To Walk in Two Worlds—Or More? Challenging a Common Metaphor of Native Education

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The metaphor of teaching students to “walk in two worlds” is frequently used to describe the goals of education for indigenous groups in the United States. Far more than a poetic device, the metaphor runs deep in our collective consciousness and permeates many everyday conversations. In this article, we critically examine five assumptions that lie behind the metaphor. We argue that walking in two worlds not only masks the complexity of choices faced by Native Alaskan and American Indian students, but also dangerously reduces their options.

Leaders of the past, masked,
Moved in rhythm with sounding drums,
Our land was free and unspoiled,
As animals that dwell in the sea.
Harmony reigned among the land, the sea, and my people.
The peace is gone with forgotten dreams.
The gold we seek cannot satisfy.
Stories and songs long to be in my veins,
Yet I am lost. I cannot find the way.
Mournful land touches shrieking sea as my people weep.
Once we danced in the midnight sun,
Found our joy in the land, respected ourselves.
Now those memories are mere whispers.
I ache to love what my mothers loved.
Change has come. Two worlds hold my people.
Will there come a day of return
When my people will know ancestral ways?
Will we see spiritual leaders dancing on mountains?
Will the ancient drums speak to our souls?
Will these things reawake in the hearts of my people?
A hunter waits for a seal and teaches us patience.
My people must learn from both worlds as they collide.

—Etta Bavilla, “My Dreams”

Etta, an 11th grader when she wrote this poem, is from a tiny Yup'ik Eskimo village that faces the Bering Sea. Of some 60 inhabitants there are only one or two elders left in her village who remember the past Etta writes of in her poem. The village is almost entirely English speaking and fraught with the problems of a people that have grown despondent: alcohol and drug abuse are rampant; violence is common. Her village is unusual in that it has a much longer history of contact with Western “civilization” than most villages in that region. For the past two generations, a nearby platinum mine has brought commerce and Kass'at (white people)\(^2\) to the village. Her poem eloquently expresses a dilemma that faces all Yup'ik students sooner or later—how to make sense of the very different social worlds that coexist in their environment.

The communities in the Kuskokwim Delta, as well as the individuals who reside in those communities, hang in a delicate balance, or what might be called a crisis in cultural identity:

> Language shift of any kind ... is an indicator of dislocation. ... Such dislocation is to be expected among intruders, be they immigrants or occupants. After all, they have left their old homes, their familiar places, and, often, their cultural self-sufficiency. ... What, then, must we conclude if we find this same picture among indigenous populations, populations who have not left their old homes, nor their familiar places, nor the territorial bases of their cultural integrity and continuity? What we must conclude ... is extremely great dislocation: the dislocation of conquest, of genocide, of massive population resettlement such that locals are swamped out, engulfed, deracinated and decimated by intruders, be they conquerors or settlers. [Fishman 1985b:66]

The Yup'ik situation is similar to a number of others in which an indigenous minority is dominated by a Western or colonial power. For the Quechua minority in Peru (Hornberger 1989), the Australian aborigines (Welch 1988), and the Inuit in Greenland (Goldbach and Winter-Jensen 1988), the cost of Western dominance has been so high that efforts at language and cultural maintenance come almost too late. For many American Indian tribes in the contiguous United States, it is already too late; one cannot maintain what has already died, although one can attempt resuscitation.

Yet other experiences challenge the bleak pattern of indigenous minority language and cultural survival and may offer models for those who are working to preserve and maintain native languages and cultures. One of these is the revitalized Maori language in New Zealand. In the 1960s, due to the promotion of English in preschool and at home, Maori parents stopped speaking their native language to their children. As a result, by the late 1970s, the language was on the verge of extinction until a movement to revitalize it swept the country in the 1980s. This surge of interest in Maori led to the development of kohunga reos, or language nests, which are “Maori language preschool groups” taught by older Maoris, fluent in their native tongue. Unique to these groups is their inclusion of the mothers, who are primary English speakers. In
addition to learning the language themselves, these parents also gain exposure to valuable child-rearing skills (Shafer 1988; Spolsky 1989).

Another hopeful note is the increased use of Navajo literacy for indigenous purposes. According to Spolsky and Irvine (1982), literacy in vernacular languages is most likely to catch on and spread if there are indigenous uses for that literacy. In an ethnographic study of the uses of Navajo and English literacy, McLaughlin found that Navajo script is indeed being used for a variety of indigenous functions, including "letters, journals, lists, and notes for intrapersonal, interpersonal, representational, and memory-supportive purposes. That any functions existed in home settings whatsoever was a major finding of this project," since the earlier predictions of Spolsky and Irvine were that literacy in Navajo would be limited to school and church domains (McLaughlin 1989:278).

