

Archived Information

Abstract

This action research study examined the question of how to help rural Alaskan Native students transition into an urban classroom. The research explored issues such as learning styles of Alaskan Native students, culture, educational strategies, teacher preparation, cultural bias, population growth in urban centers, racism, academics, and social and family issues. The data for this study was collected through means of observations of teachers, observations of the authors practices, anonymous questionnaires, and interviews with professional educators. The results of this study include suggestions for a broad exposure of pre-service teachers in Alaska to Alaskan Native cultures. This would include performing a rural practicum in addition to Alaska Native studies as requirements to become a certificated teacher in the State of Alaska. Additionally, this study suggests current teachers accommodate the learning styles of Alaskan Native students by allowing more small group and paired learning during classroom instruction. Lastly, teachers need to allow time, the greatest benefit for Alaskan Native students in successfully transitioning from a rural to urban classrooms, to overcome the hurdles they will face.

The following is an exert from the above study. To review the entire work, please contact the author at: Joel Akers, MAT; Anchorage School District; Akers.Joel@asdk12.org.

Chapter 4 Findings and Discussions

Introduction

Over the past twelve months I have had the distinct pleasure of doing my practicum and student teaching internships with some extremely wonderful and talented teachers working in schools within Alaska. Throughout this experience I was able to not only witness good teaching practices, in terms of lesson preparation and delivery, but also in terms of working with rural Alaskan Native students to overcome individual hardships transitioning into my urban classroom. In particular, the host teachers I worked with did a wonderful job of helping Native students coming from rural communities transition into their urban classrooms based upon the knowledge and experience they had.

The teachers I worked with often took the time and effort to help insure these students not only had the opportunity to adjust to the new friends and faces they saw everyday, but they also worked with the students in adjusting to a completely different, and sometimes drastic, change compared to the cultures and communities they left behind. However, it is important to note, often the comments teachers made to me either through the interview or questionnaire process were not truly what they practiced in their classrooms. In many instances I was told by teachers they simply let the children transition into their classrooms over time, and essentially did nothing special to help the students. Upon conducting my observations of the teachers, I found many of them, indeed, were working directly with transitioning Native students to help them adjust to life in their classrooms (Researcher Journal, October, 2004).

A large part of my research, in addition to my journals and observations from the classroom, came from direct interviews with, and questionnaires given to, educators

regarding the issue of assisting Alaska Native students' transitioning into urban classrooms. The following is a compilation of the themes and significant issues that surfaced as a result of my research into the best practices for transitioning rural Alaskan Native students into my urban classroom. In this regard, in the following I will discuss the methods I attempted to add to my own practices as an educator as part of my action research.

Tenure in Urban Settings for Rural Alaska Native Students

New Versus Experienced. "Oftentimes when children come in from the bush they are going into a classroom with more children than the school they came from. It is scary, it is intimidating, the rules are different, the faces are different, the expectations are different (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). This statement proved itself true each time I worked with an Alaskan Native student who was transitioning into my classroom from the bush. The children were scared and felt out of place; they did not know how to fit in to the class, and they were at a loss as to how they could make friends. The following excerpt from my researcher journal is an example of one student's experience during her first few weeks in an urban classroom:

I had already been at the elementary school where I was conducting my practicum internship for two weeks when a new student walked into class. Sally, a rosy-cheeked, pigtailed Native girl had just moved to Anchorage from a small village in Western Alaska. She was shy, obviously uncomfortable, and looked as if she was about to cry when she came up and asked me where she should sit. Not knowing what to do, as I, also, was new to this school and to this class, I turned to

my host teacher. She quickly stepped in, put her arm around Sally, and showed her where her desk would be.

After a couple of weeks Sally had begun to learn the pattern of how things worked in our class, but she was still a long way from interacting and making friends. One day I noticed, rather than working with her table group on a project, Sally had chosen to work by herself in our classroom library. My host teacher had also noticed this and had made a point to go over and sit and work with her. At about the same time my host teacher went over to work with Sally, my eyes drifted across our classroom to where another transitional Native student, John, was sitting. John, according to the discussion I had with my host teacher, was from South Central Alaska, and his family had moved into the Anchorage area at the end of the previous school year. John was actively participating with his table group in the activity they were assigned; he was being lively and gregarious, and was also displaying behavior I would have expected from a typical sixth grade boy. After observing this for awhile, I wondered what allowed John to act so comfortable and relaxed among the other students, while Sally was still having troubles settling in (Researcher Journal, September, 2003).

