
Philosophy and the Ethics of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education: A Normative Case Study

B. B. North

Teachers College, Columbia University

While working on this article, I feel a lot of responsibility; in the face of sounding sentimental, I write this because it is the story of my kin, and I want to be of service.

Indigenous people and the education of indigenous people are not delegated or isolated to the past. Rather, what this matter concerns is an on-going lived experience—and here, amongst other people, I have my family, friends, and relatives in mind. Nevertheless, many indigenous students in Alaska and elsewhere systematically struggle in an unjust way with the education passed down to them, and they are in need of something different. Accordingly, the work that I call for here can positively impact those students.

This article focuses on Public Alaskan Indigenous Education (because it is the indigenous culture that I know best, and consequently the educational system that I can have the greatest impact on). Presumably some of what is said here can carry over to other indigenous peoples; however, for ease and clarity's sake, this article will primarily concern itself with Alaskan indigenous cultures (though other cultures will be mentioned when necessary).¹ When needed, I attempt to speak in

generalizations when referring to specific locations within Alaska. That is, I attempt to keep these rural communities anonymous as much as possible, because it is not my intention to point fingers at any specific locations within Alaska. Rather, this paper will reflect on the system of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education at large.

With this heavy feeling of responsibility, it is important to get the facts correct, so throughout this paper I stick to what I know to be true, cite resources that help fill in some of the details, and argue for my thesis—all the while being open to further discussion. There is a lot to unpack here, and some things will be left out. This is not to say that what will be missing from my analysis is unimportant, but rather that the whole story cannot be told.

With that said, this paper is an attempt to add to the telling of the story, or rather it aims to illuminate some aspects of the story from a particular inside vantage point with a critical and reflective eye. It is all too easy for indigenous education to slip by within the margins of our shared global society. Put another way, the social and educational issues of Alaskan indigenous communities, like their counterparts on reservations in the contiguous United States or elsewhere, are rarely observed—if visible at all. Accordingly, being part of the global conversation is a major step in the right direction, so I sincerely appreciate this present engagement. Furthermore, it is my hope that more of the story will be filled out in future work.

Public Alaskan Indigenous Education refers to the (past, present, and future) educational systems aimed at providing schooling to rural areas in Alaska. These remote and rural communities, often referred to as “bush

¹ It is important to remember that North American indigenous cultures pre-date the border between Alaska and Canada—illustrating the superficial demarcation of the “Alaskan indigenous” or “indigenous Canadian”

respective monikers, but for ease of discussion this paper will focus on Alaska. Throughout the paper, please read “indigenous students” or such corollaries as “*Alaskan*” indigenous, if not otherwise indicated.

communities” or villages, are differentiated from the school systems that exist in the three major urban areas of Alaska (viz. Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau) and from other rural Alaskan areas that are connected to each other by the road and ferry systems (limited as those transportation systems might be).

In these other more urban or “connected” areas, there exists a smaller percentage of indigenous students, and importantly, greater availability of daily resources and easier access to medical, legal, and educational institutions. Accordingly, the main considerations of this paper are the educational aims, practices, and policies of remote villages, because these distant communities are located geographically, economically, and politically on the peripheries of western culture.

Though the state and federal governments are nominally responsible for these students, there exists an overwhelming lack of educational achievement at these boundaries of the American educational system.² Somewhat relatedly, the full moral rewards of schooling, and education in general, are not being accessed by Alaskan indigenous students as compared to other demographics. To be specific, indigenous students are not being adequately inducted into a

wider system of democracy—namely, civic and political leadership—and there exists disproportionately high rates of psychological distress and health disparities in such areas.³

This article illuminates rural Alaska as a normative case study.⁴ It argues that Public Alaskan Indigenous Education can and should serve as a standard case in educational ethics, and that philosophy should be explicitly endorsed as an educational aim in rural Alaska. This is a calling upon the ethical responsibilities of all who

work in the field of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, and a summons to other practitioners in the wider field of philosophy and education.