These studies of efforts to maintain or revitalize indigenous languages are instructive. They offer both hope and cautionary advice to the Yup'ik people in their own efforts. One of the most salient features of situations in which indigenous languages and cultures have survived is the existence of special domains, such as church activities, in which only that language is spoken. The separate domains (the native-language domain and the dominant language domain) appear to facilitate language and, by extension, cultural maintenance (Fishman 1985a).

Perhaps it is the subliminal awareness of such domains that makes the metaphor of "walking in two worlds" so appealing. The metaphor is frequently used to describe the goals of education in villages such as Etta’s and in the larger context of educational programs for indigenous groups. It surfaces when teachers are asked to describe their work, when meetings are held about native education, when keynote speakers at conferences on native education address their audiences, when native writers describe their people's dilemmas, and even when school boards write policies regarding bilingual education. One such policy states, "The ... bilingual program will assist children to develop the bilingual/bicultural skills necessary to participate in and partake of the best of two worlds." Statements and questions such as "We are at a stage now of both cultures," "I try to teach them to walk in both worlds," "Which side do we face?" and Etta’s powerful statement, "My people must learn from both worlds as they collide" also exemplify the dualistic, polarized imagery pervading dialogue about native education and identity.

The metaphor of walking in two worlds sets up a likeness between being bilingual or bicultural and walking comfortably in two very different places. The somewhat intangible notion of different cultural and linguistic repertoires is made more comprehensible through metaphorical reference to a physical process (walking) taking place in two distinct physical locations (two worlds). However, "one of the interesting aspects of metaphor is that it always produces this kind of one-sided
insight. In highlighting certain interpretations it tends to force others into a background role” (Morgan 1986:13).

When a metaphor is as pervasive as this one, it is easy to take it for granted. In an unconscious way, the metaphor shapes how people perceive their own lives and those of others (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Perhaps it was our status as outsiders in southwestern Alaska that enabled us to take a different perspective about walking in two worlds. We went to the area in 1989 at the invitation of one of the local school boards to conduct a study of a bilingual program. During the 6-month study, we visited 22 Yup’ik Eskimo villages and spent time in the hub town of the region (Henze et al. 1990). This article considers some of the findings from that study in light of what we know about metaphors in everyday life. Although we initially accepted the metaphor as a signifying device for concepts that might be difficult to express otherwise, closer study led us to view it more critically. We argue here that the two worlds metaphor does not do justice to the complexity of choices facing native Alaskan and Indian students, and in fact it may dangerously reduce their options.

Assumptions About Cultural Identity

A metaphor in common usage can reveal a great deal about the assumptions that people make. Once we understand the underlying assumptions a metaphor carries with it, we are in a better position to examine these assumptions (and the metaphor) critically. We need to ask ourselves how well the metaphor does its job. Does it make an abstract concept more comprehensible? Do the assumptions inherent in the metaphor “fit” our experience? What may be overlooked or de-emphasized when we accept the metaphor? In the following sections, we look critically at five assumptions that underlie the metaphor of walking in two worlds.

Assumption #1: Cultures exhibit internal uniformity

Walking in two worlds assumes that two distinct, readily identifiable worlds exist, and that the worlds are internally uniform. Our experience in the Kuskokwim Delta suggested that this was far from true. Rather, an extremely complex cultural shift was underway, making it difficult to see coherence in either Yup’ik culture or Western culture. A great deal of cultural and linguistic variation characterized the region, making the idealized task of walking in two worlds confusing at best, and dangerously reductive at worst.

One way to grasp the complexity of a cultural shift is to look at the language situation, since language is one of the more salient carriers of culture. In 1980 there were approximately 18,000 Yup’ik people in Alaska. About 14,000 of them spoke Central Yup’ik^3 (from here on referred to as Yup’ik) as their first language. The current population has
grown by approximately 2000, but the number of speakers has dropped by about the same number (Jacobson, personal communication, 1992). Yup’ik is still by far “the most prominent of Alaska’s native languages, both in terms of the size of its population and the number of its speakers” (Krauss 1980:45). In most of the villages that we visited, all three living generations spoke the native language, and most of the children entering kindergarten were designated as Lau category A or B, meaning that they spoke little to no English. One Yup’ik informant explained the relative strength of Yup’ik as follows: “We were one of the last areas of the state to come into contact with western culture—much later than the rest of Alaska. In the late 1800s Moravian missionaries came, but few white people actually came to the villages in this area until the 1930s or later.”

