

Chapter 2

Adaptation Isn't Just for the Tundra: Rethinking Teaching and Schooling in Alaska's Arctic



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Abstract In Alaska, schools as structured do not work for far too many of Alaska's students, especially Indigenous students. This chapter raises issues that are not being addressed in most discussions on the schooling and teacher crisis in Alaska. We call out the failure of the existing system of teacher preparation. We then move into a critical discussion around what is missing from the current deliberations around improving schooling outcomes in rural Alaska: how the history of colonization and assimilation efforts in Alaska has created and propagated the current situation. We explore recent proposals to transfer more authority over rural schools to tribes and local communities and ask whether tribes should rethink the entire enterprise of education in rural Alaska, by fully enacting tribal control and self-determination in education.

Keywords Retention · Turnover · Colonization · Indigenous · Rural

2.1 Introduction

While Alaska is part of the United States, in many ways – geographically, culturally, economically, and socially – it is distinct and separate from the contiguous lower 48 states of the U.S. Indeed, some might contend that Alaska shares more, in terms of culture, climate, and geography, with its nearest neighbor Canada, than with the rest of the nation. Certainly, this is true in terms of some of the challenges facing schooling in remote and rural communities in Alaska and northern Canada, from difficulties attracting and retaining teachers to significant barriers to making schools responsive to and reflective of local peoples' culture, languages and practices (Berger et al., 2016; Hirshberg et al., 2019).

Alaska is home to a large and diverse Indigenous population, many of whom live in numerous small and scattered villages across the state. There are 231 federally recognized Indian tribes in the state, and at least 20 distinct Indigenous languages, many of which have multiple dialects (Holton, n.d.). While some of the Indigenous languages are strong, others are threatened, as they are spoken by very few people. Only one Indigenous language (Central Yup'ik in southwestern Alaska) is spoken by children as the first language of the home (ANLC, 2021), though language learning and revitalization efforts are underway across the state.

Alaska's context means that many public policies developed in lower 48 contexts do not work well in the state. This is particularly true for education policies and practices in the rural and remote parts of the state. Over 80% or more than 300 of Alaska's communities are not connected to a contiguous road system; these are accessible only by plane or boat, and most of the most remote communities are predominantly Indigenous. And yet, Alaska's school system mirrors the education systems across the rest of the nation, and with a few exceptions the schools operate like those "outside," (in the lower 48 states) despite the unique peoples, cultures, and geography of the state. In the 2019–2020 school year there were just under 129,000

public school students grades K-12, in just over 500 public schools.¹ Indigenous students comprised over 21% of the population statewide,² but in the most remote school districts made up between 70% and 99% of the students. Statewide, Indigenous students perform more poorly than the overall population on (admittedly flawed) standardized measures of proficiency, although across the board Alaska students do not do well. In AY 2019, 39% of all students across all grades that take statewide English Language Arts proficiency tests (grades 3–10) scored as advanced or proficient, while only 16% of Indigenous students scored as advanced or proficient. In Mathematics students across Alaska performed more poorly, with only 36% scoring as advanced or proficient, and Indigenous students again were at 16% advanced or proficient. Graduation rates also indicate that schools are not serving Indigenous students well; statewide their four-year graduation rate was 68% while the graduation rate for all students was 80% (AK DEED Data Center, [n.d.](#)).

While standardized tests and graduation rates can be a poor measure of student learning – there is no way to unpack whether students simply will not take exams seriously or attend school as an act of resistance or whether they are not prepared for the test materials or high school courses – it is clear that schools as structured do not work for far too many of Alaska's students, especially our Indigenous students.

This chapter raises issues that are not being addressed in most discussions on the teacher crisis in Alaska. We call out the failure of the existing system of teacher preparation. We then move into a critical discussion around what is missing from the current deliberations around improving schooling outcomes in rural Alaska: how the history of colonization and assimilation efforts in Alaska has created and propagated the current situation. We explore recent proposals to transfer more authority over rural schools to tribes and local communities and ask whether tribes should rethink the entire enterprise of education in rural Alaska, by fully enacting tribal control and self-determination in education.

