

Integrating Culture into Education: Self-Concept Formation in Alaska Native Youth

Allan Morotti, Associate Professor, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Abstract

Very few studies have specifically addressed the formation of self-concept in the Alaska Native, or how the relationship between culture and education ultimately impacts its development. Most often, this phenomenon is mentioned in passing and is contained within the context of a larger study (e.g., an ethnography). While the discussion of the ideas that follows is framed primarily within an Alaskan context, it is proposed that the ideas are representative of issues present in the education of all minority and indigenous youth.

Culture and Education

Mental health professionals, educators, and politicians all speak of the necessity of developing a positive self-concept for healthy psychological functioning in today's society. "Promotion of environmental and socialization practices that presumably produce a feeling of self-worth in children is...a basic preventive strategy" (Lefley, 1982, p. 65). The development of a positive self-concept facilitates a person's interaction with the environment and also underpins healthy psychological functioning; therefore, an understanding of that process (i.e., self-concept formation) becomes necessary when creating programs to meet the educational needs of children living in our pluralistic society. In this paradigm the purpose of education then is not only to teach children about their world, but also to nurture the development of a positive sense of self. Failure to achieve this goal may result in students not succeeding academically; it may also undercut the very democratic principles of the American society and "the purpose of schooling itself"(Jones, 2004, p. 13).

Learning...is an essential tool for violence prevention. Children who achieve in school and develop important reading, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills are better able to cope with stressful and perhaps dangerous situations. Also, academic achievement enhances the development of a positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which are necessary for children to experience emotional well-being and to achieve success. (Clarke, 2002, p. 5)



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Every society educates its children in the needed skills, practices, and beliefs necessary to ensure the continuing existence of that society. The child's first exposure to this process occurs in her family of origin where "social learning takes place through observation and imitating other people's behaviors" (Reimer, 1999, p. 37). As children grow and mature, they are introduced to a more formal type of education, whether through the extended family, the tribe, or the community. In American society this education most often occurs through the formal school experience. Inherent in this process, be it within or outside the home environment, is the transmission of culture and values. "Schools are agents of the dominant society and as such, they reflect the underlying cultural patterns of that society" (Barnhardt, 1981, p.2). Children entering the school system, as we know it in America, are already steeped in the nuances of language and tradition that reflect the experiences of their families.

These experiences are shaped by the worldviews of the family members and when taken as a whole are the foundational elements out of which the self emerges. D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2003) state that a worldview is "how a person perceives his or her relationship to the world" (p. 267). They note that a worldview is "highly correlated with a person's cultural upbringing and life experiences" (p. 267). In other words, it is the phenomenological lens through which the person constructs his or her world based on the individual's ability to create a continuity of sameness between what the self perceives and what the society reflects back. An individual's culture and worldview each strive to create an anxiety free environment in which the person can act in a secure and meaningful way. As a result, the individual gains a sense of being a valuable member of the society, which fosters the development of self and continuation of the society. When reflecting on these ideas from an educational perspective, they clearly reflect the constructivist's philosophy that knowledge is a social creation. "Constructivist theory rests on

the assumption that knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experience” (University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education, 2004, p. 22). Therefore, learning is a process that results through the reciprocal relationship between person and environment. This implies cognitive development is not culture free, and that social interaction plays a key role in shaping cognitive development, as does language and instruction (University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education, 2004). For education then to become meaningful for the learner, the educator must teach not only to the individual cognitive abilities of each learner, but also must have knowledge of the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts shaping the learner’s perceptions of what is being taught (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1988, hooks, 1995, Vygotsky 1978).

