A Brief History of the Education of Alaskan Natives
1825-1960

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Author's Note

This "Brief History of Alaska Native Education" is indeed just what the title says. Back in 1962 I had just completed writing my Masters thesis on the history of Alaska Native Education so knowledge on the subject was fresh on my mind. Also, as an administrator, I thought it important for all teachers to understand that schools for Alaska Natives had been around for many decades. And, that during the decades the purpose of schooling had changed from straight forward assimilation to the 1960's preparation for post high school education, including college. The "Stage" in which 1962 took place had the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) as the main educational institution for educating village based Alaska Natives. The BIA in 1962-63 enrolled 6,331 Alaska Native students in 79 day schools and 2 boarding schools.

As Department Head, Academic I was supervisor of about 20 teachers who taught traditional high school academic subjects, i.e. English, history, mathematics, art, etc. 1962 was during an era in BIA Education that the traditional Indian Education curriculum was changing from strictly vocational to include college preparation courses. It was because of this change that I titled the 7th stage of Alaska Native Education as, "The Revolution." I had basic responsibility for upgrading the intellectual quality of the academic curriculum from an off-spring of vocational education to a full intellectually founded academic curriculum. In this respect a major innovation was inclusion of teaching abstract thinking. It was an interesting time and eventually, over the years, we did graduate many Alaska Native students who completed college and a few even earned a doctors degree.

This brief essay does provide a glimpse of emphases during the stages. One should pay close attention to the last stage as it reflects the desired changes, 1962, in Alaska Native Education. Basically, the paper does provide a reliable chronology of Alaska Native Education up to 1960. I suppose one could pick up on educating Alaska Natives and write a brief paper covering 1961-2013. Many basic changes have taken place in Alaska Education since 1960 which would be a very interesting document.

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EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR MT. EDGECUMBE HIGH SCHOOL

Mr. Jackson has given us some excellent guidelines to follow during our workshop. It is my intention to relate to you a few educational ideas which will fall within the same general framework. To begin with, I would like to provide the historical setting for the past and present educational objectives of Alaskan Native education; then I would like to mention a few recent innovations in secondary education in the United States; and finally, to talk a little about what these might mean for Mt. Edgecumbe High School.

Historically, the education of the Alaskan Native may be divided into approximately seven stages:

1. The aboriginal educational processes of the various native cultures, until about 1825
2. The influences of the Russians in certain areas of Alaska, 1825 - 1867
3. The purchase of Alaska by the U. S. and until 1884, The Era of Anarchy and stagnation
4. The period from 1884 until 1905, The Sheldon Jackson Era
5. From 1905 until 1931, The Enlightment
6. From 1931 to roughly 1955, Indian Education Period
7. From 1955 to the present, The Revolution

I don't feel it is appropriate at this point to mention the educational goals of the various native cultures though the influence of native education is still apparent. These original educational methods and aims are found in anthropological works and are too varied to mention at this point.

I prefer to start with the educational objectives which the Russians intended for their schools to accomplish. The schools maintained by the Russians were primarily for those children of mixed blood whose fathers were usually Russian, there isn't much available in print from which to glean information regarding this education so that the objectives here stated are necessarily sketchy and brief. The schools taught the Russian language, religion, arithmetic and navigation. Religion was intended to save the souls of the primitives and navigation was intended to make the students profitable individuals to be used or hired by the Russian

American Fur Company. It is interesting to note that the Russians required their missionaries or teachers to learn the native languages. The first schools established by the Russians were on Kodiak Island and date somewhere around the 1830's. At the time Alaska was purchased the Russians maintained 17 schools with a total annual expenditure of $20,000.00. These schools were all located in Southeastern Alaska and the Aleutian Islands therefore, excluding from their benefits almost all of Alaska's largest group, the Eskimo.