According to one of my host teachers, “The longer a child has been in Anchorage and has adapted to the urban setting, the more successful he or she is in class. I have had students who used to live in a village but they have been in school for a couple of years now and they are doing fine” (SL Interview, November, 2004).

My host teacher’s thoughts, as well as those of the Indian Education teacher, and the observations I had with the two students in my class were consistent with the

information I gathered through my questionnaires. Out of fifty questionnaires distributed to educators at the elementary and middle school level during this study forty percent of them were completed and returned. These twenty questionnaires confirmed the fact that Native children entering an urban school from a rural community need time to adjust to their new setting. The reason for this adjustment period, other than simply being new to the school, is to also give the students time to adjust to a community and culture that may be drastically different than the one they had left (Questionnaires, April, 2004 / November, 2005). This thought was, perhaps, best summed up by one of the teachers when they wrote on their questionnaire, “Students who come from rural to urban areas are entering a world that is faster paced, larger, and many times overwhelming to them” (Questionnaires, April 2004 / November, 2005).

Once I had identified that there was, indeed, a need to investigate the process for Alaskan Native students to transition into urban classrooms from rural communities, I began to look for methods that could be used to help this group of students. This was a major concern to me, because while I agreed time was important, as an educator I did not want to wait for time alone to perform its work. I felt there must be ways to incorporate strategies to assist this transition into my teaching routine and, in doing so, shorten the amount of time needed for Alaska Native students to transition into my urban classroom setting.

Methods: Transitioning Rural Students into the Urban Classroom

Indian Education. A theme that became evident during my study was to encourage and allow students to participate in Indian Education programs within the schools. This was sometimes a highly debated issue among teachers because allowing

students to meet with other children from the same or similar backgrounds a few times each week also meant losing out on valuable instruction time in the classroom (SL Interview, November, 2004). Many of the teachers I worked with felt the Alaskan Native students who were pulled from the classroom were done so at the expense of keeping up with their academic progress, and if they participated in their Native culture outside of class (which many do) then school should be devoted to their academic pursuits (Researcher Journal, February, 2004). However, according to my interview with the Indian Education teacher at my school, she felt, “New and old Native children need to be in a cohesive group. They need the support” (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). In addition to the security of the group, this also meant the Native students could have a, “Place to call their own; a place with comfortable couches and bean bags, and a place where they know they can go and relax and get away from the barrage of new culture” (JG Interview, November, 2004). This thought was further supported by my host teacher when she commented:

We (the school district) have programs set up outside of the classroom like the Indian Education Program, (and) the Cook Inlet Regional Tribal Counsel where they give kids extra studying and tutoring, which sort of helps the adjustment from rural to urban setting. And, that is helpful if the kids take advantage of it (SL Interview, November, 2004).

Taking advantage of the Indian Education program is an important step for the children transitioning from rural Native life to urban life. Not all of them readily accept the idea the program is good and some students outright let you know they do not want to participate (Researcher Journal, October, 2004), but it is important to “Let them know

that the Indian Education room is a privilege and because they are Native American or Alaskan Native they can go there. Not everybody gets to do that. This is a special place for them” (MJKT Interview, November, 2004).

Given this information, I spent some time observing the Indian Education teacher at my school work with her students. When I walked into her classroom, I could not help but notice the feeling of being at home. The classroom had a sense of comfort similar to a favorite pair of old, well-worn shoes; the kind you like to wear when you have to go on a long walk or hike; the kind you would wear for a rough, and perhaps cumbersome journey. When the students came into class that day, they took notice of me, and some even asked who I was. A couple of the students knew me as one of the student teachers in the building, and a few more even knew me as the student teacher in their regular classroom. All of them, however, made me feel welcome into their group; almost as if I had been with them all along (Researcher Journal, September, 2004).

While I was the “newest” person in the room during this particular observation, the actual newest student had transferred into the group at the start of the semester the previous September. This meant, that at the time of my observation, he had had a month to make their adjustment to their new school and their new community. The “newest” student, in this class, seemed well adjusted. Overall, the students knew the routine, rules and boundaries of the class; they were, as it became quite obvious, very comfortable here. The classroom, for all intensive purposes, was a microcosm of the classroom many of the students had in the bush, and I had to remind myself of this when I was reflecting back on the experience. This was not a typical urban classroom. There were approximately 10 students, all of them were all or part Native, and all of them had a pride about their

individual cultures and identities, that at least in this classroom, radiated from them. No, this was indeed a bush classroom in an urban setting.