The relative strength of the Yup’ik language in the Kuskokwim Delta masks its internal variation. At the time of the study there were four communities, including Etta’s, where English was the dominant language, and as many as five or more villages that were in a transitional state, with more and more children entering school speaking both English and Yup’ik, or a mixture of the two. This mixing of languages was cause for much despair among some of the elders and many teachers. Some of the teachers even claimed the children were “not speaking any language.” Although perceptions of exactly what was happening varied, it was clear that a language shift was well underway in the Kuskokwim Delta.

Most people in the Delta felt this shift occurred because parents were speaking more English to their children and because cable television had recently arrived in village homes. In discussing the education of minority cultures, Grant states, “Parents who have accepted the view of their own language as a handicap have often avoided speaking it to their children, using the majority language instead. But their own command of it may be limited, thus giving their children a stunted language base” (1988:158). Although this may indeed account for some of the perceived language problems of children in the Delta, such statements may also add fuel to the tendency of white educators to blame Yup’ik parents for the students’ poor levels of achievement in school.

Within Central Yup’ik there are at least two, and possibly more, varieties. The most prevalent is the variety spoken in the tundra villages, along the Kuskokwim River, and in the coastal villages. A different variety, known as Cup’ik, is the ancestral language in the village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island. In addition to these two divergent forms, there were said to be other, less divergent dialects, such as that spoken by Nelson Islanders. Yup’ik also exhibits strong generational differences. The language spoken by elders contains vocabulary and word forms that are in some cases quite different from those used by the younger generation.

In addition to the different varieties of Yup’ik, at least two varieties of English are used. One is “standard” English, spoken by most of the
people who come from the "Lower 48" to live and work in Alaska. Included in this speech community are most of the Caucasian teachers, principals, and district staff. Of course, attaching the term standard to the speech of all these people is a simplification, for they in fact speak several varieties of English that reflect regional patterns from many parts of the United States. The other is "village English," the language of the non-Yup’ik-speaking villages and of many residents of the hub town. Also known as “Our Heritage English” (Demientieff 1992), or “Yup’ik influenced English” (Jacobson 1984), it is primarily an oral language, and although it exhibits as much structure and capacity to convey ideas as standard English, or any other fully developed language, it does not enjoy the same status as standard English or even traditional Yup’ik.

The orthographies used to write Yup’ik also reflect considerable variation. The first orthographies were developed by religious groups in the late 1800s—Moravians, Russian Orthodox, and Catholics. Many Yup’ik speakers who had converted to these religions learned to read and write in the orthographies developed by the missionaries. In the late 1960s, linguists at the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, began working on what was to be the fourth writing system for Yup’ik. Developed because earlier systems were inconsistent in sound-letter correspondences and because some felt that a more linguistically correct system was needed, the new orthography became the official version of written Yup’ik for use in the schools around 1970.

Although the University of Alaska orthography has increased Yup’ik literacy through the encouragement of the schools, it has also placed families in a painful period of transition between the two systems. Many excellent written materials have been developed for the schools, yet because the older generations learned to read in the earlier missionary-developed orthographies, the different generations reported having difficulty reading one another’s materials. Students could not read the Bible to aging parents or grandparents, who in turn were unable to help children with their reading and writing homework. The change of orthography is one of many ways in which ties between younger and older generations have been eroded.

Cultural practices in the villages followed the patterns of language variation. In one of the coastal villages we visited, for example, Yup’ik traditions still had a firm grip on the lives of the students. As one informant told us, “We still have seal parties every year. Whenever your son gets his first seal, the parents have to give a seal party. The mother has to give goodies—cans of fruit, candy, gum, hip boots, everything, to other women. We had thirty seal parties in 1988!” Contributing to the continuity of traditional life was the respect given to elders: “The village depends on our elders instead of the so-called educated leaders. We ask our elders first, even though they weren’t educated in white society.” There were other signs of cultural strength as well: the village economy was good because of the successful fishing industry; the tribal council
had banned liquor importation and was enforcing the ban by searching everyone who entered the village; and many of the people we spoke with viewed English as necessary, but not powerful enough to destroy the Yup’ik way of life.