The second period, 1867-1884 is described as the period of stagnation and anarchy and the educational scene in Alaska was as bleak as any ever recorded in the history of the United States. There was no civil authority in Alaska and furthermore it was unlawful to establish any. The Federal Government chose to ignore this vast territory and did so until the first Organic Act of 1884. During this period schools were established in a few of the small towns, such as Sitka, but their existence was precarious and they were almost all dissolved for lack of funds and civil authority. However, there were two sparks of educational light kept going during this period: (1) the Pribilof Islands had schools continuously because the fur company leasing the fur seal rights was compelled by a clause in their contract to do so and (2) the missionaries, primarily Presbyterian, under the indomitable leadership of Dr. Sheldon Jackson established schools and in particular what is presently known as Sheldon Jackson High School and Junior College.

The objectives of the schools on the Pribilof Islands are difficult to determine, but the somewhat ambiguous reports seem to indicate that the aims were to: (1) teach the people that school taught in English would not jeopardize their going to heaven under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church (2) to provide a curriculum similar to those being provided by public schools elsewhere in the United States and (3) to include part-time teachings by Russian Orthodox priests. The objectives of the mission schools were: to save the Natives by making them Christians and to civilize the Natives and teach them to want to aspire to better things (usually material in nature).

The third period, 1884 to 1905 found Alaskan Native education under the general administration of the U. S. Office of Education and more specifically still under the influence of Dr. Sheldon Jackson and the various missionaries who had divided the vast territory of Alaska among themselves for purposes of proselytizing and teaching. It was not until 1895 that educational facilities for Natives, and for American Indians, was separated from the missions. The policy of the U. S. government prior to this date was to subsidize the various missionaries who were willing to face the hardships and isolation which usually prevailed on the

reservations and always prevailed in Alaska. Even though education was made nonsectarian by law in Alaska in 1895, the religious influences were to dominate for approximately ten more years. This is not to say that missionaries were not dedicated people or to belittle their solid accomplishments achieved so often in the face of seemingly impossible odds. I merely mean that the education of Alaskan Natives was brought at this point, about 1905, more in line with the general nonsectarian educational goals of the United States.

The goals and educational situation of this period (1884-1905) are best summarized by a quote from Dr. Jackson's report of 1886 which states:

> Into all these schools, with the exception of those on the Pribilof Islands, which are not under control of this bureau, industrial excerises are being introduced as rapidly as possible. Arrangements are already provided by which the girls on two afternoons of each week shall be instructed in sewing and kitchen work, and plans are under way for similar training of boys in the use of tools. This is but a beginning. As the purpose of the school is to develop an intelligent and useful citizenship, they will need more and more to extend their industrial facilities. As the people make progress, catch the spirit of civilization, and come under the influences which emanate from schools, they gradually begin to give up their old methods of living and adopt the American. This is especially the case among the native and semi-civilized population. One by one they saw out an opening in the windowless walls of their houses and insert sash and gales. One after another purchases a cook stove. No longer content to eat off the floor out of a common iron pot, tables and dishes, knives and forks are procured. Then comes the bedstead, and bedding is taken from the floor. Warm, comfortable store clothes take the place of (the) invoncenient, unfomfortable blanket. Thus, slowly and gradually, through the influence of the schools, the population is raised in the scale of civilization. But all this creates a necessity for a larger income and more remunerative employments. The income that was sufficient when the family ate off the ground without dishes, cooked over a fire without a chimney, and slept on the floor under skins of wild beasts, is not sufficient to purchase cook stoves, dishes, tables, chairs, bedsteads, etc. Therefore to create the want without enabling them to supply it is only to make them more miserable.

In 1907 Dr. Sheldon Jackson resigned as General Agent for Education of the Territory of Alaska and new influences were felt in Native education. The reindeer, which were introduced by Dr. Jackson, became increasingly important and some said that the Native was destined to achieve a pastoral level of civilization by herding reindeer. Agriculture was emphasized and in a few cases relocation of entire villages was attempted. (The present-day village of Noorvik is an example of a village which was moved away from the debilitating influences of a mining camp to the wholesome environs of the Kobuk River.) The education of the Alaskan Native was still the responsibility of the U. S. Office of Education and remained under its jurisdiction until 1931 when it was transferred to the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. This placed Alaskan Native education under the influence of the Meriam Report of 1928 and the Indian Reorganization Acts. It is difficult to ascertain the influences of this change with regard to the education of Alaskan Natives. Many of the problems of Indian Education had never been present in Alaskan Native education and likewise, many of our serious problems had never been experienced by American Indian Education in general. Actual classroom objectives were probably influenced little by this change as it appears that the program of development of reindeer resources was continued, some gardening was emphasized, but by and large, the village teacher was not affected until the l940's. Also, during the 1930's, secondary education for Alaskan Native students became reality and the progressive movement in education was evident in Alaskan Native education as well as in the public schools.

