

GROWING OUR OWN: INDIGENOUS RESEARCH, SCHOLARS, AND EDUCATION
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Challenging Educational Systems: The Center for Research and Alaska Native Education (CRANE)

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Editors Note: The following article is the paper presented by Paul Ongtoobuk and two of his graduate students, Daniel M. Becker and Iris Currey on a new graduate initiative at the University of Alaska Anchorage

The first Alaska Native Studies conference was held in Anchorage in 2013. Given the limited size of programs for Alaska Natives at the University of Alaska, a shared agenda is essential to prepare the next generation of Alaska Natives and allies for their challenges and opportunities. One surprising and positive outcome from the first Alaska Native Studies conference was a proposal from the College of Education to establish a new Center for Research and Alaska Native Education (CRANE). This paper describes the vision for the Center as well as its first steps, and includes commentary of two graduate students currently in the program.

Starting Up

Funding arrived late in August 2013, after courses had just begun and faculty schedules were determined and active. We were essentially handed an invitation to determine a vision, design a mission, craft goal statements, recruit students, and hire staff. I, a person with virtually no skill in administration, was pressed into service as Director of the Center. Some might take this as a monumental challenge, though I was assured this was a vote of confidence and support would be in hand, which has largely been the case.

We had no time to complete the usual process of student application and admission to graduate programs if we were to move immediately into action. Since I felt that it was critical to bring students in at the onset, we worked hard and found three outstanding students who began classes and joined our Center. Two additional students joined us at the beginning of the spring semester. These five students are completing their Master of Art's (MA) degrees in Teaching and Learning and have been invaluable in helping to design the Center's vision and mission. Each has demonstrated a commitment to their work and even more to the team approach that we have adopted throughout this year. Friday evening meetings are not at the top of anyone's best time to meet, but this busy group of students has made that work. As a result, their ideas and strong work ethic are reflected in everything that we have accomplished this year.

Why CRANE?

The Center is dedicated to the belief that a better future for Alaska Native peoples requires a transformation of current educational systems. Alaska Native cultures, societies, organizations and peoples bring

thousands of years of knowledge, insights, and understandings about the lands, waters, and dynamics of Alaska. For example, today's global climate changes are having a profound impact on the North. But how are these changes understood on a regional basis much less a far North, Alaska Native, perspective? While scientists skilled in Western education travel to the Arctic to take samples and record observations, they return to their labs to conduct analyses. They construct models that make sense of the data and then extrapolate variables from those models to predict the rate of future changes.

In contrast, Alaska Natives are year-round residents whose continued existence depends on every day close-up observation of the environment. As a result, Northern peoples experience the Arctic in a variety of conditions and they compare those observations with multiple generations of cultural knowledge. This scientific knowledge is integrally related to other facets of Northern life, including, economics, government, art and literature. Their knowledge of the Arctic is, generally, deeper and richer in its description of current conditions and also its impact on life in the North. As a result, traditional knowledge is a complex, rich way of understanding the relationship of human beings to a world in which they live.

On the other hand, Western education can be described as somewhat fragmented, due to the unevenness of quality and or standards, abstract, in that when certain aspects of history are abstracted or taken away from certain subject matters that it can lessen important and necessary information and therefore, limit the quality of those subject matters. Western education could also be described as somewhat concrete, or too simplistic and lacking in detail, which lessens the ability to make greater meaning of a certain subject matter, at the same time, it is

also rather linear and finally, too generic in nature.

This is why a transformation of educational systems for Alaska Native students requires an integration of Alaska Native cultures, knowledge, and languages from preschool to graduate school. Accordingly, the Center serves as a space for graduate students, faculty, researchers, Alaska Native leaders, and others dedicated to Alaska Native education and pedagogy to gather to imagine and shape systemic change.

The Center's mission is to help shape an educational set of ideas through research, policy analysis, and also through the development and analysis of models and pedagogy. The goal is not how to better navigate the standardized pipe of current educational trends; instead, it is more focused on exploring promising ways that will work to change or challenge that direction. That is, deficit models must be replaced with models that reflect the histories and cultures of Alaska Native communities. Some say that such schools would not prepare students for the "real world." However, it could be argued that such a perspective sadly, but also completely, reveals their view that Alaska Native cultures, tribes, and organizations are not part of the "real world." We reject that proposition.

