

Alaska Native Education: Views From Within

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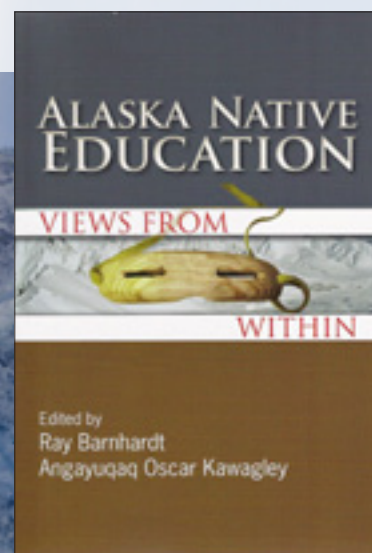
In his Foreword to *Alaska Native Education: Views From Within*, Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley notes, “From the late 1960s and up to the present, Native people have been working diligently to change education so that it accommodates their languages, worldviews, culture, and technology” (p. xiv). This new book published by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network and edited by Ray Barnhardt and Kawagley provides a collection of 31 speeches and articles that documents that work and describes how historically Native knowledge and desires have been devalued or ignored throughout the history of schooling in Alaska. Kawagley notes that this work of Alaskan Natives represents,

a slow healing process for the villages. Our educational mission is to produce human beings at home in their place, their environment, their world. This is slowly being brought to fruition through the efforts of the Native people themselves, with support from others of like thinking. (p. xiv)

The contributing authors in this collection shed light on the need for taking responsibility and ownership by Native Alaskans and Indigenous people to impart traditional knowledge, skills, and heritage to their future generations and calls for non-Natives to respect and appreciate the wisdom of Native peoples.

The book is divided into six parts and an appendix, where Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Education adopted at the World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education in Hilo, Hawaii is included in its entirety along with the

2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In Part 1, Alaska Native Education: Past, Present, and Future, seven essays trace the educational initiatives of Native Alaskans, highlighting the existing educational practices in terms of accomplishments and what still needs to be done. The contributors emphasize the problems of teachers in rural Alaskan schools and criticize teacher preparation institutions, school administrators, and teachers for their lack of knowledge and skills for teaching Indigenous children. The 1995 Report of the Education Task Force of the



A. Oscar Kawagley, Ray Barnhardt (Eds.) (2010) *Alaska Native Education: Views from Within*. Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press
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Alaska Natives Commission and the Alaska Federation of Natives included in this section focuses on the high teacher turnover problems in rural schools, which negatively influences the education rural children,

the high turnover means that teachers often do not have enough time to adjust to the schools and communities in which they find themselves and that school-community communications must begin anew each year. As a result, students in rural schools are placed at a disadvantage.” (p. 17)

The Report also criticizes all concerned agencies for not focusing on this serious problem. It emphasizes the need for preparing teachers with knowledge, skills, and respect for Indigenous languages and cultures along with different criteria for rural and urban teaching certificates. As the authors write:

Institutions that produce teachers frequently do not produce the generalists that rural schools need. They also often do not provide student teaching and internships that acquaint their students with the unique challenges and rewards of teaching in a rural, multicultural setting. These institutions also need to expand opportunities for professional development of teachers who are on the job in rural schools. (p. 17)

The worldview of Indigenous people have is seen as not compatible with the worldview of non-Indigenous people. Kawagley notes that the Yupiat, like other Native peoples, were close observers of their world and,

To the Yupiat, listening not only with the ears but with the mind and heart were essential to become aware of patterns of events that natural laws describe. The sun will rise and descend each day, the earth will continue to revolve around the sun, the spruce seeds will germinate, and so forth. These recurring phenomena will continue to occur in given way. We accept these on faith that life is science. (pp. 83-84)

In Part 2, Native Pathways to Education, the contributors emphasize utilizing traditional wisdom and community involvement in teaching children. In the essay “The circle we call community,” Miranda Wright underscores the problems of Indigenous children in terms of their Native values with reference to the Western educational system, stating, “Perhaps the Western educational system has had such a dramatic impact on our Native population that our youth do not know how to frame their inquiries from an Indigenous perspective” (p. 128). In

another essay, highlighting Tlingit education as a pleasant experience for the family and the whole clan, Dr. Walter Soboleff writes, “It was important for parents to be role models as well as devoted to the family. It is pleasing to know how the clan thought of their greatest resource: their children. The matriarchal society was the school of learning, all joining willingly as volunteer teachers” (p. 140).

