

THE IMPACT OF AN IMMERSION EXPERIENCE IN ALASKAN NATIVE COMMUNITY CULTURAL LIFE ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the changes in understandings and appreciations of pre-service elementary (K-8) teacher education students who participated in a week-long cultural immersion experience in Alaska Native communities and their schools. For this group of pre-service teachers, the experience developed new and deeper understandings about the challenges and realities of living and teaching in rural Alaska Native community schools.

INTRODUCTION

Alaska Pacific University (APU) provides opportunities for prospective teachers in its teacher preparation programs to experience living and teaching in Alaskan Native community schools. In 2005, a group of 14 APU students participated in a cultural immersion teaching experience that took them to remote Alaskan Native villages where they lived, interacted with community members, and taught the Alaska Native children for a week.

This paper explores the impact of this immersion experience on how pre-service teacher understandings and attitudes towards Alaska Native children changed over the course of this program.

Alaska Pacific University is located in Anchorage, Alaska. Alaska is the largest state in the United States and Anchorage is the largest urban area in Alaska, boasting 40% of the state's population. Alaska is also the least populated state in the United States, housing approximately 664,000 people in 2005 while Anchorage estimates are at 271,000. (State and County Quickfacts, n.d.). The remaining 60% of Alaskan residents live in areas as large as 87,500 (Fairbanks) and as small as Twin Hills, with a population of 69. Rural villages are classified as either on the road system or "bush" communities, reachable by boat or plane (or snow machine in the winter months).

RELATED LITERATURE

Kawagley (1995) and Jester (2002) note that schooling in Alaskan Native communities is primarily focused on imposing the dominant eurocentric cultural standards, ideology, practices and effects on Alaskan Native children. Jester (2002) expands upon this issue by reporting that one of the major problems facing students and teachers working in

Alaska Native schools was the absence of a culturally relevant pedagogy that included a focus on students' academic achievement while simultaneously facilitating their respect for and connection to their cultural identity. In a survey of 234 American Indian parents, Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996) reported that these parents expressed concern about the appointment of appropriate teaching staff and the way in which these staff treated their children. McLean (1997) voices similar Alaska Native parental concerns from her research with peoples from southwest Alaska. Collectively, these authors reported that many parents expressed the view that there was a need for greater cultural awareness by the teaching staff and they emphasized that parents sought ways of developing cultural understanding, respect for and a balance of their culture as central attributes of the educational experience for their children along with implementing a curriculum that reflects cultural, historical, language and social systems of their culture. This idea has been more recently labeled as place-based education by Bryden (2003), Bryden and Boylan (2004) and Barnhardt (2005). McLean (1997) goes further when she identifies the need to enhance the cultural awareness, sensitivity and knowledge of teachers to the diverse and differing needs of Alaska Native children through appropriate in-service programs. Mahan and Rains reported upon one such cultural immersion experience for 45 in-service teachers as a strategy to enhance teacher effectiveness, and teacher understanding about cultures other than the dominant American culture. The authors noted that none of these teachers had experienced a genuine immersion experience prior to their study. Through the cultural immersion experience, the authors reported that the teachers identified both personal and professional changes. Personal changes related to cultural self awareness in which the individual teacher recognized that he/she needed to behave differently to their normal pattern while professional changes focused on implementing new ways and strategies in their teaching and curriculum content that were more inclusive. The authors concluded:

If we want educators to teach about awareness and understanding in a pluralistic society in which their students are members then perhaps it is necessary for these teachers to have some direct cultural interaction [in which] the educator is the major learner. Perhaps a cultural immersion experience is a long neglected first step... (Mahan & Rains, 1990, p.23)

Kawagley (1999, p. 1) goes further and provides the strongest arguments when he states: "For Yupiaq people, culture, knowing and living are intricately interrelated" in ways that most non-Yupiaq people do not understand and appreciate. He expands on this assertion through firstly observing how the impact of the western, eurocentric education system has changed Yupiaq peoples' worldview in ways that they did not seek. Secondly, he forcefully argues that while Alaska Native schools do not require that Yupiaq children learn their own languages and lifeways while currently being coerced into learning a foreign language and its differing value systems by teachers from the outside who have little or no knowledge of Yupiaq people, their culture and traditions, this cycle of colonial imperialism and devaluing the self worth of Yupiaq children will continue and sustain the dominant eurocentric value system.

