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Serving the Purpose of Education

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In this article, Leona Okakok analyzes differences between the Northwest Alaska Inupiat and the Western world views, discusses the history of Western culture's influence on her own culture, and explains why the Native school board has taken full control of the educational system. She includes a discussion of the Inupiat's struggle to preserve their mother tongue and details how the school board has managed to adapt a foreign educational system to contemporary Inupiat culture (which accommodates both Western institutions and a traditional, subsistence-based lifestyle). Okakok's perceptive analyses encompass multiple viewpoints and engage the reader with concrete images and experiences of community-based education.

Alaska! To many who have never been here, the mere mention of the word brings visions of a vast and barren land, a landscape shaped by the endlessly drifting snow, where the human quest for survival is thwarted at every turn by the malevolent forces of nature. Vast, yes. And though I would not dismiss perceptions of barrenness, cold, and a constant quest for survival, I want to put them in perspective.

When people read about northern Alaska—even excellent material—or come here for a short period of time, they form a perception of our land and people based on experiences having nothing to do with us. For instance, if you come from an area that is rich in varieties of landscape, the flat tundra of the high arctic—no matter how full of life—may seem barren to you. You will not see all the various signs of life that are obvious to longtime residents of the area. The same applies to the perception of cold. If your mind is focused on the seventy-degree temperatures back home, the spring here will seem cold to you—although it may be even warmer than usual to a seasoned resident.

Many non-Alaskans assume that everyone prefers warm weather. But, though warmth is certainly welcomed and appreciated during appropriate times of the year, for a hunting society in the North it is not the weather of choice during critical overland travel time into hunting areas. Our preference, then, depends more on necessity than sensation. Unusual warmth would concern an Alaskan hunter. An early thaw could severely jeopardize travel to his spring hunting sites, threatening his ability to provide food for his family for the coming year. Travel to hunting sites has to coincide with the migration of certain animals through these areas.

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If the rivers break up early, travel is hampered, at best, and life-threatening, at worst.

But Native people as well are not immune to applying old perceptions to new experience. My mother-in-law visited my husband and me in California while we were attending school there some years ago. Looking through the backyard window of our apartment, she remarked that someone "ought to cut down this tree back here. It just blocks an otherwise beautiful view." To her, a good view allowed one to see far away without obstruction. She did not realize that, in that part of the world, the tree was *a valued part of the view*.

We all know that we can go through life convinced that our view of the world is the only valid one. If we are interested in new perceptions, however, we need to catch a glimpse of the world through other eyes. We need to be aware of our own thoughts, as well as the way life is viewed by other people. It is my hope that this article will show you a different way of looking at northern Alaska and at us, the Inupiat Eskimos who live here.[1]

Northern Alaska Inupiat Eskimos

The Arctic has been home to the Northern Alaska Inupiat Eskimos for thousands of years. Our history as a people is rich in tradition, passed on through the centuries, generation to generation, by storytellers widely known for their skillful art. These stories and legends both entertain and help us to better understand who we are.[2] Because of the high value we place on the ability to retell these stories and legends accurately, we can better ensure that Inupiat strengths and values are passed on to each succeeding generation.

Oral history and the art of storytelling, highly developed in a society which used it to pass on subsistence techniques and cultural values, is still practiced today, but the critical element in the process — the audience — has changed. Audiences which used to be composed of young and old listeners now usually include only the elders. Our accelerated entry into the twentieth century has brought much confusion. Besides the daily chores critical to life in the Arctic, new and varied concerns,

[1] "Inupiat" is the plural form of the name we call ourselves, the singular being "Inupiaq." "Inuk," the stem, means "a person." The ending "-piaq" means "real," "most common," or "the most prevalent type." Although the plural form is commonly translated as "the real people," a more accurate translation would be "the most common type of people," or "the people we are most familiar with."

Although either the singular or plural form can stand alone, sometimes — for more clarity — additional nouns are used:

If you are talking about one person, you use "Inupiaq" ("An Inupiaq [person] came to see me.")
If you are talking about a people, you use "Inupiat" ("The Inupiat [people] love to sing.")

When the word is coupled with "Eskimo," which is an easily understood (though non-Inupiaq) word, convention has it take the plural form. Thus we have such sentences as: "She is a fluent Inupiat Eskimo speaker," or "She is a fluent Inupiaq speaker." Both are correct.

The word "Eskimo" is a common term for the circumpolar peoples, who include the Inupiat as well as other groups. We prefer "Inuit" to "Eskimo," but it is less easily recognized by non-Inuit. If we tried to uncomplicate this for the sake of non-Inupiaq speakers, the sentence would begin to lose meaning for Inupiaq-speaking readers. We ask English readers to bear with what seems to be inconsistencies. We are trying, as with everything else, to use a foreign system (English) to get across some Inupiaq concepts and have it make sense to both groups.

[2] For more information on passing down values through traditional stories and legends, see Edna MacLean's keynote speech given at the Alaska Bilingual/Bicultural Conference in 1987, available through the State of Alaska Department of Education, Box F, Juneau, AK 99811.