A very effective and well-liked Yup’ik teacher in the school, whose deceased father had been among the most respected village elders, played a central role in fostering an active participation in, and appreciation of, the more traditional Yup’ik way of life. He kept the culture alive for his students, involving them in activities from physical competitions traditionally practiced by their ancestors, now dubbed the “Eskimo Olympics,” to study of the subtleties of climatic changes and navigation along the dangerous waters of the Bering Sea. “I’m teaching traditional compass use. We don’t use a modern compass. If you know nature, you can find your way home even if you can’t see a thing. Most of the kids rely on artificial compasses too much.” (Note the term artificial used to refer to the compasses most Westerners consider “real.”)

Western influences had nonetheless brought great changes to this village. From the questionable values espoused through the recent arrival of cable television to the daily imbuing of values nurtured by Caucasian teachers in the school, the children were receiving mixed messages. And despite the strict “no liquor” policy, enforced as a result of an alcohol-related suicide by a young man in the village, alcohol and drugs did, on occasion, get in.

In villages that lie closer to the hub town or have had a longer history of contact with Westerners, the consumerism and seeming glamour of Western culture was much more damaging. As a white teacher in one of these villages put it,

There’s a lot of hypocrisy . . . drugs, alcohol—’til that’s cleaned up, the whole thing won’t work. It reaches everyone; even the 7th and 8th graders get drunk or high a couple of times a week . . . I’m like a cog in a wheel perpetuating this farce. I think our job is meaningless. I try, but maybe I only reach them once or twice.

Although English had not yet become the dominant language, students in these transitional villages tended to be weak in Yup’ik, according to their elders. The use of village English was more and more common, although it was not viewed as having any cultural or, for that matter, linguistic value.

Finally, there were those communities like Etta’s where the ancestral language was almost extinct. In some cases, the severity of this loss was beginning to be recognized. One village, having almost lost the native language, had begun to hold on to its cultural heritage with enthusiasm and pride. A center for Eskimo crafts, the village was renowned for the quality of its mask making and basketry, and children developed pride and respect for the artistry required to produce such goods. The cultural
and historical meaning of these items was kept alive, both orally and in writing. Residents of some other villages viewed the loss in individual terms, referring to students who "don't behave like they used to," while others equated the individual losses to the broader disappearance of the language.

Bearing this cultural and linguistic variation in mind, let us return to the metaphor of walking in two worlds. If these worlds are taken to represent two cultures (Yup'ik and Western), then we have to ask ourselves, Which Yup'ik culture? Which Western culture? And how do students who are learning to walk in two worlds know when they have accomplished their task?

Assumption #2: Everyone means the same thing by walking in two worlds

When we first began considering the metaphor of walking in two worlds, we thought of it as having one fixed meaning. It seemed to represent the ideal of a bicultural individual, a person who is securely rooted in his or her culture of origin but who also functions with confidence in another culture. At a workshop at the Alaska State Bilingual Conference in 1991, we tested this assumption by asking the 60 participants (more than half of whom were Native Alaskans) what they thought the metaphor meant. In particular, what are the two worlds?

Their answers were surprisingly varied, revealing that the metaphor means different things to different individuals (see Table 1). For instance, some of the pairs of responses emphasize a change over time (e.g., the world a child was born in versus the world the person lives in today), whereas others emphasize a cultural difference (e.g., native culture versus Western culture). Some are very specific (e.g., Eskimo food versus Western food), and others are quite abstract (e.g., specific cultures versus a generic U.S. culture).

On the other hand, the answers listed under World A do share certain family resemblances, as do the elements under World B. The native or the village culture is, in most instances, associated with an older life-style, just as Western cultures tend to be associated more with "modern" life or the values of youth. In one instance, however, the answers could just as well have been reversed. "The way you'd like the world to be" could just as easily be placed under World B.

The exercise is a good example of the interplay between shared understandings and different interpretations. The two worlds metaphor tends to become a "buzz word" for a number of different, although often related, meanings. The goal implied in the metaphor—to achieve success in two worlds—becomes idealized, unreachable. The reality of many diverse worlds coalesces to become two idealized worlds, and the implicit assumption that it is possible to "walk" in both sets students up for failure. Ironically, the metaphor becomes a barrier rather than a model of how to live in the world today.
Table 1. What Do the “Two Worlds” Refer To?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World A</th>
<th>World B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The world a child was born in</td>
<td>The world the person lives in today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The village world</td>
<td>The school or Kass’aq world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The values of the older generation</td>
<td>The values of youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The positive things in village life—e.g., Yup’ik language, parents, grandparents, clothing</td>
<td>The positive things in American life—technologies such as telephone, television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native culture</td>
<td>Western culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural communities</td>
<td>National community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic culture</td>
<td>Dominant culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eskimo food</td>
<td>Western food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient culture</td>
<td>Modern culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority culture</td>
<td>Majority culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way you’d like the world to be</td>
<td>The way the world is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific cultures</td>
<td>Generic culture of U.S. (the one we teach in school)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assumption #3: Children in the region have available to them two cultural worlds, which, although different, can be merged in an individual who is bilingual and bicultural.