Barnhardt (2005) described the ten year long Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) as a program designed to document Alaska Native knowledge systems and to develop appropriate pedagogical practices that recognize, value and integrate Alaska Native ways of knowing into the school curriculum. Barnhardt (2005) reported that, by the end of the AKRSI program in 2005, in-service teachers were utilizing place-based

pedagogical practices as ways of connecting Alaska Native students and their learning with their cultural environment and their physical surroundings.

Collectively, the concerns and suggestions raised by the authors discussed above provided a foundation for the cultural immersion experience at Alaska Pacific University. The following assertion by Wallace (1977) has been the guiding principle embedded in the Alaska Pacific University's program. Wallace stated:

By functioning in a society in addition to reading books and studying about it, we can more readily become aware of the interplay of forces – social, political, religious, economic – which comprise that society. (1977, p. 25)

Thus the cultural immersion experience was designed as a short intensive living and teaching experience in remote Alaska Native villages and their schools.

THE CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

As part of the pre-service elementary program at Alaska Pacific University, students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program and those enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts Teacher Training Program (BA) are offered the opportunity to participate in an Alaskan Native cultural immersion experience that is linked to a practice teaching program in remote Alaska.

Two fundamental goals of experience are to:

1. experience teaching and learning in a rural Alaskan school;
and;
2. experience rural community living and activities.

This cultural immersion experience has been in operation at Alaska Pacific University for 10 years. The experience is a collaborative effort between selected rural school districts and the Education Department at Alaska Pacific University with their teacher education students.

In 2005, the Southwest Region School District participated in this cultural immersion experience. This remote school district operates nine schools and employs 64 teachers to teach the 719 students attending these schools. The student/teacher ratio is 11.30:1; 99.6% of students are Alaska Natives; the 2001 expenditure per student was \$13,676 (Community Database Online, n.d.). The three villages that participated in the experience were Togiak, New Stuyahok, and Manokotak and ranged in population from 399 to 809. The Southwest Region School District is located within the Yup'ik Alaskan Native region. In Figure 1 below, the location of the Yup'ik region in rural Alaska is shown.

