

**HEALING THE “UNHEALTHY NATIVE”: ENCOUNTERS WITH  
STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION IN RURAL ALASKA**

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This qualitative study presents an in-depth analysis of standards-based educational reform in an Alaskan rural school district with schools in Alaska Native villages and non-Native communities during the 2000-2001 school year. This study was undertaken to understand the district's standards-based reform in sociohistorical context by eliciting the perspectives of the district's staff members involved in the implementation process. The findings of the study indicate that the district had recast the historical civilization-savagism paradigm in an “unhealthy Native” construct that functioned to explain Alaska Native students' academic failure and protect the district's standards-based system and successful reputation. Implications for Alaska Natives, educational research, and educational policy are discussed. Specifically, the findings of this study indicate a need for additional research on the school as a site of struggle and development of educational policy that facilitates culturally relevant pedagogy.

Since the United States acquired political control of Alaska in 1867, Alaska Natives have contended with a dominant society's hegemonic agendas imposed on their culture and daily lives. Historically, the U.S. utilized the educational system as an instrument to eradicate traditional Alaska Native culture and remake the Alaskan Native according to the image of dominant society (Darnell & Hoem, 1996; Kawagley, 1995). The United States' colonial approach to schooling in the late 19th century continued well into the 20th century and formed the foundation on which the contemporary Alaska educational

system developed, a system that has consistently failed to provide Alaska Natives a culturally relevant educational experience and to effectively educate the majority of Alaska Natives when evaluated according to standardized test scores, dropout and graduation rates, and educational attainment levels (Kawagley, 1995; Pavel, Curtin, & Whitener, 1998). Thus, today's educators and policymakers in Alaska face a crucial question: In what ways does the sociohistorical context of Alaska Native schooling play out in contemporary educational policies and practices?

During the 2000-2001 school year, I addressed this question as part of an empirical study conducted in the Tikishla School District,<sup>1</sup> an Alaskan rural school district that operates schools in Alaska Native villages and non-Native communities.<sup>2</sup> While my research focused broadly on the district's standards-based reform, in this article I present the findings of the study specifically related to the sociohistorical context of Alaska Native education. I also discuss implications for Alaska Natives, future research, and educational policy.

### **Methods of Study**

This study used a qualitative approach to examine standards-based educational reform in the Tikishla School District with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the meaning and context of standards-based education in the district.<sup>3</sup> Thus, qualitative methodology was compatible with my research aims as it provided an effective framework for eliciting context and meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Data collection extended over a six-month period included in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were collected from four sources: (a)

interviews of school district staff members, (b) observations of district office meetings, (c) observations of school sites and classrooms, and (d) school district documents. The four data sources were used to elicit the intentions, forms, and meanings of the district's standards-based reform from the school district staff members' perspectives. Students and community members were not included in the data because this study focused on the forms and meanings of standards-based education<sup>4</sup> from the district's perspective. Each participant signed a consent form that described the purpose and methods of my research study. I was responsible for managing all collected data including transcription, analysis, storage of data in a locked filing cabinet, and report production.

I utilized a structured interview guide designed to evoke both objective and interpretative responses that centered on participants' views of standards-based education in the Alaska Native context. I conducted a total of 32 in-depth interviews that included interviews with the district office and school-based administrators, district office professional staff (e.g., school psychologist), school board members, and the district's classroom teachers. I recorded all formal interviews on a cassette tape player and wrote notes in a notebook during the interviews. I transcribed all interviews on a personal computer.

The purpose of the observations was to record the district's staff members' discourses and practices related to standards-based educational reform in the Alaska Native context. My role while collecting observational data was primarily a complete observer (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I recorded data in a notebook during the observation and then transferred the notes to a personal computer for future analysis. Although I did not utilize a formal observation guide, my observations were guided by my aims of

eliciting the forms and meanings of the district's standards-based reform. Observations included 9 field visits at the district office (e.g., district administrator's presentations), 14 classroom observations, and 8 observations in the school setting (e.g., teachers' meetings).

I collected data from Tikishla School District's documents to elicit published information related to the district's standards-based reform. Specifically, school district documents provided data related to (a) the perceived crisis that gave impetus to the standards-based reform; (b) the purpose, goals, and intentions of the reform initiative; and (c) the official form and meaning of the standards-based reform. Examples of school district documents included as data are the following: (a) teacher evaluation forms, (b) agendas and minutes of school board meetings, (c) District Report Card required by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, and (d) curriculum standards and content areas.

### Sample and Site

Purposeful sampling was used in this study to gather in-depth qualitative data related to the district's standards-based educational reform. Because I was conducting a contextual qualitative study, it was imperative that I collect data via interviews and observations in the central office and school sites of the Tikishla School District. The district's superintendent granted me access to district records for data collection.

The Tikishla School District operates schools in Alaska Native villages and non-Native communities. The Alaska Native villages in the district are small communities with an average population of 106 residents, the majority being Alaska Natives. The

average population of the non-Native communities is 243 residents, most of whom are non-Native (Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development, 2002).

In addition to the school sites, the district operates a short-term boarding school, the City House, in an urban setting that focuses on career and personal/social development. The City House was included in the research design because it was an integral component of the district's standards-based system. The organization and function of the City House are discussed in the section entitled "Tikishla School District's Mission: 'Amputation and Rehabilitation.'"