It is important to position ourselves in this work. We are an Indigenous educator and leader and two non-Native settlers working in the public university system, who take to heart Tuck and Yang's (2012) cautions about how we define and use decolonization. In our conclusion, we are not arguing for metaphorical decolonization but instead are advocating for a genuine transfer of both oversight and allocation of resources for education to the first peoples of the land. As we discuss below, we believe this will improve not only the outcomes for students, but also for the educators working in rural schools, both Indigenous and non-Native, and change the story from too few teachers on the tundra to developing culturally and context-appropriate system changes that facilitate stronger and more explicit connectivity amongst communities, schools, and faculty.

¹ We are using 2019–2020 enrollment numbers and 2019 standardized test data because numbers in the 2020–2021 school year are unreliable due to COVID-19 impacts.

² This number does not include the 12% of students who identify as two or more races, many of whom are also Indigenous.

2.2 The Teacher Workforce

In 2018–2019, there were 7899 certificated teachers in Alaska. The state does not report the ethnicity of teachers, but old work indicated that the vast majority of teachers are white; fewer than 5% of teachers were Alaska Native. Teacher turnover in rural schools in Alaska averages more than twice as high as in urban or “urban-fringe” schools and about 1/3 higher than in hub communities (larger communities that provide services to smaller villages in a region) From 2012–2013 to 2017–2018 annual turnover, as defined by a teacher leaving their school district for another district or the state averaged 30% in rural or remote schools, and of those over 2/3 left teaching or Alaska (Vazquez Cano et al., 2019). Despite significant investments in teacher induction and mentoring, experiments with financial retention incentives, and other efforts, turnover rates have remained high and steady. And the situation is rapidly getting worse – this past year we saw teachers backing out of contracts due to COVID-19 concerns and Alaska’s economic crisis.

Teachers who are prepared within Alaska have a lower turnover rate (Hill & Hirshberg, 2013; Vazquez Cano et al., 2019). However, for the past two decades up until 2019, the number of educators prepared in-state annually has numbered between 200 and 300, while districts typically need to fill about 1000 spots each year. And, in 2019, the state’s largest teacher education program closed; the number of teachers graduating within the state dropped to under 200. While some vacancies are filled by teachers returning to the profession after taking a leave, only about 150 locally prepared educators are hired each year, with the rest coming from out of state. And, not all locally prepared teachers enter the workforce immediately. Some are not willing to relocate for available positions, especially if they require teachers living in urban areas to move to rural Alaska. They instead work in other jobs and wait until teaching positions open in their community (Shaw et al., 2013).

2.3 Conventional Policy Efforts to Fix the Teacher Pipeline Issues

2.3.1 *Efforts to Prepare More Local and Indigenous Educators*

One of the common solutions proposed for solving teacher turnover is growing locally prepared educators. However, these efforts have not resulted in sufficient numbers of teachers to meet Alaska’s needs. There are several initiatives aimed at growing more teachers for Alaska schools. Eight districts participate in the *Educators Rising Alaska* initiative, intended to attract high school students into the teaching profession, and support them through college and into their careers. Formerly known as the Future Teachers of Alaska, it is part of the national Educators Rising initiative, which is a free national membership organization for aspiring

teachers and their mentors. Preparing Indigenous Teachers and Administrators for Alaska's Schools (PITAAS), began in 2000 at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) as an effort to grow the Alaska Native teacher workforce, and was later expanded to include school administrators. This federally-funded initiative has provided funding and support to Indigenous students pursuing degrees from the associate to the Master's degree level. The UAS Alaska College of Education also has an Indigenous Scholars Program that works with the U.S. Department of Education to offer loan forgiveness, cultural education support, and 2 years of professional development including mentorship and job placement assistance for eligible students. This program supports Indigenous students seeking both a Master of Arts in Teaching and a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership and principal certification. However, the numbers graduating through these efforts remain low. A \$3 million, three-year renewal of the Sustaining Indigenous Local Knowledge, Arts, and Teaching (SILKAT) grant at the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education (UAFSOE) has facilitated the introduction of a series of Alaska Indigenous Teacher Initiatives, i.e., The Alaska Indigenous Teacher Corps (AITC), as well as plans to develop an Alaskan Indigenous Teacher Network working to support Indigenous educational leaders and facilitate post-graduation community building and professional development. The plan is to develop regional Alaska Indigenous Teacher Alliances (AITA) composed of tribal organizations, businesses, school districts, the UAF School of Education, and UAF Rural Campuses. These are all University of Alaska system efforts to bring local cultural knowledge to the forefront of the curriculum and to recruit, equip and retain new teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach in and through the arts and culture in Alaska's schools.