In this model, interpretation and meaning making is not autonomous but done with others, and through this interaction meaning is constructed. Formal and informal instruction, performed and shared by more knowledgeable others, is the main vehicle for the cultural transmission of knowledge. This process of sharing ideas with others results in each individual refining her own ideas and helping to shape the ideas of others (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001). Information is normally passed on by social agents like peers, parents, teachers, or elders, and in so doing they construct a universe for the child that is similar to their own. In this way, culture, which influences perception and behavior, is inherited from one generation to the next. Hence, children’s development is a reflection of their cultural experiences and the opportunities they have had to access members with specific skills and knowledge. (University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education, 2004, p. 23)

Education is, therefore, a socially negotiated contract between society and the individual that is subject to a variety of contextual factors (e.g., sociopolitical, sociohistorical), which affects simultaneously both teacher and learner. Thus, a person's learning occurs within a system of bi-directional relationships influenced by the interplay of individual differences and the surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

Theoretical Constructs of Self-Concept: An Overview

The psychological construct known as self-concept came into prominence with William James (1890) and his publication of *The Principles of Psychology*. In this work James theorized that self-concept was a critical factor in the development of the individual. He hypothesized about the presence of the subject—object dichotomy in the individual, and of the difficulty in determining the origins of the person's internal world of consciousness from knowledge gained through interaction with the external world (Burns, 1979; L'Ecuyer, 1981).

Later theorists offered other explanations for how self-concept developed. For example, George Herbert Mead (1934) sought to explain the origins of the self through the individual's interactions with society. These interactions have meanings attached to them by the parties involved who utilize their interpretative processes to define the actions of the other. Thus, interpersonal behaviors are based upon inferred meanings generated from the intrapersonal world of each person in response to her perceptions of how the other sees her. Mead highlighted the importance of studying the person within the context of her culture. Hence, it becomes necessary to understand how each culture transmits the knowledge of what constitutes acceptable behaviors for its members. According to Mead, the use of language with the symbolic meanings individuals attach to it and the culture structures (i.e., norms, mores) implicit in its usage is the primary vehicle of cultural transmission between self and society (Burns, 1979).

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Erikson (1968) hypothesized that the self results from an integration of psychosocial and biological factors. He theorized that each culture develops unique ways for its members to resolve developmental crises, thereby strengthening the self.

Identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation...by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves...while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them.... (Erikson, 1968, p. 22)

This process is a continuous interface between personal reflection and self-observation. For Erikson the self as object grows out of experience with the environment and is given meaning through the individual's culture. Therefore, cultural upbringing colors each person's emerging personality and becomes a critical variable in the formation of the individual's self-concept.

On the other hand, humanistic-existential theorists (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1951, May, 1979) offer another set of hypotheses for the development of self-concept. From the humanistic perspective behaviors are interpreted as symptoms of self, while the person's subjective world of experience is construed as being the originator of behaviors. Implicit in this hypothesis is the premise that society or culture can be a potentially limiting factor in the development of the individual. For the existentialists, it is the act of choice itself that determines the potentiality of a person's being. An individual can choose to live as pure subject or pure object, but in so doing limits the experience of the self. Self emerges out of the individual's ability to exist between the two and assume responsibility for the choices made (May, 1979).

More recently, Hurrelmann (1988) has conceptualized self-concept as developing out of "the reciprocal relation between individual and society. This model places the human subject in a

social and ecological context that affects the individual but at the same time is always being influenced, changed, and shaped through the individual” (p.38). This theory recognizes the creative potential of the individual as a choice-maker through the balancing of the contextual relationship existing between internal perceptions and external societal expectations arising from various roles assumed or assigned to the individual.

Regardless of theoretical orientation, present day theorists are in agreement that self-concept is a multidimensional phenomenon. The process of self-concept formation creates varying degrees of psychological stress within the individual. “One cannot be conscious of the world without first being aware of oneself.... Knowledge of oneself is power, and you acquire it by looking into yourself to see what strengths and weaknesses you have” (Kawagley, 1999, p. 34). For minority youth it is thought that progression through this developmental phase carries with it additional life stressors due to accompanying problems often associated with minority status, for example: racial prejudice, poverty, or limited educational and/or employment opportunities (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Moritsugu & Sue, 1983; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). Therefore, educators must have knowledge of the sociohistorical relationship between the two cultures and how the dominant society’s oppression of the individual and her group may have affected perceptions of self.

Theories of identity development (Casas & Pytluk, 1995; Cross, 1995; Helms 1990; Sadowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995) have been posited for specific minority groups (i.e., Black, Asian, Latino/Hispanic Americans); in addition, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1998) have developed *The Minority Identity Development Model* that seeks to identify commonalities across the specific minority groups. D.W. Sue and D. Sue (1999) have further refined the model to make it more applicable to a broader population, renaming it *The Racial/Cultural Identity Model*.