Challenging Current Systems

The current model for Alaska Native education is largely a branch of an increasingly mono-cultural system that is institutionalized across the country. While there is not a national curriculum in the United States, the textbook industry is hugely influential in determining what gets taught in our schools. Since textbook publishers design materials for the broadest swath of the market, the results are generic and

assimilative. Moreover, standardized testing reinforces this trend with the result being that place, context, local histories and cultures are largely ignored.

In contrast, place-based models of education are process based, as it is with inquiry learning. In place-based curricula what is actually studied is content that is determined locally. Science is an interesting example of this. Alaska Native societies developed rich understandings of science and technology over the course of thousands of years in ways that supported and advanced the lives of their peoples. Scientific knowledge was relevant; it was an integral component of life; but it was place-based. Alaska Natives have a long history of practicing place-based education, and a return to this model has the potential of establishing meaningful connections between schools and communities.

Yet, for generations, State schools have educated Alaska Natives to be laborers and or workers for others. Through schooling, historically and currently, Alaska Natives have been taught to be grateful as Western culture is gradually moving them up the imaginary "ladder of civilization." Likewise, Alaska Natives in the 1960's were faced with a daunting array of international oil corporations, union labor organizations, conservationists, as well as the state and federal governments who were united around one goal: establish a legal path that would allow the taking of resources from Alaska Native traditional lands via a removal of the peoples and cultures tied to these specific lands and waters. That "Removal" continues today via the generic curricula that ignores Alaska Native cultures and instead chooses to focus on the transmission of individualistic and capitalistic values. That is why it is essential to examine what is NOT taught.

Current schooling narrows, or eliminates, our

understanding of ourselves as Alaska Natives. Community purpose, cultural histories, Native languages, and critical issues related to our future are excluded from study. That is, models of self-determination are ignored, tightly controlled, distorted, or presented as obsolete. Moreover, fundamental issues faced by Alaska Native Corporations, such as membership and the balance between promoting the “social” welfare and the “economic” welfare of Alaska Native peoples are not discussed. For example, the complex relationship between history, subsistence, assimilation, education, oil exploration, mining, Identity—are all rather absent or only briefly explored.

The consequence of these omissions is a perpetuation of the current systems: What is now in place will stay in place. I, however, would argue that we need room and structures in schools for ideas that might alter the current social, political, economic and standard educational pipelines. Right now, schools are educating our children in what can only be described as a rigged game of choice: Do we want the robbers to wear a red shirt or a blue shirt? Once again, the problem is the omission of Alaska Native history, which is quite literally left out of the picture. Ultimately, this modern day exclusion of Alaska Native histories and cultures is not tolerable, and it is critical that we use new ways to define how to educate the next generation and the generations to come.

Therefore, the Center for Research and Alaska Native Education will challenge current educational canals and also help to construct a river of understanding based on an Alaska Native perspective. We will conduct research, complete analysis, sponsor public forums and provide graduate study opportunities. We will help to identify and separate successful programs from those that are not. We will contribute to a professional

body of knowledge that will be available for common use and we will develop our own concepts, ideas, and approaches.

Graduate students, with regard to their advanced study, will be economically supported with tuition scholarships and other similar opportunities. We will also embrace a cohort/community model that builds Identity and that contributes to success. Our students will have more opportunity to study in Alaska. As a result, they will remain more connected to their cultures, their homes and to other related opportunities. Students will be encouraged to construct individualized programs that will allow more in-depth exploration of their particular interests and they will graduate with an expertise in their field of study that has been cultivated across a variety of courses. With that in mind, we take seriously the many gaps and silences on issues critical to the future of Alaska Native peoples. Throughout all of this, we will expect much of ourselves as we contribute to the articulation of a shared purpose that will move us forward.

I am encouraged that I will be able to frame this effort within the work of William Oquilluk. He focused not only on the significance of understanding, but also and more importantly on the desire for thoughtfulness. We share his belief in “The Power of Imagination” and, with gratitude, have adopted his words as our motto.