The professional staff of the Tikishla School District's central office included a superintendent, assistant superintendent, reading specialist, technology coordinator, grants coordinator, special education specialist, school psychologist, and three professional development consultants. The district employed nine classroom teachers, including "lead-teachers" that served as the administrators at each of the school sites. During the 2000-2001 school year all professional staff were White.

According to the 1999-2000 District Report Card, the academic year from which enrollment data were available at the time of this study, 78 students were enrolled in the district's schools. The average student enrollment in the Alaska Native villages was 14 students, and in the non-Native schools the average enrollment was 32 students. The students' ethnic makeup included 100% Alaska Native in the Alaska Native villages, and in the non-Native community schools the student demographics were 61% White, 24% Alaska Native, and 15% Asian American.

## Data Analysis

The formal analysis process involved a systematic searching and organizing of the data to increase my understanding of the district's standards-based system and to identify significant findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Formal data analysis began after I had collected a sufficient amount of data, transcribed the interviews, and summarized my observation fieldnotes. I reviewed all data I had collected and then developed coding categories related specifically to the district's standards-based reform and Alaska Native students. Next, I labeled the data with codes and utilized the labeled data to construct a descriptive portrayal of the district's standards-based reform in order to identify significant findings.

Following the completion of the research report, I provided a copy to the district's superintendent for review and distribution to the district's staff. I offered to discuss the findings and report with the participants of this study.

## **The Sociohistorical Context of Alaska Native Education**

The purpose of this section is twofold: (a) to review the form and function of American Indian education as imposed by the U.S. educational system in the 19th century; and (b) to describe how this educational approach was transferred to the Alaska Native experience in the early 20th century.

### Sociohistorical Overview of American Indian Education

In the mid-19th century, U.S. policymakers proposed two options for American Indians' future: (a) continue in tribal life and become extinct, or (b) assimilate into American society (Adams 1988, 1995). Based on the principles of Social Darwinism,

Whites assumed that Western European societies had reached the pinnacle of civilization, whereas American Indians remained in a savage or barbaric stage. Policymakers turned to schools as a primary mechanism to “assist” American Indians in their evolution from savagism to civilization (Adams, 1988, 1995). Some policymakers reasoned that with extensive exposure to White’s civilized society, specifically exposure through the educational system, the social evolution process could be accelerated for American Indians (Adams, 1988, 1995).

Principles of Social Darwinism applied in the American Indian school setting gave rise to what Adams (1988) coined the “civilization-savagism paradigm” (p. 10). Adams (1995) further noted that this paradigm aimed to erase Indian identity by eliminating external symbols of tribal attachment and replace their tribal identity with the values and behaviors of civilized society. The educational strategies that promoted the civilization-savagism paradigm included (a) the location of the school, (b) a comprehensive educational program, and (c) indoctrination in the essence of the civilization-savagism paradigm (Adams, 1988).

Location of the schools. Because policymakers aimed to sever American Indians’ tribal attachments, by the early 1900s the off-reservation boarding school was the preferred form of schooling for American Indians. The boarding schools functioned to immerse American Indian children in the White’s civilized society for extended periods of time to aid in their progress from savagism to civilization (Adams, 1988, 1995; Almeida, 1997; Lomawaima, 1995).

Comprehensive educational program. The second strategy of the civilization-savagism paradigm, the comprehensive educational program, made teaching Indian

children acceptable codes of behavior a priority over academic knowledge and skills (Lomawaima, 1995). This strategy sought to create an Indian child that dressed, ate, walked, spoke, and thought like the “civilized” White (Adams, 1988, 1995; Coleman, 1999; Lomawaima, 1995).

Indoctrination in the essence of the civilization-savagism paradigm. The third strategy of the civilization-savagism paradigm was to indoctrinate American Indian children in the basic principles of Social Darwinism so they would accept the superiority of White society and hasten their social evolution process. In practice, however, this strategy reflected racist ideology that framed the American Indian as an inferior race and culture and functioned to prepare them “for their place as a detribalized social and economic underclass” (Lomawaima, 1995, p. 198).

### Civilization-Savagism Paradigm in Alaska Native Education

The civilization-savagism paradigm was transferred to Alaska Native schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the following section I explain how the civilization-savagism paradigm played out in the U.S. educational system for Alaska Natives via the following strategies: (a) removal of Alaska Native children from traditional homes and placement in boarding schools; (b) requirement that English-only be spoken in the schools; and (c) establishment of codes of behavior.

Removal of Alaska Native children and boarding schools. In 1878, a female Presbyterian missionary teacher moved to Wrangell, Alaska, and began teaching in a newly established mission school. After observing what she perceived as savage behavior among the local Alaska Natives, she established a boarding home-school to “move girls whose virtue she considered in jeopardy out of the longhouses in the Indian

village in which their parents lived and into her home” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 76). By the late 1800s the boarding school approach had been institutionalized in Alaska and the underlying rationale of the boarding schools was explained by a Catholic priest that directed a boarding school in Holy Cross, Alaska, in 1887:

In my opinion, the only plan by which these people can be raised to some degree of civilization is through the establishment of good boarding schools, where the children can be taught, besides English speaking, reading, and writing, some kind of work calculated to promote their welfare and home comfort. The children should be removed as far as possible from contact and association with the elder ones of their race. . . . Those who imagine that a few years of preaching and teaching in day schools will suffice to civilize and christianize wild native tribes are, in my opinion, greatly mistaken. (Mitchell, 1997, p. 94)