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including Western education and religion, vie for the time and interest of the child. Even if children are interested, rarely do they have time to sit quietly, to listen and learn from their elders. The purpose of these long storytelling sessions—that of passing down values and other important elements of our culture—is severely restricted. The elders' role as *the* teachers and resource regarding contemporary life is no longer a given. Now, excellence in the subsistence way of life does not ensure survival in our modern world. The cash economy, Western civilization, and Christianity—concepts which the elders could not teach when they were introduced—emerged as standards against which others judged our life.

Parents, recognizing the inevitable encroachment of the Western way of life upon Inupiat land and culture, reluctantly released their young into the hands of schoolteachers, who assured them that this was best for their child. We respected the judgment of these newcomers to the area—teachers and ministers—because they were authorities on the new way of life. They represented the efforts of the United States Bureau of Education, which, through a contractual arrangement with churches, was committed to providing an education to children within what was then the District of Alaska. We did not realize that their objective was to educate our children enough to reject their own culture and to embrace the "more civilized" Western way of life. With this purpose firmly in mind, Western education began for our young.

The Early Years

In order to show the disruption caused by the displacement of our own educational system, I will briefly sketch the early development of Western education in our area of Alaska, which began in 1889 when the first school was established in Barrow (it was administered by the Presbyterian Church through a contract with the Federal Bureau of Education). This early phase continued until the 1920s, causing changes that affected the whole community: Children were no longer learning the ways of our people at home, and families were severely restricted from taking their children along on extended hunting trips—the children's prime learning experience. Families often had to depend on relatives willing to allow children to remain with them in the village while their parents were on extended hunting leave. Although many elders now gratefully acknowledge their relatives' hospitality back then and recall being treated as children of the household, there was much left to be desired. Certainly there were exceptions, but frequently those who were given the chance to attend school had to continue their basic education—achieving the ability to survive in their world—long after others their age had achieved success as subsistence hunters. The effort to mainstream the Inupiat children into Western society failed.

The focus of education in the North shifted only after local control was initiated in the mid-1970s. No longer were we, as a people, to be forced to assimilate into Western society. Western education *would* serve its purpose, but it would be a purpose determined by our own people.

The District

Eben Hopson, the power behind the formation of the North Slope Borough, our

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Home Rule Government, said in a speech before the local School Board in December, 1975:

> Possibly the greatest significance of Home Rule is that it has enabled us to regain control of the education of our children. . . . We must now begin to assess whether or not our school system is truly becoming an Inupiat School system reflecting Inupiat educational philosophies, or are we, in fact, only theoretically exercising political control over the educational system that continues to transmit white urban culture. Political control over our schools must include professional control as well in our academic institutions if our academic institutions are to become an Inupiat School System able to transmit our Inupiat traditions, values and ideas.[3]

In his speech, Mr. Hopson also reiterated the basic purpose behind the formation of the North Slope Borough School District: stopping the assimilation process which had long been advocated by Bureau of Indian Affairs schools as the only way to "civilize" our people.

In assuming control over our educational system, which began after the establishment of the North Slope Borough School District in the mid-1970s, we, the people of the northern countries, have struggled with the problem of Western content and approaches to education in our schools. While seeking to produce students with scholastic achievements comparable to those of other areas of the United States, the board has also sought ways to bring into our schools certain elements of historical and contemporary Inupiat Eskimo culture and knowledge of our natural environment. We have found that the attainment of academic skills in our students is directly related to our ability to successfully introduce Inupiat Eskimo concepts and educational practices into our schools. This paper describes some of our actions in this area. After discussing some important differences between the Inupiat and Western concepts of education, I will describe some of the modifications to our school system and innovations that we have implemented with some success.

The North Slope Borough School District, established in 1972, is the northernmost school district in the United States and encompasses the northern third of Alaska, an area of approximately 88,000 square miles. The district serves nine schools in eight villages with over 1,500 students, a majority of whom are Inupiat Eskimo (Northern Alaska Eskimo). The largest of these villages is Barrow, the northernmost community in the United States. Ipalook Elementary School, the largest of the nine schools, is located here, with a school population of 580 children from ECE (Early Childhood Education) through grade six. (Barrow has a separate junior/senior high school.) The smallest of our schools is Cully School in Point Lay, Alaska, with a total pupil population of forty six, ECE through twelfth grade. Most of the other schools fall somewhere in between Ipalook and Cully.

What draws these nine schools together is a common heritage, language, and the municipal government under which they were established. We decided that local control was the only way to ensure that our values as Inupiat people were reflected within the school system. Great strides have been made with the formation of the school district and the subsequent redefining of the purpose of educa-

[3] Eben Hopson speech, December 1975. On file at the Inupiat History, Language and Culture Division of the Planning Department, North Slope Borough, P.O. Box 69, Barrow, AK 99723.

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Steven Patkotok *(right)* teaches ivory carving to Vernon Rexford.

tion. We had to take a "foreign" system—the Western educational system—and strive to make it work for us. This has not happened without its share of problems, however. The differences between cultures and lifestyles were ignored for far too many years in the hope that what worked for the White population could be made to work for our Native people by mere persistence.

