based" approach and losing sight of the original purpose of the program. The competency approach, therefore, seemed more inhibiting than helpful for our purposes.

We knew, from the limited literature on the subject at the time (primarily Collier), that subtle differences between native and non-native "teachers" in their relationships with native children appeared to have a significant impact on the response of those children to formal learning, even though the materials presented and the learning environments were otherwise similar. The differences seemed to be related, in part, to more compatible communication and interaction styles between native teachers and students, derived from prior associations and common cultural experiences. One of our major concerns then, was to avoid destroying those characteristics inherent in the native person's attitude and behavior that might allow them to relate more effectively to native children. Although we still could not define the ultimate end product, we could at least now state that the program would attempt to protect and nurture the intrinsic qualities that the students brought with them. But we were no further along in explicating those qualities.

We were also aware that the institution of "schooling" and thus, the role of "teacher" as we know it today, were once alien notions in the rural native communities, introduced to the native people within this century by well-intentioned outsiders who only vaguely understood or anticipated the consequences of their action. While "education" was viewed primarily as an informal and life-long process prior to the arrival of schools in rural Alaska, it had since become synonymous with those activities that occurred within the large, luminated building on the hill, and had been further confined to six hours a day, five days a week, 180 days a year. Consequently, the parents and children in the remotest community in Alaska had developed expectations regarding the role of "teacher" similar to those held in any other community where a school, a classroom full of children, and a teacher existed.

Any effort to define the native teacher's role in the context of a specific cultural background was further constrained by the desire on the part of the students themselves to be prepared to teach not only in a rural Alaskan native community, but in any school in the country where an Alaskan teaching certificate could be parlayed as an acceptable license to teach. They did not want a second rate education. We resolved, therefore, that the best judges of what constitutes a native teacher would be the students we were about to train, so the most logical course of action was to obtain their assistance in the development of the program. In that way, we could help the students define their role as we went along. Maybe in the end then we would have some basis for determining whether a native could be a native and a teacher too. Consequently, what follows is as much the product of student thought and effort as it is that of the program staff.

How Do You Train "Native" Teachers?

With a few assumptions in hand to serve as guidelines, a limited conceptual framework within which to work, a vague direction in which to move, and a group of enthusiastic students to lead us, we ventured forth on our journey. Following a brief getting-acquainted and settling-in period in the field sites, all the

students and staff came together for an intensive six-week orientation and work session. It was during this session that the essence of the program evolved.

The individuals from each field site, including the team leader, began to work together, gradually forming a closely knit working team in which the whole became more than the sum of its parts. Team members assisted each other in their work and openly exchanged ideas and opinions to their mutual benefit. Native and non-native students viewed each other as equals and began to explore their similarities and differences. Natives from different ethnic backgrounds within the State discovered they could learn much from each other. They learned how to communicate and understand each other's views through direct experience. Once established, this interaction process carried over on their return to the field sites. The native students learned how to cope with "the system" from the non-native students, who in turn learned how to cope with village life from the native students.

Following the return of the students to the field, we discovered that one of our earlier assumptions needed a broader interpretation: The native community, as a remote but intensely personalized learning environment, was contributing to the low academic achievement rate of non-native students. The non-native students, who comprised one-fourth of the student population, were responsible for nearly one-half of the drop-outs during the first year. They were experiencing the same problems of adjustment to the native community that native students experienced coming on campus. But while this approach created some adjustment problems for the non-native students, it provided numerous advantages for the native students, and for the program as a whole. The delivery of the training to the rural native communities permitted the native students to control the effect of the learning experience by allowing them to encounter it on their own ground and on their own terms. With the help of fellow team members, including the team leader, the students approached their coursework as a cooperative enterprise. When a student had difficulties with a particular assignment, someone was close at hand to help him out. Also, the students did not feel threatened by the instructors (who were sometimes 1500 miles' away) or a large classroom environment, so they did not hesitate to provide feedback to the instructors regarding the courses they were receiving. Instructors working with the program frequently commented on the high quality of work and degree of interest shown by the students in the coursework.