During my initial observation that day, and subsequent observations throughout the semester, I noticed something curious concerning the work habits of the students in this classroom. It was something I had seen regularly practiced in the Indian Education room, and the children automatically did this upon entering the room; they worked in pairs. In fact, not only were these students working in pairs, but they often were in pairs matched by age, sex, and as I later found out, by cultural groups (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). While this practice was common in the Indian Education room, it was something I rarely saw in the regular classroom environment. At most, students were allowed to work in small groups, and at best there might be two Alaska Native students in a small group (Researcher Journal, October, 2004).

Pairing. According to the general theme emerging from the interviews I conducted and the questionnaires I distributed and collected, nearly all of the professional educators I worked with said they tried to pair new Alaska Native students with a student they knew would model success, good behavior, be a role model, and would be, in general, a decent student (April, 2004 / November, 2005). This sentiment was best stated by one of the teachers interviewed when she responded:

I had a student a number of years ago that recently moved from a remote part of Alaska....This guy would not do a thing for me, and finally I was at my wit's end with trying to motivate him. As it turned out I ended up sitting him next to this girl he must have fallen madly in love with, and she was finally able to get him motivated. She would say things to him like, "You mean you are not doing your

spelling? You need to get busy right now!” She had some connection with this boy. She actually got him busy working (JG Interview, November, 2004).

While the Indian Education teacher was the only educator I observed who went to the extent of encouraging the students to find their own friend to pair up with, thus allowing a more natural pairing between sex and age within the students, she was also, perhaps, the only teacher who had the student resources to do this because of the inherent dynamics of her classroom (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). However, as an educator, I could see the benefit, if it was possible, to try to match a new Alaska Native student in my class with a Native student of same age and sex who had already built up tenure in my classroom, to provide a good, positive role model.

Pairing became an important part of my action research in my own teaching during this time. While working with the fifth graders from my multiage classroom in guided reading, I was able to see the benefits of this strategy firsthand through two Alaska Native students in the group. The group, itself, was small; consisting of only eight students, and made up of Alaska Native students, Caucasian students, and Asian/Pacific Islander students, and included six girls and two boys. Both Alaska Native students were girls. From the first day, students were allowed to pair themselves into groups of two students on their own. As I had hoped, the Alaska Native students paired up with each other for discussion about books we were reading and topics they were given. Both students, upon entering my group, were marginal readers based upon the initial testing done on them at the beginning of the year, and both were regarded by teachers in the school to be shy and unwilling to speak in class. However, I found that through allowing them to pair up with someone they were comfortable with, discuss what

they were reading, and have a safe, small group environment where they could speak, these girls improved in their general reading fluency, comprehension and writing (Researcher Journal, November, 2004).

In addition to allowing students to have a place that is both comfortable and comforting to them and allowing them to work in pairs, one final theme under methods immersed in helping Alaska Native students transition from rural to urban classrooms. That theme was one of slowly working the students into the culture of the classroom.

Space and Time. All of the professionals involved in this study agreed one of the best practices to follow, when working with an Alaska Native student transitioning into their classroom is to give the student some space and time to figure out for themselves how they fit into your classroom. It would be an exceptional student who could fly from a remote setting, land in Anchorage and then walk into your class ready to hit the ground running (SL Interview, November, 2004). In fact, Alaska Native children “Arriving from the bush for the first time are overwhelmed. City life is big, it is fast. Everything they experience here is a hundred times more than a village. In the village you are safe; you are surrounded by family” (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). Even the school is larger than most of the villages they come from by leaps and bounds. So, given that, they are coming into a situation that, just from the sheer walking into the door of the school is overwhelming (MK Interview, November, 2004).

Because of the dynamics working against rural Alaskan Native students merely by moving to the city, patience on the part of the teacher begins to play an important role in working with these students. In many instances Alaska Native students transitioning into urban classrooms experience a lack of understanding and empathy from their

teachers and administrators when they first arrive in the classroom. Because we, as an institution and society, expect almost instantaneous results from our students, we often fail to recognize the situations special groups of students are faced with. It is not uncommon for one to hear in the teachers' lounge comments like, "I've had this student for an entire quarter, and she still is not reading at grade level" (Researcher Journal, April, 2004). In truth, "It sometimes takes rural Alaska Native students weeks into months, and sometimes even years to feel comfortable in the city." (SL Interview, November, 2004).