The Role of Local Culture in the Learning Process

We, the indigenous people of the United States, have had to overcome many obstacles in order to acquire basic education. One of the main obstacles was language. Not only were we required to learn to read, at the same time we also had to learn the language we were learning to read in. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, in order to help children learn English, teachers visited Inupiaq parents and instructed them to speak only English to their children. Most parents knew very little, if any, English, so they were effectively being told to sever communication with their children. Parents were willing to comply with this instruction, except that their great love for their children and the necessity to interact with them sustained Inupiaq in the household, thus keeping alive the foundation of our culture. But severe retardation of our native language did take place in time. Besides ordering that English be spoken at home, teachers punished children for speaking their mother tongue in the classroom. I remember clearly catching myself many times speaking in Inupiaq during my first few years in school and feeling guilty for doing so. I was rarely caught and, therefore, rarely punished, but others were not so lucky. Many times we'd hear the whack of the ruler either on the head or the palm of the hand of any student caught being "naughty" and speaking in our language.

But we spoke in our own language in order to survive. Imagine learning to say a word in a language you did not know, and having no earthly idea what that word represented. As hard as learning a foreign language was, however, it was easier than absorbing the content of Western education. The world view of the West,

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the perspective from which our schoolbooks were written, was totally different from ours. Therefore, understanding what we were learning to read in the English language came very hard. For example, as I was learning to read, one of my earliest realizations was that, in the Western world, grandparents and other relatives are not people you see or visit every day, even when they live nearby in the same town or city. A visit from them is an occasion, a cause for special preparations. This behavior was so foreign to my experience that it took me a long time to understand what I was reading and to realize that extended families are not the norm in the Western world.

In our communities, visiting relatives is a frequent, everyday occurrence, learned in early childhood. Unplanned, spontaneous visits (as opposed to purposeful visits) bond our relationships with relatives and friends. When visiting is unplanned, it does not require a formal invitation; tea or a soft drink is usually served unless it is near mealtime, when visitors will be expected to join in the meal. Other cultural practices, such as the special relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, reinforce these visiting patterns. A high degree of social interaction is the norm in our communities.[4]

During the years my husband and I attended the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, my father's first cousin, an elderly lady, lived right in town, an area where I frequently shopped. When I took my father there for a visit I was soundly scolded for visiting only when I had a purpose—in this instance, taking my father to see her. Although I was living in the same town, I had not nurtured my relationship with my aunt with intermittent, spontaneous visits.

In the Western world privacy is considered such a basic right that I am afraid many find it hard to understand the value of spontaneous visits. It is equally hard for us to understand why anyone would want to have so much privacy that developing nurturing relationships becomes very difficult, if not impossible. This is an example of one area where two very diverse cultures have different but equally valid values; members of both cultures have to strive to acknowledge and to understand each other's differences.

Another example of the proliferation of Western concepts and Western "realities" contained within textbooks is the "fact" that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. This is included in tests that evaluate the child's understanding of the world around him or her. In the arctic, however, the sun behaves differently. Depending on the time of year, it can do almost anything, six examples of which are: 1) it doesn't rise at all; 2) it peeks through the horizon for a few minutes; 3) it rises in the South and sets in the South a few minutes later; 4) it rises in the East and sets in the West; 5) it rises in the North and sets in the North almost twenty-four

[4] For more information on Inupiat extended family relationships, see Rosita Worl and Charles W. Smythe, *Barrow: A Decade of Modernization* (Anchorage: U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Alaska OCS Region, Socioeconomic Studies Program Technical Report No. 125, 1986); Robert F. Spencer, *The Northern Alaskan Eskimo*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 171 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959); or Ernest S. Burch, Jr., *Eskimo Kinsmen: Changing Family Relationships in Northwest Alaska*, The American Ethnological Society Monograph No. 59 (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1875).

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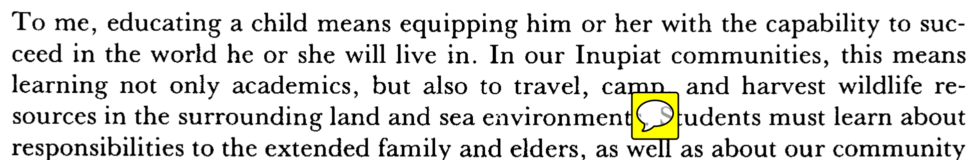
> My Life
>
> Baxter Adams, Grade 8
>
> When I was small I went to go camping with my family. When I was one years old I walked. When I was two I learned to talk. When I was three I had lots of fun. When I was four I went to Anchorage. When I was five I went to Seattle. When I was six I went to school. When I was seven I went to a circus. When I was eight I went to Fairbanks. When I was nine I got a first shotgun. When I was ten I got a bike. When I was eleven I got a duck. When I was twelve I got a goose. When I was thirteen my uncle caught a whale. When I was fourteen the crews went down to go whaling. That is my life.

hours later; *or* 6) it doesn't set at all. During the whole process of moving from the first instance to the last, so gradual is the sun's movement along the continuum that it is almost imperceptible. You will note that the Western world's "fact" about the sun rising in the East and setting in the West is only one of various northern Alaskan realities. Saying that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West up here would be like saying that a yo-yo with a two-foot string reaches twelve inches. Certainly it does, at some instant, reach the twelve-inch point, but there are infinite points along the string that it also reaches, including being fully wound and fully extended.