In 1947 the Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school was established in Sitka, Alaska, for Alaska Natives across the state. The superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska explained the goals of education for Alaska Natives by highlighting Mount Edgecumbe:

We are now setting up a program that will take the boys and girls out of their community, and we don't care if they ever go back at all. In fact, we urge them not to go back because the communities cannot support them. This is the purpose of Mount Edgecumbe at the present time. (Darnell & Hoem, 1996, p. 71)

The strategy of removing Alaska Native students from their home villages with the purpose of preparing them to not return reflected the civilization-savagism paradigm's boarding school approach. By the 1960s, boarding schools were the only option for Alaska Native students in villages who wanted to attend high school. It was not until the

1970s that Native students had the opportunity to acquire a secondary education in their home communities (Barnhardt, 2001; Darnell & Hoem, 1996; McDiarmid, 1984).

English-only. During the Early American and Territorial periods (1867-1959) most Alaska Native children spoke their Indigenous languages fluently. In schools, however, policymakers and educators aimed to civilize these students by requiring them to speak English in schools (Darnell & Hoem, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Napoleon, 1996). In a 1908 issue of the newspaper, *Thlinget*, a teacher from Sitka explained the purpose of the English-only rule as a civilizing mechanism:

Everything should be done to encourage and help the Natives to acquire the English. . . . by dropping their dialect and acquiring the English, they would the more rapidly get away from the heathen customs and advance in civilization. (Mitchell, 1997, p. 95)

Codes of behavior. The White's perception of the savage Alaska Native was also demonstrated through dress codes and criteria for hygiene. In the 1920s, Carpenter (1928) visited schools in Inupiaq villages and noted that school rules included prohibiting students from wearing traditional parkas in the school and requiring that students attend school with a clean face and groomed hair. It was common in these schools for students to be required to take weekly baths in the schools' bathtubs; and when a new child was enrolled, he was "taken to the bathroom where his hair [was] combed and his body rigidly inspected" (Carpenter, 1928, p. 226).

In sum, the civilization-savagism paradigm was a salient feature in the educational system serving Alaska Natives. The paradigm was demonstrated by the Whites' perceptions that Alaska Natives were uncivilized and inferior to Whites. Also, the

civilization-savagism paradigm was reflected in educational policies and practices, as evidenced in the preceding examples.

### Summary of Current Alaska Educational Scene

Since Alaska gained statehood in 1959, the state's educational system has undergone numerous changes, including some legislation that explicitly aimed to improve schooling for Alaska Natives, for example, the 1976 law that established secondary schools in rural communities (Darnell & Hoem, 1996). During the 1990s, Alaska launched standards-based educational reform that has resulted in the following:

1. Content and performance standards that districts are required to adopt.
2. Benchmark exams in grades 3, 6, and 8.
3. A high-stakes graduation exit exam that the 2004 graduating class must pass to receive a high school diploma.
4. A school designating system that beginning in August 2004 will rank schools according to students' scores on standardized exams (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2002).

The recent educational policies and practices have emerged and been implemented within an educational context historically linked to the civilization-savagism paradigm. When a paradigm is institutionalized in schools, central aspects of the paradigm continue to flow through the system long after the innovation was developed and implemented. The underlying ideologies become infused within the culture of the system and define the norms and expectations that are seldom questioned or noticed.

As a result, when new reform initiatives are developed and introduced into the system, the foundational elements of the system often function to reinforce, contradict, and otherwise influence the forms and effects of the innovation (Cuban, 1992; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Thus, because the civilization-savagism paradigm was institutionalized in Alaska's educational system, it is likely that threads of the paradigm are woven in the basic fabric of the system and continue to influence the form and/or effects of contemporary educational policies and practices.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly examine the civilization-savagism paradigm's effects as a significant aspect of Alaska's educational context, Yup'ik scholar, Oscar Kawagley (1995) effectively articulates a potential confusing outcome for Alaska Native students:

The modern public schools are not made to accommodate differences in the worldviews, but to impose another culture—their own. This has had a confusing effect on the Native students. (p. 36)

In sum, contemporary schooling in Alaska needs to be approached with the assumption that salient features of the civilization-savagism paradigm (e.g., its ideology, practices, and effects) continue to play out in the educational arena. It is this assumption that underlies the following sections related to the Tikishla School District's standards-based system.

### **The Tikishla School District and the Standards-Based System**

In this section I report findings from my research that relate specifically to the role of the Tikishla School District's standards-based system in the Alaska Native

sociohistorical context. I provide an overview of the district's standards-based system and discuss a discourse of concerns especially relevant to Alaska Natives.

### Overview of Tikishla School District's Standards-based System

The Tikishla School District began standards-based reform during the 1994-95 school year upon hiring a new superintendent and assistant superintendent. According to the district's administrators, in 1994 the district faced a "crisis" stemming from students' (a) low standardized achievement tests scores, (b) below grade-level reading levels, and (c) lack of success in post-secondary endeavors. Thus, in response to the perceived crisis the district office administration forged the path for a standards-based reform initiative that was fully implemented in 1997.

The Tikishla School District developed a curriculum that consists of ten content areas including the traditional academic areas (e.g., math, reading, writing) and nonacademic areas (e.g., personal, social, and career development). Students are expected to progress through a hierarchy of performance levels in each of the content areas by passing assessments, and a student can advance through the levels only when he or she has demonstrated mastery at any given performance level. The Tikishla School District's standards-based system was presented as a "no-failure" system where all students excel because every student is taught at his or her ability level and where each student moves through the system at individual rates.