However, the numbers produced by programs like PITAAS and SILKAT are not yet sufficient to address these problems, and we need to have a unified, concerted, and ongoing effort that is not tied solely to intermittently sustainable support sources like federal grants. District efforts to support pathways for local residents to become educators are a start. Three districts in Alaska have explicit pathways for paraprofessionals to move toward certification and nine more districts provide financial support to paraprofessionals in teacher education programs. The long-running program in the Lower Kuskokwim School District with UAFSOE's SILKAT program, in particular, has made an impact on who is in the classroom, as is discussed elsewhere, but there are only a handful of these efforts, and there needs to be a broader community conversation about how to make the pipeline attractive and permanent (see Tetpon et al., 2015; Defeo & Tran, 2019).

2.3.2 Efforts to Retain New Teachers

Another way education leaders have tried to stem turnover is through initiatives that support new educators as well as financial incentives to incentivize teachers to stay. One longstanding effort is the Alaska Statewide Mentor Program (ASMP). Built upon a model developed at the New Teacher Center (NTC) in California, this

initiative is in its 18th year of working with new educators. While this effort has been effective with some teachers, the overall trend statewide continues to defy efforts to significantly reduce the rate of turnover. Financial incentive experiments such as longevity bonuses have likewise not produced a significant change in turnover rates.

Alaska's rural schools are failing to serve too many children, and this systemic failure is often identified as rooted in Alaska's teacher workforce crisis. The state's rural school districts have struggled to attract and retain educators. In-state teacher preparation programs have never met the demand for educators statewide, and rural districts have primarily had to hire teachers prepared outside the state (Hill & Hirshberg, 2013). The recent loss of the largest teacher preparation program in the state has further diminished the local supply of educators (Hanlon, 2019). And yet, the issue of achieving better learning outcomes for all of Alaska's students runs much deeper than a supply and demand conundrum.

Annual teacher turnover rates of 20–40% in rural Alaska schools likely impact students' academic and emotional well-being; high teacher turnover is strongly correlated with lower student achievement in Alaska and across the U.S. (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Hirshberg et al., 2014). Turnover forces students and communities to repeatedly rebuild rapport, connectivity, and trust with newly recruited educators. In Alaska's rural and Indigenous communities, new educators face additional challenges in serving students from unfamiliar cultures and navigating the challenges of working in places with often very different living and working conditions from those where they were educated to teach.

But while it is easy to point to issues of teacher recruitment and retention as the primary cause of rural school failure, we contend that the full story is far more complex, and therefore the solution less straightforward than current efforts to prepare, recruit and retain teachers, which continue to be largely unsuccessful.

2.4 Policy Efforts to Create More Culturally Grounded Practice

Another approach to retaining teachers is to help them be more successful and satisfied in their teaching. A key effort to achieving this is equipping teachers with the skills to create inclusive learning environments through utilizing Alaska Native cultures, languages, and pedagogies in the classroom. The *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools* attempt to do this (Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN), 1998), calling for schools and communities to critically examine the extent to which they recognize and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students and families. These standards represent a shift from teaching and learning about culture and heritage to learning and teaching *through* culture as a foundation for education. In Spring 2012, the Alaska Board of Education officially adopted the "Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators," along with new guidelines for implementing the cultural standards (AK DEED, 2012). However, these guidelines have never resulted in a widespread change in educational practices around the

state. The standards are not being employed in a systematic or systemic way in schools or districts. Including them in school accountability measures with school climate surveys and similar types of data measures beyond graduation rates and standardized tests could yield more useful data in understanding the challenges students and teachers face beyond teacher supply and retention, but this does not seem likely to happen.

The state has tried to support culturally responsive practice by offering a “Type M Limited certificate” for educators with expertise in three specific areas: Alaska Native language or culture, Military Science, or vocational/technical areas. This has had limited success; as of 2019, there were 32 Type M certificate holders for Alaska History, Alaska Native Language or Culture, Alaskan Studies, or Alaska Native Arts, in 13 districts. Some districts have implemented policies and practices to create systems that better reflect the cultures, places, and environments within which they operate. These include Yup’ik and Tlingit language immersion programs and the Iñupiaq Learning Framework in the North Slope Borough School District. However, none of these efforts are widespread nor do they challenge the fundamental structure of the Western school system.