This assumption, captured in the metaphor of walking in two worlds, oversimplifies the issue in several ways. First, it overlooks the tremendous internal conflict that can ensue when an individual tries to live according to two value systems that in some ways contradict each other. For example, the traditional Yup’ik way was to do good work without seeking or expecting rewards. The good work or the help given to another person was believed to come from a spiritual source, not from the person, and thus it was inappropriate to take credit for something that a spirit was actually responsible for. This contrasts starkly with the school’s practice of rewarding students as a source of motivation. As a Yup’ik elder pointed out,

In the past, there’s a saying that if you help someone, don’t ask for a reward because someone “up there” will help them. If someone tries to reward you, don’t accept it. But nowadays, the younger generation cannot help the needy without a reward because there’s so many rewards given in school. Every time they do something good. In our culture, that’s a no-no.

Second, the metaphor assumes that students actually have available to them role models and environments that are (1) traditionally Yup’ik and (2) urban and Western. In fact, however, the traditional Yup’ik
environment was fading quickly as elders in the villages passed away, and the second had not really arrived in the Delta. What students heard and saw of Western culture in the villages was a distorted, decontextualized part of the larger package. Both worlds were unavailable to students for practice and accommodation.

You go to the village, and because of TV, children have a picture of the Lower 48 as fast cars, hot women and massive consumption of differing kinds, so they—they have more wants that there’s no way to fulfill at the village level. And on the other hand, they have the old people in the village telling them, “The way that we’ve lived for a long time is a good way. You should learn the way. You should know the way.” Sure they’re caught betwixt and between. [Hare 1990]

Finally, the metaphor of two worlds reduces to two the number of worlds one can walk in. It gives no validity to the other world (or worlds) that many Yup’ik people are actually walking in right now—a world that is not just a transitional stage, but one that has a culture, language, and life of its own.

The visible pieces of this identity are a bit like the exposed peaks of a newly formed yet still submerged island, peaks located distantly enough from one another that it is easy to assume there is no coherent whole connecting them underneath. One of those peaks is village English. Spoken in husky voices even by children, the language holds on to vowel sounds and voiced consonants a bit longer than standard English does, elongating the rhythms in a way that we found pleasant to listen to. The syntax and grammar are heavily influenced by Yup’ik (Jacobson 1984). Outsiders typically consider village English to be a diminished form of English, and students who speak it are not encouraged to use it in writing for school, even in prewriting or process approaches. Two Caucasian teachers characterized it pejoratively:

It’s a misuse of English syntax and intonation with English words as in “He do me. Where it is? or What time it is?” It has a misuse of verb tenses and pronouns. “He let me fall” versus “He made me fall.” It reverses the order of adjectives as in “red, big” instead of “big, red.” And idioms are mixed up—“blue red and white” instead of “red, white and blue.”

At the community college, we spoke to a teacher and long time resident of the area who, although Caucasian, speaks both village and standard English. “To me village English is like a third language. . . . It reflects Yup’ik more than English. . . . You get a lot of your identity from your language. . . . I try to teach standard English as a third language, but students don’t like to be told that they speak a different variety.”

Although village English certainly had a limited geographic use compared to standard English, it did not appear that the function it did serve—to communicate in English dominant villages and in the hub towns of the region—was acknowledged or celebrated in any
public way. As with other varieties of English spoken by minorities, its value as a means of communication was largely ignored (see, e.g., Sontag 1992).

There were other aspects to this third identity. Among these were the love of snow machines (not dog teams and sleds as in the old days) and the enjoyment of basketball. “Basketball is said to be a big motivator. They [students] do better during basketball season because if their grades are poor they can’t play basketball.” Another prominent part of modern Yup’ik identity was religion. Whether Moravian, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, or Covenant, many Yup’ik people managed to blend traditional spirituality with Christian doctrines, mapping new religions onto existing belief systems in unique ways. In some instances, the values were quite compatible, and in others, they were not. (For an interesting discussion of the way traditional spirituality influenced the conversion process, see Fienup-Riordan 1990.)