In Part 3, Honoring Indigenous Knowledge, the authors have underscored the need for honoring Indigenous knowledge in research by academia. Over the years the amount of research has increased in educational institutions, which has created mistrust and a breach of the code of conduct as throughout the world non-Indigenous researchers have used Indigenous people and communities for their own personal gain and professional development while misinterpreting the realities of Natives. The authors of the first essay cite a Native Alaskan saying to reflect this mistrust: “Researchers are like mosquitoes; they suck blood and leave” (p. 147). The authors emphasize the need for designing research based on Native values and traditions and applying the methods and techniques that are in line with Indigenous people’s cultures and realities. For this, they suggest doing participatory research that involves those who have Indigenous knowledge, skills, and abilities. The authors cite Māori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, writing,

academic knowledge is organized according to disciplines and fields of knowledge that are grounded in Western ‘ways of knowing’ and are therefore inherently culturally insensitive. Western research simply interprets Indigenous knowledge from a Western framework, effectively distorting reality.” (p.150)

In Part 4, Culturally Responsive Curriculum, the essays highlight the need for culturally responsive curriculum to preserve Native values, social mores, and generational knowledge. Kwagley and Delena and Roger Norris-Tell argue that the worldview of Native Alaskans is unique,

Yupiaq people have extensive


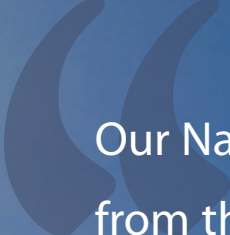
knowledge of navigation on open seas and rivers, and over snow-covered tundra. They have their own terminology for constellations and have an understanding of the seasonal positioning of the constellations and have developed a large body of knowledge about climatic and seasonal changes--knowledge about temperature changes, the behavior of ice and snow, the meaning of different cloud formations, the significance of changes in wind direction and speed, and knowledge of air pressure. This knowledge has been crucial to survival and was essential for the development of the technological devices used in the past (many of which are still used today) for hunting and fishing. (pp. 224-225)

Referring to the gap between the worldview of Native Alaskans and Western science, they note,

Yupiaq people view the world as being composed of five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. Aristotle spoke of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. However, spirit has been missing from Western science. The incorporation of spirit in the Yupiaq worldview resulted in an awareness of the interdependence of humanity with environment, a reverence for and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment. (p. 227)

A similar worldview is found in Hinduism, which differs from the Yupiaq’s worldview in one aspect and that is “spirit.” According to Hindu worldview, the world is made up of five elements: earth, air, fire, water and universe. For Hindus, spirit is God himself who is in each and every creature.

Part 5 is titled Strengthening Native Languages. Here, the need for sustaining and developing Native languages is emphasized. The contributing authors make the case that survival and revival of Indigenous languages is essential for preservation, maintenance, and transmission of Indigenous knowledge, skills, and wisdom.



Our Native languages come from the land. They are derived from the land. It is the language of the land that makes our Native people live in harmony with Nature.... Our Native words come from the creatures and things of Mother Earth naming themselves, defining themselves through action words—that's reality! Nature is our teacher. Information and rationality are a small segment of knowing and learning.

In her essay “Mediating Athabascan Oral Traditions,” Beth Leonard highlights the importance of utilizing traditional oral narratives as part of the curriculum for Alaska Native students.

In Part 6, Education for Self-Determination, the authors emphasize that it is the responsibility of Indigenous peoples to take the lead in educating the children in Indigenous values, norms, and traditions. The authors express their concern that non-Indigenous people and agencies do not understand and appreciate the problems and issues of Native Alaskans and argue powerfully that this situation needs to change. Kawagley writes in the introductory essay to this section,

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Using the loon as a metaphor, Kawagley concludes,

The loon does not blame anyone though its environment is rife with problems and pollution is beyond its control. Its mournful call reminds us that we, as humans, must do our part to regenerate and reciprocate with Nature. We, the Native people, must quit blaming other for our problems.” (p. 297)

In the Appendix, one can see the whole text on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which only the United States, Canada, and New Zealand have failed to ratify. Section 1.7.2 of the Coolangatta Statement reads,

Indigenous self-determination involves choice and diversity. If an Indigenous person chooses to access an Indigenous education system, then this is a choice, which must be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access non-Indigenous education, then this choice must

also be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access both non-Indigenous and Indigenous systems of education, then this choice too must be respected. Not to do so is in itself a violation of a basic human right. (p. 344)

The many contributing authors to *Alaska Native Education: Views From Within* offer eloquent testimony on the failings of past colonial, usually English-only, educational practices and the need for respecting and utilizing Indigenous knowledge in our schools today. This Native Indigenous knowledge is based on a close, thoughtful, continuing observation of the world we all live in, and we ignore this knowledge at our peril as pollution and associated climate change threaten all of us. ★

Note

All page numbers refer to Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley (Eds.), *Alaska Native Education: Views From Within*. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, Center for Cross-cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 2010.