Starting about 1955 or perhaps a little earlier, a basic foment began in education in Ameriea. This revolution, as I choose to call it, has begun to make its influence felt in Alaska today.

And now May I go into part two and describe what appear to me to be some important innovations in secondary education which will be meaningful for Mt. Edgecunbe High School.

American education came under close scrutinity following the launching of the Russian sputnik. The U. S. was taken aback to realize that we were not first in the race to achieve this important technological triumph. The development of space travel depends on educational training of a kind which we were accustomed to think we excelled. On the contrary, a special look at our math and science curriculums revealed that our colleges and technical institutions were having to reteach high school graduates for almost two years following their high school graduation. It was simultaneously discovered that the American high school

student could learn more and understand content that had usually been deferred until college.

Further, a clearer look at our society revealed that it continues to change at an incredibally rapid rate and that the accumulation of knowledge in the respective disciplines increases faster than any one human being can comprehend within a life time, given the current methods of teaching outmoded content. The dependence upon statistics and mathematical logic for decisions, even in the filed of politics, is ever increasing. The ditch digger who at one time used a shovel and strong back now, if he is qualified, sits astride a small tractor and manipulates hydraulic levers which do in a minute what it formerly took five men a half an hour to do. The unemployed ranks are being swelled by people who cannot meet the modern demands of society, even in Alaska where we still have a vast physical frontier.

A look at our educational institutions revealed that we were still teaching the skills and concepts which were perhaps adequate at the turn of the century. That drastic changes were in order was apparent to all who were not afraid to look at the facts.

The science and mathematics curriculums came in for the first remodeling job and have been changed basically with new concepts (new content material) being included and the obsolete being thrown out. Next case a task force for economic education and just this summer a committee for the revision of the English curriculum was formed, all, I might add, being financed through the National Defense Education Act and, consequently, by Federal funds. Textbooks are being rewritten to include those new approaches to content material in secondary and in elementary education. Now, educators are saying, “What about the sleeping social studies”?

Let us now look for a few minutes at some important findings in the field of education and in this context I would like to mention two educational conferences I attended this summer: (a) A workshop sponsored by the BIA at Brigham City, Utah where supervisors and principals were to learn what it’s like to evaluate excellent teaching, and a conference at Stanford University of secondary administrators from across the nation.

At Intermountain we saw some outstanding teachers teaching high school geometry and English. The teacher in geometry was teaching young Navajo students from a textbook based on the Ball State research committee for high school mathematics. The students were being taught to think preciesely and to

learn the rules of logic. Great emphasis was placed on the "why" of an answer. In the English class empahsis was being placed on verbalization of field trip experiences and classroom organization of a high order was much in evidence. In both classrooms a "high" concern for the intellectual development of the students was demonstrated. The teachers were more than a little interested in the recent changes in American education and what these changes may mean to them as teachers under the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

At Stanford University I met at firsthand many administrators who are actively participating in some extremely interesting experiments which are challenging students in new ways. The theme of this conference was, "Team Teaching and Flexible Scheduling - A Searching Appraisal", and these men did not mince words, they were both self-critical and challenging of each other.

At the Stanford conference large group and small group teaching was mentioned with a slight favor being given to the small groups. In all cases those who had tried flexible scheduling were convinced that it did something important for the students. Mostly, it was found that interest mativation was increased by scheduling which allows students time to pursue individual interests, which gets them out of the textbooks and into the laboratory, or introduces them to original resource material.

Programed learning (teaching machines) were discussed with comments usually being favorable. However, it was felt by most that these innovations cannot in any measure replace the personal rapport established between a master teacher and the student. One principal is conducting an ungraded high school where students are/placed according to where they can best learn. This principal is courageous beyond the ordinary and is vitally interested in the search for ways to achieve maximum intellectual development of American High school students.