While not a comprehensive theory of identity development, the model does address an individual's attitudes and beliefs about "(a) the self, (b) others of the same minority, (c) others of another minority, and (d) majority individuals" (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003, p. 215). Certainly, the attitudes and beliefs a person holds in relation to these theoretical constructs definitely provide insight into how the individual perceives herself and are indicators of environmental factors that have and are impacting her self-concept.

Education and Self-Concept Formation

One of the major challenges facing educators in America today is the diverse ethnic and racial makeup of children attending school (Jones, 2004). Currently, 40 percent of all school-age children are identified as being of minority status, while the corps of educators is approximately 90% Caucasian (National Education Association, 2003). American Indian and Alaska Native youth account for approximately only one percent of the school-age population, but may speak one of 252 distinct languages or be a member of one of 512 different tribes (Garrett & Myers, 1996; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003).

Furthermore, the curriculum being taught in public schools is based primarily on a western scientific understanding of the world and is infused with mainstream American values and cultural traditions. Often times these values and traditions are different from those held by minority youth, especially indigenous youth. Some of these differences include: harmony with nature versus mastery of nature, a present time orientation rather than a future time orientation, cooperation with others as opposed to being in competition with others, sharing wealth with others rather than accumulating material goods, and an emphasis on nonverbal communication (Garrett & Myers, 1996; Herring 1997; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). This latter difference is of

importance to educators of indigenous youth for it emphasizes the role of observation rather than talking in the learning process. D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2003) note:

Not only do Indian children and adolescents face the same developmental problems that all young people do, but they are also in a state of conflict over exposure to two very different cultures. They are caught between expectations of their parents to maintain traditional values and the necessity to adapt to the majority culture. (p. 318)

These cultural differences in how one perceives and interacts with his or her environment have definite implications for all aspects of a person's life, including how one learns. Individuals cannot develop a sense of being a valuable member of their society unless their actions adhere to the cultural standards they ascribe to. When this does not occur the individual experiences a bifurcated sense of self.

American Indian and Alaska Native children are often described as being unmotivated in school due to their reluctance to compete against one another. Being competitive means putting oneself above the tribe and implies that the person is better than the tribe (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). This is but one of the many value conflicts that face indigenous youth in school today. The underlying message for minority youth is that to achieve academic success they must assimilate into the mainstream society. In referring to Battiste's research, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2004) state that:

Students in indigenous societies around the world have, for the most part, demonstrated a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the experience of schooling in its conventional form—an aversion that is most often attributable to an alien institutional culture, rather than any lack of innate intelligence, ingenuity, or problem-solving skills on the part of the students. (p. 4)

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For education to become meaningful to indigenous youth it must reflect to some degree the cultural traditions and values that are a part of the heritage of these youth and be relevant to their everyday lives. Demmert (as cited in Clarke, 2002) reviews many studies that show American Indian and Alaska Native children are more successful academically when their families maintain strong traditional values. For educators, this means the development of curricula, teaching strategies, and methods of assessment that draw more on traditional ways of knowing from within the indigenous society than on a knowledge base designed solely to develop skills specific for participation in the larger dominant society (Barnhardt, 1981; Kawagley, Norris-Tull, & Norris-Tull, 1998; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002; Theobald & Howley, 1998). In addition, this calls for the development of an educational system that blends together the cultural traditions of both indigenous and western societies. “Traditional wisdom learned from generations of experience with life and the land is vital to Indian education. It is also vital to identity formation” (Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002, p. 87). However, these are not new ideas or recommendations.

In a major ethnographic study on the Inupiat that lasted over a four-year time span, Chance (1966) noted the role cultural values have in the development of socially acceptable behavior and the formation of a positive identity. In another study utilizing Yup'ik children, Harkins (1975) investigated the effects of a native language program on self-concept and academic performance. In the schools where the children's native language was the primary language of instruction the students demonstrated a greater sense of self-concept and better academic performance than students in the control schools. Positive identification with cultural roots through the use of one's native language and the expression of traditional values enhances the development of self-concept. For education to promote this process it must be offered in

ways culturally respectful to the recipient, allowing the process of developing the self to proceed without impediment.

