

"The quest is for modernity...and authenticity, simultaneously, for seeing the *world*, but 'through our own eyes,' for going to the *world*, but 'in our own way.'" ¹⁸ It further proves that, given the opportunity, a people has every desire and capacity to participate in the planning of its future. There is never a guarantee that a particular language or educational policy will "work," but when that policy reflects the goals of the people it is to affect rather than those of either foreign missionaries or a colonial government, and when it reaffirms rather than negates a people's knowledge of its culture and heritage, then there is no better prospect for its success.

"Hello, Grandfather": Lessons from Alaska

Much scholarly research and writing focuses on disconnection. Traditional bastions of academe distance people from one another as they create power relationships whereby one group maintains the power to "name" the other. They decontextualize people as their research subjects are scrutinized and analyzed outside of their own lives. As one American Indian friend says, "I wonder how many people, as they tell stories around their campfires, know that their lives are sitting far away on someone's shelf gathering dust."

Connections and context. I learned a lot about research and I learned a lot about myself while I was in Alaska. One of the monumental lessons I learned was to reconsider my role on the earth, to understand that I could not be a distanced observer and controller of the world as academic research would have me believe. Rather, I was but one component of the world, connected to and no more important than all other parts. Once, when I was going to Denali National Park to sightsee (Denali is the Indian name for Mt. McKinley), an older Aleut friend said, "When you see the mountain, say 'Hello, Grandfather.'" That statement stopped me in my tracks: I had been going, as the superior human, to look at the lifeless, inanimate mountain. She reminded me in that brief lesson – and it was a lesson – that the mountain and I were part of the same world, that it had lived infinitely longer than I, that it would "see" me, even as I thought I was looking at it, and that I must then approach this grandfather with due respect, a respect deserved for all that it had seen.

This lesson was only one of many I received on learning to be a part of the world rather than trying to dominate it – on learning to see rather than merely to look, to feel rather than touch, to hear rather than listen: to learn, in short, about the world by being still and opening myself to experiencing it. If I realize that I am an organic part of all that is, and learn to adopt a receptive, connected stance, then I need not take an active, dominant role to understand; the universe will, in essence, include me in understanding. This realization has proved invaluable as I, an educational researcher, pursue learning about the world.

These lessons were not entirely new to me, for I come from a culture steeped in connectedness. Learning them, however, did push me to make explicit to myself aspects of my home culture, which previously had been an unexamined backdrop for everyday living.

My years of growing up fostered connectedness, as well as an understanding that things are never as they seem at any one “level of analysis.” I learned early that Miss Pat, of Romper Room – no matter how much I looked into her magic mirror and no matter how good a “Do-Bee” I was – would not let me join her television classroom. “That’s only for white kids,” my mother explained. Things weren’t as they seemed on television. She had to explain the connectedness of things initially beyond the grasp of my four-year-old, home-centered mind: somehow my “nappy” hair and my family’s brown skin (I had yet to understand that my own “lighter” skin was irrelevant as long as it was embedded within a brown family) was connected to the workings of the larger world in ways that prevented me from sitting in Miss Pat’s circle or from going to the bathroom while shopping downtown – and prevented my mother from trying on hats in a department store or from getting a teaching job closer to our house.

I also learned early on that my fate was irrevocably connected to that of other black people: if ever, heaven forbid, an actual or imagined crime was committed by a black person against a white person, then the well-being of all black people was at risk, often serious physical risk. We children in our seg-

regated schools were constantly admonished about being proper “representatives of the race.” The white population saw us as one undifferentiated mass, and so, perhaps, we learned to see each other that way as well. On the positive side, we therefore learned to feel like one family whether we knew each other or not, to take responsibility for caring for one another, and to take great pride in the accomplishments of our race. The sociologists and the anthropologists call it “fictive kinship”; we just called it living right. Alaska taught me to understand what I had lived.