The best practice, according to the teachers I observed and interviewed, was to let the student see the dynamics of the class; let them see how other kids respond, and let them have a few weeks (at a minimum) to become accustomed to the class. Then, once they start to enjoy school and become more at ease in their new environments, the students will be more willing to participate (JG Interview, November, 2004). This thought was stated best by the Indian Education teacher when she said, "Back off the academics a week or so. Let the students get used to their new school before piling on the work. Then, slowly, introduce the rules to them and set their expectations. Most of this is just common sense to me" (MJKT Interview, November, 2004).

Putting it into Practice

Small Groups. Once the sub-themes under methods became clear I, in various ways, put them into practice within my own classroom. Pairing, as stated earlier, was something easily implemented in my class because of the ability to break the multiage setting into three smaller and more functional groups. Since my host teacher and I decided the structure of our multiage class would be to work as much as possible in small

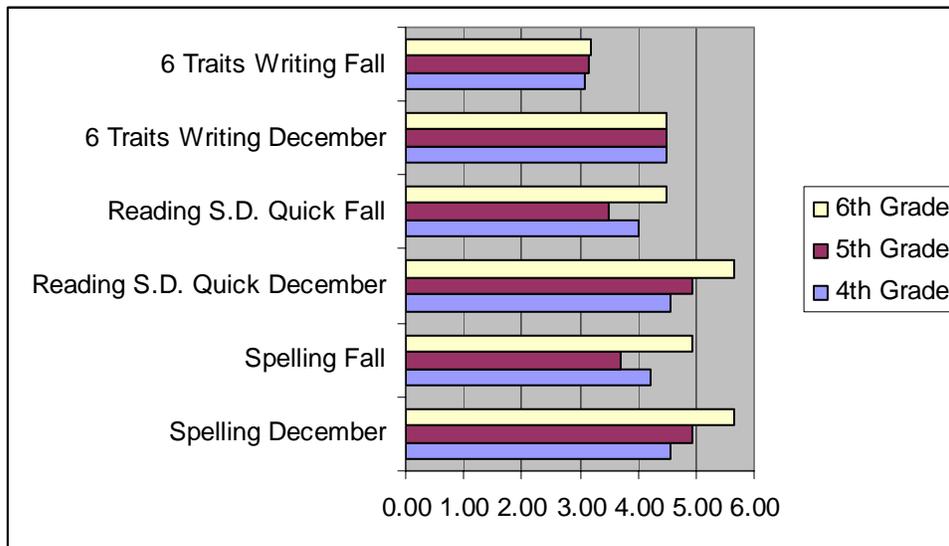
groups, I simply added the feature of assigning paired work within my small group setting. Within the small group, I allowed the students the autonomy to pick whom they wanted to work with. Since I effectively had one-third of my class in the small group setting, I also took advantage of using the remaining two-thirds of the students as a control group.

Each of the remaining two-thirds met either with my host teacher or the Bilingual teacher for guided reading. We had decided, prior to beginning the guided reading groups, they would not allow the students in their groups to pick their own partners. In addition, they would do less paired work and more group work than I was doing. The goal of this was to see which of the six total transitional rural Alaska Native students from our combined class transitioned the easiest into the classroom and at the same time upheld or increased their academic performance in language arts.

The graphs below show the progress the six students in my multiage class made over the course of the fall semester in three different areas: Spelling, *San Diego Quick Reading Assessment*, and “Six Traits Writing”. These tests were first given to the students during the first three weeks of school to assess the grade level they were functioning at in spelling, reading, and writing. Under usual circumstances, the students would not be required to retake these tests until the fourth quarter of the school year. However, since my study ended at the terminus of my student teaching, I informally tested the students in December on the three areas using the same criteria as the school district. This meant they were given the same set of spelling words in December as they were in the fall, were tested for reading accuracy based upon the same criteria, and had an individual writing assignment (same assignment for all students) graded for content of the

“Six Traits Writing” (voice, word choice, ideas and content, organization, sentence fluency, and conventions).