Kleinfeld's (1979) study of the bilingual-bicultural education program at St. Mary's High School in St. Mary's, Alaska is perhaps the finest example of this. Kleinfeld wrote, "the central problem in the education of minority group children is how to teach the skills needed for success in the majority culture but at the same time maintain a strong and comfortable ethnic identity" (p. 127). This was accomplished at St. Mary's by respecting traditional cultural practices of the Yup'ik Eskimo, while introducing the skills necessary for success in the dominant culture "as expressions of those established values" (p. 130). This helped to lessen the cultural conflict between the goals of the school and the students' value system. For example, achievement was presented as an extension of self-sufficiency through being able to help others. This value restructuring allows the student

to develop a basic framework of values that would order experience and direct action.... It is the formation of stable core values that produces what education is all about—flexible personalities able to adapt to change, cope with special demands and stresses, and yet maintain coherent identity. This is the key developmental task of adolescence.

St. Mary's did not change fundamental identity patterns. Rather, the school strengthened the students' primary identity framework and extended values learned in a village childhood to the contents of modern life. Students acquired the behavior necessary for effectiveness in the majority culture through a process of "culture fusion." (p. 133)

What can be culled from Kleinfeld's (1979) work is that the demonstration of

respecting a minority student's culture by significant individuals (e.g., teachers) or groups from the dominant culture helps facilitate the student's positive development of self. In addition, by integrating local community practices into traditional school activities (e.g., a community potlatch to mark the beginning of the school year) parents and community members become active participants in the education of their children. Also, by utilizing a skills approach to teach the dominant culture's value system minority students are given the opportunity to fuse old and new values into a workable unit for their own development. This requires educators and students alike to become familiar with not only their own cultural heritages, but also to be open to learning about each other's cultural heritages. "Cross-cultural awareness is competency in recognizing, interpreting, and understanding cultural elements that contrast one's own behavior, values, and beliefs" (Jones, 2004, p. 15). What results from these multicultural exchanges is the development of an inclusive educational system (Ayalon, 2003), which helps to build toward an understanding of a global cultural community by demonstrating respect for the validity of differing worldviews. "A major goal of...education is to help students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function within their own microcultures, the U.S. cultures, other microcultures, and within the global community" (Banks, 2001, p. 25).

Making Education Culturally Congruent

It is not possible to be attuned to the cultural needs of every student. However, it is possible to incorporate selected aspects of the differing cultural backgrounds represented throughout the student body into the curriculum. "Over time, students in culturally mixed schools can learn to treat cultural differences as part of the natural fabric of society, to be celebrated and identified as a strength, rather than as a threat" (Barnhardt, 1997, p.6). This underscores the importance of teaching from within a cultural context relevant to all parties as

opposed to simply teaching about another person's culture. In essence, schools can be conceptualized as micro multicultural societies that encompass the knowledge bases of all students and provides them with the opportunity to learn (Jones, 2004).

What this type of educational approach calls for is "blending the academic functions of the school with the cultural patterns of the community" (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 12). It requires using the local culture as a foundational unit for teaching the concepts present in a standards-based curriculum. To develop such a curriculum educators must first have knowledge of what

the basic values, customs, and beliefs of the culture [are].... the culture's beliefs about education....[and what constitutes] healthy child development.... the culture's beliefs about assessment.... [including] how expectations are communicated, how feedback is shared, and the roles of authority in cultural learning situations....[in addition to] what the key features of instruction and learning [are] within the indigenous culture [and how they can] guide instruction. (Alaska Department of Education, 1996, p. 2-28)

In other words, what is presented in the formal school experience needs to be joined with the indigenous learning patterns already present in the everyday lives of the students. This validates both cultural systems' ways of knowing, helping to ground the student solidly within their own cultural heritage, which facilitates the individual's forays into the dominant society. The validation of self and culture helps the individual to develop a secure sense of identity, confidence in her abilities, and dignity for her personhood (Kawagley, 1999). This is critical for healthy psychological development of the individual for often times the messages indigenous and other minority youth receive from the dominant society are ones disregarding their value as members of that society.