Another lesson I learned in Alaska was the importance of context. In education, we set about solving educational problems as if they exist in a vacuum. We isolate the problem and then seek technical solutions. I was a professor of literacy in Alaska, so I was well aware of the traditional solutions for the “literacy problem” among people of color and people in the Third World. Children and adults in Alaskan villages were spoken of in much the same way as children in inner-city communities: illiteracy was high among adults, children weren’t reading on their grade level (indeed, they weren’t reading much at all outside of school), there was a “literacy crisis” that had to be addressed. The call for technical solutions abounded – “change the instructional methodologies”: more phonics; less phonics; flood households with books, magazines, and newspapers; teach adults to read; teach parents to read to their children; encourage children to read to their parents; and so on, and so on, and so on.

Certainly some of those solutions might promote reading and writing, but I knew from my own experience that the “problem” might be deeper, related to more than the technical skills of literacy. Understanding the nature and importance of context was helpful to me not only in terms of shedding new light on the “problem”; it also helped me to understand some of the underpinnings of the Western worldview.

In our Western academic worldview, we assume that literacy is unequivocally good, and that everyone should aspire to be literate. Most of us have not taken the time to think about

possible drawbacks or political implications of this ideology. Literacy can be a tool of liberation, but, equally, it can be a means of control: if the presses are controlled by the adversaries of a community, then reading can serve as a tool of indoctrination. Governments may want more people literate so that they can be held accountable for upholding laws – whether or not those laws are in the best interest of a particular community.

The practice of literacy, typically a solitary endeavor in academically oriented Western societies, can also promote alienation in communities that value collaboration and interaction. Growing up, I remember being admonished to “put that book down and go outside and play with your friends.” Alaskan villages similarly value interaction and community more than individualism and solitary pursuits.

Sometimes, when I visited village classrooms I saw such conflict enacted before me. The then-accepted “best practice” in reading instruction was to abandon what many of us grew up with, “round-robin reading” – having each child read aloud in turn from a text. The savvy Anglo teachers frequently adopted these newest methods and had children read silently instead. The Native Alaskan* teachers usually adopted strategies their progressive administrators thought were outdated: they continued to have children read texts aloud as a group. Since my role as literacy instructor was to update teaching techniques, several school principals suggested that I try to get the Native teachers to change their instructional practices.

Having learned, however, the necessity of learning from the people I was supposed to teach, I presented my “suggestions” by initiating a discussion. The comments of the Native teachers were enlightening. They let me know that in order to engage their Native students and to ensure understanding of what was often a text about foreign concepts, they found it vital to read as a group. They believed that students could eventually be led to reading on their own, but that first they

* “Native Alaskan” and “Alaskan Native” are terms self-selected by the indigenous peoples of Alaska to represent themselves as a political group in land claims negotiations with the federal government.

needed to introduce them to the new skill and the new concepts in contexts they already found familiar, namely, interactions with people rather than with books. Connectedness was an issue once again.

Their insights reminded me, too, of work of sociolinguists and educational anthropologists such as Shirley Brice Heath, who observed a distinction between many African-American communities and middle-class white communities.* In the latter, a baby’s crying resulted in someone bringing a toy for the baby to play with. In the African-American communities studied, where households tended to be more people-rich than toy-rich, someone would inevitably pick the baby up. Thus, the African-American babies early on expected people to solve their problems, while the white middle-class babies grew to connect appeasement, at least in some contexts, with objects.

When I found myself wondering how to pursue investigating whether that preference might persist as babies grew up, I asked a teacher of a multicultural group of middle-school children in Fairbanks to have her students answer a brief survey on how they would most like to learn something new. They were to rank learning from a teacher they liked, learning from a book, learning from a friend, learning from a teacher they didn’t like, and learning from a computer. Sure enough, in that classroom, a higher percentage of white children preferred learning from computers and books while the African-American and Native Alaskan kids preferred human teachers. Although the sample was too small and the procedures too unscientific to come to any real conclusions, I did find the results intriguing, especially now, in light of recent recommendations to improve education in inner-city schools by shifting completely to computer-based instruction. We risk failure in our educational reforms by ignoring the significance of human connectedness in many communities of color.