Because the rising and setting of the sun rarely changes in the rest of the United States, it does seem a useful gauge in determining a child's learning. But for children in the far North, there are too many variables for "the" fact of where the sun rises and sets for it to be useful. For Western students, the direction of shadows or looking in the direction of the rising or setting sun are obvious clues to the time of day. But when these clues were presented in schoolbooks, I was always looking also for clues as to the time of year, which, I later realized, even if they were given, would not have helped at all. Although I am a puzzle fan, I was often understandably stumped by what I later learned was no puzzle at all to Western students.

Those of us who experienced these problems during our schooling realized that we had to find a better way to teach our children. We who work at the grassroots level of education—the local PTAs, advisory committees, and school boards—are in a unique position to observe schooling in action. We are often the first to know when something works and when it doesn't.

Contrasting Definitions of Education



To me, educating a child means equipping him or her with the capability to succeed in the world he or she will live in. In our Inupiat communities, this means learning not only academics, but also to travel, camp, and harvest wildlife resources in the surrounding land and sea environment. Students must learn about responsibilities to the extended family and elders, as well as about our community

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and regional governments, institutions, and corporations, and significant issues in the economic and social system.

"Education" and "schooling" have become quite interchangeable in everyday speech. When we talk of a person being educated we usually mean he or she has gone through a series of progressively higher formal systems of learning. Although a person may be an authority on a subject, we don't usually think of him or her as "educated" if he or she is self-taught. Since all of our traditional knowledge and expertise is of this latter type, the concept of "an educated person" has worked against us as a people, creating conflicting attitudes, and weakening older and proven instructional methods and objects of knowledge. Therefore, we, the North Slope Borough School District School Board, have defined "education" as a lifelong process, and "schooling" as our specific responsibility. This is expressed in our Educational Philosophy statement:

> Education, a lifelong process, is the sum of learning acquired through interaction with one's environment, family, community members, schools and other institutions and agencies. Within the Home Rule Municipality of the North Slope Borough, "schooling" is the specific, mandated responsibility of the North Slope Borough School District Board of Education.
>
> The Board of Education is committed to providing academic excellence in the "schooling" environment. This commitment to academic excellence shall focus on the learner, recognizing that each student brings to the "schooling" environment his own interests, learning styles, cultural background and abilities.[5]

We decided that our role is to control the environment of the schooling process: the building, the equipment and materials, the quality of teaching and counselling services—everything about our schools—to ensure that education can take place in the classroom.

Remember that education is also the passing down of a society's values to children. Although I suppose there are people who would disagree, I think teachers pass down values by what they do in certain situations. Showing approval to a child for quickly attempting to answer a question—even wrongly—is valuing a quick answer to questions. At home, this same child may have been taught not to say anything until he or she has observed and observed and *observed*, and feels certain that his or her answer is correct. At home, the parents value accuracy more highly than a quick answer. They know that accuracy may mean the difference between life and death in the Arctic. In grade school, however, many of us learned that the teacher would "reward" us when we spoke up, whether we were right or wrong. Only by hearing our responses could she determine whether or not learning was taking place. If the answer was correct, she would have the opportunity to praise us. If a wrong answer was given, this gave her the opportunity to correct us.

Education is more than book learning, it is also value-learning. To address this issue we, as a board, have incorporated a cultural component into our new-hire orientation. The bilingual department is an integral part of the orientation, high-

[5] North Slope Borough School District Policy Manual, Policy AD (Educational Philosophy), Adopted 10/13/76, Revised 8/11/87.

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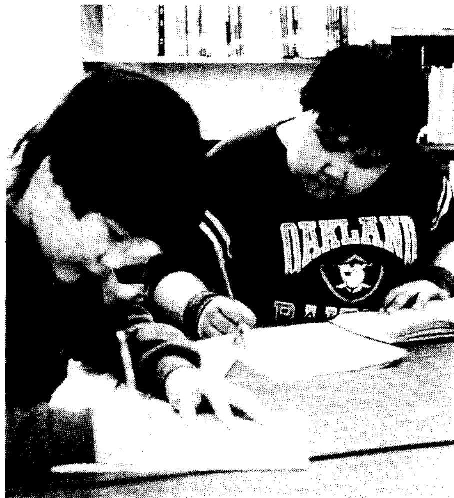
lighting differences in how our children learn. We hope that awareness lessens the frustration of teaching children who do not respond in ways teachers usually expect.

It is interesting that the root of the English word "educate" is very similar to our Inupiaq concept of education. According to Webster:

> It has often been said that *educate* means 'to draw out' a person's talents as opposed to putting in knowledge or instructions. This is an interesting idea, but it is not quite true in terms of the etymology of the word. 'Educate' comes from Latin *educare*, 'to educate', which is derived from a specialized use of Latin *educere* (from *e-*, 'out,' and *ducere*, 'to lead') meaning 'to assist at the birth of a child.'[6]

This old meaning of the English word "educate" is similar to our own Inupiat Eskimo word "iñuguq-"[7]—which literally means "to cause to become a person." It refers to someone who attends to the child in the formative years and helps him or her to become a person. In our Inupiat Eskimo society, the first few years of a child's life are a time when they are "becoming a person." Anyone who attends to the child during that time of his or her life is said to cause him or her to become a person, "iñuguġaa."

