



Transforming the Culture of Schools: Yup'k Eskimo
Examples

Jerry Lipka, Gerald Mohatt, and
the Ciulistet Group (1998)



The Need for Change

- ‡ Indigenous teachers organized to change or transform the school curriculum from Western tradition (disengaged with the indigenous community) to a *culturally responsive education or culturally based pedagogy*.

From an investigation into the discontinuities - the beginnings

- † The process began with a group of teachers – members of the indigenous community who had been schooled in the Western tradition and were now teachers faced with a sense of conflict over how and what to teach. The process of reconciliation and transformation emerged from an inquiry on teaching, learning, and school-community discontinuities, a discourse that led to deeper “contextualized understanding of the conflict between school and community.” (p.4)

The Major Questions

- † Based on the premise that the contributions of organized indigenous teachers can be *critical tools* for revolutionizing the education of their communities, the book's leading questions are:
 - 1. What constitutes legitimate school knowledge?
 - 2. What is the role of the community?
 - 3. How can insiders and outsiders work effectively in co-constructing curricula and pedagogy, and thereby transforming asymmetrical power relations?

The Lessons

- ‡ Many lessons were learned, among these – by simply increasing the number of indigenous teachers, schooling does *not* change. And, the process is slow; patience is required.

Other Lessons

- 1. Transforming cultural “voids” into cultural knowledge;
- 2. Changing frustration and anger into cultural work;
- 3. Connecting Yup’ik cultural knowledge to schooling.
- 4. The importance of building on teachers’ personal histories that capture the struggles, dilemmas, conflicts, and hopes of the teacher group (Ciulistet). A discourse of teacher voices was established, noting the determination of the group, for example, Esther Ilutsik states : “No longer must our culture remain outside of schooling. We have new possibilities.” (p.15)
- 5. The importance of organizing a formal teacher group, the Ciulistet, an ongoing teacher study and action-research group.

More Lessons

- 6. As teachers shared their experiences, they broadened and deepened their understanding of the larger sociohistorical and sociopolitical context and their struggles within this landscape.
- 7. Their roles as cultural brokers in their efforts to mediate cultural differences among indigenous and non-indigenous individuals – a role that was consistently “fraught with contradictions and dilemmas.” Many teachers feel scrutinized by “two pairs of eyes” – by the standards of the school and the standards of the village who are often at odds with one another.
- 8. Instead of pitting power against culture, the teachers sought to transform schools through “culturally negotiated schooling.” It is defined as a process of building a new synthesis, or education as “culture-in-the-making at multiple levels.” P.31)

Creating Authentic Concepts

- † “Authentic culturally mediated cognition” is based on the incorporation of the knowledge of the community into schooling in ways that respect the local culture. (Hollins, 1996). *Authentic contexts* - knowledge base and activities that contain that knowledge.

Avoiding Culture and Language Loss

- † Cultural discontinuity – leads to language and culture loss, i.e., the “next generation may no longer share the same language and cultural activities as their basis for developing culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy.” (p. 30) To confront this loss, the authors offer curricular and pedagogical alternatives that are accurate representations of the community and more democratic.

Reconciliation

- ‡ Current challenges – how to reconcile with the fact that traditional culture is faced with a series of :”modern” choices – how to make the best choices, maximize the best resources, etc.