Commentary by Daniel Becker

Deconstructing or Seeing Past the False Narrative of the Historical Pendulum, Which is to See that Assimilationist Pedagogy is Extinction Unless A Conscious Balance Can Be Achieved

Assimilationist pedagogies intend to mold all students into one pre-cut shape. For other cultural groups, assimilation into the wider American culture might be acceptable, or even desirable, but for Alaska Natives, complete or unbalanced assimilation is extinction. In fact, it is actually a form of brainwashing. The rationale behind that argument is that complete assimilation essentially means that Indigenous as well as Alaska Native people must forget or choose to marginalize their history, their traditional culture and values and replace them with a more socially acceptable Westernized worldview. Yet, the history of Indigenous people in the United States has often been one of violence, loss and subjugation. For Indigenous people to deliberately forget that negative aspect of their history would mean the ultimate form of assimilation or brainwashing. Yet, most of that painful history was directly linked to their disenfranchisement from their traditional lands.

In relation to this and over the course of history, Indigenous people have experienced both the pros and cons of Federal Indian law. Some have described the political shift from assimilation to that of tribal sovereignty as a pendulum, which goes back and forth between the recognition of tribal sovereignty to its extreme opposite, which is that of losing legal recognition regarding Indigenous identity and other related cultural and land rights. Yet, that form of recognition begins

with another form of re-recognition, which is related to that of Indigenous identity and history.

Accordingly, Alaska Native people have a unique relationship with the Federal Government. For example, certain tribal lands and or American Indian reservations often have their land base managed by the tribe under the auspices of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs; as opposed to the jurisdiction of the various states they are located. However, Alaska is truly unique as instead of forming Reservations, Alaska Native people formed Native corporations. Much of the basis for the *Alaska Native Land Claims Act* was to delineate who had rights to land in Alaska and to also encourage Alaska Native people to assimilate into the modern world of Western capitalism.

As an undergraduate at Dartmouth College, I majored in Native American Studies, with a focus on governance and sovereignty. I learned, from my coursework, that a so-called pendulum symbolized a significant part of the narrative by which I came to understand the historical relationship between tribes and the federal government. That is, as stated earlier, certain historical events favored one side and then, at other times, alternated to favoring the opposite side. Moreover, a variety of factors determined the velocity and direction of this pendulum, which often swung back and forth with regard to the legal recognition of tribal power. While the pendulum metaphor offers some insight into the legal recognition of Indigenous issues and tribal power, most of the time, the pendulum swung in favor of the dominant power structures at the top of the American legal system and not in favor of Indigenous people.

Those factors that often influenced the direction of the pendulum include a number of political issues: the effects of liberalism,

conservatism, international law, national law, the recognition of civil rights, U.S. Presidents, and judges, as well as other related people who were connected to the higher levels of the United States government.

Generally, the implication was that if Indigenous people could just keep pushing back as they have in the past, they would get the pendulum moving in a direction that was more beneficial to their land and cultural matters. Since I was introduced to that metaphor in my freshman year, I couldn't help, but note how pervasive it is, as I heard that word from professors, lawyers, teachers, tribal bureaucrats, politicians, and other people.

For example, earlier today, I was at an education conference. At a panel discussion, an American Indian legislator used the metaphor of the pendulum to describe legal and political change in our nation's history. He referenced *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and he explained, the legally legitimate and therefore sanctioned practice of racial segregation in public facilities, including schools, from the late 1800's, which remained laws for over 50 years.

However, in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned Plessy's doctrine of "separate but equal" and instead recognized the unconstitutionality of unequal treatment with regard to different races of people and their access to public institutions. This landmark decision, he argued, is a model for the kind of change we should work towards and should also expect in our work towards defending tribal sovereignty and most importantly defining Indian education in the future.

It's a nice thought. The problem is, the model doesn't quite fit. It would be unthinkable for decisions from today's Court to cite *Plessy*, much less to use the substance of its logic to

inform contemporary jurisprudence. Especially since *Brown* overturned its logic and language, as an attempt to effectively stamp out its prevailing legacy and influence on future law.

Generally, in our current times, when the Court writes decisions that focus on Indigenous issues, they invariably often begin with and also structure their arguments based on past, generally racist based cases. Those cases often reflect the history of American Indian people and their interaction with the higher Courts. Even today, the origin of Federal Indian Law often emanates from the so-called Marshall trilogy, whose philosophical basis is principally rooted in languages of legal racism and therefore based on the all too familiar arguments based on stereotypes such as that of Indian savagery.