*In no way should these examples suggest that all white people or all black people are the same. There is a great variance within any group. For example, African-American families whose lifestyles are more similar to middle-class white families have adopted more of the latter’s child-rearing practices.

Spending time in Native Alaskan villages and talking with Native Alaskan teachers brought me face to face with the question of just what it takes to be successful in Western-oriented schools. How do academically oriented families train their young to be successful? How do schools reinforce and sustain what academically oriented families teach their children at home? Through readings about literacy and through my Alaskan experiences, I came to what were for me some breakthrough insights. To explain, though, I must take a rather circuitous path.

Many scholars who have studied literacy (including David Olsen, Walter Ong, Ron and Suzanne Scollon, Jack Goody and Dan Wart) have contrasted literacy with orality. Literacy communicates a message solely through a text, through the *word*. Orality, by contrast, has available to it other vehicles for communication: not only is the message transmitted through words (the text), but by factors such as the relationship of the individuals talking, where the interaction is taking place, what prior knowledge and/or understanding the participants bring to the communication encounter, the gestures used, the speaker's ability to adjust the message if the audience doesn't understand, intonation, facial expressions, and so forth – the *con*, (meaning "with,") in *context*.

Think about the difference between learning to play chess from your grandfather or learning from a book. The best part about learning from a grandfather is that there is presumably a relationship to build the learning on and, because he is there with you, he can adjust the instruction according to what he sees that you need. The problem with depending on a grandfather is that you might not have one when you need one. A book, on the other hand, transcends the necessity of the "teacher" sharing your time and space: you are in control of when you learn, even from a teacher who might be long dead. Given the hectic lives we lead in most industrialized societies, books are much easier to schedule than grandfathers.

As we pursue the increased demands and the often scheduled isolation of the modern world, there are more and more forces pulling away from sharing time and space with those

we might want to learn from or communicate with. The "modern consciousness," as the Scollons would say, and its move toward greater and greater dependence upon literate communication, inevitably moves us toward a focus on "text" rather than on "context," on words rather than on all the phenomena surrounding the words.

David Olsen suggests that when children are taught to read in school, they learn both to read and to treat language as "text." Over the years, they learn, in other words, to rely less and less on contextual data and more on the decontextualized word. Jenny Cook-Gumperz says that teachers have even developed an oral style to guide children to becoming literate. By teaching children to pay attention to exact wording more than to contextualization cues in following instructions, they work toward developing skills in decontextualization that are perceived as necessary to literacy. (Even such seemingly pointless rituals as taking points off for putting one's name in the upper-left corner of the paper instead of the upper-right corner has a purpose when viewed in this light.) In schools, then – some would say in the "modern world" – the decontextualized word reigns supreme.

Not so in communities like Alaskan villages, which are more "connected" than our modern communities, and less dependent on literate means of communication. Grandfathers are usually nearby, so learning from them is more practical than learning from books. Schedules, far from isolating individuals, bring community members into frequent contact. People who work together never have to resort to memos to communicate. And news spreads from household to household without the need of newspapers.

In such communities, the *context* of a message is at least as important as, and often more important than the text of the message. It's not just what is said, but who says it, who is present when it is said, the intonation of the speaker's voice, how he or she looks when it is said, what else is happening at the same time, what happened yesterday or last week or last year.

These two contrasting communicative styles became quite evident in my own life when I moved from a predominantly

white university to an historically black institution. At the white university, people tended only to listen to what you *said*: you could feel quite confident that no one would be the wiser if you expressed an entirely different message through facial expression, body language, or intonation. At the historically black university, however, I had to relearn quickly how to behave exactly as I had in my home community. People *watched* what was said as much as they listened to what was said. As a child, I could get punished for saying "yes, ma'am" while subtly "rolling" my eyes. At this institution, any gesture, any change in intonation, any slight facial expression could communicate to an audience an entirely different message than my words would suggest. Like Native Alaskans, African-Americans placed the value of context far above that of decontextualized "text."