During the data collection phase of this study, the district was developing a tracking system that consists of an academic track and a nonacademic track. Students in the academic track advance through all the performance levels in each of the content areas resulting in a traditional high school diploma. The nonacademic track focuses on

“transition skills,” the vocational and social/personal skills that the district identified as necessary to “transition from school to life.” These transition skills included, for example, making eye contact when communicating with others, choosing positive/healthy free time activities, and identifying attributes of healthy/unhealthy communities (Tikishla School District, 2000-2001). Students in the nonacademic track receive an alternative high school diploma that highlights the transition skills, and the administration envisioned the alternative diploma communicating to future employers: “Okay, he can’t do the academics, but here’s what he can do for you.”

The Tikishla School District boasted of having achieved overwhelming success and pointed to improvements in standardized test scores as the primary indicator of this success. According to the district’s superintendent, since 1994 the district’s standardized achievement test scores had improved in reading, language arts, and math with averages rising from the 36th percentile in 1995 to the 74th percentile in 1999. While it is not the purpose of this article to analyze the statistical validity of the improved test scores given the small student sample size in the district, the data indicated that teachers were reluctant to promote the improvement in test scores as proof of the district’s standards-based reform’s success. As one teacher explained, “The statistics that are involved are not very accurate, I think often, or [a] very fair measure of what’s happening.” However, the district’s administration consistently utilized the improved standardized test scores as the principal evidence of the standards-based reform’s success.

The Tikishla School District’s “success” has captured the attention of national foundations and agencies. For example, in the fall of 2000 a private foundation awarded

an Alaskan agency almost \$5 million to support the transfer of the Tikishla School District's model to other Alaskan school districts. And in the spring of 2001 the Tikishla School District was granted an award by the U.S. Department of Education for innovative education (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2002).

In sum, by conventional measures (i.e., achievement test scores) the Tikishla School District's "no failure" standards-based model appeared successful and had been rewarded accordingly. However, beneath the ostensible success, dramatic implications for Alaska Native students and communities were taking shape. It is to this discourse that I focus attention in the following sections.

#### The Obscured Concerns and Response: Students' Failure and the "Unhealthy Native"

While publicly the district was enjoying its success, privately administrators and teachers were concerned that many Alaska Native students were not meeting the district's academic graduation requirements. Quantitative data with regard to the number of students at risk of not graduating was unavailable at the time of this study. However, the concern of failing students was a salient discourse among the Tikishla School District's staff as evidenced, for example, in a teacher's statement from an Alaska Native village:

I've got kids in there that will not meet graduation standards. They just won't, no matter how long we keep them in the system.

Another teacher in this village said,

There's a lot of kids who are not going to make it. . . . The standards are going to fail in this village if all of a sudden nobody ever graduates.

In addition to the problem of students' failure within the district's standards-based system, the district was concerned that these students would not pass Alaska's high-stakes exams and consequently fail to graduate according to the State's criteria. The discourse of concerns was echoed by the district's professional staff across all school sites and in the district office. In sum, beneath the Tikishla School District's successful reputation flowed a discourse of concerns related to students' academic failure in the district's standards-based system and within the state's high-stakes testing environment. This failure placed the students at risk of not graduating and it threatened the validity of the district's standards-based system and successful image.

"Unhealthy Native" The Tikishla School District's crisis with students' academic failure gave rise to the district's "unhealthy Native" construct, a discourse that functioned in the district to explain the Alaska Native students' academic failure, to divert attention from the role its standards-based system might be playing in the students' failure, and to maintain a successful reputation. During the period that I collected data in the Tikishla School District, an administrator repeatedly portrayed the Alaska Native students and villages as unhealthy. He said,

Our communities are very unhealthy! I'll be honest about that, a lot of problems.

This negative portrayal of Alaska Native communities was reiterated by other district staff members, and graphically illustrated by a teacher when I first arrived in one of the villages to collect data: "This village is unhealthy . . . three fourths of this village needs to be sterilized because it is so bad."

The Tikishla School District referred to multiple indicators as evidence of the Alaska Native's unhealthiness that included psychosocial and sociocultural conditions. For example, an administrator presented a desperate village situation as follows:

So we're hoping that the next generation coming through is not going to be tainted with alcohol as much, is not going to be influenced by no jobs, not going to be committed to one way of life.

He continued by explaining that the district is "dealing with suicide, depression . . . [and] loss of identity" in the villages. Thus, the administrator defined the "unhealthy" Alaska Native context as a community laden with psychological and sociocultural conditions that included overwhelming despair, depression, alcoholism, and suicides.

The unhealthy village situation was explicitly described by a central office staff member when she explained the merits of the district's urban boarding home for Alaska Native students:

Oh my gosh! It pulls them out of a village scene where they are so protected it's like a compound. There's no boundaries. You know, you can walk into anybody's house, they're all your aunt or your uncle.

This staff member portrayed the Alaska Native village as a prison-like compound and applied sweeping generalizations when she referred to "*no boundaries*" and "*they're all*" family members in her description of the villages (emphasis added). To emphasize a negative village situation, she reduced the Alaska Native village to stereotypes that carry racist overtones about Alaska Natives. The statement also reveals the goal of the district's City House to remove the Alaska Native children from this "village scene," a

theme to which I return to in the section entitled “Tikishla School District’s Mission: ‘Amputation and Rehabilitation.’”

