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EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES FOR RURAL ALASKA

* R. Bernhardt

BACKGROUND

In the recent years, major economic developments have occurred in rural Alaska that have permanently changed the social, political and institutional landscape. The 150 Eskimo, Indian and Aleut communities have borne the brunt of these changes. Few have had available to them the indigenous human resources, the technical skills and educational preparation necessary to assume full control over these forces. In 1980 the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in co-operation with several native organisations, successfully approached the Bernard van Leer Foundation with a proposal to assist Alaska Native communities in developing their own capacity to shape their future. This is the story of how the 'Van Leer Project' has attempted to respond to those developments.

In 1971 the U.S. Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Pressure to extract oil from newly discovered fields on the North Slope of the Brooks Range led the Federal government to settle long-standing Native American claims to much of this land. This settlement included the transference of ownership of 40 million acres of land back to Native peoples, and payments of substantial compensations to native interests. However, the Government chose to manage the land and money derived from the settlement, through a series of business corporations. Twelve Native regional corporations and a village corporation for each Native community in the state were established, with each Native person holding shares in their local and regional corporation. The corporations were given a twenty year period of grace during which the stock could not be sold or transferred, to allow time for them to become viable and fully functional. Consideration was not given, however, to the educational processes required for the stockholder to acquire the skills necessary to manage both a local subsistence and a modern economy as expressed through the corporations.

The planned opening up in 1991 of Native lands to outsiders has the force of a death sentence to Native peoples who thought the land was theirs in perpetuity. Native peoples must by then have acquired all the operational skills necessary to run their lands and corporations. Yet few means to achieve this have been provided. The

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move from subsistence economy to management of corporations which must negotiate with, for example, the world's major oil companies is massive.

EMERGENCE OF A REGIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

A second event of major consequence to rural communities was the dissolution of the State-operated School System in 1976. In its place twenty-one regional school districts were created, each with its own locally elected board. For the first time in the fifty year history of schools in rural Alaska, local community members were responsible for the personnel, curriculae and the operation of the schools in their region. It was not long, however, before the high expectations resulting from this turned to disappointment and frustration because, once again, adequate attention had not been given to preparing everyone concerned for the new kinds of relationships and responsibilities that had been created. State rules and regulations and the inertia of conventional teaching and administrative practices impeded efforts to develop new and innovative educational approaches responsive to local community needs. These frustrations continue today.

Equally important was the 1976 legal decision to allow the establishment of new small secondary schools. As a result, high school-age students who had previously been attending boarding schools, sometimes hundreds of miles away from their home community, were able to attend high school in their home community. This allowed students to retain family and cultural relationships throughout their critical developmental years. However, the traditional mechanisms for social control and support of adolescent children were weakening. Many of the educational benefits of the new high schools were offset, therefore, by the negative effects of intergenerational conflicts. The result was a high incidence of alcohol-related crime, and self-destructive behaviour, particularly amongst youth. Although many State and Federal programs address these problems, too often these have been aimed at superficial symptoms rather than causes, thus producing at best only short-lived results. Concerns such as these led to the formulation of a project aimed at assisting the youth of rural communities to face such challenges in a new way.

INTEGRATING YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Over its first three years of operation, the Alaska Van Leer Project evolved from the development of a regional network of Alaska Native youth organisations to an emphasis on the integration of youth into a broader community development process. The original aim was to train indigenous community youth workers via a new

University degree program. They then would develop programs to complement the home and the school as socialising forces in the communities. It soon became apparent that to accomplish this, a more intensive relationship with the participating communities would be essential. The working and living conditions typical of the area are critical in this. Alaska is one of the last major wildernesses in the world. Distances are immense and weather conditions are unpredictable. The project based in Fairbanks had only a few options on how it would make contact with field bases up to six hundred miles away. These are accessible either by several hours travel in light planes, by using telephone links via satellite or by borrowing time on small computers in local schools. There are no access roads to the project area.

An additional strong influence on the project is the local lifestyle. Athabascan Native peoples, traditionally nomadic, populate the vast interior of Alaska. They have been resettled in small villages for most of this century. The traditional form of self-government within the area is designed to produce a democratic consensus of opinion on local issues. It is based on a deep attachment to and knowledge of the natural environment. It is unfortunate that the forces of modernisation which exert increasingly strong pressures on local life rarely show understanding of or sensitivity to Athabascan culture. Instead, traditionally balanced subsistence economy has been degraded into dependence on the U.S. economy. Yet, there are very few opportunities for paid work in Native villages. Many men are required to leave their homes to search for wage employment. Families are frequently split up for long periods of time, with further negative effects on village organisation and the quality of local life.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Education, which should be an important access route for training and self-help, in practice provides little assistance. Equal opportunities within the education system has long been problematic for Native peoples. The semi-subsistence lifestyle and commitment to extended family structures create different time scales and rhythms of life. The academic year cuts across prime hunting and subsistence timetables essential to feed the communities.