Together with village English, these indicators formed part of an identity that no one really talked about except in derogatory terms. Several Caucasian teachers in the hub town claimed that the high school was “not a Yup’ik school” because the dominant language of the students was English (even though 75 percent of the student body was of Yup’ik ethnicity). The students themselves did not have the vocabulary to talk about their ethnic identity. One Yup’ik teacher told us, “I ask the kids, ‘Are you Yup’ik or not?’ They reply ‘None.’” It was no wonder that students had “self-esteem” problems, when the culture many of them knew best had no name or identity.

The third assumption, then, is mistaken in several ways. First, it overlooks the conflict students experience when they try to embrace value systems that may contradict one another. Second, it assumes that both traditional Yup’ik and urban Western environments are available in the villages, when in fact many students have little access to either. And finally, by assuming that no more than two worlds exist in students’ lives, it ignores the richness and vitality (as well as the problems and pain) of the worlds in which students actually live.

Assumption #4: Children and young adults are able to pursue the “best” of both worlds

Another variation of the two worlds metaphor is the often-heard wish that students acquire the “best of both worlds.” Assuming for the moment that there are two distinct worlds, how should children acquire the best of both?

For most people, it takes all of childhood and adolescence to master the rudiments of the subculture enough to function as competent adults. To know how to choose what is “best” in a culture requires knowledge of the fullest array of what that culture offers. How can children be expected to choose what is best in a culture when they have not had time to be deeply immersed in either culture? We were told that to become a
great marine mammal hunter (which, some might say, exemplifies one of the best practices of traditional Yup'ik culture), one would have to spend six days a week on ice—hardly the sort of schedule that enables one to also pursue an academic education.

Some of the informants we spoke with suggested that an immersion approach to education might solve this problem. Rather than expecting students to master two systems at once, the school system and the Yup’ik elders should devise a plan for students to spend a substantial amount of time (months or years) immersed in and learning Yup’ik ways of life without the interference of Western schooling. At another time, they should be immersed in academic schooling, possibly in an urban setting far from the village, but with the necessary support systems in place. A pilot program along these lines was in fact initiated recently.

If students are to take the best of both worlds, this certainly offers them a chance at success. The current system makes it almost impossible. However, there are no easy solutions. Although the immersion idea makes sense in terms of exposing students to a coherent system and giving them plenty of practice, it has other problems. Sending students away from their families and homes for extended periods of time, if not handled well, could deprive these students of the kind of parenting many of their parents lost when they were forced to attend boarding schools away from their villages. Although immersion can teach children to function in two worlds, it also can make neither world feel like home.

Assumption #5: The school can help students mediate between traditional Yup’ik and Western culture

This assumption is captured in the bilingual policy, mentioned earlier, that states that the school should help children “participate and partake of the best of two worlds.” As the numerous contradictions we have raised show, however, a school system that is strongly based in one culture cannot really help students mediate. A further difficulty is that, having been cast in the implicit role of mediator, the school serves to reify the simplistic notion of two worlds and to alleviate others (such as parents and other community members) of the responsibility for helping students mediate among the complex worlds that surround them. Even if we overlook any conscious intent on the part of the schools to dominate the villages and assimilate the children into the “mainstream,” we must still consider size and institutional power. “Pierre Trudeau, while Prime Minister of Canada, likened sharing a continent with the USA to being in bed with an elephant; it may bear you no ill will, but if it rolls over in the night you get crushed all the same” (Grant 1988:160). The relationship of the school district to the village is similar.

To help students participate and partake of the best of two cultures, the school would need to demonstrate clearly that it values the language and culture of both worlds. Yet a deep ambivalence pervaded many of
the school system's dealings with language and cultural issues. The way teachers interpreted the goals of the bilingual program was a case in point. Many believed that the primary goal of the bilingual program was to maintain the Yup'ik language, yet the objective of the transitional model as it is defined in the federal and state departments of education is to move children out of the native language and into English as quickly as possible. Table 2 shows the breakdown of responses from a questionnaire we administered during the study.