2.5 What Can Or Should Be Done? A More Critical Examination

Clearly, the status quo isn’t working, and something else must be done. At a minimum, state policymakers, district and school leaders, and community members must find ways to nurture effective teachers who will stay and become rooted in the diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic fabric of Alaska’s classrooms and communities. Schools and communities can take more intentional actions to support current and prospective educators and help them succeed, from simple actions like finding community members to mentor/guide teachers and encouraging parents to get to know teachers, and help teachers get to know community leaders, to revamping salary and benefits structures, and investing savings from retaining teachers in teacher compensation and professional development. But these approaches fail to address the fundamental issue for rural and Indigenous students, that the entire system is based on an imposed structure that has never reflected local cultures, epistemologies, or ways of teaching and learning.

2.6 The Impact of Colonization

The current public school system in Alaska is built on the legacy of a colonial system, imposed by settlers from outside of Alaska. The history of colonization in Alaska, including compulsory and imported schooling, mirrors that of many other places in the north. While Russian missionaries provided the first formal schooling in

parts of the state, it was when Alaska became a U.S. territory that schooling became an explicit tool of the colonization process.

It's important to note that education was not something that white colonists brought to Alaska – the Indigenous peoples of this land have been educating their children for thousands of years, and we will circle back to that shortly. But schooling was imposed by non-Natives with the goals initially to Christianize and “civilize” Natives in order to accommodate the economic and cultural needs of the dominant Western society. Early schools in Alaska were run by missionaries, and then when public schools were created Alaska Native students were often kept in segregated schools (Hirshberg, 2001). From the 1950s to the mid-1970s Indigenous students in rural communities were forced to attend boarding or residential schools to receive a secondary education (and for some also for primary school); some of these institutions were profoundly abusive, and all were grounded in languages, cultures and teaching methods other than those of Alaska Natives (Hirshberg, 2008). When public schools for secondary students were established across the state in the mid to late 1970s, as a result of a legal settlement and new wealth from the Alaska oil pipeline, Alaska Native students continued to be educated in schools structured like those from the Midwest of the United States.

The lasting legacy of colonization extends beyond the loss of language and culture that many recognize. It continues in the fundamental structure of the schooling system, in Alaska and elsewhere in the U.S. The ways that knowledge was transferred before Western schooling was imposed on Indigenous Alaskans was quite different from what is practiced today in schools, with learning happening on the land and by observation and hands-on practice. In revolving around sharing the knowledge needed for survival, learning also followed seasons and subsistence practices. We are not implying that all formal schooling is bad, or romanticizing learning from before contact, but rather highlighting that the system now follows a schedule that often does not make sense and that interferes with critical place-based learning opportunities. Current school calendars keep students in school when subsistence cycles would dictate their participation in critical activities, for example during moose hunting in September in the interior of Alaska or hunting for migrating birds in April instead of taking standardized tests.

But it's not just pedagogy or the calendar. It's also whom the state designates as being an approved educator capable of sharing knowledge within the institutional setting of public schools. With just a few exceptions (as was described earlier), it does not allow local communities to determine who should be considered an appropriate educator for their context. Moreover, the system fails to recognize the value of knowledge held by elders or others considered knowledge bearers by their community.

There also hasn't been healing from the abuses of the former boarding school system or the missionary schools. There hasn't been a truth and reconciliation process, nor has the federal government made reparations. It took until 2018 for there to be a formal acknowledgment of the abuse by the Alaska government, when former Governor Walker apologized to Alaska Natives “for the wrongs that you have endured for generations, for being forced into boarding schools. . . for (being)

forced to abandon your Native language and adopt a foreign one. . . for erasing your history. . . for the generational and historical trauma you have suffered” (Hughes, 2018). However, functionally this was an apology without any action; the governor lost the election and there hasn't been a real reckoning about what else needs to happen to address the lasting impacts.

Instead, Alaska has a track record of multiple generations of students for whom school as structured simply did not and still does not produce learning outcomes that benefit all students in realizing their potential. One reason is that negative attitudes towards education are passed on to multiple generations without either the youth or educators fully understanding the root cause of these feelings within communities. The history of that abuse has been lost for many families, and yet the feelings remain.

