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TOWARD A COMMUNITY-BASED TRANSITION
TO A YUPIK FIRST LANGUAGE (IMMERSION) PROGRAM
WITH ESL COMPONENT

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Abstract

This paper overviews the process of school restructuring in the small Alaskan village of Manokotak. The restructuring involved moving from an "English Submersion" program to a Yup'ik First Language transitional (Yup'ik Immersion) program with an English as a Second Language component. The restructuring focused on the vitalization of the community language and culture through the transformation of instructional practices and the use of native language instruction. As the district moved toward competency based instruction, parallel Yup'ik competencies were created. Challenges were encountered in materials and curriculum development, scheduling, available funds, top-down decision making and community participation. Formal and informal assessment results are promising for both the students and the school. Community decision making and on-going collaboration with the school district continues to be the crux of the success and perpetuation of this program.

Historical Background

For over a century, Alaskan education has reflected a state of flux not found in many "lower 48" educational systems. Geographic

isolation, harsh and varied climates, and the many faces of colonialism have left their unique imprints on the ever changing systems used to educate children in Alaska.

Assimilationist doctrines from the turn of the 19th century up to the present have shaped the mostly implicit language policies governing Alaskan schools. Both Russian and English speaking missionaries and educators attempted to eradicate indigenous ways of life and languages, requiring the Native peoples to become "civilized". As a result the indigenous people moved rapidly, and with varying success, from parochial subsistence lifestyles to ones filled with new technology, hunting weaponry, modes of transportation and, most relevant to this study, new values and languages.

Two or more languages are now spoken in many Alaskan villages. These may include the native language as the elders speak it, the native language modified by English, English modified by the native language (village English) and "standard" English taught in the schools (Henze & Vanett, 1993). The varied responses to this battery of languages, on individual and social levels has perplexed all concerned. School personnel are not clear, themselves, on the best way to respond to the dynamics of the language shifts.

The Yup'ik and Iñupiat speaking peoples in Alaska are the largest non-English language groups in the state. Central Yup'ik comprises 42% and Iñupiaq 20% of the non-English speakers (Travis, 1993). They form the northern, western and southwestern periphery of the state. This is the only place in the world where these languages are spoken. They have solely their own communities to depend on to maintain the viability of their languages. Coping with the realities of language shift and loss has motivated many communities to organize attempts to re-vitalize and/or maintain the vitality of their native languages (Okakok, 1989).

In examining the following model of school restructuring in a Yup'ik Eskimo village, language is recognized as the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture and values. It is also recognized as a vehicle for supporting and augmenting the native speaker's sense of identity and self-esteem.

Southwest Region School District

Southwest Region School District (SWRSD) is located on the southern coast of the Bering Sea. The Bristol Bay region is a mountain bordered basin in the southwest corner of Alaska. SWRSD serves 9 schools in eight villages in southwestern Alaska. The villages are populated predominantly by Yup'ik Eskimos and Aleut Indians. Most non-native village residents are employed as teachers.

The regional school board is comprised of seven members. Each village also has a Community School Committee (CSC), comprised of from three to five members. The CSC serves as an advisory group, providing information to the administration and school board regarding educational needs.

The district's current emphasis is on Competency Based Education, Pre-school Education, a comprehensive K-12 Guidance and Counseling program, Vocational Education, Bilingual Education, and upgrade of facilities.

Manokotak Village

Manokotak is a village of about 300 inhabitants in the SWRSD. The village school has a student population of 122, Kindergarten—12th grade. Manokotak is a 15 minute "air taxi" flight from Dillingham where the central office is located.

The village is clustered at the bottom of a small mountain. A nearby river provides access to the ocean and to fresh water fishing in the summer months. Community activities include commercial fishing and a subsistence lifestyle including foraging, hunting, and fishing.

The Challenge

Manokotak is one of the remaining villages in the Bristol Bay area that is almost entirely Yup'ik speaking. Seventy-eight Percent of the K-8 students in Manokotak school speak Yup'ik exclusively or combined with some English. Evidence of a systemic problem in the school was seen in the high rates of student attrition, poor standardized achievement test scores, pupil disinterest and, strained student/teacher and

community/school relations. These stresses affected everyone in the village.

A new direction had to be taken. The community was crucial in initiating needed changes. How could they make the school program fit the needs of their children and their community? How could they guide the instructional program to reflect and meet both the traditional community's educational needs and the necessities of "formal" schooling? What would the focus be? Since 78% of the students were Yup'ik speakers a decision was made to change the language of instruction to Yup'ik with a progressive ESL component.

Restructuring

Research stresses the importance of both native language instruction and effective community involvement in the planning and implementation of school programs. With this in mind, the Manokotak community and school, in collaboration with district efforts, focused on restructuring the instructional program to support the maintenance and augmentation of the Yup'ik language.