| Student Name | Spelling Fall | Spelling December | Reading S.D. Quick Fall | Reading S.D. Quick December | 6 Traits Writing Fall | 6 Traits Writing December |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 4th Grade #1 | 5.80 | 5.90 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 3.52 |
| 4th Grade #2 | 2.60 | 3.20 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 3.16 | 3.63 |
| 5th Grade #1 | 3.50 | 4.80 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 3.58 | 4.02 |
| 5th Grade #2 | 3.90 | 5.10 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 2.75 | 3.76 |
| 6th Grade #1 | 3.50 | 4.50 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 2.91 | 3.50 |
| 6th Grade #2 | 6.40 | 6.80 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 3.50 | 4.35 |
| 4th Grade Average | 4.20 | 4.55 | 4.00 | 4.50 | 3.08 | 3.58 |
| 5th Grade Average | 3.70 | 4.95 | 3.50 | 4.50 | 3.17 | 3.89 |
| 6th Grade Average | 4.95 | 5.65 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 3.21 | 3.93 |



What interested me, upon review of this data, was that the group who were allowed to pair up with another transitional Alaska Native student (the 5th graders) had a combined average increase in their overall performance in spelling, reading and writing of 24.33 percent, while the other groups who did not have their transitional Alaska Native student pair up came out with a combined average increase in their spelling, reading and writing performance of 11.00 percent (4th grade) and 16.33 percent (6th grade).

The information presented in the data identified that pairing students together in order to help overcome some of the transitional difficulties was effective. Indeed, this was the case as far as the three small groups of students were concerned. However, all of the transitional Alaska Native students in my class continued to show signs of having difficulties working within the classroom environment as a whole. This group the students were often observed not partaking in structured group activities unless requested specifically to do so, and, in general, seemed overwhelmed at times with the size and pace of our class (Researcher Journal, December, 2004). Because of this, I changed my focus from looking at implementing strategies to help transition these students into my classroom, to studying the effects of the family situations and cultural differences of the students.

Role Played by Culture and Family

Culture. “Steven has missed a number of days of school. I would say he has missed all of last week and, so far, all of this week. I cannot understand why he is gone so much. We are barely into our second week of school and he has not turned in a single assignment. I am afraid he is heading for trouble” (Researcher Journal, September, 2004). What is missing from this quote is that Steven was from Tyonek, an Athabascan

Native village that is a twenty-five minute flight from Anchorage on the western side of Cook Inlet. The month of September is moose hunting season for the people of Tyonek as well as for most other hunters in South Central Alaska, and Steven was with his family doing what people from their culture have done for thousands of years – getting meat to store for use during the winter.

According to the teachers I interviewed during my research, many of the Alaska Native families who move into urban communities like Anchorage tend to keep strong ties with the culture they left behind in their villages. “Their culture is strong and their beliefs and morals from the Native culture are very strong. It is almost like you turn a switch; you have a foot in both worlds” (MJKT Interview, November, 2004). In rural villages if it is time to hunt moose, whale, walrus, harvest salmon, or pick berries, these subsistence issues take precedence over school, and school is, for all essential purposes, halted. When families move away from bush communities it is hard for them to leave that part of their lives behind, as it is so much a part of them (SL Interview, November, 2004). Not only is the feeling of keeping subsistence practices strong with many Native families living in Anchorage but, according to some educators, there seems to be a view of them breaking ties with their community if they do not participate in cultural traditions. This observation was best stated by an Indian Education teacher when she said:

In terms of culture, the parent or relative many of these kids are living with do not see the problem in removing the kids from school for cultural reasons or celebrations. A lot of this has to do with not wanting their child to be forced to stand out and be ostracized for not participating in activities such as hunting and

fishing, potlatches, and other events. What becomes clear when you really work with Alaska Native students is that the priorities from the bush carry over when they move to Anchorage (MJKT, November, 2004).

Family. The priorities carried over from life in rural Alaska also concerned and affected the family life of the students in my classroom. Some of them had, what would be considered in Western cultures, a normal home environment. The students had a mother and father at home who worked and were there to provide for the needs of their family. However this was not true for all of the Alaskan Native students. At least two of the students in my class were taken away from their families in the village because of parents abusing and neglecting them, and sent to live with family members in Anchorage. Another student's family left her village because of lack of work and not being able to survive on subsistence living alone. According to my host teacher, "Some students leave the village for the city under adverse situations. If their families come to the city without a support network and they do not have all the pieces in place (housing, jobs, and utilities) it becomes hard for them to acclimate while so many changes are happening in their lives" (SL Interview, November, 2004).