The most significant consequence of the field-centered approach was that it permitted the native students to maintain contact with their own community. Their relationships in the community were often strengthened and several students moved into leadership positions as they developed their abilities to understand and deal with community and school problems. Although the native students were developing many skills and ideas of non-native origin, they were learning and changing within the context of the community, so that no major discontinuity was experienced. Changes within the students and within the communities were continually blended through cohabitation, thus allowing for compatibility of interests and roles as the new life styles evolved.

The same process applied to the native students' experiences in the schools. They gradually worked their way into the classrooms and assumed a variety of roles, sometimes adapting to the situation, other times adapting the situation to themselves. In this way, each student was able to define and carve out his own role as a native teacher in the school and community.

Curriculum

So far I have focused my discussion on two particular structural elements of the training program, namely the team concept and the field-centered approach. What about the "curriculum?" What were the students doing, and what were they supposed to be learning during their stay in the program? In the development of the training design for the program, our concern was focused on the totality of the students' experience-not just the particular courses they would take. Thus, curriculum was viewed in its broadest sense, as encompassing context, process and content. In that sense, the team concept and field-centered approach were integral parts of the curriculum.

The **context** was the community, within which the school was viewed as one element in the total educational experience of each child. The students spent nearly all of the first year living, working and studying out in the community. The training program attempted to capitalize on the resources available to the students through activities that brought the students in direct contact with the realities they would face as teachers.

Within this context, the students learned through an experiential **process**-that is, they came to understand the world around them and their role in it through direct experience. They learned how a community operates by living in and studying their own community. They learned how a child grows by interacting with and observing real children. They learned how to teach by teaching. They learned how to learn, from each other as a team. Most importantly though, through this "confrontation with reality" process, they learned about themselves and how their lives are affected by and affect those around them, which sometimes necessitated a considerable reconstruction of the individual's view of "reality" and his role in it.

On top of all this, we had the curriculum **content**. This could be partially summarized by running down the course list on a student's transcript. But the course titles cannot adequately portray the learning experiences associated with each course, particularly those offered in the field. The field courses were drawn primarily from the social sciences, the humanities, and education, since these could be most easily adapted to, and capitalize on the field setting. So a course that appeared on the transcript as "Anthropological Field Methods" included, inherent within the course activities, a variety of concomitant learning experiences not necessarily represented in the course outline. For example:

1. The students prepared a detailed map and household directory showing all the buildings in their respective communities and listing the residents by age and level of schooling. This brought them in contact with everyone in the community through a purposeful activity, and resulted in a document that was useful to many people in the school and community,, not to mention the specific field method skills the students acquired in the process. This activity placed emphasis on the participant-observer's role, with the native and non-native students sharing their observations from an "insider" and "outsider" perspective. Each activity was preceded by background reading and discussion, and followed by analysis and write-up.
2. The students prepared and conducted open-ended and structured interviews, focusing the questions on an education-related issue that was of immediate concern to themselves or to some element of the school or community. In this way they provided a useful service while gaining experience in interviewing techniques.
3. The students constructed and administered a questionnaire to a sampling of students, teachers, and parents, obtaining information regarding their attitudes on certain school-related issues. They compiled and analyzed the data, and made comparisons to determine the similarities and differences in the three sets of responses. In addition to learning about sampling, and the strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires as a data-gathering technique, they stimulated a lot of discussion in the community regarding the issues and were able to better understand some of the problems they would face as teachers.
4. Each student selected an informant from the community and prepared a "life history," focusing attention on the educational development of the individual. This activity stimulated dialogue between the students and other members of the community, and gave the students some perspective on the processes of cultural transmission, culture change, and acculturation, all of which are highly significant processes for teachers to understand in contemporary Alaska.
5. The students at each site were provided with film, cameras, and a complete set of darkroom equipment, and trained in the use of photography as a research technique.