There is also a lack of confidence among young people about their capacity for education. Because the region's young people have for many years been sent away to boarding schools where there is no access to the traditional teaching systems of their community, youngsters grow up lacking the local knowledge essential for full

participation in their own culture. They are de-skilled in terms of their ability to understand or exploit the natural environment. Equally, very few have gained access to higher education or advanced training. Development of community leaders has therefore not occurred. The stereotyped, cultural curriculum has worked against the young's motivation and ability to learn. Until recently, the University of Alaska has not adapted its organisation, staffing, course content or structure to assist Native groups despite the evident need. The young are doubly disadvantaged, therefore, in terms of both the majority and the minority cultures' expectations.

The University's Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies was among the first to experiment with alternative education for rural Alaska. It devised a scheme which brought higher education to potential students unable to leave their villages. The program has successfully developed the first significant group of Native teachers. Because these are committed to their communities and view their involvement as long-term, they have begun to impact a state system which previously imported all of its teachers from outside the region.

MAJOR INNOVATIONS

In setting up the Foundation sponsored project for potential community leaders to work with the area's young, similar principles of educational relevance and self-help were applied. However, the extent of the need and the vastness of the area stimulated important innovations. One was the method of identifying participating communities. The project selected two villages whose local school had a native teacher who was a graduate of the cross-cultural teacher training program. These teachers could provide crucial support for students because they knew from personal experience the problems of integrating advanced study, a semi-subsistence life style and the demands of a young family. They also provided a new kind of role model, positive and successful in terms of the dominant society, yet rooted in local culture and community life. The communities chosen, Hughes and Huslia, are situated in interior Alaska near the Arctic Circle.

A further significant innovation was in the methods used for recruiting students. A local woman was chosen to recruit at community level. This initiative differed greatly from the usual passive selection process. She was herself studying at post graduate degree level, at the same time raising a family, but had remained fully part of the extended family and kinship network in the project area. She recruited young women in the target villages, using language and concepts familiar to them in explaining the value of the work. Women, rather than men, were the target because of their key role within

family and community. The program was thus from the first an indigenous effort, based on local personnel, rather than one imposed by external agencies unaware of the local context. This approach also enabled the project to identify those students with the strongest leadership potential. From the earliest stages, therefore, the program has been directly responsive to local people in its form, organisation and, so far as possible, content.

The course tutor, sought critically to extend the principle of local relevance. He sought to demonstrate in all aspects of his daily living that he, and by implication the course work, were locally-oriented, and part of community life. The tutor, therefore, took on the role of a community educator, with no set working hours: he worked continuously with the students as tutor, counsellor and adviser. He worked informally with husbands who sometimes felt threatened by their wives' development in academic terms; he worked with the young of all ages, introducing to them new possibilities for growth and change; and he became closely involved with the elders of the community who were able in turn to teach him about the culture and local background. He showed in many complementary ways that local people, their culture and identities had a value equal to that of the dominant U.S. culture and way of life.

It was therefore stressed at every stage that this new approach sought to build up local potential to enable local people to solve their problems using Native skills. Students were being offered responsibility and challenge instead of dependence and passive acceptance of other people's reality.

The program also sought to build up group cohesion, mutual responsibility and support. This approach was considered vital if the challenging four year course of part-time study and practical work was to be completed on time. The working style was again fully consistent with local cultural values. The more experienced women helped and encouraged the others, and a sense of team identity gradually emerged. The local communities also grew accustomed to seeing the project women in their distinctive 'Van Leer' caps as they worked together, and became increasingly involved in important decision-making processes. Decision-makers found themselves challenged by reasoned, confident arguments from project participants. Students would also have many other subsistence tasks to undertake, such as hunting and preparing meat for the winter. In addition, the women set out to identify and respond to their local needs. Their study of other societies and disciplines, primarily anthropology and sociology, enabled them to place the Athabascan experience in context. They were able to define the values of their culture, and to determine how best to build upon its strengths.

Intensive daily study periods were combined with practical project involvement and active, critical participation in the area council's decision-making. As the project mothers increased their critical awareness of the challenges facing the young within their communities, they realised the urgent need to train them not only in self-help, problem-solving and decision-making techniques, but also to acquaint them with Native strengths, their own unique identity and potential.