We Inupiat believe that a child starts becoming a person at a young age, even while he or she is still a baby. When a baby displays characteristics of individual behavior, such as a calm demeanor or a tendency to temper tantrums, we say "he or she is becoming a person." In our culture, such characteristics are recognized



Larry Chrestman *(left)* and Timothy Oomituk *(author of poem at right)* during individual work.

Poem

Timothy Oomituk, Grade 8

Me
Excited, Active
Visiting, Talking, Playing
Teachers, Friend, School, Barrow
Working, Learning, Walking
Laughing, Big

Timothy

[6] *Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 418.

[7] Inupiaq words followed by a hyphen are stems that need at least an ending to make sense. For those interested in more information about the structure of the language, please see the introduction to *Iñupiallu Tanŋillu Uqaluŋisa Iḷaŋich, Abridged Iñupiaq and English Dictionary*, compiled by Adna Ahgeak MacLean (University of Alaska, 1980).

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and accommodated from early childhood. As each child shows a proclivity toward a certain activity, it is quickly acknowledged and nurtured. As these children and adults in the community interact, bonds are established that help determine the teacher and the activities which will be made available to that particular child. As education progresses, excellence is pursued naturally.

Parents often stand back and let a child explore and experience things, observing the child's inclinations. If a child shows an aptitude for skills that the parents don't possess, they might arrange for their child to spend time with an expert, or an adult may ask to participate in the education of the child. Thus, many adults in the community have a role in the education of our children.

When you hear the word "educate," you may think more often of the primary Webster definition, which is "to provide with training or knowledge, especially via formal education." In the Western tradition, educating children depends heavily on a system of formal schooling with required attendance until a certain age.

Our concept of education has much in common with the Western concept of "child-rearing." It is interesting to us that Eskimo practices of child-rearing are commonly regarded as "permissive," in contrast to Western methods. Our perception is that Western child-rearing practices are overly directive and controlling, essentially interfering and intruding in the development of the child. The development of individuality is constrained and childhood is prolonged in Western society.

Though most of the education in our traditional society was not formal, it was serious business. For us, education meant equipping the child with the wherewithal to survive in our world. Because social interaction is a part of survival in the Arctic, this included education in proper social behavior, as well as in equipping the child with the means with which to make a living. As Robert F. Spencer wrote in his description of traditional North Alaskan Eskimo society: "The educative process . . . succeeded in a remarkable way [to produce] an individual capable of living in the cooperative situation demanded by the social and natural environment." [8]

In the traditional Inupiat Eskimo culture, education was everybody's business. It was okay to admonish, scold, or otherwise correct the behavior of any child, whether or not one was a relative. The success of the child's education depended in large part on how well his or her parents accepted admonishment of their child by other members of their own community. We as a people valued this acceptance highly because we knew that every member of our village was involved in some way with equipping our child for success.

Educating for Success

We need to equip our children for all the choices to be made upon graduation. In the North Slope Borough a majority of our students choose to remain in their villages after graduation. To provide an adequate education for each child, therefore, we need to teach Arctic survival skills, as well as the academic skills needed for success in the Western world.

[8] *The Northern Alaskan Eskimo*, p. 239.

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As stated above, there were problems inherent in the displacement of our traditional educational system with the Western model, which have to be addressed if we hope to make schooling a success for our children. I will now discuss our innovations in several key areas.

Teacher-Student Ratio

Most survival education took the form of one-to-one learning. A "student" had many teachers, each teaching the child during different parts of the day or year. Young boys were taught hunting skills by their father, uncle, grandfather, or another skilled hunter. Young girls learned from their mother, grandmother, or sister all the various skills needed to run a household, feed the family, and keep them warm.

In the Western education model, on the other hand, groups of students are put in a classroom and taught many skills throughout the year by a single teacher. The one-to-one student-teacher relationship is absent, and the assumption is that a single teacher is proficient in *all* the skills to be taught to the whole group.

We have addressed this difference in two ways. First, a low student-teacher ratio helps us to better address the needs of individual students. Second, teacher aides hired from within the community provide critical role models for students, since an overwhelming majority of our classroom teachers still have to be brought in from outside our school district.

Although we can never hope to reach the traditional one-to-one ratio through Western classroom teaching, we can recognize the role of other "teachers"—par-

Reading Hour in Barrow, Alaska. Martha Hopson *(right)* reads to *(counterclockwise)* Falomi Ahgeak, Mandy Olemaun, and Asisaun Tanigeo.

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ents, grandparents, community and church members—in the child's life and work with them toward the child's successful learning. We also need to recognize that the hours children spend away from the classroom are as much a part of their education as classroom time. This means teaching them how to use any situation as a learning experience. Excellent teachers recognize and teach this already. These are points we need to keep in mind, as a school board, when planning our educational program.