Looking at what happened with Native teachers and children in classrooms, where the expected and approved instruction often ran counter to community expectation, helped me better understand some points of classroom cultural conflict. Jerry Mohatt, a psychologist who has worked and conducted research in many Native American communities, has captured on videotape an interesting set of interactions contrasting an Anglo teacher in a classroom of Native children, and a Native American teacher in a similar setting. What's interesting to me is the frequency with which the Anglo teacher's words do not match his actions: he frequently directs the children to do something while he is physically engaged in a completely different task himself. For example, he says, "copy the words from the board" while he is away from the blackboard looking through his desk for something or other. The Native teacher, by contrast, almost always matched her words with her actions: if she says, "copy the words," she is at the blackboard pointing. The Anglo teacher asks that the children attend to what he *says*, not what he does; the Native American teacher, on the other hand, supports her words in a related physical context. What gets *done* is at least as important as what gets said.

It would be easy to suggest that the Anglo teacher should be more consistent, but in truth he may well be unconsciously

preparing children for their future schooling where they will be expected to attend to the words and not the surrounding context. Yet, if they learn what he teaches, they could find themselves in conflict with what they learn at home.

A Native Alaskan teacher commented to me that one of the most senseless rituals of schooling was the roll call: "We ask the children if they are here while looking at them!" But, of course, that conforms to the decontextualizing rituals of school: we insist that children assert their existence through the *word*, their actual presence is insufficient.

This teacher, however, developed a different kind of ritual:

What I do is to greet all the children in the morning and talk to them. I ask them how they slept and what they had for breakfast. I also ask them what they saw on the way to school. "Did you see any clouds? Was the ground wet? Ooh, was it really cold out?" Every day I ask them about what they saw and pretty soon they begin to notice more and more because they know I'm going to ask. Then I can lead them to make connections – to learn that when a certain kind of feel is in the air then it will snow, or that when a certain kind of cloud is in the sky then the weather will change. They'll learn to learn from everything around them; they'll learn how to live in their place. And since I'm talking to them anyway, I'll mark them present!

Another example of the decontextualizing ritual often enacted in schools is our insistence that children verbally mediate any action. The action itself is not evidence of its existence – it must be put into words. Native teachers often told me that one of their greatest frustrations was to have one of their instructors in school insist that they explain how they solved a problem. Doing it was not sufficient; unless it was accompanied by words, it didn't count. How many times do we insist that children talk through some problem they have already solved? We think we are "checking for understanding," but could we merely be helping children to learn to ignore context? Could we be asking them to ignore knowledge they've acquired through a variety of nonverbal sources and to limit their understanding of the world to the word?

Ron and Suzanne Scollon, in their book *Narrative, Literacy, and Face in Interethnic Communication*, talk about their surprise

in discovering how they had programmed their own daughter to focus on the decontextualized word.¹ As many linguists do, they had begun chronicling on audio tape their daughter's language development from her infancy. When they listened to the tapes they were more surprised by what *they* said than what *she* said. At one point, when the baby falls down and begins to cry, her dad scoops her up to comfort her with the words, "Aw-aw poor kid... What tripped you, did you see what tripped you?" Although the little one is not yet able to talk, she is already being taught implicitly that crying, or any reaction for that matter, is inappropriate unless it is accompanied by a verbal explanation. The Scollons discuss how so much of what just seems ordinary to academically oriented parents is really training children to respond to the world in very specific ways. While these modes may be reinforced in school, they are foreign to many children growing up in families not of part of an academic culture.

Along with valuing context, Native Alaskan communities value children in ways that many of us would find hard to fathom. We non-Natives tend to think of children as unformed future adults. We hear about the birth of a child and ask questions like, "What did she have?" "How much did it weigh?" and "Does it have any hair?" The Athabaskan Indians hear of a birth and ask, "Who came?" From the beginning, there is a respect for the newborn as a full person.