In the first section, a few vignettes are offered, illustrating some tensions of the diverse educational goals of

these unique communities. Section two argues that policy makers are morally required to enact a measured change with regard to Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, and that the U.S. government is morally failing indigenous students when culturally sustaining education is not given a place in the school system’s overall axiology (i.e., value structure). Section three of this paper ends by suggesting and highlighting one such educational-ethical value aimed at narrowing the academic achievement, civic

The social and educational issues of Alaskan indigenous communities, like their counterparts on reservations in the contiguous United States or elsewhere, are rarely observed—if visible at all.

² Ray Barnhardt & Alaska Native Knowledge Network, “Indigenous Education Renewal in Rural Alaska,” in *Honoring our Children: Culturally Appropriate Approaches to Indigenous Education*, eds. Jon Reyhner, Joseph Martin, Louise Lockard & Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert (Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University Press, 2013), <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/HOCL/>. B.M.J. Brayboy & K.T. Lomawaima, “Why Don't More Indians Do Better in School? The Battle Between US Schooling & American Indian/Alaska Native Education,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 2 (2018): 82-94.

³ Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Joseph P. Gone, W.E. Hartmann, A. Pomerville, DC. Wendt, S.H. Klem, & R.L. Burrage, “The Impact of Historical Trauma on Health Outcomes for Indigenous Populations in the USA and Canada: A Systematic Review,” *American Psychologist* 74, no. 1 (2019): 20.

⁴ Meira Levinson & Jacob Fay, *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016).

engagement, and opportunity gaps (i.e., furthering personal and communal autonomy): Philosophy—*The Love of Wisdom*. This educational-ethical value is often critically missing from Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, but is fundamental for strengthening culturally sustaining education and education in general.

At base, if loving wisdom is a desire to go on learning, then it may be an explicit educational practice that has wide reaching effects for indigenous students.

Historical Context of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education

Alaska is the largest, farthest north, and farthest west state of the United States of America. Its size, location, and history present remarkable and distinctive characteristics that come with unique educational and ethical concerns.

There are over two-hundred remote villages ranging from 25 to 6,000 citizens. These villages are spaced out over 663,000 square miles (the farthest apart being roughly the distance from New York City to Havana, Cuba). There are 22 different indigenous cultures with numerous unique languages. Many villages are only accessible by small airplane, small boat, or snowmobile; only some are serviced by larger commercial jets. Often, plumbing is limited, and “outhouses” are common restrooms. In winter, temperatures can reach 60 degrees below Fahrenheit. Subsistence, in the form of hunting, trapping, fishing, whaling, and foraging are the

norms of life. Certified teachers that meet state and federal requirements are limited. These villages suffer from high rates of the following: alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, domestic abuse, adverse childhood experiences, diabetes, and other long-term physical and mental health problems.⁵ Having only been “discovered” in 1741 by Russian explorers, sold to the U.S. in 1867, and entered into statehood in 1959, Alaska is referred to as *The Last Frontier*.

Since Russian and American colonialism there has been a lived struggle between learning indigenous ways and assimilating into “western” ways. To be sure, before colonialism, indigenous education did not come in the form of schooling. Writing about indigenous education before colonialism, Yupiaq scholar Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagely maintains:

In distant times, education was well suited to the people and to their ecological systems . . . Education was a part of life. It was provided effectively and stress-free by parents, family, extended family, and the community . . . Every person knew that all would have a part in the community and the community took care of them. The foremost purpose of traditional education was to insure that the principles or rules for constructing a cognitive map for life were learned well by all people . . . From this they would make tools for making a living. The environment was their school and their cathedral, and reading its natural processes gave meaning to all life.⁶

⁵ Joseph P. Gone, W.E. Hartmann, A. Pomerville, DC. Wendt, S.H. Klem, & R.L. Burrage, “The Impact of Historical Trauma on Health Outcomes for Indigenous Populations in the USA and Canada: A Systematic Review,” *American Psychologist* 74, no. 1 (2019): 20. Paul A. LeBuffe, & Ann McKay Bryson, “Academic Achievement of American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Does Social-Emotional Competence Reduce the Impact of Poverty?,” *American Indian and Alaska*

Native Mental Health Research 24, no. 1 (2017): 1. Marc Kruse, Nicolas Tanchuk, & Robert Hamilton, “Educating in the Seventh Fire: Debwewin, Mino-bimaadiziwin, and Ecological Justice,” *Educational Theory* 69, no. 5 (2019): 587-601.