The "Old" Transitional ESL Program

Originally, Manokotak school had described a Transitional Bilingual program with ESL Component¹ to meet the needs of their students. In reality, 99% of the instruction was in English at all grade

¹ Prior to restructuring, the Transitional with ESL Component description for Manokotak's program read: Under a transitional type program, students' native language is used as the primary medium of instruction in grades I through 3. During these years, increasing emphasis is given to teaching English as a second language. Decreasing emphasis is given to teaching native language oral and literacy skills although native cultural implications are considered in all subject areas. By grade 4 (or any other chosen grade level) students have been shifted to the use of English as the medium of instruction for all subjects, and emphasis is on the mainstream culture. No attempt is made to support native language or culture in the school after the early years.

levels with no native language support. The program reflected the "English Submersion" model described by Krashen (1984).

Community Based Transition

The administration, staff and community involved with Manokotak understood that effective restructuring would take several years to complete. New goals are set each year to guide the process. They were initiating an attempt to reverse undesirable practices that have taken generations to develop.

The Manokotak Planning Team

The Manokotak Planning Team (MPT) was formed for the Manokotak school site. It consisted of both classified and certified staff, a Community School Committee (CSC) member, a School Board Member, a community member and elders from the community. The MPT developed a plan of action. The community and staff now had a common goal of working towards the betterment of their school and village. Even negative comments and problems brought to the meetings provided perspective on what needed to be resolved and what solutions could be arrived at to satisfy the parents and the community.

The MPT continues to meet three times a year to evaluate, change, improve, make comments and discuss the problems of the program. Community members have consistently shared their opinions, concerns and suggestions through the monthly CSC meetings, Open House, Parent/Teacher conferences, MPT meetings and public meetings on education.

Research

Research on effective models of bilingual and ESL instruction was examined. To assist in the initial development of an appropriate instructional model for Manokotak, the MPT invited experts in the fields of second language learning. The X-CED program faculty, through the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, was instrumental in the early stages of the restructuring (Lipka et al., 1991).

Attitudes

This research, concomitant with persistent negotiation with and education of the Superintendent, administration and staff, brought about a transformation of attitudes.

The prevailing attitude was that English is the only and most effective way to instruct language "minority" students. The administration came to recognize the benefits of using native language (L1) for instruction for students and for the district. These included: higher academic performance, increased self-esteem, increased motivation to attend school, improved school/community relations, better staff morale, and a more culturally relevant curriculum.

Community Survey

A house to house survey was conducted in the community to solicit input into what community members wanted their children's instructional program to look like. Interpreters were used in many cases. Most families wanted their children to succeed in the school system. However, they indicated their discomfort with the school and the problems that both they and their children were experiencing. They cited the school's lack of relevance to their lives. Since many of the children would stay in the village after they graduated from high school, the school should help them do that. Yes, they would like to have their children educated in Yup'ik, but they must still learn English. In the end, the community arrived at a majority decision about the direction of the program.

Yup'ik Immersion

Manokotak community and school finally decided to implement a Yup'ik first language program with an ESL component - a Yup'ik immersion program. The program would begin in kindergarten and progressively be implemented up through sixth grade. The model reflects the transfer curriculum model presented by Anna Uhl Chamot (1983), but modified to meet the needs of the Manokotak program (Table 1).

Table I
Yup'ik Immersion with ESL Component Model for Manokotak School

Kindergarten	All competencies in Yup'ik and Oral English component
1st Grade	All competencies in Yup'ik and Oral English component
2nd Grade	Competencies in English with emphasis on oral language and extension of reading and writing in Yup'ik
3/4 Grade	Competencies in English with emphasis on oral language and reading and writing in Yup'ik
5/6 Grade	Competencies in English with oral language component and reading and writing in Yup'ik

First Year Goals

The first year goals were to, 1) improve oral language skills in Yup'ik and English and, 2) improve reading and writing skills in both Yup'ik and English. The 1st through 4th graders were already reading in English and it was maintained that the students continue working on their English competencies. The new Kindergarten students and first graders were to work on student competencies through Yup'ik instruction.

Scheduling Yup'ik/English Instructional Time

The program was designed for progressive English instruction. The hours spent in each language range from 4 hours of Yup'ik and 1 hour of English instruction at the kindergarten level to 1 hour of Yup'ik instruction and 4.5 hours of English at the 5th and 6th grade levels

At the writing of this paper, the schedule is charted to be changed in order to add more Yup'ik instruction and decrease the hours of ESL in grades K, 1 and 2. The teachers and parents realized that the students needed more time in Yup'ik to gain fluency.

The weekly scheduling underwent constant revision. This was one of the weakest aspects of the program, due to small staff size, time constraints and the combination of grades.