Rollo (Forthcoming) describes this phenomenon in Canada, noting that Indigenous communities and students participate in schooling for strategic reasons such as acquiring the credentials that offer a pathway to economic security, learning about the political and legal landscape affecting Canadian Aboriginal policy, and becoming educators themselves. However, “none of these strategic practices should be interpreted as an endorsement of schooling.” He adds “Non-consensual, compulsory schooling has been central to the colonial displacement of certain Indigenous parenting cultures. . .” Rollo then argues:

Decolonization of education, therefore, requires much more than Indigenization of the curriculum and instructors, since inclusivity has been a strategy of promoting Indigenous attendance and success in non-consensual assimilative contexts of state schooling for almost a century. Rather, decolonization appears to require rejection of the colonial premise of non-consensual education entirely: of compulsory attendance, classroom management, and imposed assessment as the chief mechanisms of assimilation.

The only way to achieve the goals of an education system that repudiates colonial pedagogies and practices, he notes is “. . .with an education system that is developed and managed by particular Indigenous communities according to their particular traditions and needs.”

2.7 Creating a Decolonized System

We contend that to rectify the failures of rural schools in Alaska, the narrative must change. Rather than trying to increase the number of teachers recruited to or prepared in Alaska, we need to create culturally and context-appropriate system changes that facilitate stronger and more explicit connectivity and accountability amongst communities, schools, and faculty. This is not intended to say that students should not be prepared for working in the western world, but rather that the best way to equip them with the skills and knowledge to succeed in their future endeavors is to ground them first in their own culture, language, and knowledge systems, and then build onto these the skills, language, and epistemologies that will enable them to succeed in the western system. This also allows those students the choice between pursuing further

education and job opportunities outside their home community, staying in their home village and living a traditional subsistence lifestyle, or doing both, and moving between urban and rural homes and workplaces as they choose, something that growing numbers of Indigenous Alaskans have decided to do. This approach to schooling has been shown to work in individual schools and communities in Alaska, such as at the Ayaprun Elitnaurvik Yup'ik Immersion School in Bethel where students consistently outperform other students in the district on standardized test measures.

However, it is difficult to recapitulate/reform an educational system that has deep and ongoing roots in colonization and assimilation. There is no simple reset button to start over as a decolonized system. Our Canadian colleagues have come to similar conclusions, with Berger et al. (2016) noting that "...basing high school on Inuvialuit rather than EuroCanadian culture would require a complete redesign of formal schooling and very many Inuvialuit teachers and administrators. . ." (p. 70). We contend that this is what is necessary if we are going to address the failures we describe above. But, how do we completely rethink, reform, and rebuild from the ground up a decolonized system when colonization and assimilation roots have proliferated so far on the tundra and in policy arenas, thinking, and communities with incredible effect on the past and present social fabric? How do we disrupt the current and ongoing narrative of the lack of teachers to how to develop Indigenous-developed systems that produce community, connectivity, and cooperation/collaboration amongst communities, schools, and faculty? How can we balance the system so that students can find success for themselves after schooling to continue pursuing the development of Indigenous knowledge, skills, and culture within their community and/or pursuing continuing education elsewhere in Alaska or more broadly? How can we produce a system collaboratively that produces successful learning outcomes and values development in two knowledge systems, Indigenous and Western?

2.7.1 Shifting Control of Schooling

Shifting control of rural schools offers one possibility. In Alaska, a proposal has been circulating for some years to allow tribal compacting of education. In other words, tribes create a contract with the state government to run their own schools rather than having state or REAA run schools. This effort enjoys support from the Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development as well as from participants in the state's "Alaska's Education Challenge process," a collective planning effort to improve public education in Alaska (<https://education.alaska.gov/akedchallenge>). The details are yet to be determined, but one question is whether community and tribal control over schools might lead to alternative approaches to certifying, hiring, and supporting teachers. And with tribal control, there could be drastic improvements to the relevancy, timeliness, and applicability of curricula and content in these classrooms. It is unknown as to what tribal determination of public schooling will

look like. The details, in fact much of it, are yet to be determined, but leadership in Alaska has allocated COVID relief funds to begin this process. Also, alongside this effort, a ballot initiative to codify state recognition of tribes will be voted on in 2022. This could provide needed momentum for expanded state-tribal partnerships toward achieving State Tribal Education Compact Schools (STECs).