⁶ Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagely, *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006), 21.

Before colonialism, indigenous education was part and parcel with life; education was not considered as isolated to a specific space and place.

**The intergenerational
experience of the moral history
of schooling in Alaska—gives
education a bad name.**

With colonialism, education for indigenous cultures changed. The elders from indigenous communities were no longer the teachers of value, and of the world; the teaching of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom began to come from books and from foreign teachers. During this time, many Alaskan indigenous people died of epidemics; proselytization of Christianity was prominent, and with American colonization English was mandatory in schools. Accordingly, indigenous people began to lose their native languages and their indigenous philosophies.⁷ The curriculum changed drastically as well. Studying rivers, weather, snowpack, roots, animals, oral history, etc. were no longer seen as objects of valuable knowledge (even though they are present academic studies). Because of this drastic adjustment, the relationship between indigenous students and education changed.

Schooling can be a source of wisdom in many ways, but not necessarily. It can also be a source of pain and humiliation. Remembering the year of 1965, in her 2003 book, *Raising Ourselves*, Alaskan Gwich'in author Velma Wallis writes about her early years in school:

My first experiences with school teachers were not much better. In first and second grade, my teachers were women who were disciplinarians and took it upon themselves to whip us anytime we so much as looked at them the wrong way. My older brother Jimmy said that having their husbands for teachers was even worse, for the men seemed to take pleasure in spanking the boys.

Once, when my first-grade teacher paddled my behind with a Ping-Pong paddle, I laughed at the foolishness of it. She was a frail thing, in high heels and a skirt, who wore herself out spanking a bunch of us, and it was obvious she was getting tired. When at last she started on me, I started to giggle. She became so incensed that she threw me into the closet for an hour.⁸

Corporal punishment is not unique to Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, but what I would like to draw attention toward here is that Wallis and her fellow classmates expected that their experience with education was going to be physically and morally painful. Colloquially, this anticipation—namely, the intergenerational experience of the moral history of schooling in Alaska—gives education a bad name.

Wallis goes on, “I was well acquainted with feelings of rebellion and hatred toward educators when I met my third-grade teacher. She would be the one to open doors in my mind and to restore some of my self-esteem.”⁹ Though the animosity to schooling is keyed into here, it is important to note a positive aspect of Wallis’s memory; her third-grade teacher, Miss McMullin, was a source of inspiration.¹⁰ Nevertheless, though the story of indigenous education is not all negative,

⁷ Harold Napoleon, *Yunyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Fairbanks, AK: Publications Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, College of Rural Alaska, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1991).

⁸ Velma Wallis, *Raising Ourselves: A Gwich'in Coming of Age Story from the Yukon River* (Kenmore, WA: Epicenter Press, 2003), 93.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ It is not my intention to vilify schooling in Alaska, but to tell an accurate story.

confusion about the moral history of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education abounds.

To juxtapose these past portraits of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, the following are some relatively present statistics of a local school taken from Alaska's Department of Education website: for a K-12 school of one hundred students, there are ten teachers, zero counselors, and zero nurses.¹¹ Only twenty percent of the teachers have been at the school for five or more years, and thirty percent of students improved from one year to the next on state summative assessments. Fifty-seven percent of students are classified as economically disadvantaged and sixty-two percent are determined chronically absent.¹²

These statistics are meant to give a quick look at what primary and secondary schools in rural Alaska are presently like according to standardized measurements. Over half of these indigenous students are missing at least three weeks out of the school year, if not more. Further, it shows that many teachers do not stick around for more than five years, and that nurses and counselors are nonexistent.