Staff

Staff's strengths and weaknesses were evaluated in the process of designing the scheduling. Factors of subject area strength (math, language arts), language proficiency (Yup'ik, English) were considered in placement. Four Yup'ik instructors (non-certified) were placed with certified classroom teachers (3 Yup'ik and two non-Native). Teachers switched classes for ESL and Yup'ik instruction.

Staff Development

Certified, classified and administrative staff received training and assistance in areas including first and second language acquisition, English as a second language instruction, bilingual materials and curriculum development, cooperative learning, culturally relevant literature, whole language philosophy and related strategies, the writing process, assessment, competency based education, and parent involvement.

Staff development was provided using the services of the Alaska MRC — Region XVI as well as outside consultants. Selected staff also went to observe the Yup'ik transitional programs in the Lower Kuskokwim School District and attended an International Reading Association Conference in Nevada.

Materials Development

The staff, administration and the MPT were involved in creating Yup'ik competencies in math and language arts.

District funds — a combination of state bilingual, state foundation and Title VII bilingual grant allocations — were allocated to purchase and create materials for both the Yup'ik First Language (YFL) and ESL programs.

Teachers identified what materials they needed in order to teach both English and Yup'ik competencies in the classroom. Available Yup'ik materials were few. Although the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) had developed materials in Central Yup'ik, the language spoken in Manokotak, there were enough dialectal differences that the Manokotak Yup'ik teachers did not like to use them.

Therefore, Yup'ik materials were created by the Manokotak staff — often modeled on the LKSD materials and other ESL and language arts

materials. In this way, the language used more accurately reflected the Yup'ik dialect of the students in Manokotak, yet the teachers did not have to re-invent the "instructional wheel."

An additional logistical difficulty was the orthography of the Yup'ik language, now official since the early 1970s. The current orthography is the fourth since the late 1800s (Henze & Vanett, 1993). Except for the youngest teachers, most have had to re-learn their orthography. This has affected the fluency of literacy transmission and acquisition.

Community Development

A variety of workshops were provided in Manokotak for parents and planning team members. This was in order to assist parents in enhancing their relationship with the school through initiation of and participation in activities in the school and at home with their children. A parent task force was set up. One result of this community/school collaboration was a bilingual school newsletter in English and Yup'ik.

Cultural Relevance vs. Competency Based Instruction

Using the native language for instruction would seem to make instruction culturally relevant. Competency based instruction, on the other hand, might seem to preclude cultural relevance, notwithstanding its presentation in Yup'ik. As the Yup'ik competencies were developed for Manokotak, The MPT reviewed them and edited them to make sure that items reflected the cultural backgrounds and addressed the experiences of the students.

A holistic approach was used for Yup'ik and English language arts that capitalized on student's experiences as the content for the literacy process. Within this contextual base were orthography and grammar were taught. Thus, students were assisted in acquiring "western" literacy skills in the context of their culture as well as encouraged to retain their "literacy" in the traditional skills of the community. In this way, students' identity with their community was supported.

Teacher/student interactions in Manokotak are more culturally congruent because the Yup'ik teachers can now instruct in Yup'ik, rather than entirely in English. The school discipline structure also is

more reflective of the community "style" of discipline, rather than the traditional "Western style" evident in most mainstream schools.

Assessment/Evaluation

In order to assess progress and abilities in reading and writing in Yup'ik and oral language skills in Yup'ik and English the following tests were used: 1) Language proficiency test (pre-LAS for Kindergartners), 2) Stanford Achievement Test (SAT)- Yup'ik (grades K-2), 3) Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) — (fall & spring, K-4), 4) informal observation and anecdotal data (training in alternative assessment pending) and, 5) informal writing samples and analytical writing assessments (including developmental samples, and checklist observations).

ITBS. Currently, the data available are the ITBS scores (K-4) and the Yup'ik SAT scores (K-2). The ITBS scores in reading and math serve as baseline data (Table 2). By most standards they are low. The assessment was administered in the Spring of 1992.

Table 2
ITBS Test Scores (Spring 1992)
Mean National Percentile Rank

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>
Kindergarten (n = 12)	28.91	22.67
First (n=11)	27.90	16.45
Second (n=13)	14.00	12.31
Third (n=14)	5.07	17.36
Fourth (n=3)	5.67	12.00

The Yup'ik SAT. The Yup'ik SAT was administered in January 1992 and again in October of 1992 reflecting a change in testing schedule (Table 3). There is a marked improvement in average achieved mean among grade levels. The first testing cycle showed that both the first and second graders achieved, on the average, below the expected mean. The kindergarten class was the exception that year. It should be noted that Special Education students also were administered the SAT Yup'ik tested and were included in the scores.