Skills Taught

The traditional education of the Inupiat people focused not merely on survival but on excellence. Although all children were expected to master the basics of subsistence living, the inclinations exhibited by each child were noted and nurtured. All specialties were needed in order for the culture to survive. A storyteller and philosopher was as integral to the community as a good provider or an excellent seamstress. Once an Inupiat Eskimo child shows an inclination, such as an interest in archery, storytelling, or sewing, that interest is nurtured by all concerned with his "education." He or she may be apprenticed to a relative or another member of the community who is an expert in that field. Certain other areas of education may be de-emphasized so that the child may develop his or her talent.

Some years ago, at a gathering of elders for a regional Elders' Conference, Otis Ahkivgak recalled how he developed his hunting skills to the exclusion of learning other things considered equally important:

> . . . you see, when they would have the 'nalukataq' [blanket toss] festival I would never pay much attention. I would push along a sled by its stanchions and go hunting down there. That is the reason I don't know the great songs of the 'nalukataq' feasts. . . . Although I listened from where the airport is now, when they were singing long and loud I was occupying myself delightfully with the snipes. Although I can try singing them by following my recollection of their singing, I do not know them very well.[9]

Once Western education models were introduced into our culture, the nurturing of individual interests virtually stopped. No matter what the unique interests of the child, all were taught the same subjects, at the same pace, in the classroom.

Although we can no longer de-emphasize other subjects a child needs to learn, we can recognize the talent within and use that interest to help the child succeed in other areas. This requires talent and creativity on the part of the teacher. We have excellent, creative teachers, but in order to fully utilize this talent we need to identify policies or regulations that restrict the exercise of their creativity and search for alternatives that fully support teachers.

Another way of attending to the quality of skills taught to the children is through building partnerships within the community. For many years now, departments within the North Slope Borough, such as the Planning, Public Safety, and Health and Social Services departments, have willingly sent employees to classrooms to give talks to students on subjects ranging from secretarial work, to surveying, to management. The children need to see how their studies are applicable to real life:

[9] Kisautaq (Leona Okakok's Eskimo name), *Puiguikaat* (Things You Should Never Forget), Proceedings of the 1978 Elders Conference, North Slope Borough, 1981, p. 367.

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how the command of English is important in secretarial work; the use of calculus in surveying; the role of logic, mathematics, and social skills in management decisions.

Parent Involvement

Another challenge is parent involvement. In our traditional society, once a "teacher" is identified, parents do not interfere. Although they, themselves, may not be experts in whatever is being taught, they have complete faith that the "teacher" will do whatever needs to be done to equip the child with the skills to succeed in our world.

Since Western education was introduced in the Arctic, Western teachers were given the same courtesy previously extended to Native "teachers": they were left to do with the child what they needed to do to educate him or her. After all, the teachers were the experts in the areas being taught, something that they, the parents, knew nothing about. Then, as today, this was often misinterpreted by educators to mean that parents did not care about their child's education, when, in fact, they were doing what they felt was in the best interest of the child.

Parent involvement, or rather the lack of it, is often touted as *the* problem of educating Native youngsters. What we, as people interested in Native education, need to do, now that we are fully immersed in Western education, is to assure parents that this particular type of education *needs* parent involvement in order for the child to succeed. Parents will become more involved only when they learn that their knowledge, regardless of the extent of their schooling, is valued and plays an important part in their child's education. Teachers need to reach out to individual parents and to the community. Because school was not a positive experience for some of those who are now parents, going to the school, even for parent-teacher conferences, is often intimidating. We hope that through positive interactions these parents can eventually become not only involved but keenly interested in other aspects of education.

Parent involvement is an important element in another specific area of education in the North: that of passing down the language of our people. As is the case with indigenous languages anywhere in the world, our children are our only hope for the survival of our language. Our cultures, as peoples indigenous to the United States, are unique and to be found nowhere else in the world. Once our languages disappear, we have nowhere else in the world to turn to revive them. Yet there has not been much support for the language preservation programs which Native Americans have been trying to administer. We must make certain that indigenous languages within North America are not allowed to die, and we must employ every humanitarian effort it takes to do so.[10]

Cultural Identity

Some of our greatest successes in the schooling process can be attributed to the fact that we take advantage of both the historical and contemporary culture of an area. For example, we invite elders into the classroom to tell stories and teach cultural activities (songs, dances, sewing), because in our society respect for elders is a value taught very early in life, and the classroom has become the place where

[10] For more information on efforts to preserve Alaska Native Languages, contact the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK 99775.