Statistics on higher education for Alaskan indigenous students are hard to come by. However, in his 1991 report to the U.S. Department of Education, "American Indian and Alaska Native Higher Education: Toward a New Century of Academic Achievement and Cultural Integrity," Wright writes:

Low enrollment rates and high attrition rates contribute to low college graduation rates and even lower rates of participation in graduate programs. Most Native college students attend public institutions, and over half attend two-year colleges. Less than half attend full time. Native participation in higher education is inhibited by persistent barriers to access, retention, and graduation, such as: inadequate academic preparation, insufficient financial support, unsupportive institutional climate, lack of Native role models, and cultural influences on student adjustment.¹³

If Wright's analysis is still accurate today, then American Indian and Alaskan indigenous students attend college at lower rates than other demographics. Academic achievement, civic achievement, and opportunity gaps are of little wonder under such circumstances.¹⁴

Again, this is meant to fill in some of the larger portrait of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education.

Further Tensions: Cultural Mismatch

The year is 2017; Chris is a sixteen-year-old Yupik student who lives on St. Lawrence Island, an island in the middle of the Bering Strait. It is

¹¹ For the academic school year 2017-2018. The location was randomly picked, is located above the arctic circle, and will remain unnamed.

¹² Taken from www.education.alaska.gov/compass. According to my research, this village represents an average sample.

¹³ Bobby Wright, "American Indian and Alaska Native Higher Education: Toward a New Century of Academic Achievement and Cultural Integrity," in Indian Nations at Risk Taskforce, *Commissioned Papers* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 1991), 1.

¹⁴ M.J. Brayboy & K.T. Lomawaima, "Why Don't More Indians Do Better in School? The Battle Between US Schooling & American Indian/Alaska Native Education," *Daedalus* 147, no. 2 (2018): 82-94. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Lack of Achievement or Lack of Opportunity?," in *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*, eds. Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

36 miles off the coast of Russia—its closest landmass.¹⁵

He is on a boat with family members hunting a bowhead whale. If they are successful, the meat will go toward feeding the island which consists of two villages (population 1,352) for the year. In a place where milk can be over ten dollars a gallon—cows are scarce in Alaska and nonexistent on St. Lawrence Island, and this is not to mention the price of gasoline or other food items—subsistence is not only crucial for providing the necessities of life, but it is also an immemorial tradition.

Chris has been training for this day his whole life. Today, he has the chance to be “the striker”—his training pays off and the hunt is successful. Later, the communities of the island wholeheartedly thank and congratulate him for his diligent work, but not long after the celebration he receives hundreds of hate emails and even death threats; a well known animal rights activist has caught wind of his successful hunt, and after a viral post, hundreds of people are making obscene and morbid remarks at his expense. People even rudely comment about his mother, which is more than Chris can handle. He stops going to school, almost stops talking, and questions life. However, after receiving a letter of support from the Governor, and a congratulatory phone call from a State Senator, he vows to keep hunting.

In the terms of Jennifer Morton’s 2019 book, *Moving Up without Losing Your Way*, this scene illustrates a cultural mismatch.¹⁶ Her description of the preconditions of a striver’s life—someone born into a systematically unjust situation, which requires unequal educational, political, and economic hardships—perfectly fits with those

that are born in many Alaskan villages. Yet, rarely are such villages thought of in such analyses. Morton argues that the ethical costs of moving up should be honest and clear-eyed. Furthermore, not just individuals but communities at large should have mobility.

He is on a boat with family members hunting a bowhead whale. If they are successful, the meat will go toward feeding the island which consists of two villages (population 1,352) for the year.

Accordingly, Morton’s analysis should be extended to highlight the ethical trade-offs that most indigenous people and communities have to face on their way up. That is, the ethical costs of upward mobility in “our western world” will be felt by most indigenous people, for there is a mismatch between indigenous culture and the “western” world in general, which includes academia at large. Put differently, the childhood goods of Alaskan indigenous students—those of connection to the natural world and the connection to the overall community for survival and flourishing—are in direct conflict with some modern educational goods.¹⁷

Growing up in Alaska as an indigenous person, I was keenly aware that education was used as a tool against indigenous people; I knew that schools were “worse” when my mom was a child, even worse when my grandmother was growing up, and not really existent when my great-grandparents were of school age. I often

¹⁵ This is a true story; see: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/we-alaskans/2017/08/12/internet-threats-hound-teen-subsistence-hunter-after-he-kills-bowhead-whale/>.