Once I had realized, aside from the issues of time and incorporating methods of helping students to transition into my classroom, I had to work with students whose family and culture often put them at odds with the life they were experiencing in my urban classroom, it finally dawned on me I needed to include the parents of these children in the transitional process as well in order to begin to bridge the gap that existed between the rural and urban lives of the students. In discussions with the various teachers I worked with during this project I discovered a number of them accomplished this task by

doing things as simple as sending letters home with the students periodically to let the parents know what important events were coming up at the school, or inviting parents of a new Native student to come and take a tour of their child's school, and at the very least, talking frankly to the parents at parent teacher conferences. (Researcher Journal, October, 2004). One teacher even went so far as to say:

The first thing I do when I have new [Native] students come to my class is meet with the person that brings them to the door. My classroom is set up so, no matter what is happening, I can put my kids to work independently and I can steal away to the hall to have a few minutes to talk with the family if they are available. You know, have a personal, warm introduction with everybody. I want to make eye contact and I want them to feel like I have the warmest, friendliest, most caring classroom so they will feel comfortable returning (JG Interview, November, 2004).

While these seemed like good ideas, I wondered if they truly conveyed to the parents of Alaska Native students the greater importance of their students being in school (according to our cultural standards) than going to Native cultural or subsistence events. The sad answer, as I discovered, was in many cases the parents of the Native students felt keeping their children involved with their culture took precedent over their education, and did not see the value of finding a balance between the two (Researcher Journal, October, 2004).

By understanding the above piece of the puzzle in helping rural Alaska Native students transition into an urban classroom I knew there was one additional piece which had to be addressed before I could fully realize my goal of successfully implementing my

action research into my classroom: I had to understand where the students were coming from. I had to know something more about their culture than the anecdotal information I already possessed.

Where the Students are Coming From

Teacher Perspectives. “Embrace the state, embrace your students, and learn all you can from them” (SL Interview, November, 2004). This one, simple statement is perhaps more telling than any vignette could ever be in terms of the importance of understanding the cultures and traditions of Alaska Native students. They are not only held dear by them, but they are a part of them, and because of that we, as teachers, must learn from them. As people who live in the city and understand city life we “Have different expectations of behavior that you do not have in the village. You cannot walk out of the door and in fifteen minutes be in the deepest part of the wilderness. There are places in the city where it is not safe to go, not because of animals or the environment, but because of other people. Not everybody is your friend. Not everybody understands the way you dress, the way you speak, and what you eat” (MJKT Interview, November, 2004).

Throughout my research it became clear to me the teachers who had done rural practicums or who had actually spent a considerable amount of time teaching in the bush communities had a much better understanding and deeper appreciation for the transitional difficulties rural Alaska Native students go through when entering an urban classroom. To live, breathe, smell, and “hear” a culture allows for so much more than simply reading about it in a textbook. When asking for the most valuable piece of information seasoned

educators could give to their peers regarding best practices for transitioning Alaska Native students into urban classrooms, four quotes stood out:

“Go teach in a village. Go teach in a village. I think it would open some people’s (teachers) eyes” (SO, Interview, April, 2004).

“Any experience you can have in a rural setting can only help you” (Questionnaire, November, 2004).

“Visit a rural area. See what it feels like to be out of your element just as a rural student would feel coming into an urban environment” (Questionnaire, April, 2004).

“I wish I had more experience teaching in the bush” (JG Interview, November, 2004).

These above quotes encouraged me to see what life in a rural school in a rural community was like. I wanted to travel to, teach in, and experience life in a remote community in Alaska. With that thought in mind, when I was presented a number of different villages for my rural teaching practicum, I chose the most remote location offered, Savoonga, Alaska.

Savoonga. Savoonga is a village of approximately 700 people who live on Saint Lawrence Island 160 miles southwest of Nome, Alaska in the middle of the Bering Sea. The community is made up of Siberian Yup’ik Eskimos who, while having modern luxuries such as government housing and the use of snowmobiles, still embrace a subsistence lifestyle. Aside from the food served to the children and staff at the school, most of the villagers still provide for their families by hunting sea mammals or birds and fishing. The villagers still follow their cultural traditions of using walrus hides as the

skin for their umiaks (boats) and many of them carve the ivory from the walrus tusks to earn money.

During my flight from Nome to Savoonga my excitement grew as I anticipated the experiences I would have not only in the classroom teaching, but even more so by seeing firsthand the culture of the Siberian Yu'pik. When the plane landed, and I was loaded onto the back of a wooden sled and towed by snowmobile to the school I was thrilled. I was finally there, and once I was shown to the classroom where I would teach in and live in during my stay, I immediately began preparing for my first day with my students.