THE COMMUNITY ADVANCES

The project women used traditional social patterns to bring together all age groups to break down the new barriers between the generations which prevented joint action and effective communication. Much effort was needed to convince local people that success was possible, and that the initiative for change could be grasped locally. This was especially problematic because of strong Athabaskan traditions which gave authority to the old and wise, the older people felt anxious and threatened by the new assertiveness of the young and by their skill in reading and writing English. The young were frustrated by their lack of real skills or the opportunity to develop them.

The project mothers therefore planned and organised the first-ever regional forum, bringing together elders, youth and community leaders to help all age groups and their communities to understand the fundamental problem: how to develop the technical skills and tools necessary to deal with an imposing Western way of life and, at the same time, maintain a strong native cultural identity and self image.

The project has tried to upgrade the community's sense of itself via the mother, in the attempt to stimulate far-reaching changes within the total environment, with a particular focus on the young family. In such depressed communities, where the men fear further threats to their identity and feel alienated from their traditional sources of authority and value, women have emerged strongly as the most stable elements and as leaders. They bring to the young a new sense of purpose and demonstrate that action and achievement compatible with inherited values are indeed achievable. The project has therefore progressed over the last three years from a training program aimed at 'at risk' youth to a program which is setting new goals for families and communities, providing a firmer basis for all children's growth, with a key development role for mothers.

THE INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

The project has also stimulated extensive changes within the University itself, none foreseen when the project began. Most importantly, the project's very existence and the support of an international network via the Foundation has encouraged the University to pay attention to this work, its positive outcomes and new philosophy. This new acceptance of cross-cultural principles, is turning the University to consider the acute needs of Alaska's villages, and has created a new working context for the project, its staff and students. The project has served as the stimulus for creation of a new Department of Rural Development, housing a new degree program now becoming accessible to Native peoples throughout the State. New study options will cover vital areas such as resource management, enabling Native people to train to meet contemporary challenges, in addition to the project-inspired work with young mothers, families and young people. The State government has now accepted the right to access to such essential facilities for self and community revitalisation.

LOOKING FORWARD

In a second phase of three years, due to begin at the end of 1984, the project aims further to devolve to key mothers trained through the project the responsibility to extend the work to new communities and, later, to other ethnic groups - Yupik, and Inuit peoples in the other regions of Alaska. The small group of women selected for this will undergo a period of intensive training before moving out into new areas of activity. They also intend to encourage the young men to undertake basic production activities, based on plentiful natural resources, so that self-help and self-reliance can again be encouraged in support of the stability and self-reliance of the family unit.

Despite the enormous problems of initiating culturally appropriate innovation in rural Alaska, a great deal has been achieved in a very short time. However, the critical element in achieving changes in institutional policy has been the demonstrated success of the work at the local level.

Students have demonstrated their potential, and now wish to extend such an opportunity to others. The advantages gained, although hard-won, lie in the ability of these women to share with their communities the new possibilities grasped and the changed prospects for their young children. In that sense, the battles and the toil involved have been fully justified. The parents involved can now indicate positively how education can be used to attain new life

chances. The message about their cultural identity can then be absorbed by children from their earliest years.

The mothers' familiarity with the language of concepts, action, discussion and debate in the real world, their intimate understanding of the education process and enhanced ability to argue for resources, support for new teaching methods and educational opportunities will further aid them to support their children and communities. The project's original goal, that of developing the community setting as a critical environment to reinforce growth and learning, has clearly become attainable in the short-term, instead of seeming to be a distant, almost inaccessible dream.

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ANZAC FELLOWSHIPS 1986

A number of Australians will study, conduct research, or further their professional experience in New Zealand next year under the Anzac Fellowship Scheme. The Fellowships assist Australians working in such fields as primary and secondary industry, commerce, education, the arts or public service to spend three to twelve months in New Zealand, following an approved program.

One of the major aims of the Scheme, which is financed by the New Zealand and Australian Governments, is to foster good relationships between Australia and New Zealand. Any Australian citizen may apply but preference is given to applicants who are under the age of 45. Active participation in the local community or an interest in community affairs would be an advantage.

Benefits include a personal maintenance allowance, an allowance for dependants and the return air fare for the fellow from the airport nearest his/her home to Wellington.

Assistance with air fares for dependants is provided, depending on the length of the Fellowship. Successful applicants will also receive payment of approved internal travel and approved tuition and other fees. Fellows will be reimbursed for medical insurance costs.

Applications close on 17 July and information brochures are available from the offices of the Commonwealth Department of Education throughout Australia.

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