The dysfunctional family was a central feature of the Tikishla School District’s “unhealthy Native.” A teacher in one of the villages said, “These parents are horrendous” and the only way the school could help the community change would be “if a teaching couple committed to ten years in the village, have their children there, and show the community an example of a functioning family.” The teacher not only framed a dysfunctional family situation, he also proposed that an outside family, presumably a White family because only 5% of the teachers in Alaska are Alaska Native (McDowell Group, 2001), needs to teach the Alaska Natives families how to live functionally.

The dysfunctional family’s negative effect on the children was a prominent theme of the “unhealthy Native” construct. For example, an administrator explained that the district had discovered that the majority of the students have “low self-esteem” due to dysfunctional families. He described the situation as follows:

You know what we found out about our kids? They have low self-esteem. It’s really bad! Ninety percent (90%) of our kids have low self-esteem. And we think the reason is that their home lives are so f \_ \_ \_ d-up. And they go home and get the s \_ \_ t kicked out of them, emotionally, not physically as much. And then their parents are not role models, I mean they are into drugs and alcohol.

According to this administrator, the students’ “low self esteem” was a direct result of parents’ abusive behaviors, drug and alcohol use, and lack of positive role modeling. As with the central office staff member’s statement regarding the “village scene” referred to previously, the administrator’s response reiterates stereotypes inherent in racist assumptions about Alaska Natives.

Alaska Native parents were also portrayed as barriers to the children's achievement in school because they do not teach their children appropriate social and personal skills necessary for educational success. For example, a teacher in one of the villages explained that the district must teach students "how to treat each other right [because] they haven't been taught them before." Another teacher articulated this view by explaining that many of the Native students "lack enough personal and social skills that on occasion it gets in the way of learning so I've made those my priorities."

As noted previously, the district presented alcohol abuse as a central characteristic of the "unhealthy Native," and related to this theme was the district's focus on children that had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Effect (FAE) and were cognitively unable to succeed in the standards-based system. For example, an administrator explained that in one of the villages many of the children had FAS/FAE; and consequently had the "cognitive ability at 70, 60 or 80" making them "unable to meet the standards." Only one of these students had been medically diagnosed with FAS, but according to this administrator the children were known to have FAS/FAE:

Through teachers and staff's informal observations they have seen their mouths, eyes, behaviors in class; and we know that many of their parents are still alcoholics.

Thus, based on staff members' informal observations of students and their perception of parents, the district had categorically identified and labeled many Alaska Native students with FAS/FAE and intellectually incapable of succeeding academically.

In sum, in the context of the district's successful reputation with standards-based educational reform and the crisis caused by the failure of many Alaska Native students

in that system, the Tikishla School District had focused attention on the “unhealthy Native” as the cause of the crisis. The district’s “unhealthy Native” construct included major psychosocial and sociocultural problems that supposedly existed in epidemic proportions in the Alaska Native villages. The district also highlighted the negative effects these conditions were having on Alaska Native children. Thus, the district had framed the problem of Alaska Native students’ academic failure as the result of a deficient Alaska Native (i.e., “unhealthy Native”) and, in effect, diverted attention from and critique of its standards-based system while maintaining its successful reputation.

#### Tikishla School District’s Mission: “Amputation and Rehabilitation”

We’re trying to Band-Aid them, and I think we’re actually doing more than that now. We’re actually trying to do some amputations and rehabilitation of people and communities to help and support what we’re doing and to help their villages become better places to live.

In response to the district’s “unhealthy Native” construct, as indicated in the administrator’s statement above, the Tikishla School District had undertaken the mission to heal the “unhealthy Native” via radical surgery (i.e., “amputations”) and rehabilitative therapy performed on the Alaska Natives. This medical model included extensive diagnostic procedures followed by a treatment plan that utilized components of the standards-based system as the instruments of “healing.” In this section, I present this healing model by focusing on the district’s diagnostic/profiling program and the City House.

Diagnostic/Profiling. At the time of this study, the Tikishla School District was beginning to implement a diagnostic system consisting of a battery of “objective” tests

that measured each student's intelligence quotient (IQ), academic achievement, emotional quotient (EQ), and learning modalities. The district planned to also incorporate a test that measures students' volition or values, and the results of this test would indicate which students had values congruent or incongruent with the school's values, thus making it easier to target values instruction. The district compiled the results of these tests into comprehensive individual student profiles that would be used to

1. identify which students were capable or incapable of academic achievement;
2. plan differentiated curricula that involved placing students in either the academic or nonacademic track; and
3. explain to parents of academically unsuccessful students why their child would not meet the academic graduation requirements and needed to be placed in the alternative nonacademic track.

The Tikishla School District's official discourse about its diagnostic/profiling program was that it allowed teachers to provide "individual instruction" and deliver a curriculum tailored to each child's needs. In practice, however, the diagnostic/profiling program functioned to support the view that the Alaska Natives' academic failure was a result of their "unhealthiness" and correlating low intellectual capabilities. In effect, the diagnostic/profiling program served as an instrument for promoting the district's "unhealthy Native" construct and diverting attention from the failure of its "no-failure" standards-based system to adequately educate all students academically.