¹⁶ Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Kawagley, *A Yupiaq Worldview*. Harry Brighthouse, Helen F. Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift, *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence and Decision-Making* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

heard stories about how my grandmother was physically reprimanded in school for speaking her native language. Moreover, for Alaskan indigenous people, there is nothing remotely prestigious about going to a boarding school.

In grade school, I remember learning about the history and culture of the U.S. and other parts of the world, but never learning anything in school about indigenous culture or places. Accordingly, I felt like my heritage was unrecognized and devalued because the ways of life of my family were not included as objects of school study. For example, we learned about the Mississippi River, the Amazon, and even the Nile. But what about the Yukon River in our Alaskan backyard, and what about fish wheels and trapping animals—things my elders went on at great length to teach me about? Indeed, I recognized that my culture and schooling were often seen as antithetical; this is a mismatch, and there is no doubt that Chris, Velma Wallis, and others feel this.

This complete lack of cultural relevance is not necessarily the case in public Alaskan schools today. Presently, highschoolers are mandated to take at least one Alaskan history course, student-teachers are mandated to take three credit hours of an approved Alaskan studies course, and there is a movement for other types of culturally sustaining education in classrooms. There is even an animated PBS kids show about present indigenous culture, called *Molly of Denali*. Nevertheless, there was nothing in place like this when I was in school. Relatedly, schooling was not a main interest for my family, relatives, and kin.

But why does this matter—why does history matter?

Alaska and Educational Ethics

Public Alaskan Indigenous Education should serve as a standard normative case study in educational ethics.

There are unique lessons that we, qua educational practitioners, can learn from Public Alaskan Indigenous Education. Not only do these tensions within the unique and diverse educational aims, practices, and policies of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education serve to tease out ethical ramifications, but they also teach us what education can and should be. Moreover, Alaska's story has been engaging with the ethics of education, if only implicitly, since Russian colonialism. Namely, the indigenous people of Alaska (and others) have viewed schooling with a critical and reflective eye since the 19th century, but sadly, until recently, indigenous people have had little power to affect systemic practices and policies, if at all.

The educational task to get students to have a positive relationship with schooling (and education in general) is not new, but for indigenous students this task is different, because there exists in such places a lived, if only implicit, hatred of schooling.¹⁸ This hatred of schooling is different from other (non-indigenous) forms, because of what the history of schooling has done to indigenous culture. In short, schooling was used in many ways as a tool against indigenous culture. Below, I attempt to learn something from the above vignettes about how to form a positive relationship to schooling, and education in general, for Public Alaskan Indigenous Education.

It is easy to think of Alaskan indigenous education as a problem for the indigenous people of Alaska and for them alone, or perhaps even as a problem delegated to the past. However, as should be clear by now, this is not just a problem

¹⁸ This hatred of schooling is often incorrectly confused with misogyny—the hatred of study.

isolated in bygone history, and as will be shown below, not only is the U.S. government politically and morally responsible for the past, present, and future of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, but also indigenous culture can help improve our system of democracy. Nevertheless, more history is illuminating.

When the Secretary of State, William H. Seward, purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, the U.S. government and the American Indians of the contiguous states had already made many agreements that Alaskan indigenous people were not legally involved with. It was not until the 1884 Organic Act that the federal government passed legislation that delegated responsibility of providing schooling in Alaska “for children of all races” to the Secretary of the Interior.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the schooling of indigenous Alaskan students, if it occurred at all, was heavily influenced by the 1819 Civilization Fund Act, which aimed at Christianizing and “civilizing” indigenous culture.