Each team prepared a photo essay of their community, including a photographic overview, incidents of social interaction, a survey of the technology evident in the community, and a pictorial summary of their own activities as a team. These albums were then brought to the campus during the summer and shared with their fellow students from other teams. This enlarged their perspective on the diversity of cultures and environments existent within their own State.

6. Finally, all of the above information, along with a variety of additional data, was compiled and reported in the form of a community study. The information contained in these reports was of subsequent use to the students, and in several cases, accomplished useful purposes for others. For example, the household directory compiled by the students in one community was instrumental in convincing the U.S. Census Bureau that they had made a 40% error in the official 1970 census conducted the same year. In a community of 500 actual population, an error of this magnitude can result in a drastic misappropriation of critical funds and services that are allocated on a per capita basis. Such results can stimulate a great deal of motivation and interest on the part of the community as well as the students.

I do not wish to imply that all courses were as able to capitalize on the resources of the field setting as the one I have described. Indeed, many courses were simply re-runs of the same courses as taught on campus. To the extent, however, that the instructors were familiar with the field setting and able to adapt their course to that setting, they usually did so.

The conceptual and methodological framework embodied in the curriculum and program design drew heavily on the social sciences, in particular, anthropology. While this may be, in part, a reflection of the educational background of those of us responsible for the academic component of the program, it did not occur without purpose or reasoning. If the students were to eventually overcome the ethnocentric confines of the existing educational system, and see beyond the usual narrow definition of concepts such as "schooling" and "teaching," they would have to develop a perspective that transcends cultural boundaries and provides a holistic and adaptive framework for assessing needs and resolving problems. For that perspective we looked to the content and methods of the social sciences. We employed the concept of culture in its many and varied manifestations, as a means to help the students better understand and assess the needs of the children they were preparing to teach. We used the methods of anthropology to guide us in the development and implementation of the program design. As the program evolved, we gradually developed a separate undergraduate curriculum with an interdisciplinary focus on cross-cultural education, which has since been incorporated into the university's degree offerings.

What Have We Learned?

Since the program was intended to be experimental in nature, we have taken advantage of the rare opportunity to do a lot of experimenting. The whole program has, in effect, been an experiment in the techniques of survival in a bureaucratic society. We have experimented with alternative models in teacher education. We have experimented with different approaches to the delivery of academic coursework. We have experimented with a variety of conceptual frameworks for viewing the process of education. And we have experimented with people's lives, to the extent that we have ventured forth with them into the unknown.

By 1974 we had completed a four-year cycle of the program and forty-two of the original sixty students had graduated, so we took stock of our experience and revised the program to expand on its strengths and reduce its weaknesses. We changed the team leader role from a certificated teacher to that of a university faculty member who remained in the field, but whose responsibilities were expanded to encompass a region rather than a single community. In this way the instructors could become more familiar with student needs, and more students could have access to the program.

We also expanded the curriculum beyond the elementary teaching emphasis to include the preparation of bilingual teachers and teachers for small rural high schools, and the development of a non-teaching degree emphasis in "human resource development" to prepare persons for the educational development roles in the new regional and village corporations (see Gaffney, this publication). Since the program's efforts were expanded beyond the preservice training of teachers, the program name was changed from ARTTC to the Cross-cultural Education Development Program (or X-CED), reflecting the broader application and focus of concern. In addition, a Masters program in cross-cultural education has been developed and is now available through the same field delivery system established for the undergraduate program.

So what have we learned from it all? In effect, we have learned most of what I have presented above. Although we had some vague notions about what we wanted to do in the beginning, we had no detailed, premeditated plan or preconceived model from which to work. Since we were unable to obtain an acceptable training model elsewhere, and we did not want to force the students into a potentially inappropriate model of our own making, we decided to use a process approach and let the program evolve. What I have described above as the program is what we have learned and accomplished through a process of evolution.