2.7.2 Grounding Schooling in Local Community Ways

In the current system, teachers educated in the western system are taught to keep kids in classrooms in the chairs via classroom management systems and mandates, oriented towards compliance. They are not taught the real-life and functional aspects of living in a rural Alaska village. Why not? There is much learning content for students to grapple with in understanding the logistics of projects or how to organize outings for the community to learn, experience, and grow together. Students should be leading or co-leading here. In this way, students understand how to “do” management in the village, instead of emerging as a graduate from the school system and unable to do what they need to do to live successfully in their home community. Societal values and norms are all as important to this as is the logistics and organization. Students, as well as their teachers, need to be well-versed in how to communicate with and take care of others in locally appropriate ways and need to understand community processes and protocols and the intricacies of resource allocation in villages. All of these concepts could easily be refashioned within the state’s current vague education standards, but this necessitates an intimate understanding of the local community.

A useful unit could explore village logistics and management as part of the curriculum, and would provide ample fodder for lessons and curriculum that is directly relevant to students and provides a basis for project- and service-based assessments of what students have learned. In what ways can communities involve students early in their educational careers to be contributors to the social and governance fabric of where they live? How can the public school system serve to heal the wound it created?

This knowledge is understandably but severely lacking in the imported teacher workforce with limited to no experience in the village community. And it likely will take longer than a one-week culture camp for incoming teachers to learn enough to become comfortable teaching this content to their students.

Elders are a rich and underutilized resource in many communities. They are a natural fit in advising and supporting this shift in culture. Schools should reinforce and reiterate the importance of the key aspects of growing up as identified by Elders, adults, and teachers. Students need to understand the importance of staying in school, and if this is not the message they are receiving, then school staff need to investigate and provide counterarguments. Elders take on an important role in reinforcing the importance of schooling especially when they are actively engaged in the process. This leads to the community feeling more welcomed in the school and

taking on many more of the paid and volunteer roles that every school needs to run most effectively. Elders should be seen as effective liaisons and mediators bridging the gap between school and community.

2.7.3 Schooling to Reclaim and Create Systemic Change

One way to improve learning outcomes for students in rural schools is to leverage schools to support community efforts to reclaim their heritage, identity, and culture, and to make educational reparations. Schools and teachers could include cultural activities as an integral part of the curriculum, i.e., teaching the skills of dancing, drumming, and storytelling through song alongside other core content. Where communities lack experts to teach these skills, they could rely upon one another for the reclamation of these traditions, especially in those places where colonization resulted in significant gaps or even the total eradication of these practices. If schools actively taught students subjects like anthropology and archeology, students could be actors in uncovering artifacts on the land and taken elsewhere. Schools designing these types of skills along with research into the curriculum can empower students to reclaim and repatriate materials and artifacts across the globe. Students could be the recorders through which the stories and life experiences of Elders are recorded and amplified into literacy texts to teach their fellow students. There are a multitude of powerful ways that schools could be repositioned to be a support system for students to reclaim what the school systems unjustly eradicated throughout their ancestors' schooling. For example, we could create options for students to fulfill their Western education mandates alongside learning their place-based cultural and linguistic skillsets. This would allow a young person to learn to craft sleds or participate in hunting and still complete high school. In turn, non-Indigenous students in these regions can have similar options.

In flipping this script on the role of education in rural communities, we also highlight the importance of education on the land as an emphasis before education in the classroom. When students have strong connections to the land and place, it provides a strong foundation from which to build the other more global and academic learnings. In this way, schools go about teaching the visible and present to students so that these understandings empower and equip students to understand what is not visible, the critical lens.

Unfortunately, as a result of colonization, gaps exist in local knowledge of the land and traditional practices, and it varies from community to community. School systems can be the catalysts to build infrastructure and connectivity amongst communities so that a community is never doing this alone. Students can provide the integral technology and vitality aspects of creating this fabric across communities. With this kind of network building, the knowledge doesn't have to come just from within each individual community; it can come from neighboring communities in a constructivist approach to rebuilding culture, language, and traditions. Education has been a place of healing for some. What can be done to reconfigure school to become a healing force from the damage it rendered in the past? To instead have schools heal, empower, and

resource students and communities to become their best? Schools that are exciting places to work bring in teachers, and transform rural teaching positions so that it is a privilege being hired into these communities. Teachers regularly identify as an important aspect of retention the opportunity to work in a community where everyone is excited. Teachers, school staff, and students want to be part of an environment where they can partner with the community in transforming, especially transforming a system that was once a system for assimilation, colonization, and abuse.