City House: Instrument for “amputation and rehabilitation.” Although the Tikishla School District’s “healing” strategies were implemented through multiple components of its standards-based system, I focus on the role of the district’s City House. The City House, located in an urban neighborhood outside the villages, functioned as a short-term boarding school. The students traveled from the villages throughout the school year to spend from three days to ten months depending on their age and/or position in the district’s performance levels (i.e., grade level). While the Tikishla School District’s students primarily utilized the boarding school, students from other Alaskan school districts also attended it periodically.

The boarding school was an integral part of the district’s standards-based system designed to teach content performance standards with an emphasis on the nonacademic areas of career, personal, and social development (e.g., making eye contact in interpersonal communications). In addition, the boarding school intended to provide the students opportunities to apply performance standards in the academic content areas (e.g., application of reading and writing skills to complete job applications).

On the surface, the City House appears impressive in the sense that students engage in “real life” experiences while learning and applying the district’s standards-based curriculum. However, when analyzing the boarding school contextually within the Tikishla School District’s “unhealthy Native” construct and healing mission, a strikingly different interpretation emerges. In this context the boarding school served as an instrument for amputation (i.e., the removal of Alaska Natives from their families and communities) and rehabilitation (i.e., exposure to and practicing of “healthy” ways of

living) of “unhealthy” Alaska Native children. The amputation/rehabilitation function of the City House was referred to previously in the central office staff member’s explanation that it “pulls them out of a village scene.” And an administrator succinctly articulated this amputation function in the context of his discussion about the students’ “f \_ \_ \_ \_ d-up” homes: “That’s why we do the City House is we get them out of that environment.”

The rehabilitative role of the City House was explained as transforming the unhealthy Native into a functional, healthy individual. An administrator encouraged me to observe the transforming power of the boarding home:

And you [should] watch in this environment, just sit, be a fly on the wall, just observe and observe and you just watch as this transformation occurs with these kids in a matter of days. And it’s remarkable. And it’s sustained because we keep bringing them back and nurturing that.

A district staff member that oversees the domestic aspects of the boarding school described the rehabilitation and transformation that occur in the City House by comparing the students when they arrive at the boarding school and after they have participated in the program. She explained that they enter the boarding school “shy” and “reticent” and resistant to participating in the dining ritual and engaging in interpersonal relationships:

Rarely will [they] eat the first meal because we sit family-style and sometimes the food is unfamiliar or whatever. And by the end of the week they are buds with people from the other side of the state. They will eat anything.

In sum, the City House aimed to remove (i.e., amputation) the “unhealthy” Alaska Native child from a perceived dysfunctional sociocultural village environment, and within only a few days the “unhealthy Native” is transformed (i.e., rehabilitation) into a healthy individual. The end result of this transformation according to the district was as follows:

They know it's okay to meet and greet a new person. You're don't necessarily put the head down. . . . It's given them a lot of self-confidence that they can operate in two different worlds.

Thus, according to the district, the amputation and rehabilitation that occurs via the City House “heals” Alaska Native children of complex sociocultural and psychosocial conditions and enables them to live healthily in the dominant society or villages.

## **Discussion**

### Function of the Tikishla School District's Standards-Based System

The Tikishla School District had developed and was implementing a form of standards-based education promoted as a “no-failure” system. The district's standardized test scores had risen since implementing the reform and this improvement had resulted in a plethora of support and positive recognition. However, beneath the successful image flowed a discourse of concerns regarding students, specifically students from the Alaska Native villages who were failing to progress through the district's system. This situation threatened the validity of the district's standards-based system and its successful reputation because many of these students would likely not graduate according to the district's academic standards or according to the state's graduation criteria.

The district had responded to this problem by framing a deficient/unhealthy Alaska Native as the cause. The solution proposed by the district was to “heal” the Alaska Native children via a systematic diagnosis/profiling program and strategies of “amputation and rehabilitation” executed through the structures and practices of the standards-based system (e.g., City House). In effect, the healing approach functioned to reinforce the district’s “unhealthy Native” construct by framing the Alaska Native student as the agent of his or her own educational failure while simultaneously legitimizing the district’s standards-based system and protecting its successful reputation.

At the time of this study the district staff faced a crucial question: How could they address the issue of failing students in a way that would not threaten the district’s standards-based system and successful image? Admitting that these students were failing academically was not an option for the district because that would undermine their “no-failure” theme. In response, the Tikishla School District was institutionalizing a tracking system that functioned as a dual educational system that allowed the district to identify “incapable” students and place them in a nonacademic track resulting in an alternative diploma. In effect, the district’s response to the students’ academic failure postulated that its “no-failure” standards-based system would fail, as these students would not be provided a comprehensive academic curriculum.

### Recasting the Civilization-Savagism Paradigm

While the preceding findings reveal significant aspects of the Tikishla School District’s standards-based system related to Alaska Native education, the system was not operating in a vacuum. As explained previously, the historical colonial educational approach had been institutionalized in Alaska’s educational system and elements of this

approach likely continued to play out in the district's educational policies and practices. Thus, the Tikishla School District's standards-based system needs to be examined within the sociohistorical context of Alaska Natives' schooling. In this section, I present the Tikishla School District's system through the lens of the civilization-savagism paradigm and argue that the district had recast this paradigm in its "unhealthy Native" construct and ostensible attempts to heal the Alaska Native students.