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The messages from the school and the media, and other manifestations of Eurocentric society, present Yupiaq students with an unreal picture of the outside world as well as a distorted view of their own, which leads to a great deal of confusion for students about who they are and where they fit in the world. This loss of Yupiaq identity leads to guilt and shame at being Yupiaq. The resultant feelings of hurt, grief, and pain are locked in the mind to emerge as depression and apathy, which is further reinforced by the fear of failure in school, by ridicule from non-Natives, and by loss of spirituality. (Kawagley, 1999, p. 37).

Identity and culture are intrinsically linked. The development of the self is not possible in a cultural vacuum. Therefore, educational experiences that acknowledge the value of the student's culture of origin help to promote development of a more holistic self and not one fragmented by the intrusion of western influences. It is not uncommon for the culturally diverse individual to feel competent among her own people, but experience feelings of inadequacy when interacting with representatives from the dominant culture. The dissonance created by this interface of cultures can result in the culturally diverse individual forming negative appraisals of self.

The empirical study of self-concept centers on identifying the phenomenal and non-phenomenal variables that affect its development. However, the interdependency of the individual and the community in Alaska Native culture complicates this task because of the difficulty in determining the origin of specific behaviors (i.e., do actions originate from within the individual or the community) and the motivations that underlie them. "It is often difficult to separate out the difference between role expectations and value orientations, as one is invariably reflected in the other" (Trimble & Fleming, 1989, p. 189). Furthermore, "the intrinsic value of

any behavior is situational” (p. 188) and its meaning can be inferred only through understanding the context in which it occurred.

Since roles are social constructions they carry with them cultural expectations and values. Values underpin both roles and behaviors. Their purpose is to give meaning to a person’s actions. If behaviors are situational though, “How can one determine their value base?” The answer lies in examining a person’s actions across time to see if a behavioral pattern emerges that infers the presence of specific values.

The actualizing or doing of values can be considered representations of self because it is the individual who creates organization out of her life experiences, giving meaning to them. The self-concept is the representation of that process. It is the unification of the person’s subjective experiences of self with feedback from the outer world of interpersonal relations.

What this implies is that while behaviors are situational, the values from which they spring can maintain their continuity across cultures. Just as individuals are in a constant state of development, cultures are also. Just as individuals must integrate their self-perceptions and social experiences into the self so, too, must cultures integrate the different experiences of their people into a tradition that promotes their constant continuous growth.

Existential theorists argue that being human means doing, and through this process of doing the self is forever emerging (May, 1983). Acceptance of this premise makes it possible to assume that behaviors are representations of being-in-becoming. Being-in-becoming is a central tenet of Alaska Native worldview. In addition, it can be concluded, “that the strength of a person’s value orientation, especially one endorsed by other normal, healthy, functioning individuals, is closely correlated with self-perception” (Trimble & Fleming, 1989, p. 191). Therefore, from an educational and prevention standpoint determining the origin of a specific

behavior is not as critical as determining whether the outcome of the behavior expressed enhances the person's psychological well-being and is culturally congruent.

Inherent in this proposition is the assumption that selfhood is not an end product in itself, but is forever being constructed and reconstructed by the person as she interacts with the surrounding environment. "The individual is not a consistent, structured personality as much as a dynamic, changing actor, never 'becoming' anything, but always in the state of becoming" (Charon, 1985, p. 29).

Alaska Native Self-Concept

In attempting to identify what variables affect the formation of Alaska Native self-concept, it can be stated that one dimension of the self appears to emerge from an expression of values associated with Native culture. Being psychologically grounded in a cultural tradition connects the person in time and place to the experiences of her people past and present. It gives the individual a reference point from which to move out into the world, allowing for personal growth. Certainly, the educational experiences of an individual are a primary component of that personal growth. "Students develop confidence in many ways, and those who are confident about their skills are more likely to engage in challenging [educational] activities....[These perceptions affect their selection of activities, level of effort put forth to accomplish a specific task] and the persistence they exhibit once...involved in the activities" (Ames, 1990, Bandura, 1977, 1986, Schunk, 1981, 1984, cited in McCoach & Siegle, 2002, p. 2).