I often heard Anglo teachers in villages complain that parents don't care about their children. Nothing could have been further from the truth, yet these teachers could not see how care was manifested. They complained that parents didn't make their children come to school, yet parents believed so strongly in the necessity of respecting children's thinking that they would say that if the child did not want to come to school, then the school must not be a place that welcomed the child. The teachers said that parents didn't make the children do homework, but the parents believed that if the teacher could not present the work so that the child understood its value, then the work must have had no value. In the parents' view, children were not to be coerced with authority, but were

to be treated with the respect that provided them with rationales, stated or unstated, to guide them to make decisions based on their own good sense.

During my first few years in Alaska, I was confused by a statement I heard over and over in many villages. When parents found I really wanted to hear what they had to say, they would tell me in a tone of quiet desperation, "They're making our children into robots." I accepted what they said and tried to be as sympathetic as I could while trying to understand exactly what they meant.

It wasn't until I came back to the university and talked to Eliza Jones, a gifted Athabaskan linguist, that I began to understand. Eliza, wise and educated, although not in the formal, schooled sense, told me a story – the Athabaskan way of teaching that I learned to cherish.

A little boy went out with his grandfather and other men to hunt bear. After capturing a bear and placing it in a pit for skinning, the grandfather sent the boy for water to assist in the process. As the boy moved away from the group, his grandfather called after him, "Run, run, the bear is after you!" The boy tensed, started to run, then stopped and calmly continued walking. His grandfather called again, louder, "Run, run I say! This bear is going to catch and eat you!" But the boy continued to walk. When the boy returned with the water, his grandfather was very happy. He had passed the test.

The test the boy passed was to disregard the words of another, even those of a knowledgeable and trusted grandfather, if the information presented conflicted with his own perceptions. When children who have been brought up to trust their own observations enter school, they confront teachers, who, in their estimation, act as unbelievable tyrants. From the children's perspective, their teachers attempt to coerce behavior, even in such completely personal decisions as when to go to the bathroom or when to get a drink of water. The bell rings, go to lunch; the lights blink, put your work away, whether you are finished or not. Despite the rhetoric of American education, it does not teach children to be independent, but rather to be dependent on external sources for direction, for truth, for meaning. It trains children both to seek

meaning solely from the text and to seek truth outside of their own good sense – concepts that are foreign and dangerous to Alaskan village communities.

I wonder, too, about the effect that this dependence on the decontextualized word has had on our general society. The word has the potential for becoming more and more disconnected from its surrounding context, more and more disconnected from actions. Sometimes it seems that we are moving closer and closer to the “doublespeak” of Orwell’s *1984*, in which the Ministry of Love conducts war and the Ministry of Truth creates propaganda. During recent administrations the Department of Environmental Protection was led by toxic waste producers, and an era that was supposed to result in a “kinder and gentler nation” ended with more people homeless than I had ever seen in my lifetime.

In *Drylongso*, a collection of life stories from “ordinary black folks,” one of the informants says to author John Gwaltney, “How can white folks talk so good and do so bad?” The informant goes on to tell a story about how a group of white cops accosts him and beats him silly. Afterward, one of them announces, “We have to get this man to the hospital.” Not only is he injured and mad, but now he has a \$109.50 hospital bill he can’t afford to pay!²

I do not wish to suggest by these stories that children from communities of color cannot or should not learn to become literate. Rather, I propose that those of us responsible for teaching them realize that they bring different kinds of understandings about the world than those whose home lives are more similar to the worldview underlying Western schooling. I have found that if I want to learn how best to teach children who may be different from me, then I must seek the advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students.