Ambivalence was illustrated as well by the mixed messages parents had received over the years regarding which language to speak to their children. Many members of the generation who are now parents spent their high school years in the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, where they were actively and often painfully discouraged from speaking their native language. To spare their children this experience, many made a conscious decision to speak English at home, or at least a combination of Yup'ik and English. This decision was reinforced by educators in the early and mid-1960s. A Yup'ik instructor at the local community college noted, "Back when parents were told to speak only English to their kids, they did that but had very limited vocabulary in English. With limited vocabulary, children aren't going to learn that much." Now, however, parents are hearing that they should speak Yup'ik to their children. This change has caused some parents to mistrust the advice of educators. A Yup'ik parent voiced this mistrust at a school board meeting: "First I was told one thing, then another. If the advice changes every five or ten years, why should I listen?" If educators cannot be consistent with their information, it seems many parents would rather not hear it.

Even in Yup'ik classes, where Yup'ik language is the instructional content, there was evidence of ambivalence. We observed a class in a traditional Yup'ik-speaking village where the teacher routinely gave instructions and controlled the social participation structure through the use of English (e.g., "OK, anyone, one more?" "Oops, not too fast," "Let's hear from this table"). Although it was a class in Yup'ik language, the teacher's use of English for the management of classroom participation sent an ambiguous message, as if the teacher were saying: "We're here to study Yup'ik, but we're going to use English to manage the social aspects of class."

Another area of ambiguity was evident in hiring policies and practices. Principals and teachers had to be certified, resulting in the schools being staffed primarily by non-Yup'iks from the "Lower 48." Thus, not only were they ethnically different from the children, but they also were not from the state of Alaska. Although there were a few Yup'ik certified teachers, most native people working in the schools functioned as either associate teachers (those with some college), aides, or maintenance workers. These staff members and a few of the young village leaders were the only true bilingual and bicultural models for the children. It is
Table 2.
Percentage of Non-Yup'ik and Yup'ik Respondents Mentioning Select Bilingual Program Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Teacher Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Yup'ik (n = 59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain Yup'ik language</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain Yup'ik culture</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach English as a second language</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide equitable access to curriculum</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach Yup'ik as a second language</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ Yup'ik speakers from the villages</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A great irony that they learned to walk in two worlds by leaving the village for high school and being punished for speaking their native language.

None of the school principals or the non-Yup'ik certified staff could claim fluency in Yup'ik. That the Caucasian faculty, for the most part, walked only in one world confused the message that school policy aspired to convey and teach. It appeared that Yup'ik people were expected to walk in two worlds, but Caucasians did not need, want, or have to. This double standard had the potential to diminish the value of bilingualism and biculturalism in the eyes of the students.

Ambivalence was reflected in the policy-making groups as well. If they did not truly support bilingualism in the school, they could not meet the district’s goals. The following dialogue at an advisory school board meeting illustrates the division. Here, three school board members discuss plans for a survey of community members regarding the institution of more Yup’ik classes:

Person A: One question I’d like to see included, if the parent requests it, can their child be pulled out?

Person B: Then we should ask if the kids can be pulled out of social studies, spelling, or anything else.

Person C: They’re different.

Person B: In my opinion, they’re not.

Much of the ambivalence is structured into the system at levels far beyond the control or conscious manipulation of the school or the local district. Nonetheless, we believe that the school and its instructors can make a difference. Erickson makes a similar argument in his critique of
John Ogbu's "perceived labor market" explanation of minority student failure:

It appears to presume . . . an organic or mechanical view of society in which there are tight and invariant causal connections across subsystems so that the general social structure drives the actions, perceptions, and sentiments of particular actors in local scenes of action. In such a view, there is no room for human agency. Such a social theory, when applied to education, implies that neither the domestic minority students nor their teachers can do anything positive together educationally. [Erickson 1987:343]

As the schools continue to make the curriculum reflect the local culture, the "cautionary tales" of a study in a Yup'ik village near Bristol Bay must be kept in mind. Simply reflecting the local culture in the curriculum is not enough if it is still the school that determines that curriculum. In one project designed to develop culturally relevant curriculum, a group of students and their teacher decided to study subsistence. To do so they designed a survey that the students would give to community members. When word of the survey got out, however, community members were warned not to complete it. The elders felt it was not the school's place to teach the traditional culture to students. If the school taught traditional culture, what would be left for the community to teach its children (Lipka 1989)?

The school, then, is seriously compromised when it takes on, implicitly or explicitly, the role of mediator between traditional Yup'ik and Western culture. The school is biased by its very history as a Western institution. In our study, we found many instances of ambivalence in the school's attempts to promote Yup'ik language and culture. To expect the school and the layers of authority that govern the school to perform a mediating role is to invite bias and dilute the effects of cultural or language maintenance projects. The communities that really want to revitalize their language and culture would do better to turn to their own members: the parents of the children now in school. The school can and should do its part to be supportive, but the limitations of that part must be recognized.