Unhealthy Native/Inferior Savage. The assumption underlying the civilization-savagism paradigm was that American Indians/Alaska Natives were inferior to Whites. While the Tikishla School District did not explicitly refer to Alaska Natives as inferior, it had constructed an "unhealthy Native" that functioned as the historically inferior "savage." The district supported its "unhealthy Native" construct by referring to multiple sociocultural and psychosocial indicators including alcoholism, drug abuse, and dysfunctional communities and families, as well as using the standards-based system to reinforce this construct (e.g., the diagnostic/profiling system). Evidence exists that Alaska Natives do face aspects of these conditions (e.g., alcoholism), and some Alaska Natives have publicly discussed these issues in a discourse regarding Alaska Natives' psychosocial "unhealthiness" as an effect of colonialism (Napoleon, 1996). However, the pertinent question related to the Tikishla School District context is, What function did these indicators serve in the district's "unhealthy Native" discourse?

Based on my data, the Tikishla School District was utilizing the "unhealthy" indicators to define the Alaska Natives and justify Alaska Native students' academic failure in the standards-based system. Conversely, this situated the Whites in the superior position as indicated in the district's strategies to remove Alaska Native children from their

“unhealthy” villages and immerse them in the “healthy/superior” dominant society (e.g., via the City House). And consistent with the principles of the civilization-savagism paradigm, the district was willing to “help” the unhealthy/inferior Alaska Native progress toward a healthy/civilized life as evidenced by the “healing” strategies embedded in the standards-based system. Thus, the civilization-savagism paradigm’s inferior savage was continuing to play out in the Tikishla School District via the “unhealthy Native” construct and related policies and practices.

As noted above, “unhealthy” is a relatively common descriptor used by some Alaska Natives in a discourse related to the effects of colonialism. However, the district had reframed the unhealthy discourse to position the Alaska Natives in the district as the authors of their own academic failure while simultaneously protecting the district’s standards-based system and successful image. In addition, at a foundational level, the historical civilization-savagism paradigm institutionalized in Alaska’s educational system likely functioned to reinforce and normalize the district’s “unhealthy Native” construct. Thus, a deficient/inferior Alaska Native made sense in the sociohistorical context of Alaska Native schooling; and when the Tikishla School District articulated its “unhealthy Native” construct, the norms of the educational system likely functioned to reinforce the discourse, avert critical analysis, and obscure the negative implications for Alaska Native students.

Civilization-savagism paradigm’s strategies. In the preceding section, I discussed how the civilization-savagism paradigm’s underlying “inferior Native” assumption continued to play out in the Tikishla School District’s “unhealthy Native” construct. In addition, the Tikishla School District’s standards-based system contained policies and

practices that reflected the three strategies used historically to implement the civilization-savagism paradigm: (a) location of the school, (b) comprehensive nonacademic education, and (c) indoctrination in the civilization-savagism paradigm.

The historical function of the Indian/Alaska Native boarding school was to remove Indigenous children from the corrupting influences of uncivilized traditional life and immerse them in the superior culture of Western civilization. While the Tikishla School District's City House was located outside the Alaska Natives' home villages, the location alone does not necessarily imply that it functioned according to the purposes of the historical boarding schools. However, examination of the district's discourse regarding the City House strongly suggests that it served a similar purpose as the district intended to perform "amputations and rehabilitation" on Alaska Native students. The district explained that the City House "pulled them out" of an "unhealthy" sociocultural situation (i.e., amputation) and exposed the Alaska Native to "healthy" ways of living (i.e., rehabilitation). Thus, the City House functioned to remove Alaska Native children from the perceived unhealthy/inferior homes and communities and immerse them in the healthy/superior environment of the dominant society where they could learn to live healthy/civilized lives.

The second strategy of civilization-savagism paradigm was to provide Indian/Alaska Native students a comprehensive educational program that focused on nonacademics that in effect prepared them for underclass positions in the U.S. society. The Tikishla School District's standards-based system displayed this strategy overtly in its emerging dual educational system and related practices. As discussed previously, the district's diagnostic/profiling program would be used to label, sort, and track students that would

result in an alternative diploma for students that do not meet academic graduation requirements. The focus of the emerging nonacademic track and alternative diploma was on “transition skills” specifically addressed through the career, personal, and social development content areas. The district utilized its City House as a primary instrument for transmitting these skills. However, as noted previously, teachers in the villages also focused heavily on teaching personal/social skills to Alaska Native students. Therefore, a comprehensive nonacademic educational program was an integral part of the Tikishla School District’s standards-based system.

The third strategy utilized historically in American Indian/Alaska Native schools was indoctrination in the civilization-savagism paradigm. The Tikishla School District’s “unhealthy Native” construct and healing strategies promoted an implicit but powerful message to Alaska Native students that their homes and communities were inferior to those of dominant society. From this perspective, the logical conclusion was that Alaska Natives could be “healed” by abandoning their attachments to “unhealthy” families and communities and adopting the Tikishla School District’s version of health and success. In effect, this message functioned as an attempt to indoctrinate Alaska Native students in the essence of the *civilization-savagism paradigm* (i.e., the Alaska Natives’ way of life is inferior to that of the dominant society).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The implications for Alaska Natives, research, and policy are significant given the sociohistorical context of schooling in Alaska and the situation in the Tikishla School

District. In this section I discuss implications and make recommendations related to (a) the school as a site of struggle, and (b) the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy.