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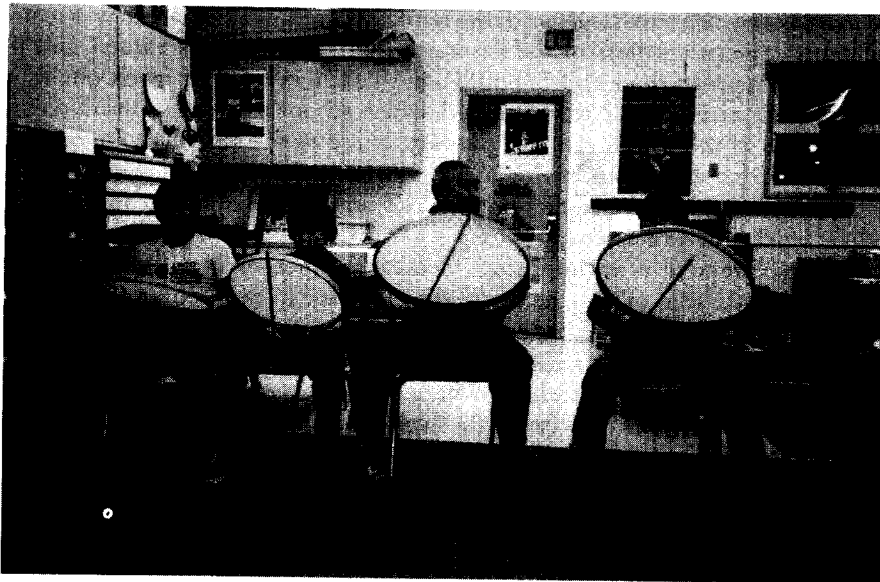
so much of the child's education transpires. Every year, in the North Slope Borough School District schools, elders go to the schools to teach Eskimo dancing. This is one of the most positive and well-attended programs of the whole year. Eskimo dancing is incorporated into the annual Christmas programs at the schools, along with the usual Christmas songs. The children are very enthusiastic about learning and performing these Native dances.

Inupiat people have a long tradition of competitive athletic events, which are integral components of gatherings, celebrations, and trade fairs involving many groups from different parts of the Arctic. These unique sports events, which involve skills of agility, strength, and endurance, are fundamental to work and survival in the Arctic environment. In addition to developing skills, sporting events are used to provide lessons about discipline, patience, good humor, cooperation, and sharing: "A different kind of kid gets involved in the Native games than gets involved in basketball or wrestling. It's something Native kids can excel in, receive self-esteem from, that they get in no other way."[11] In the spring, Native high school children from throughout the state compete in Native Youth Olympics. Top finishers receive invitations to compete in the World Eskimo Indian Olympics in Fairbanks later in the summer, and the Arctic Winter Games, an international competition involving Canadian athletes, held every two years.[12]



(Left to right) Bradford Nageak, Kunneak Nageak, Larry Kaleak (teacher), and Timothy Akpik practice Eskimo drums.

[11] Statement by Reggie Joule, in *Heartbeat: World Eskimo Indian Olympics,* Annabel Lund, writer; Howard Simons, editor; Mark Kelly, photographer; and Clark Mischler, photo editor (Juneau: Fairweather Press, 1986).

[12] For more information on these sports, see *Heartbeat*; F. H. Eger, *Eskimo Inuit Games* (Vancouver: X-Press, n.d.).

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In 1984, the North Slope Borough School District Board, recognizing that contemporary Inupiat culture now includes formal institutions, established Student Corporations. This is in response to the rapid growth of public and private institutions and organizations in the last fifteen years.[13] Among these institutions are specialized Native corporations that were mandated in the settlement of Native land claims by an act of Congress (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971). Corporations are as much a part of everyday life in Arctic communities as subsistence hunting and fishing. Every child, in order to become capable of making life choices, needs to learn the basics of both realms. We, as a board, recognized that Native village and regional corporations needed employees and board members who are knowledgeable in all areas of corporate management. Thus, Student Corporations, established under the Laws of the State of Alaska, were incorporated into our schools. Children learn about how corporations are established, how proxies operate, and how elections and meetings are held. They also learn to evaluate moneymaking projects and, in the process, hone their decisionmaking skills.

These types of activities within the educational arena serve another, more basic, purpose. After decades of assimilation programs within the educational system that treated local cultures as detriments to the child's education, programs now teach that the culture of the area is *not* a detriment, but is indeed a valuable tool in the schooling of our children.

Bilingual Education

When bilingual education became a reality in the North, many parents and grandparents were very puzzled—and rightly so—by the about-face in the attitude of school staff in regard to speaking Inupiat. Suddenly children were not only allowed to speak Inupiaq in school but actively encouraged to do so. For many, however, this came too late. Parents who had been punished for speaking their native language in schools were raising their children using only the English language to communicate with them. Inupiaq in the home was being replaced by a broken Inupiaq, the English language interspersed with bits and pieces of Inupiaq. During this time, even bilingual education seemed a contradiction in terms to parents who had been persuaded that Native languages inhibit education.

It has sometimes been painfully hard work on the part of the local bilingual department and others interested in the survival of our language and culture to convince parents and the whole community about the need for language revival. But the efforts are paying off. Our district uses a very effective method, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, of teaching our language to the children. The TPR method involves the whole learner, not just his or her mind. For instance, the teacher walks as he or she is teaching the word "walk," or portrays the emotions when teaching the words for these emotions. Each new word or sentence we hear a child use tugs at the heart, right in there where we hold memories of the times when we had almost . . . almost . . . lost one of the very abilities that make us uniquely who we are.