In a small qualitative study of four Alaska Native educators, Morotti (1992) noted that traditional Native values were expressed through participating in activities commonly associated with the dominant culture. A rank ordering of values based on the participants' behavioral expressions indicated that family, community, and respect were prominent themes in the lives of

each participant. What this implies is that psychological accommodation to the dominant culture can occur without loss of core values from a person's culture of origin. For example, sharing with others can be expressed through acquiring an education as a means to help protect the rights of all Alaska Natives. Acceptance of this proposal permits the individual to maintain the integrity of her cultural identity, while also allowing for the acquisition of new behaviors.

Five hypotheses were generated from the study as possible indicators of psychosocial factors that facilitate the development of a positive sense of self in Alaska Native youth:

- (1) The expression of traditional family values through self-sufficiency, industriousness, and participation in sustaining the economic livelihood of the family promotes feelings of competency and worth in the individual, thereby enhancing the development of self-concept.
- (2) The family's recognition of the individual's role in helping to maintain its day-to-day existence strengthens family bonds, building mutual trust and respect. Also, this recognition assists in the transference of the individual's role to the larger community through kinship ties, making possible the evolution of the self in the communal setting.
- (3) The integration of the individual's family role with the needs of the community reinforces those personality attributes deemed valuable to the society. This, in turn, helps to ensure the continuance of the community and creates the necessary conditions for the individual to acquire greater social competency, increasing his or her sense of self.
- (4) The emphasis on doing for others creates within the individual a psychological state of preparedness that promotes personal responsibility and independence, while

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enhancing the values of cooperation and harmony. These values underpin the relationship between the individual and the community.

- (5) In doing for others, the individual develops a progressively complex understanding of external reality, the function of his or her role in the physical and social world, and the realization of behavioral competencies. Through this process the individual becomes more adept at selecting behaviors that facilitate psychological integration of internal and external reality. The result of which is a healthier sense of self.

The hypotheses focus on the interplay of psychosocial variables that affect the Alaska Native's self-concept. Their origins can be traced to the expression of behaviors in this culture. Furthermore, they are based on the assumption that the potential for forming a psychologically healthy self-concept is present in the individual at birth, and its development is a life-long process. This potential rests on the interaction of the individual's biological predispositions, psychological characteristics, and the surrounding social environment.

To integrate the aforementioned hypotheses into the education of Alaska Native youth educators, parents, and community members must come together and work towards developing a common understanding of what types of knowledge are necessary for the student to learn to be able to function in at least two distinctly different cultures. Furthermore, while the task of curriculum development becomes a shared responsibility the overall implementation of the curriculum and how it is taught still rests with the dominant society's school system. Therefore, it is critical that those individuals with the most training in human development within that system (i.e., professional school counselors) assume a central role in assisting other educators in developing learning experiences that affect positively the formation of an individual's self-concept. To work effectively with indigenous youth professional school counselors must possess

a solid understanding of the cultural dynamics that impact these youth (Herring, 1997). Furthermore, Garrett and Garrett (as cited in Herring, 1997, p. 57) write, “if counselors and educators come first as students, and second, as professionals, they might be surprised at how much learning would take place by members of both worlds.”

An educational program built upon these ideals would include the following: (a) small group action-oriented cooperative learning tasks, (b) the use of Native elders in explaining and sharing traditions, (c) the identification of and appreciation for traditional values and beliefs in their (i.e., students) daily lives, (d) dominant culture values taught as skills for building behavioral competencies facilitating interactions with the dominant culture, (e) association of these skill components with traditional Native values, (f) participation in school and community activities to reinforce traditional values while providing the opportunity to practice newly acquired skills and (g) activities recognizing the contribution Alaska Native values make to the dominant culture.

For example, in a small rural school whose students were primarily of Athabascan origin a three panel mural project was undertaken to teach the concept of an historical timeline. Panels one and two were used to show both the old and new traditional hunting/fishing camps of the village’s families. Panel three was used to show the genealogy of the families presently living in the village. This activity required the students to become actively involved with parents and community elders alike, who used storytelling as the primary means for relating their historical memories. It promoted the development of pride in the students for their ethnic and cultural heritage—both are key components of self-concept formation. It also integrated the subject areas of history, art, and language arts into the everyday lives of the students (Morotti & Boyle, 1998).