The early and influential American missionary, Sheldon Jackson (c. 1897) writes,

If the Natives of Alaska could be taught the English language, be brought under Christian influences by the missionaries and trained into forms of industry suitable for the territory, it seems to follow as necessary result that the white population of Alaska, composed of immigrants from the States, would be able to employ them in their

pursuits, using their labor to assist in mining, transportation, and the production of food.²⁰

Naturally, this training and education took away time and experience from indigenous ways, and vocational work was given emphasis; however, entry-level manual labor was the norm for the indigenous workforce, if any employment was found at all.

Following the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, the 1928 Meriam Report, officially titled, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, was submitted to the Institute of Government Research.²¹ This report not only brought attention to many of the

Growing up in Alaska as an indigenous person, I was keenly aware that education was used as a tool against indigenous people.

social and political issues that indigenous Americans faced, but it also called for reformation of indigenous education: boarding schools and culturally insensitive

education were highly criticized. The Meriam Report greatly influenced the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which gave American indigenous people greater sovereignty and control over their lands and economic situation.

However, it was not until after (and in large part because) oil was discovered in 1968 on the north shore of Alaska did Alaskan indigenous people settle their aboriginal claim to the title of traditional lands, and were compensated for other original lands now occupied by the Federal and State governments. The 1972 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act incorporated the Alaskan indigenous people into twelve regional corporations, effectively ensuring that indigenous people would be a part of western

¹⁹ Carol Barnhardt, “A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 40, no. 1 (2001): 11.

²⁰ Sheldon Jackson, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1896-1897, Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), xlv. See also

William L. Iggiagruk Hensley, *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow: A Memoir of Alaska and the Real People* (New York, NY: Sarah Crichton Books, 2009), 205.

²¹ Lewis Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, (1928), <https://narf.org/nill/resources/meriam.html/>.

capitalism—with the threat of bankruptcy and loss of land, education into the western ways became even more important.

Despite a confusing and morally troubling history, it should be clear by now that the U.S. is historically responsible for creating the conditions described above. Accordingly, U.S. educational policy makers are legally and morally required to continue to positively affect Public Alaskan Indigenous Education. Educational ethicists and other educational practitioners ought to help hold present policy makers responsible, and move ethically responsible education forward.

Culturally Sustaining Classrooms

As the stories of the young whale hunter, Chris, and author, Velma Wallis, illustrate, the challenge for educational policy is reconciling conflicting worldviews. As mentioned above, culturally sustaining curriculum grounded in local culture can help alleviate some of the hardships indigenous students face at school. Furthermore, and with gratitude, such education is presently happening in rural Alaska.

The Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, along with the State government and other Alaskan indigenous institutions, have created classroom practices that engage with indigenous ways—all the while attempting to bridge the conflicting worldviews. In such classrooms, subjects like geography, history, outdoor survival skills, fishery research, botany, the aurora borealis, food preservation, etc. are investigated with both indigenous and modern scientific methods. Barnhardt writes:

After ten years, data gathered from the 20 rural school districts involved with the

[Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative] (compared to 24 other rural Alaskan districts) indicated that its educational reform strategy fostering interconnectivity and complementarity between the formal education system and the indigenous communities being served in rural Alaska had produced an increase in student achievement scores, a decrease in the dropout rate, an increase in the number of rural students attending college, and an increase in the number of Native students choosing to pursue studies in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.²²

Accordingly, having culturally sustaining classrooms positively affects the standard outcomes of indigenous students; learning how indigenous culture and western ways are related allows for indigenous people to not only learn their traditional ways of life in school, but also learn scholastic or academic knowledge more fluidly.²³ In short, culturally sustaining education (and place-based curriculum) can help ameliorate the academic achievement, civic engagement, and opportunity gaps.

The government is morally failing indigenous students when culturally sustaining education is not given a place in the school's overall axiology. Relatedly, the U.S. government is failing all citizens when they are not highly serving this unique set of students. What indigenous people bring to the table of civic engagement are, among other things, the wisdom of being connected to the environment—and to each other; both are greatly needed in the 21st century, and beyond.