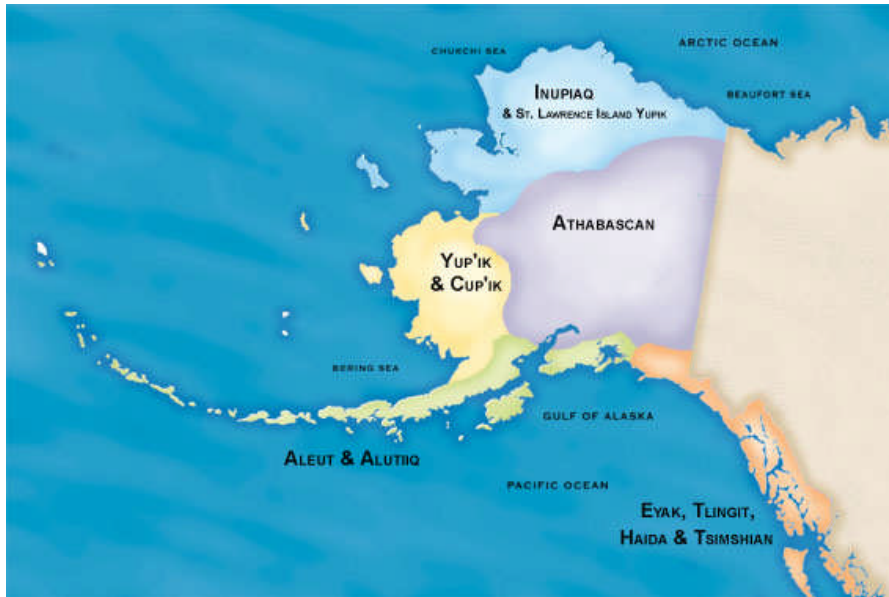


Figure 1: Yup'ik nation in rural Alaska

The cultural immersion experience was conducted over a five-day period, with four or five students being placed at each of the three participating schools for the whole five-day period. The three participating schools were K-12 schools with student populations ranging from 220 in Togiak to 142 in Manokotak. As part of the planning and organization, the students were billeted with host teachers or in host schools at each rural location. Additionally, an Education Department faculty member from the university accompanied each group of students to their assigned school.

The participants

Fourteen pre-service elementary teachers participated with nine pre-service teachers enrolled in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program and the remaining five pre-service teachers enrolled in a BA program at Alaska Pacific University.

Self-report questionnaires were administered to the group prior to and immediately after their cultural immersion experience. Student biographical details as well as information about the impact of this experience on the students who participated and their perceptions about Alaskan Native village living and the community were gathered through the questionnaires. All 14 students completed the pre-participation questionnaire while 13 students completed the post-experience questionnaire. This paper reports on the analyses of responses to the questionnaires. Responses to open-ended questions were comparatively analyzed and categorical descriptors were generated to identify emergent patterns in the students' responses.

RESULTS

Pre-service teacher biographical information

The 14 participants in this cultural immersion program consisted of 3 males and 11 females. All participants were non-Alaskan Native students with 4 of the 14 pre-service teachers having not undertaken any teaching experience outside of the urban Anchorage School District. Eleven of the 14 had grown up in urban settings.

Impact of the program

Pre-service teachers responded to a series of open-ended questions concerning: 1) why they chose to participate; 2) what expectations they held about learning about teaching and working in rural schools; 3) what they perceived as the challenges in living in a rural community; and, 4) what challenges they perceived for a classroom teacher working in a rural area.

The analysis of responses to the first open-ended question from the pre-experience questionnaire revealed that for 11 students, the main reason for participation focused on gaining school and community related experiences in rural and remote Alaskan Native villages, e.g. *“It will be very important for a pre-service teacher to experience rural life since some of the students we will be teaching will be from rural Alaska”* (Female, MAT); *“...an important experience for any Alaskan teacher”* (Male, MAT); and *“For the experience, teaching in a small community”* (Female, BA).

The second open-ended question from the pre-experience questionnaire sought pre-service teachers’ perceptions about what they expected to learn about teaching in remote Alaskan Native village schools. Responses to this question were mixed among the respondents. Three major response categories were generated by the authors. Table 1 below lists these categories and the number of responses for each category. Additionally, individual responses indicated that some expectations were high or open-ended.

Expectations about rural teaching (n=25)	Frequency
Rural Pedagogy	12
Cultural and contextual information	9
Teacher’s work life	3
Uncertain	1

Table 1 Participant expectations about rural teaching

For 12 respondents, their primary expectation from the experience was a practical focus: they sought a first hand experience in the teaching students in remote rural Alaskan schools, e.g. *“How rural life/culture is incorporated into the classroom. What it’s like to teach in rural Alaska. To see how native Alaskan children respond differently to different teaching strategies”* (Female, MAT); *“How teachers from outside the village bridge the gap with the students from the village”* (Male, MAT); and *“How to provide meaningful, authentic activities that integrate culture, community and the native ways of*

knowing” (Female, BA). For some students, they specifically identified that they wanted to learn about Alaska Native peoples’ culture: e.g. *“More of the cultural aspects that are taught in the classroom”* (Female, MAT); and *“How the community accepts teachers”* (Female, BA). Only one respondent was uncertain: *“Wait and see – no expectation to limit my experience!”* (Female, MAT).