“I am ready for school on my first day of teaching in Savoonga. I counted fourteen desks in my classroom, but only nine students showed up. I hope tomorrow I will have a better showing” (Researcher Journal, April, 2004). To prepare for my first day of teaching in the bush I stayed up nearly the entire night getting ready for what I anticipated to be a day filled with new and interesting learning experiences. However, as I found out, the real learning experience I received was, despite my research into Native students and Native communities, that I actually new little about how life in the bush.

In Savoonga, most of the third and fourth grade children had curfews during the week of midnight, and this meant they were out riding snowmachines or four wheelers right up until that time. When they actually went to bed was anybody's guess. For those students who showed up for class in the morning, it was all I could do to keep them from falling asleep. Later in the week, when the walrus came in, the students disappeared from the classroom (Researcher Journal, April, 2004). What became clear was the sense of time I operated on was completely different from the sense of time the village operated

on. This meant, what I considered to be important was not shared by my students or the rest of the villagers. This sentiment was supported by the words of one of the teachers I interviewed when she said:

The sense of time in an urban environment is not the sense of time in a village environment. Precise time is very crucial in the city. You have to be at school at ten minutes to nine, the bell rings at nine-o'clock, everybody goes to the lunchroom at eleven-twenty. In the village it is less structured. Time does not have the same meaning, and so one of the difficulties that does happen is the teachers are concerned because a child is not here on time, does not have their homework done on time, or they do not realize that the children may not know the assignment is late because they are dealing with two different concepts of time. Usually the teacher in an urban environment does not understand their sense of "On time" is not the same as the child's or the child's family (MJKT Interview, November, 2004).

While teaching in the bush it became clear to me schooling was viewed as a place for the children to go to learn the ways of the western world. If a child did not feel like going to school, they were seldom made to. If a cultural event came up, school became less of a priority. For the children of Savoonga, their life was the Siberian Yup'ik culture of their parents and grandparents, and they knew most of them would spend their lives in this community. Therefore, it was more important for many of them to learn and live the ways of their culture. However, this was not entirely true for all the students.

Exception to the Rule. In my classroom, and in each of the other classrooms I observed there were a handful of students who showed up each day for school and

performed at or above their grade level. These were typically the students whose parents were involved in working at the school. Some of these students had also been outside of Savoonga, and in talking with them during breakfast and lunch times, I found out most of this group had intentions to leave their Island home someday. It was during these conversations I began to think back on my research and tried to picture how students from a community as remote and far removed from the western culture found in Anchorage could successfully transition if they were left to do it by their own means. Despite my efforts I could not see how this could be done, and when I asked these students how they felt if would be like to transition into a larger community, one where they were considered a minority, most of them had no conception of what it would be like. They had nothing to compare it to, except for what they could recall by watching television (Researcher Journal, April, 2004).

Summary

The results of the data I collected led me to conclude three facts about working with rural Alaskan Native students who were transitioning into urban classrooms. The first was that allowing the students to work in pairs helped them to not only create a bond with another student, but actually served to help improve their academic performance. This experience not only helped the students in their transitional process by allowing them to share their learning with another student in a parallel situation, but also allowed the students to experience academic success faster than other transitional students who were not allowed to work in pairs.

The second important factor in helping rural Alaskan Native students transition into urban classrooms was allowing them, and encouraging them, to work with the Indian

Education teacher in their school. The environments created by these specialists not only gave the students a sense of security but also a sense of belonging in a school and community that was foreign to them. It became clear that when the students met with the Indian Education teacher, their sense of self improved and their sense of where and how they fit into their new community and culture became more clear to them.

Finally, the third factor important to successfully helping the rural Alaskan Native students transition into urban classrooms was for me to experience and learn the culture of these students. The result of my rural practicum helped me to confirm that with many of the rural Alaska Native students I will be dealing with in my classroom I need to be aware of the frailty they bring with them. Yes, they perhaps know how to survive in the harsh and unforgiving environment of rural Alaska, but they do not necessarily possess the skills to survive in an urban classroom with the help and guidance of their teacher. The issues of prejudice, minority status, increased educational demands, and the need to keep ties to their cultural heritage all need to be thoroughly and completely understood by teachers of these students if we are to ever be successful helping them transition into our classrooms.