In the words of Meira Levison's 2012 book, *No Citizens Left Behind*, "Above all else, the gaps in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and participation matter because they profoundly diminish the

²² Ray Barnhardt and Alaska Native Knowledge Network, "Indigenous Education Renewal in Rural Alaska."

²³ Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2017).

democratic character and quality of the United States.”²⁴ Nevertheless, such rural communities are rarely thought of in such analyses.

This deserves to change.

The Love of Wisdom in Alaska: Indigenous Philosophy

Historically, indigenous people have not been offered an armchair at the educational policy table, because, among other things, indigenous languages were not the dominant or working language of educational discourse.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that indigenous people do not historically know anything about education—art, geography, history, educational theory, etc.—or indeed possess philosophies of their own. Truly speaking, Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, in all its forms throughout history, are enactments of different philosophies of education, but this has been given little emphasis. From assimilation, to vocational education, and to the present culturally sustaining classrooms, indigenous people have experienced what can be called different *loves of wisdom* (from the ancient Greek “philo” meaning *love* and “sophia” meaning *wisdom*). However, only recently have indigenous philosophies—or put generally, an indigenous love of wisdom—been included in guiding educational aims, practices, and policies in Alaska.

Indeed, the love of wisdom was present in indigenous cultures before colonialism, and exists today.²⁵ Call this the *Love of Indigenous Wisdom*. This new culturally sustaining Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, mentioned above, is an instance of present love of indigenous wisdom. It is a particular philosophy

of education; one that attempts to reconcile western conceptions of education with indigenous ways of life (i.e., indigenous philosophies).

It is my contention that when a student learns a piece of historically indigenous knowledge in school that—by the same token—they are being presented with a philosophy of education. That is, not only are they being taught a different type of education, but they also may even begin to personally love the wisdom on offer, if they feel so connected. Culturally sustaining classrooms help create this connection for indigenous students.

Put differently, if indigenous students are drawn toward this type of schooling, then in this “movement toward education,” they are genuinely loving wisdom. This has been a central, if not the paragon, educational aim and practice since Plato’s *Akademia* (if not before), and deserves an explicit place in Public Alaskan Indigenous Education.

The Love of Wisdom

Alaskan indigenous culture is relatively new to western society. In a lot of ways, indigenous people have been thrust into a new world and into a new way of life. Likewise, Alaskan indigenous people are similar to the “protagonist” in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*: we have been thrust into a much bigger world, and with this new circumstance and knowledge we are forced to choose how best to live.

²⁴ Meira Levison, *No Citizens Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 49.

²⁵ Lesley Le Grange and Carl Mika, “What Is Indigenous Philosophy and What Are Its Implications for

Education,” in *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Paul Smeyers (New York, NY: Springer, 2018), 499-515. Marc Kruse, Nicolas Tanchuk, and Robert Hamilton, “Educating in the Seventh Fire.”

Unfortunately, Alaskan indigenous (and other indigenous) people are often still struggling to flourish in this new way of life. Similar to Plato's allegory, an explicit love of wisdom—as a way of life—can help in this domain. If this is compelling, then philosophy—as the love of wisdom—should be explicitly taught alongside culturally sustaining classrooms. Indeed, if what is said above is true, then an implicit philosophy is taught nevertheless. Thus, it would be wise to be mindful of the effects, and purposefully draw out an explicit love of wisdom.

One might object: why teach philosophy in Public Alaskan Indigenous Education when real things like plumbing and internet access in villages are major issues? Why put energy into such ivory tower ideals? Wouldn't this be culturally insensitive?

To be sure, I am not suggesting that indigenous students should study and only study the ancient Greeks or other canonical figures and texts. Rather, I am suggesting that an explicit aim of crafting and developing a lived love of wisdom can be fecund with academic, civic, and traditional growth. All things being equal, the oral histories, spiritual systems, and ethical frameworks of the indigenous people will only be strengthened with an explicit comparative philosophy—which can also be a point of entry for indigenous students.