In the following two tables, respondents’ perceptions of the challenges associated with: a) living (Table 2); and, b) teaching (Table 3) in a remote Alaskan Native village were sought. Because of, and sometimes in spite of various media representations of what is available throughout the state, and about what is happening in rural areas, the participants provided a diverse set of responses to this question. In total, 28 statements were analyzed and three resultant categories were generated. Table 2 below lists these categories with the most common responses and their frequencies.

Category	Examples	Frequency
Access issues	Services (food, shopping malls, theatre, housing)	5
	Recreational (roads, people)	4
	Educational (supplies, opportunities)	3
Community focused problems	Substance abuse	3
	Subsistence lifestyle / attendance	3
	Parental expectations and involvement	2
	Student village lifestyle issues	2
Isolation related problems	Personal (family, friends)	4
	Harsh climate	1

Table 2 Challenges associated with living in a rural village

Access issues and community based issues accounted for the majority of the students’ responses. The following quotes reflect the perceived challenges of living in a rural village: *“Because many rural Alaskan communities are subsistence base it would be a challenge to maintain continuity in the classroom when it’s fishing season, you may end up with ¾ or more of your class being absent. You still have to teach the ones that are there and catch the others up when they return.”* (Female, MAT) and *“Housing (i.e.) Showers plus running water, flush toilets. How the community accepts non-native teachers. The far away distances from friends, family and major cities.”* (Female, BA)

The second aspect of this question dealt specifically with challenges facing the classroom teacher in rural areas. Thirty-four responses were provided. The authors analyzed these responses and generated three themes to categorize their responses as noted in the Table 3 below.

Category	Examples	Frequency
Teaching related problems	Lack of supplies/resources	8
	Student motivation and attendance	5
	Lack of teacher networks and professional development	3
	Parent/teacher/student relationship building	3
Adjustment to rural life	Isolation from family and friends	4
	Racial/cultural biases	2
	Boredom / loneliness	2
	Lack of facilities	1
Community related problems	Community support (especially elders)	2
	Substance abuse	1
	Rural peoples' attitudes	1
	No privacy	1

Table 3 Challenges with classroom teaching in a rural village

For the respondents, the major challenge for a classroom teacher was perceived to be related to being an effective and professional teacher. Examples of comments provided included: *“The teachers may not have many resources or exchanges of ideas for new lessons. It’s a very small place, no privacy. Relationships are very important because students and families are in contact with you or your neighbor. Limited outside resources.”* (Female, MAT) and *“Resources/materials (expensive to ship books and so on). As a non-native teacher I would be concerned about connections with students, parents and community. Being far away from friends and family.”* (Female, BA)

In the post experience questionnaire, this same focus was revisited when respondents were asked: What did you learn about teaching in rural Alaskan Native schools from this experience? Analysis of the 25 responses made by 13 respondents revealed two broad areas in which their understandings had changed. Firstly, in the development of a Cultural and Contextual information base about the Alaskan Native village and its community, and secondly, in understanding how Alaska Native rural pedagogy and its practice is both similar and different to their prior practicum experiences.

Category	Examples	Frequency
Cultural and community information	Need to relate to community and its culture	5
	More time and patience is needed	2
	Importance of Elder involvement	1
	White teachers in a Native setting	1
Rural pedagogy	Alaskan Native and urban children	4
	Small class sizes	2
	Aides are employed in every classroom	1
	Art is limited	1
	Close Student – Teacher interactions	1
	Meeting all students’ needs	1
	Teachers in control of learning	1
	Visual instruction/verbal communication importance	1
	Hands-on activities	1
Other comments	Absence of rules	1
	Supplies limited	1
	Resources good	1

Table 4 What did you learn about teaching from the experience?

The main differences to emerge from comparing Tables 3 and 4 were that: 1) the pre-service teachers realized that the importance of Alaska Native community as an essential and rich source of information for place-based education to happen; 2) Alaska Native schools were well resourced; 3) the children needed good teachers who realized that teaching Alaska Native children presented both similar and different challenges to teaching non-Alaskan native children; and 4) community engagement was important both from a teaching and lifestyle point of view.