Likewise, during my undergraduate years in college, the Marshall Trilogy was my initial introduction to the notion of the pendulum. In the first case, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823), racist language and reasoning abound unfettered. The argument that Natives are incapable of proper ownership of their land based on their racial inferiority is a clear and predominate phrase. However, *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) was presented to us as friendlier to the notion of tribal sovereignty, as that case considers international law, refers to tribes as nations (albeit as "lesser dependent nations").

In the end, what surprised me is how easily the pendulum metaphor was handily deconstructed or reinterpreted, which was done the first time I saw someone take a step back and question the legitimacy and meaning of this word. Lumbee Legal scholar Robert A. Williams (2005) demonstrated clearly that the metaphor lacks a real basis in history and is not an adequate tool with regard to better understanding Indigenous rights. Williams

argued that the pendulum metaphor foretells, in part, the future trajectory of racial law. In response to this, he softens the language and logic of *Johnson* to a more nuanced, argument that is more acceptable with regard to future political change in relation to American Indian legal cases.

At the same time, American Indians had to find a rather precarious balance between assimilation and also holding onto important aspects of their traditional cultures. That had to happen aside from whatever direction the so-called pendulum moved. That is, Indigenous people had to find a way to deal with the cyclical nature of American politics if they were ever to develop a land base and retain a positive view of their traditional culture. The ability to develop and to strengthen that balance meant consciously remembering their past and also incorporating integral aspects of Western culture, especially that related to higher education, to writing, and to history.

Ultimately, a familiarity with the key concepts of federal Indian Law is essential to understanding Alaska Native life past, present, and future. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act is anchored, for example, in the principle of “traditional use and occupancy.” Likewise, the history of how Alaska Native people got to that pivotal point in Alaskan history is one that is fraught with people from the past making a variety of courageous stands throughout that narrative. Our schools should encourage Alaska Native and all other students to recognize the complete narrative or history of Alaska. Even while Alaska Native history is absent or limited in most standardized history texts, it is the imperative of recognizing that absence, which is the key to gaining a fuller understanding of that particular history. It is also the best way to deconstruct or reevaluate the historical pendulum, which is also to

strive to see past political and historical illusion by remembering the real Indigenous past. Even though that past is not included in most standardized texts, seeing that omission is to deconstruct the False Narrative of the historical pendulum.

Moreover, our schools should be filled with primary and also secondary documents, books, curricula, and media that help our students develop informed perspectives about themselves, their past, their lives and their futures. An adherence to assimilationist pedagogy that prefers to forget the unique and relevant moments of Indigenous history assures us that issues and narratives that are of the most relevance to Alaska Native students will continue to be omitted. Yet, for us, that kind of assimilation is extinction. It does not encourage balance and for Alaska Natives they must deconstruct that form of assimilationist history, which does often omit and or ignore pivotal elements of Alaska Native history. But first, they must assimilate enough to master the educational essentials of Western thought and then re-recognize their own history, their own narrative and also their own selves.

Commentary by Iris J. Currey

Teaching with Alaska Native Students

Currently, there is a debate over the question of how to educate our children. The debate was stimulated by former Alaska Governor Parnell's Education Session, which resulted in Senate Bill 139, House Bill 278, and Senate Joint Resolution 9 (Alaska State Legislature, 28th Legislative session).

These bills once again bring up the idea of boarding schools, more politely referred to now as Regional schools, and whether or not they are a "solution" to the "problem" of education in rural Alaska. While there are heated opinions both in favor of and in opposition to boarding schools by white and Native peoples alike, most of the debate ignores the historical context and end goals of education and is inherently vacuous.

For example, much of the conversation is focused not on the actual subject of education, but rather on where said "education" will occur. The method of curriculum delivery at a regional boarding school is essentially the same method of curriculum delivery that would exist in a local school. While it is true that regional boarding schools might have the resources to offer a wider variety of classes, the cultural responsiveness thereof isn't necessarily any different or any better. The educators who would be teaching in a local school are going to be for the most part the same itinerant educators who would be teaching in a regional boarding school. They are two sides of the same coin with location being the only variable. The notion of self-determination is thrown around but is simply a semantic shell as the menu of choice is predetermined and limited to "pick one of two options."