Electronic computers are being used to do many of the routine tasks of the typical high school. These tasks include class scheduling, reportcard making, recording and analyzing various student test and course data.

Closed circuit television as a teaching device was mentioned. And most of all - there was a great surge of feeling and concern that secondary schools emphasize the development of the human intellect, the development of the ability to think, to question, to investigate and to synthesize. It was agreed that it is no longer adequate for a student to merely memorize and recite. He must be able to intelligently use his knowledge. And - most important was the plea for teachers and

administrators who are aware of this need and who themselves find the world an ever-interesting and intellectually stimulating place in which to live. These men are calling for a courageous change in education.

These rather exciting ideas and feelings for educational change are motivated by a deeply felt need for schools which will teach students to live in a space age, an age where change is rapid and the accumulation of knowledge is increasing at a fantastic rate. The educational objectives of 1900 or 1920 or 1930 or for that matter, 1950, are no longer adequate for our students. The secondary schools of today are beginning to teach the underlying principles on which our super-abundance of technology is based and the underlying principles on which our society is based in the belief that this basic philosophical approach to learning will help students better understand and cope with the complexities of our modern world.

To me, this trend, has meaning for Mt. Edgecumbe School in that it re-emphasizes the need for the various subject areas to be coordinated, so that the student gets a unified and correlated view of his world. It would be interesting for the students if the English, math, science, social studies, home economics and shop teachers could achieve a coordinated approach without sacrificing the quality which specialization affords. On a practical level it might be beneficial for the freshman student if, for example, the teachers of Mt. Edgecumbe School could work toward achieving a common unit such as: "Machines In Our Modern World". The first task, of course, would be for the teachers to clarify and verbalize for themselves why such a unit should be taught. Could the content of such a broad unit subject be kept within workable and meaningful limits and what are these limits? Of what use would the knowledge gained from such a unit be to the students? Would it broaden and deepen their knowledge of the world they must live in in any really significant way? Would the knowledge gained have continuity value? Would it be a block in the foundation on which they must build during their sophomore, junior and senior years? If such a unit passes all the tests of "why" the next task is to discover how it can be taught in all areas so that it will have depth and meaning for the student.

The English teachers might find stories related to modern machines such as those required in space travel, (the current literature book has such stories in it) and require themes written about space travel and why it is being developed. Students might be let to seriously and imaginatively investigate some of the wonders of space travel and how man has been dreaming of this unbelievable accomplishment since time immemorial. The home economics and shop teachers might relate their

teachings to the machines found in and around the home and in the trades. The science teachers might investigate the physical principles related to simple machines and their underlying theoretical explanations showing in a necessarily elementary way how these very ancient discoveries led in time to our modern technological competency culminated in space travel. The mathematics teacher might use algebra to prove the physical principles used in the science of simple machines. Positive and negative numbers could be used to tabulate and record directions taken by machines. The overall picture given the student might then have a unity that has been primarily lost in American secondary education if, indeed it was ever there, and would be team teaching in the true sense of the word. The teachers as a group might decide on a common core of concepts and vocabulary to be utilized by all teachers and then the respective subjects could be expanded and terms introduced which are related to the specialized areas. In so far as possible, the English teachers utilize the vocabulary used in all subjects. Such an approach would create many varied uses for the vocabulary and would give students practice in applying the principles learned in math and science to home economics and shop and vice versa. And the expression and appreciation of these learnings might be used to help the student "discover" English language in a setting more meaningful than the vicarious environment and sterility of the single textbook.

Our job as teachers and administrators is to improve the intellectual training of the Alaskan Native high school student. We must, whether we want to or not, face the challenge of the "intellectual frontier" for this is just the challenge each of our students face upon graduation and entrance into the swim of life in the U. S. The United States no longer has the physical frontier to conquer and has wisely turned inward to the intellectual frontier which is infinite and ever-stimulating. Alaskan Native education faces a real challenge when we accept the existence of the "intellectual frontier" and in addition we also have the challenge offered by an incredible physical frontier. If our students are to meet the challenge of this new frontier, as it moves into Alaska then we as teachers must bd in the vanguard giving them the tools necessary to their success.