[13] For a description of the recent formation of a profusion of governmental institutions, corporations, boards, and commissions in our areas, see Worl and Smythe, *Barrow: A Decade of Modernization*.

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Addressing Issues

When we talk about educating our children for success we need to examine every facet of schooling to see if it is serving its purpose. Sometimes this requires making some hard decisions. A few years ago we, as a board, reevaluated our philosophy, goals, and policies to make them compatible. After careful research and deliberation we took a bold step. We changed from an individualized learning system to competency-based education. As hard as this decision was, we needed to address the issue of graduates who could not read or write, much less make life choices. We saw that our students were advanced to higher grades not on the basis of skills achieved, but through a process of "social advancement": students were advanced to the next grade even if their skills were not adequate. As a school board, we identified this practice with the way individualized instruction was interpreted and carried out within our district.

Individualized instruction, though very successful in other areas, was never satisfactorily demonstrated within the North Slope. For instance, in some high school classes students were given a book at the beginning of the semester and expected to go as far as possible with it at their own pace. There were no objectives given. The students were only told to read and to do what the text requested they do, with the teacher there as a resource if needed. This was explained to one parent as being individualized instruction. It is instances such as this which alerted us, the Board, to problems within our system which needed to be addressed, such as teacher accountability. Recently we instituted a competency-based approach to student advancement because we felt that it was more congruent with our traditional educational practices. In the competency-based approach, skills expected to be mastered by students in a certain grade are identified. The students, then, must demonstrate mastery of competencies before they are promoted to the next grade. This approach is similar to our traditional practices in which elders expected children to master certain competencies before they went on to more difficult tasks.

When the Western economic system became a viable way of life in the North, right along with subsistence, we, as Native people, should have felt an ownership of the educational system that taught our children how to survive in our contemporary world, a world which needs people with academic capabilities. But because it is a Western educational system, we, as parents and local populace, have found it hard to identify with. We tend to view it still as a foreign system that was thrust on us. The move to mastery learning, a type of education which we identify with, has helped us attain ownership of the educational system in our schools. Since we, as a board, have determined that our children cannot survive in our world without also learning the basics of the Western way of life, we have chosen to teach them that way of life, but in the way that has proven to work in educating generation after generation of our children—through mastery learning.

Although competency-based education was widely supported by the parents because of identification with their own teaching style, others had to be convinced that it was in the best interest of our children. The school district, in order to ensure the success of the program, conducted many in-service programs with teachers and parent groups across our district on the elements of competency-based education, including how content is taught, how learning is assessed, long-range plans for curriculum and instruction, identification of competencies in texts and

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other instructional material, and lesson design. Now in its third year, it has already proven to be a success. We find that our youngest children are ready for advancement because competencies are identified at the beginning of the year, and the teachers know what the child needs to master in order to advance to the next grade.

With changes in our school system in past years happening so often, we also have had to deal with the fact that our educational system was a mishmash of new ideas which, although these were excellent concepts, were never quite synthesized into a coherent unit or system. What happened was that a group of students were taught using one system for a few years, and then were taught using another system. Because of this lack of continuity we have students in the upper grades who need extra help.

We are currently focusing on providing the very best atmosphere for learning for all children, and doing all we can to remedy the problems some of the older children have because of the deficiencies of earlier systems and the lack of continuity. One of the best ways we have found to address this problem is through enhanced guidance and counseling services. Besides providing counselors in each school site, we also provide a district-wide counselor who travels routinely to all schools, providing individual as well as group counseling. She is also available to travel to villages to help in crisis situations as needed. This coming year we are expanding services to give children better access to guidance and counseling, which may help them deal with difficulties for which they may not be well enough equipped.

The Dollar Bill

Naomi Ann Itta, Grade 7

Last year, in 6th grade, Mrs. Albert gave all the graduating seniors a dollar bill along with a card.

The dollar bill that I received is very special to me because I liked Mrs. Albert like she was an aunt.

The same day we received the dollar bill, I thanked her by giving her a picture of myself.

At the end of the year I knew that Mrs. Albert was proud of us, not because of the dollar bill, but because of the smile that shined on us like the sun over the ocean.

Conclusion

In order to provide the best possible education for our children, we need first to identify the desired "product" of our schooling system and then to provide a system through which to acquire that product.

We, as a board, already know that we want young adults capable of becoming productive, happy citizens in whatever world they choose. We then need to make

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certain that all aspects of the schooling system, especially the environment, are conducive to the achievement of that goal. Above all, we must make certain that cultural differences in the way we view the goals and objectives of programs are addressed. The way different cultures choose to achieve the same goals and objectives varies greatly. We need to take as much care in choosing the system as we do in defining our goals.

We now have an excellent and effective school system in place, based on research that calls for specifying the school mission, educational expectations, curriculum and instruction, and monitoring time on task, student progress, and home-school relations. Profiles of these characteristics have been done on all of our schools in the District. Therefore, we are not as quick to turn to every current trend in education. We are not, however, hesitant to research new ideas. But we take extra effort to make certain the new ideas are compatible with our philosophy. In this way we assure our children the best education we can give them, as well as provide needed stability in programs and goals. Thus, we can ensure that we are, indeed, serving the purpose of education.

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