Table 3
SAT-Yup'ik Test Scores
Mean Grade Equivalent

<i>Grade 1/92</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Expected Mean</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>Grade 10/92</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Expected Mean</i>	<i>mean</i>
Kinder	13	1.6	.05	Kinder	13	.04	.02
First	14	1.4	1.5	First	13	1.6	1.2
Second	13	1.9	2.5	Second	12	2.3	2.2

The second year all groups exceeded the expected mean. Non-Yup'ik speaking kindergartners were included in the testing, which dropped the average scores for the Kindergarten class. The first grade class retained the same grade level equivalent from kindergarten, which was quite advanced to begin with, and still exceeded the expected mean their second year. The second grade class had come up a full grade level from first grade.

The increased scores give an indication of the potential success of the Yup'ik Immersion program in Manokotak. We can make a cautious assertion that the YFL program, in the first two years, was experiencing some success. Third year data will provide a more reliable indicator as to the qualitative success of the program.

Alternative assessment. Anecdotal data (based on community feedback, student/family self-report, writing samples, student language use, behavior reports, cultural understanding, and teacher observation) indicate success related to improved student self-esteem and improved relations between the school and the community and between the students and school/teachers.

Positive effects can be seen in the transformation of student response to schooling in Manokotak. Students reported feeling good about going to school and being interested in what they were doing. According to reports, the students began to communicate more in both English and Yup'ik. There seemed to be little confusion between the languages. The students appeared to be excited about what they were learning.

Most parents were supportive and were pleased with the changes occurring in the school. Parents were able to discuss school with their

children because they now had a common language, i.e. learning was occurring in the language of the home, at school.

Teachers and parents were perceiving the students as having more positive attitudes and increased self-esteem. One teacher noted that she was amazed at how quickly the students were learning Yup'ik and how good they felt about it. As parent herself, she also commented that the parents also felt good about it (the learning in and of Yup'ik and how their children were responding.)

Staff perceived student and community resistance to school to be much lower and attendance and participation much higher. Discipline problems in the classrooms and in the school as a whole seemed to be fewer and less severe. The ESL teachers, in particular, made note of this.

Along with the modest positive indicators of the standardized test scores, anecdotal data concerning the outcome of the first years of program implementation have been positive.

Critical Comments and Recommendations

Problems encountered in the Manokotak restructuring process included: lack of curricula in Yup'ik; the scheduling of ESL and YFL classes; a start-up that was, in hind-sight, too quick; top-down decision making; and budget cuts. These are common problems for most programs in transition.

Cummins' framework of empowerment for minority students (1986) seems a fitting model with which to summarize the work of the Manokotak community and the SWRSD staff in their restructuring efforts. In the process of transforming Manokotak's school program to meet the needs of the students, we can see how the project addressed the four main components of Cummins' model: cultural/linguistic incorporation; community participation; pedagogy; and assessment.

The crux of this restructuring attempt has been to equalize the education of the Manokotak students. The school has endeavored to incorporate Yup'ik culture and language in the face of a hostile language environment - a powerful move that was not entirely successful. Some Yup'ik speaking families were initially not supportive of the immersion program. This reflects the strength of English language "prestige" even today. Perseverance and effective results won these families over.

The district and community continue to collaborate in the restructuring process. This process has demanded that each group educate the other so that communications can be clear and the community's needs can be met on an equal footing with the needs of the district. Now many perspectives are being included in the decision making process, rather than being excluded. Everyone recognizes, however, that there is still more work to be done in this area. The Manokotak Planning Team and the Community School Committee will continue to meet and the school board continues its commitment to community input.

The issues of pedagogy - lack of materials and teacher training, ineffective discipline and instruction - show most clearly the status that the Yup'ik language and culture has held in the education system in Alaska. Ancient assimilation policies still reverberate through the curriculum and instruction. In creating fugitive² materials, the staff has had to reach out to the community to gather information that infuses the materials and lessons with the lives of the students. The staff and administration are coming to understand the value of approaching both students and learning in ways very different from the ways many teachers are trained in college. Ways that are far more effective for the students of Manokotak. Instruction is becoming more interactive and student directed.

Assessment has been designed so that instructional and programmatic decisions are not predicated solely on quantitative data, but also on information gleaned from the consumers of the services - the students and their parents. The service providers also provide input in a system that traditionally makes decisions in a top down fashion. We are still warned, in this vignette, that community participation, although very empowering, can be blocked easily by a single administrative decision. The organizational system of public education itself needs to

²Fugitive materials are instructional materials created locally for a specific group of students. These materials may be modeled on commercially made materials that are not available in the target language. Fugitive materials typically are found only in the area or region in which they are created.

be restructured to meet the needs of students in rural Alaskan communities.

Conclusion

SWRSD and the site of Manokotak are moving toward more effective student empowerment. The process is not an easy one nor quick. Vision, patience, and committed effort are the primary ingredients necessary to achieve needed improvements to enhance student success and community empowerment at the Manokotak site.

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