Conclusion: An Emerging Yet Unacknowledged Identity

This article has posed a number of challenges to the metaphor of walking in two worlds. To summarize, we see an inherent conflict in asking students to embrace two worlds whose value systems may be contradictory. To add metaphor to metaphor, picture an individual struggling to walk with one foot on one side of a river bank and the other foot on the other side, with a raging torrent in the middle. It would be an impossible task to continue walking without being thrown off balance by the psychological and physical force of the torrent. This is the image that comes to our minds when we consider what the metaphor asks students to do.
Even if the elusive biculturalism that is sought did not produce such conflict, it is somewhat unrealistic these days to expect students in the Kuskokwim Delta to be fully skilled and knowledgeable in the traditional Yup'ik world, just as it is unrealistic to expect them to feel comfortable in an urban Western environment.

Alaskan native teenagers come to see the acquisition of Western written literacy as a kind of metaphoric adoption of a new ethnic group identity. To become literate in school terms would be to disaffiliate symbolically from their parents and other members of the Alaskan native village, a few of whom are "lit"erate" in traditional knowledge and skill, such as that involved in hunting, and many of whom are marginally literate in school-like practices of literacy. Caught in ambivalence between multiple cultural worlds, Alaskan native youth resist adopting the complete system of school-defined literacy, and then suffer the consequences of marginal acquisition. They do not belong fully to the old ways or the new. [Erickson 1984:539]

Beyond the lack of realism and the conflict inherent in the notion of walking in two worlds, we believe an even deeper issue confounds and confuses the Yup'ik students of today. In the Kuskokwim Delta, we saw and heard evidence of a third cultural world that is not acknowledged either in the school's bilingual program or in the words that local people use to describe themselves and their goals. Our brief time in the region has convinced us that present-day forms of Yup'ik culture need to be better understood and valued along with more traditional forms. Otherwise, many students will continue to be denied a firm sense of cultural identity.

"Challenging a common metaphor" is really a metaphor in itself, for we do not expect the metaphor to respond. Rather, we hope to reach users of the metaphor. It is doubtful that the metaphor will die out or be replaced, but for the many people who continue to use it, we hope this article will stimulate discussion of, and reflection on, the metaphor and its implications. Although we have focused on the Yup'ik situation, the metaphor and the reductionism that it encourages are far more widespread. The goals of schooling for other indigenous groups, in the United States and in other countries, are expressed in similar, if not the same, words. As we have shown, the language used to express these goals, although seemingly benign, is a powerful force shaping people's expectations of students and their view of the worlds around them. When a metaphor such as walking in two worlds reduces and distorts the options of young people, their future is damaged, and language, although not the only cause, is part of the systematic political and social inequity that keeps them in a powerless position.

Etta Bavilla asks in her poem, "Will there come a day of return when my people will know ancestral ways?" Sadly, we do not think so. But we do believe that if communities begin to forge a new, strong sense of their cultural identity that includes knowing ancestral ways and valuing
current ones, Yup'ik and other indigenous students will have a chance to succeed in many worlds.

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Notes

Acknowledgments. We wish to acknowledge the other two members of the original research team, Kate Regan and Michael Power, for their valuable contributions during the study that led to this article. We also want to thank Sau Lim Tsang and the entire staff at ARC Associates, as well as the school board of the district where this study was carried out. Earlier versions of the article were presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, December 2, 1990, New Orleans; the Bilingual Multicultural Education Equity Conference, February 7, 1991, Anchorage; the American Indian Institute, April 5, 1991, San Francisco; and the Bilingual Bicultural Conference, April 9–10, 1992, St. Mary’s, Alaska. We received valuable feedback at each of these conferences.

1. This poem was previously published in Writing From Alaska’s Schools (Rude 1990). It is reprinted with permission.

2. Russians were the first white people to have contact with Yup’ik Eskimos; the singular Kass’aq and plural Kass’at are transliterated from the term Cossack and applied generally to all Caucasians.

3. The Central Yup’ik language, spoken on the Kuskokwim Delta, is part of the Eskimo/Aleut family of languages, which includes Aleut, Alutiq, Central Yup’ik, Siberian Yup’ik, and Inupiaq. Although they have much in common, these languages are not mutually intelligible. Speakers of Central Yup’ik cannot, for instance, understand Siberian Yup’ik without some prior exposure to it (Jacobson 1984).

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