We also have learned that the single most important characteristic that program personnel must possess, if such an approach is to succeed, is a high tolerance for ambiguity. Many persons find it difficult to cope with uncertainty and to proceed with little more than intuition and instinct as guides. They seek structure or closure on a matter prematurely, thus reducing the opportunity for flexibility and adaptability. Under contemporary pressures for accountability and related demands for the delineation of specific objectives and the development of flow charts in pursuit of explicit end products, it is indeed difficult to survive on a creed that declares, "We will know where we are going when we get there." So far, we have learned enough about what we are doing and where we are going in time to satisfy our own needs for direction and to meet the challenges of each step along the way. If we had tried to anticipate in the beginning all that we know now, we would have been overwhelmed and given up long ago.

We have learned many other things since we started our journey that have implications for what we are trying to do. Since some of these are still vague and undocumented notions, and others are fundamental questions that may not be resolvable, I will present a few of them in brief, summary form here, as points of departure for future discussion.

We have learned that it is difficult to be a native and a teacher too. Many aspects of the two positions are incompatible and the demands of the role are enormous. On the one hand, as a native, the native teacher is expected to represent the community's interest in the school. On the other hand, as a teacher, he is expected to represent the school's interest in the community. Until the function and format of the school is compatible with the needs and cultural milieu of the community, however, compromise is inevitable for the native teacher. In addition, the adaptation is usually in the direction of the school, for it is difficult to significantly change the role of the teacher in the context of a conventional school environment. So the native teacher faces a Catch 22-the more effective he is as a teacher, the less effective he may become as a native, and vice versa. Our concern then, is that placing native teachers in the schools may not significantly improve the education of native children, if the design of the institution itself does not change. But who is to change it, and in what direction? (See Barnhardt, this publication.)

We have learned that our program may not really be training "teachers" after all. Six months into their first year of teaching, we brought the first group of graduates back together at a meeting to find out how they were doing in their hard-won profession. They related a variety of concerns, particularly in reference to the day-to-day routine of teaching. They did not feel satisfied with such everyday teaching responsibilities as lesson planning and classroom management. The consensus of the group was that they were frustrated as teachers in the schools, because they had been prepared as "educators." They felt more like general practitioners than specialists. Consequently, many of them left the schools and took up practice in

other types of educational programs. Our tendency, at this point, is to view this outcome more as a success than as a failure.

We have learned that the literature in education, as well as anthropology, is often of limited use in our program. Almost all of the literature normally used to help prepare teachers for work with cultural minorities assumes that the teacher will be from outside the culture. From the native students' point of view, the literature is "culturally deprived." While such issues as "familiarity with the cultural background of the children," or "ability to communicate effectively," are major issues in the "outsider" context, they become secondary to the native teacher. In most of the literature, the natives usually find themselves as the objects of study. In an effort to break down some of the stereotypes embodied in the anthropological literature, we have focused our studies on groups and institutions in Western society. So now the native students are taking on the role of anthropologist and studying the primitive society of the school. They compensate for the lack of appropriate literature by generating their own.

We have also learned that the training of educators, native or non-native, requires more than the inclusion of a few anthropology courses in the teacher training curriculum. Such a limited focus runs the risk of putting just enough information in teachers' hands to make them dangerous, even when well-intentioned (see Kleinfeld, this publication). The development of a cross-cultural perspective in education requires that the person being trained have extensive guided field experience in which the methods and concepts provided in the training are blended with actual working experience. Only after having coped with the uncertainty and confusion engendered in a cross-cultural experience, can a person fully internalize a perspective which transcends cultural boundaries, and only when such a perspective is fully internalized can the person use it productively.

For most native students, cross-cultural experience is implicit in the daily life of the individual. Engaging in academic training, itself, contributes to that cross-cultural experience. The problem, then, is one of identifying and understanding the forces shaping that experience, and developing the capability to deal with it more objectively. By examining and analyzing the confluence of external and locally derived experiences through close and sometimes intense personal interaction with non-native team members within the community context, the native student is able to inductively build and gradually internalize a "transcultural perspective," while at the same time retaining his own cultural integrity.