As Native peoples, we have suffered countless injustices as a result of European contact, and while this is widely recognized, less attention is paid to the far more insidiously devastating effects that neocolonialism and the diffusion of the European rationality model are still having today. While it would be foolish to make a blanket statement universally dismissing all of European influence as being inherently "bad" for Alaska Natives, it's important to recognize that in the area of education specifically there have been many transgressions committed. For all of the good that has come from different areas of westernization, from modern health care to travel and various other amenities, to immediately dismiss our own traditional education systems in favor of that which was imposed on us seems extremely imprudent. We have bought into the idea that education is something that is only taught in schools with neatly classified subjects such as English, math and science. We have allowed the European model of education to dictate our own. We compartmentalize the world and in turn, our views of education. Too often we teach *at* students, not to them, and certainly not *with* them.

Our ancestors knew what we seem to have forgotten, that learning is a process, an exchange between teacher and student. In our acquiescence to the European education model we have completely forgotten the other half of the equation: our elders, the teachers. As well-intentioned as the largely itinerant teachers are in rural Alaska, if our actual goal is to create healthy communities then we are doing ourselves the greatest of disservices in allowing our education to come from anywhere other than within us. In disenfranchising our elders, by removing them from so much of the education of our youths, we are further creating a rift and exacerbating the lack of connections within our communities.

The horrors of regional boarding schools and the subsequent loss of many of our traditions are essential pieces of history that must be addressed in the dialogue on education in Alaska. We as Alaska Natives are dealing with severe, generational, post-traumatic stress syndrome. We have generations of children raised in institutions; generations of parents who never had parents and in turn never learned how to be parents themselves. There has been a devastating break in the cyclical transference of traditional knowledge and culture. History has already shown us that attempting to heal this disconnect within ourselves by means of outside pedagogy will fail to yield the desired results. What does it matter if Alaskan Native graduation rates are lower than the national average when those same children alternately have some of the highest suicide and domestic abuse rates? What child can adequately focus on their education when their home lives are often fraught with turbulence?

There should not be a separation between the school life and the home life, and to think of school and home as anything other than interdependent systems is to fall victim to the Cartesian world model that has created this situation. In the 40 or so years since the state of Alaska began to take control of Alaska Native education, not only have graduation rates not improved, they've actually gotten worse. Obviously, the current systems are simply not working.

The end goal of educational reform is not simply to increase graduation rates, but to create healthy communities. It is apparent that the adult community members have been just as neglected as the children themselves. We are Native, young and old, elder and youth, and just as an ecosystem is the result of the interdependency of all living things and their environment, so are our communities. To truly be self-determined and independent we

must reinstate our own pedagogy. We need to think farther and broader than we have been. There are times when the reformation of an outdated model is not enough; sometimes that model needs to be replaced entirely.

In the case of our health care provision, we recognized that the Federal government was not meeting our needs and in turn created a completely different model that intersected with the creation of the tribal non-profits. Slowly, the health care provision evolved into different programs such as the Community Health Aides and the Dental Health Aide Therapists. Various countries around the world have studied our system. In both of these cases, the implementation of the new models was hard-fought and subject to vehement opposition, but the knowledge that it was imperative to create these changes resulted in inventive, elegant solutions. How is education today different from healthcare, then? Why have we not put our minds to *complete* educational reform?

We have allowed ourselves to be tricked into thinking that we don't have governance over our educational systems. The lingering effects of "killing the savage to save the man" are still haunting us. The United States government has a long history of trying to find new and inventive ways to wipe us out as a people. Our mere existence is a source of shame, a reminder of the bloody history that has shaped this country, and in indoctrinating us into forgetting ourselves, the government hopes to lessen its guilt. We have finally come to the point where it is no longer enough to consider ourselves survivors. We need to grab hold of the things that have formed us; specifically, the places that have shaped us as well as the cultures that have sustained us. We are the First Peoples, the Original Peoples, the Real People and we will no longer be passive about our education.

The dedication and perseverance that we have demonstrated in facing head-on the potential loss of our indigenous lands, the threats to our subsistence and land rights, and the economic hardships presented to us are now the same dedication that we need to apply to the problems in our educational systems. We participated in the structuring of ANCSA to deal with the threat of the loss of traditional lands and we found solutions to the problem of health care access for our people both rural and urban. We now need to create new educational systems that are true to our indigenous pedagogy and ideals. The activism that we have displayed over the years in response to the many issues we have faced is more necessary now than ever. We need to work together to find educational solutions that are right for us, and these solutions can only come from within ourselves.

The inherent question is not just education, it is existence.

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