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A second activity that drew upon the same subject areas and developmental issues as previously noted was the paddle project. The students were required to research the development of different types of canoe paddles. Through their research, students learned that paddle designs not only represent family tribal traditions, but also are similar to a coat of arms. Students also learned that paddles are fashioned for a specific purpose (i.e., a pointed paddle can be driven into the beach as a stake for holding the canoe in place). Students were then asked to design out of wood their own canoe paddle that either represented a goal they hoped to achieve or served as a representation of who they are (Morotti & Boyle, 1998).

An example of how to integrate the traditional Native values of caring for others and cooperation has been demonstrated through the use of challenge activities. Over a three-year time span (2001-2004) a small rural school district with a large population of elementary school-aged Native children utilized a ropes course plus other challenge activities. These activities were part of a comprehensive developmental guidance curriculum and were integrated into the physical education program. Anecdotal comments from principals and teachers indicated overall improvements in student behavior, attendance, and academic performance (J. Lorence, personal communication, November, 29, 2004). The activities required that the strengths and limitations of each student be recognized in order to achieve the desired goal that benefited the entire group. These challenge activities provided the students with another avenue outside of the traditional classroom environment for developing self-concept and interpersonal skills. (Morotti, Lorence, Fitts, Lansing, & Lutz, 2002). The learning activities also demonstrated to the teachers themselves how traditional Native values could be utilized to teach higher order thinking skills (e.g., decision making, problem solving), which are essential for academic success in the formal school experience.

The Future: Culturally Responsive Educators and Schools

In an attempt to create educational environments where the aforementioned hypotheses can be integrated into the formal school curriculum Alaska Native educators working in conjunction with the University of Alaska through the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) have developed standards for the creation of *Culturally Responsive Schools*, which include standards for: students, educators, schools, curriculum, and communities. The standards were developed primarily to meet the educational needs of Alaska Native youth living in rural areas of the state. However, the spirit and intent of the standards are applicable to the education of all children, because their “emphasis is on fostering a strong connection between what students experience in school and their lives out of school by providing opportunities for students to engage in in-depth experiential learning in real-world contexts” (Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, 1998, p. 3). For example, the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools state:

Culturally-responsive educators use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of their students. (p.3)

A culturally-responsive curriculum fosters a complimentary relationship across knowledge derived from diverse knowledge systems. (p. 15)

A culturally-responsive school provides multiple avenues for students to access the learning that is offered, as well as multiple forms of assessment for students to demonstrate what they have learned. (p.18)

The standards are a critical first step in affecting a system-wide change in the formal educational experiences of all children, but especially indigenous youth. The need for changes to improve the educational experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native youth has been

identified in the literature for many years by researchers (Fuchs & Havighurst, 1972; Herring, 1997; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003).

The AKRSI has worked closely with 20 rural school districts for the past five years to implement and document the effectiveness of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into the western educational system. The results of these efforts show a steady gain in students' academic performance over non-participating AKSRI schools (Barnhardt, Kawagley, & Hill, 2000). This certainly strengthens the argument for making education culturally congruent through the implementation of place-based educational practices, as the 20 school districts in the AKSRI project have historically had the lowest academic achievement rates for students in Alaska (Barnhardt et al., 2000).

Through changes like this, which lessen the cultural discontinuity between the learner and the school, it is hoped that graduation rates for indigenous youth will increase and further strengthen their sense of self. In addition, higher graduation rates will provide greater opportunities for an improved economic livelihood, helping to break a cycle of poverty which may contribute to the many social problems (e.g., substance abuse, suicide) confronting Alaska Native youth today.

Alaska Natives were once the dominant culture of the arctic and subarctic regions of the world. Since coming into contact with the Euro-American society commonly known as the United States, they have been relegated to the position of being a small sub-population of that culture. Even though Alaska Natives are presently struggling with many issues resulting from rapid social changes in their culture, they have demonstrated a resiliency throughout history for survival. To continue to survive Alaska Native youth must have the freedom to choose and define their sense of self through cultural traditions, values, lifeway, language, as well as

educational and economic opportunities. Culturally congruent educational practices provide Alaska Native youth with one such way to realize this goal.

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