2.8 Models and Finances

There are models in other sectors for tribal control of services and grounding large public institutions in Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. An especially powerful one is the Tribal healthcare system in the state of Alaska. The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and the local and regional tribal health providers clearly demonstrated the capacity for profound transformation in Alaska. The Tribal health system integrates Western medicine and practitioners into an Indigenous system, not the other way around. The education system could do the same; instead of injecting Indigenous cultures into a broken system, we could bring the best of the Western education system into the Indigenous culture.

It takes funding and efforts to explicitly design what has shown success in the education system at the student, teacher, school, and school district scales – to make the educational system as a whole sustainable. Through these efforts it demonstrates the respect of the agency of the people who are teaching and learning; people are learning what they want and need to learn as well as have the resources and ability to go about learning these things. We even have examples of this from the past, but these stories are not widely known. The writings of Hudson Stuck (1916), demonstrate that what we are proposing for non-Indigenous educators is feasible. Stuck was educated in the United Kingdom but developed the skills necessary to survive in the North after coming to Alaska as a missionary. He was multilingual, speaking the Gwich'in, Koyukon, and Inupiaq languages as well as English, and French and he was skilled at snowshoeing and running dog teams. And he demonstrated exactly what we are arguing for Indigenous children in Alaska – if you are well-educated in your heritage language, culture, and knowledge systems, you can then learn to be successful in other, very different physical, cultural, and linguistic environments. Why does this seem so out of reach today?

2.9 Summary

We should be doing a better job of engaging students in their schooling process. We have seen time and time again that youth have a vested interest in their school and often enough experience to adequately assess much of what they are getting, and

conversely not getting, out of the schooling process. A teacher is successful when students are interested in the learning; it doesn't matter the content. Students spend a lot of time in school learning and they gravitate towards those educators who possess a passion for the material and who model investing themselves in the learning. These types of experiences build lifelong learning traits in our students that can be carried to other areas of their studies and life. The emphasis needs to shift from covering the content to equipping students with the skills that will enable them to ultimately learn on their own, skills about how to learn, the epistemology. And it becomes even more important over the long term that the core is rooted in Indigenous culture and language practices. People observe that learning and sitting with an elder is equivalent to getting an advanced lesson and at the same time, different people often are getting different lessons. Traditionally stories have been told in a way that is recursive and builds upon the learner's prior knowledge, Indigenous differentiation of instruction. Rootedness and becoming a student are learning and understanding that something is valued, having the knowledge, pursuing the value of knowledge whether culinary, welding, snowshoeing, or algebra.

We must address the cultural and linguistic gaps that Indigenous students experience between their community and the public school and increase the relevance of schooling to place while challenging all students to do better. Schools must better engage students in a process of identity and cultural development and definition that better fits the fabric of their home and community lives. Schooling needs to be built on relationships. Relationships are key in our rural communities – these are collective and not individualistic cultures. Educators need to be part of the communities or even better, from the communities. Students need to see the utility of education in enabling them to contribute to their communities as well as to enable them to pursue their dreams. Humans learn everywhere.

We support people working towards a more holistic and community-minded approach to schooling. But to truly achieve this, schools need to *belong* to their communities and reflect their communities, and not look like schools from thousands of miles to the south that operate within entirely different contexts and cultures. And yet, we are not arguing for the elimination of Western schooling; schools must prepare young people to have a choice when they reach adulthood of being successful wherever they choose to be, whether in their home village, at a university, or working at a job 50, 100, or 3000 miles away from home.

Some will argue against the state relinquishing control of rural schools. But given that little progress has been made toward fixing these schools, and the multigenerational impacts on rural communities and students from decades of a system that created deep and costly failure, shifting the locus of control is likely the only way to achieve the needed changes and outcomes. If tribal schools are to succeed, however, we must provide scaffolding and resources so that communities can enact genuine self-determination in education. As noted previously, this may be less difficult than it seems initially, if the funding in support of COVID recovery is directed toward this rare opportunity to try something different. Hopefully, this chance will not be squandered.

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