D., a Native teacher, told me a story about being a bilingual aide in an Anglo teacher’s classroom. The teacher wanted to bring the children’s culture into the class. She asked D. to write the directions for making an animal trap on the blackboard so the children could make traps in class during their

activity period. D. told me she had a hard time writing up the directions, but struggled through it. The kids, however, were the ones who really had a hard time. They found the directions impossible to follow. Finally, in utter frustration, D. went home and got a trap. She took it apart and let the children watch as she put it back together. Everyone made his or her own trap in no time.

Learning solely through the decontextualized word, particularly learning something that was so much a part of their home culture, was simply too foreign for the children to grasp without careful instruction about how to make the transition. Another Native teacher told me that she handled making this transition by having the children practice writing directions to go to or from a certain place in the village. When the children finished, she took the class outside. Of course, the students wrote in ways that assumed a great deal of insider, contextual knowledge. This teacher had them laughing and trying harder and harder to be more explicit as she pretended that she was an outsider, a *gussak* (white person) trying to get her knowledge solely from the text. They soon understood that they had to use words in a different way in order to get their message across.

She repeated the exercise with other familiar activities over the year, such as having the children write down how to make different Native foods and then having them watch her attempt to follow the directions. After a while, the children learned that they could make use of decontextualized literacy when they needed to. They did not learn, however, that they had to give up their own contextual way of experiencing the world.

Other Native teachers made literacy learning a group rather than a solitary endeavor. There was much time spent talking and discussing what was read, particularly when the text presented concepts foreign to the children’s physical setting or to their background knowledge. Many Native and sensitive Anglo teachers also devised reading and writing activities that would in some way contribute to the well-being of the community. Some had students write letters to

senators about the Native Land Claims Settlement Act or to the Fish and Game Department about some new ruling that was adversely affecting the village subsistence economy. In short, the successful teachers of Native Alaskan children found ways to contextualize the literate endeavors and to celebrate, rather than to limit, the sense of connectedness which the children brought to school.

Unfortunately, most Native Alaskan children do not have Native Alaskan teachers, just as most children of color throughout this country do not have teachers from their own cultural group. A young Athabaskan Indian boy once looked at his teacher and asked, "When are we going to die?" The teacher to whom he addressed the question was surprised, but answered, "Well, none of us know when we are going to die, that is for a power beyond us to decide." The young boy looked away and said softly, "Well, if we don't know when we are going to die, then why do we have to go to school? Why can't we just be happy?" That Native Alaskan teacher later said to me with tears in her eyes, "Why can't we figure out ways to make that child happy in school?"

Touched by those comments, I have carried around the question of that child and that teacher for many years. Why do we have such a hard time making school a happy place for poor children and children of color? A few years ago, I asked Oscar Kwageley, a friend, teacher, Yupik Eskimo scientist, and wise man, what the purpose of education is. His response startled me and opened my eyes even more: he said, "The purpose of education is to learn to die satiated with life." That, I believe, is what we need to bring to our schools: experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied.

Teachers' Voices: Rethinking Teacher Education for Diversity

There can be no doubt that issues of diversity form the crux of what may be one of the biggest challenges yet to face those of us whose business it is to educate teachers. In the wake of reports proposing the complete reformation of teacher education has come a groundswell of concern about the effects of reform-related activities on the participation of ethnically and culturally diverse teachers in the workforce.¹

Concern is not misplaced; conservative estimates suggest that black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children presently comprise almost 30 percent of the school-age population, and "minority" students represent a majority in all but two of our twenty-five largest cities. Furthermore, by some estimates the turn of the century will find up to 40 percent nonwhite children in American classrooms.² Yet the current number of teachers from nonwhite groups threatens to fall below 10 percent, and the percentage of education degrees conferred onto members of these groups decreased by more than 6 percent between 1981 and 1985; additional data suggest a continued downward trend.³ Patricia Graham, then dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, put it succinctly: "Most teachers who teach today's children are white; tomorrow's teaching force will be even more so."⁴

Researchers have cited many reasons for the decline of minority participation in the teaching force – among them, the overall decline of the numbers of college-bound students from ethnic groups, the widening of professional opportunities for people of color, the increased prevalence of compe-