### School as Site of Struggle

While this research study did not focus on the Alaska Natives' perceptions of and responses to the Tikishla School District standards-based reform, my data suggest that the district likely functioned as a site of struggle for Alaska Native students. Popkewitz (2000) discussed the sovereignty concept of power, a process in which society's dominant groups exercise power over others via educational policies and pedagogy to benefit and exclude different social actors.<sup>5</sup> As an effect, a site of struggle is created in which the excluded or "oppressed" respond to hegemonic strategies with resistance, compliance, and/or adaptation. Lomawaima (1995) presented an example of this perspective in a discussion about how Indigenous students attending U.S. boarding schools "adapted to regimentation and resisted authority in creative ways" (p. 198).

It can be argued that the Tikishla School District had created a site of struggle where Alaska Native students contended with an educational system that exercised its power over Alaska Natives to exclude or marginalize them while benefiting the district. For example, the assumptions, discourses, and practices in the district framed Alaska Native students, families, and communities as unhealthy/inferior in comparison to the supposedly healthy/superior White dominant society. Also, the Alaska Native students were faced with mechanisms that were situating them as the agents of their own academic failure while promoting the district's standards-based system and successful image. In this context, Alaska Native students likely responded in complex ways in order

to understand, resist, modify, and/or comply with the Tikishla School District's assumptions and strategies.

With regards to the school as a site of struggle, future research should examine the Alaska Native students' perceptions of and responses to the district's "unhealthy Native" construct and its standards-based system. In addition to examining the district's effects on Alaska Native students, this line of research could analyze how the Alaska Natives' responses act to disrupt, modify, and/or facilitate the district's discourse and practices. The findings of this research agenda could provide valuable insight into the playing out of a historically constructed paradigm and contemporary power networks in postcolonial educational contexts. These findings could also form the basis for developing alternative educational policies and practices that facilitate Alaska Native students' educational success.

#### Absence of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

While I have addressed multiple aspects about what was occurring in the Tikishla School District, a central question related to implications for Alaska Natives is, What were the Alaska Native students missing in the Tikishla School District's standards-based system? I propose that culturally relevant pedagogy was strikingly absent in the Tikishla School District. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy includes three elements: (a) academic achievement, (b) cultural competence, and (c) sociopolitical criticism. Culturally relevant pedagogy promotes students' academic achievement while simultaneously facilitating their respect for and connection to their cultural identity. Also, culturally relevant pedagogy aims to facilitate students'

critical consciousness for understanding how social inequities are perpetuated in school and society.

My data suggest that the Tikishla School District was not incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy in its standards-based system. For example, according to the district's discourse of concerns, many students from Alaska Native villages were failing academically and the district had low academic expectations for the "unhealthy Native." Also, the Tikishla School District's "unhealthy Native" construct and "healing" mission were not intended to enhance students' connection to and respect for their identity as Alaska Natives. And no evidence suggested that the district's standards-based system aimed to prepare Alaska Native students to critique the sociopolitical context in which the schools operated.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is not the sole answer for resolving all issues or solving all problems related to Alaska Native schooling. However, the situation in the Tikishla School District could serve as a catalyst for creating alternative educational approaches and strategies, and culturally relevant pedagogy presents a compelling alternative with its assumptions relating to academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Thus, school board members, administrators, teachers, and Alaska Natives from the local communities should collaboratively advocate for policies and practices that incorporate the culturally relevant framework. While the initial strategy for developing and implementing culturally relevant education might target the local school district, ultimately systemic, comprehensive change will require Alaska Native and non-Native community members and educators to advocate for state-level support and leadership to address the sociohistorical roots of the educational system and develop

educational policies and practices that facilitate all students' academic success, cultural identities, and critical consciousness.

In conclusion, school as site of struggle and the absence of culturally relevant pedagogy in the Tikishla School District suggest implications for Alaska Natives that stretch beyond the boundaries of this rural school district. As Alaska implements standards-based educational reform statewide, Alaska Native students, parents, and community members are faced with the possibility that historically linked hegemonic assumptions, agendas, and/or effects are continuing to play out in contemporary educational policies and practices. Thus, to address the implications of standards-based reform for Alaska Natives, I propose the following questions to facilitate discussions and guide future research and policymaking:

1. In what ways does the state's standards-based educational reform reflect and/or perpetuate the civilization-savagism paradigm?
2. Does the state's standards-based educational reform function to position the Alaska Native student as the agent of his or her educational failure while legitimizing and/or promoting the reform? If yes, in what ways is this occurring and what are alternative, more effective educational approaches?
3. What are the Alaska Native discourses about schooling that could be utilized to inform, disrupt, and/or change the state's "official" educational discourses, policies, and practices?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tikishla School District is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the people and places indicated in this study.

<sup>2</sup> The actual number of communities included in the district is not revealed to protect the anonymity of the people and places indicated in this study. However, other quantitative data (e.g., number of district staff members and student enrollment) presented in this article are actual numbers.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term *the district* to mean the Tikishla School District's professional staff and documents included as data in this study.

<sup>4</sup> In this article, I am using the term *standards-based education* in reference to the district's system because it was a central element in the Tikishla School District's discourse. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the form or meaning of standards-based education in the Tikishla School District compared to the standards-based model used in other educational arenas or discourses (e.g., the "standards movement"; Thompson, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Popkewitz (2000) also discussed the governmentality concept of power, a process by which systems of reasoning produce knowledge that is utilized by social actors to discipline and regulate themselves. Due to space limitations, I did not utilize the governmentality concept as a theoretical lens in this article. However, the application of this theoretical framework could provide an intriguing and potentially useful analysis of the district's "unhealthy Native" construct.

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