Comments provided by the participants in their responses reported in Table 4 above included: *“About the culture and how they (students) are engaged with certain activities.”* (Female, MAT); *“I learned that they are a homogeneous group of students in the classroom (Yupik Natives). I’ve learned that only a few teachers are Alaska Natives, but mostly are white teachers. I’ve learned that elders have a role in the school and that they give award (sic) to behaved students.”* (Female, MAT); *“I learned that students need more time and patience; they also have and need close relationships to teachers and the community.”* (Female, MAT); and, *“It’s a different atmosphere to live and work in.”* (Male, BA).

Two Likert scale items (using a 5 point Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale) were included in the post experience questionnaire that related to teaching Alaskan Native children. The first item sought respondents' perceptions about: *"I have a better understanding of the challenges facing a teacher in a monocultural setting."* All responses were affirmative with 5 of the 13 strongly agreeing and 8 of the 13 agreeing with this statement. The second item explored the impact of their experience on appreciating the challenges that an Alaskan Native child experiences when their family relocates to one of the large urban centers in Alaska. The item asked: *"I have a better understanding of the challenges rural students face when relocating to urban schools."* Again, all responses were positive and affirmative with 7 of the 13 respondents strongly agreeing and 6 of the 13 agreeing with this item.

Finally, in the post experience questionnaire, the respondents were asked to report upon what they regarded as the highlight of their experience in the Alaska Native school and community. The pre-service teachers provided a total of 25 responses with 11 responses stating that teaching the Alaska Native children was the highlight. This was closely followed by 10 responses that focused on the community and its culture and then 4 responses identified the opportunity to talk with the teachers in these Alaska Native schools was the highlight for them. Examples of their responses are included below: *"Community event; visiting the village - basketball with the kids! Taking over the classroom - gaining confidence; getting to know my team better."* (Female, MAT); *"I stayed with two wonderful teachers. WARM, welcoming and terrific teachers in every way. I also connected with the children, two local women, and their families, and some elders."* (Female, MAT); and, *"Actual living in a rural/remote place for a week. Teaching in a rural school with AK Native students and have witnessed how a rural community gathered/come to school during the assembly"*. (Female, MAT).

CONCLUSION

For this group of non-Alaska Native pre-service teachers, the week long cultural immersion experience of living and teaching in a Yup'ik community had a significant impact on their understanding and appreciation of the challenges and realities of working in these locations. Through their participation, they gained first hand knowledge about these Alaska Native schools, their students and teaching conditions, the importance of community involvement both from the community into the classroom as well as from the teacher into the community perspectives, and realized that these remote Alaska Native schools were well resourced thereby dispelling a common myth about rural schools.

The primary expectation held by many of the pre-service teachers focused on learning more about the "realities" of teaching Alaska Native children in remote villages was achieved. The comment from the pre-experience questionnaire that typified this expectation was: *"I expect to gain an intimate knowledge of how a rural school is run. I'm interested in how students perceive their setting and the challenges teachers have."* (Male, MAT). The typical response to this same issue from the post experience questionnaire was: *"In the community I visited I felt completely accepted. Now I could possibly see myself teaching in a village community"*. (Female, BA).

To conclude, we return to Kawagley (1999, p. 37) and endorse his assertion that "by not teaching the Yupiaq youngsters their own language and ways of doing things, the

classroom teachers are telling them that their language, knowledge and skills are of little importance.” It is through programs such as the cultural immersion program described in this paper that we can sensitize pre-service teachers to the Alaska Native traditions, value systems and beliefs as the first step towards developing the necessary knowledge and understanding about Alaska Native peoples. As in-service teachers living and working in Alaska Native communities experience how to infuse the place-based language, values and beliefs systems into the educational programs offered in these Alaska Native schools, they will be better prepared to continue that practice when they work with Native students in the future.

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Key Words: Alaska; Pre-service teacher education; Immersion program.