For the non-native (or native) student without previous cross-cultural experience, the process of internalizing a "transcultural perspective" appears to be more difficult, consisting of three identifiable stages, and of at least one year duration. The three stages may be generally classified as (1) enamoration, (2) antipathy, and (3) transcendence. In the first stage the new experiences are all exciting and different. New insights are spawned, the causes of problems are easily identified, and hope for the future abounds. Then reality sets in, and we are in stage two. The problems are not as simply formulated as they first appeared, and the solutions become even more evasive. Human relationships become increasingly complex and difficult to manage. Basic value orientations are called into question. Disenchantment reaches the point of anger and frustration. Careful guidance is necessary at this point to prevent the onset of avoidance behavior, or complete rejection of the experience. Failure to go beyond stage two will result in bitterness and an aversion to cross-cultural issues which is often manifested in a regressive attitude implying "I have been there and it didn't work." Careful planning and support must be provided to insure that the persons being trained are given the opportunity to reconstruct their view of reality and basic value system within the context of a transcending conceptual framework. Once they have achieved such a reorientation, they have begun to internalize the cross-cultural experience.

Finally, we have learned that the processes by which education takes place are often more important than the content that is being transmitted. The field-based nature of the program appears to be more influential in the students' development than the material being presented in the courses. The graduates are frustrated as teachers, in part, because their field experiences, while progressing through the conventional teacher training curriculum, exposed them to educational processes beyond the school.

Those experiences are reflected in the behavior of graduates who are striving to develop comparable field experiences and approaches in their work as “educators.” If the adage, “You teach as you are taught” is correct (and we believe it is), then our task as a program staff is to provide a model whereby the processes through which we train teachers will also be applicable to the education of children in the communities. Though we continue to strive for more appropriate and useful content in the academic coursework, the process through which the content is presented remains our primary focus of concern.

Another dimension of the field-delivery process that has been critical to the implementation of this approach is the nature of staff/student relationships. The closer the personal relationship between staff and student, the more effective and productive the learning experiences have been, and there is a big difference between “personalizing” and “individualizing” those experiences. Using course completion as an indicator, we have had very little success with canned correspondence and strict competency-based courses. Although such courses were usually mechanically efficient and flexible in terms of alternative routes and timelines for completion, if the instructor did not provide personalized attention to each student’s needs, the courses were generally neglected and ineffective. Education is not an efficient process, and attempts to make it so can often undermine the purpose for which it is intended—the medium becomes the message.

The most successful courses have been those in which the instructor has been aware of the students’ needs and has devoted considerable time and effort to take interest in, and personally address issues, problems, and concerns raised by each individual student. Though this may seem obvious, it is often difficult to achieve because instructors rarely meet students face-to-face and are not able to convey ideas, feelings, and impressions in the usual manner to which they are accustomed. A personal note on an assignment becomes much more significant under these conditions than in a campus context, so instructors must reorient their perception of students. Since effective teaching under these conditions can be extremely demanding and time consuming, we have sought to limit the size of the program and the number of students, and thus provide an opportunity for strong staff/student relationships to develop. Without such relationships, though some students might be coaxed through a limited number of courses, few will complete a four-year degree program. And while, for some purposes a few courses may be sufficient, the long range educational needs of rural Alaska call for fully degreed and credentialed native persons who can begin to assume professional responsibility for, and control of, the programs serving their people. We, therefore, have attempted to develop a program oriented to the needs of students working toward a four-year degree. To offer less would only perpetuate the second class status to which native people are often relegated in schools today.

These are only highlights of what we have done and have learned over the past few years. We intend to continue learning, from our successes as well as our failures, because only through continued exploration of alternatives can we build upon our experiences and push back the frontiers of our understanding. Hopefully, then, the education of the children of tomorrow will benefit from our experiences today.

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