Furthermore, the harm from colonialism did not come from learning about the larger world while practicing education at its fullest. Rather, it came from policing traditional ways; an act of not allowing the love of wisdom to thrive. Moreover,

many different scientific theories and methods are already given attention within culturally sustaining curriculum, but here, as is common in the neoliberal world, the emphasis and value of education is on the easily seen and easily measured instrumental value of the sciences—and only rarely on the humanities.²⁶

This is a mistake.

Presumably, culturally sustaining classrooms already implicitly teach intellectual virtues, and even reason assessment.²⁷ Accordingly, educational practitioners should explicitly endorse teaching the love of wisdom in Alaska because—at base—it is a desire to go on learning, and at best, it is the education of virtue, rationality, justice, and democracy. These are values that have been present in indigenous culture for thousands of years. Thus, philosophy may be an explicit educational practice that has wide-reaching effects for indigenous students.

Conclusion

The moral dimensions surrounding Public Alaskan Indigenous Education have been one of the hardest challenges for myself and such peers: I was not inspired to learn throughout primary and secondary school; I was confused about the moral history of Public Alaskan Indigenous Education, and consequently the value of education in general; I was not curious about scholastic learning and was not “lead out” (from Latin *educere*).

²⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Jason Baehr, *Intellectual Virtues and Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Harvey Siegel, *Education's Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

The love of wisdom was present in indigenous cultures before colonialism, and exists today.

Nevertheless, my horizons changed when I drifted into college. At the University of Alaska, I began wondering, “How ought I to lead my life?” Learning that the discipline of philosophy asked this ancient question in a critical way, I realized that I should learn more, and for the first time I was drawn to formal education; I learned about the love of wisdom, and I was taught to *love wisdom*. That is, not only did I learn about the writings of Plato, Descartes, etc., but *my relationship* with learning and understanding was transformed, and thus my relationship with education changed.

I took an active and explicit role in my education that was not there before. I began to explicitly love learning and love wisdom—I pursued and sought it out—I had an *eros* (from ancient Greek *love*) for it—a literal friendship or relationship (*philo*) with learning and education was formed. I have succeeded in academia, insofar as I have, because there is an explicit valuing of wisdom (*sophia*) and education that I now practice. This illuminates that—at base—philosophy (the love of wisdom) is a *positive relationship with education*.

Again, the young Yupik whale hunter Chris, Gwich’in author Velma Wallis, and so many others have historically been missing valuable opportunities to explicitly practice this educational-ethical value within the colonial culture and schooling passed down.

Yet there is hope here.

Alaska, and other global institutions, are beginning to administer systematic education with culturally sustaining methods, and this is a way to draw out the lived love of wisdom within indigenous students. In this article, I argued that policy makers are morally required to enact a measured change with regard to Public Alaskan

Indigenous Education, and that the U.S. government is morally failing indigenous students when culturally sustaining education is not given a place in the school system’s overall axiology.

It is time that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of indigenous people are brought into the social and political discussion. Philosophy can help here. Educational ethicists and other practitioners can further learn about educational and ethical theory by reflecting more on Public Alaskan Indigenous Education.²⁸

As an Alaskan Athabaskan, Buddy has a deep connection to philosophy and education as a means to thrive. His work in virtue epistemology has led him to philosophy of education, and to questions like: how is epistemic value related to moral and eudaimonic value? He has a B.A. in philosophy from the University of Alaska, an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Victoria, and is presently a Ph.D. student at Teachers College, Columbia University.

²⁸ For helpful comments and generative discussions, I would like to thank Velma Wallis, David Hansen, Juan Antonio Casas, Rebecca Sullivan, Ting Zhao, Qifan Zhang, Sara Hardman, Rory Varrato, Sulki Song, Jo Hinsdale, Frank Margonis, Nick Tanchuk, Harry

Brighthouse, Randy Curren, Zachary Barber, Shannon Brick, Tatiana Geron, Krystal Smith, Jessica Talamantez, Kirsten Welch, Fiona North, Kyle Greenwalt, and Nassim Noroozi.