

# This Is How We “Role”: Moving Toward a Cosmogonic Paradigm in Alaska Native Education

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*This article describes the Alaska Native Policy Center’s efforts to develop a role-centered conception of educational success that contrasts school- and culture-centered conceptions common in Indigenous education research. Because role-centered success hinges on relationality over resources, it makes apparent the dangerous roots of a standards and accountability paradigm. As such, role-centered success draws on a cosmogonic paradigm that emphasizes relationships in places; over time; and across human, natural, and spiritual realms. Tracing the genealogy of high-stakes testing, the author highlights the limits of a standards and accountability paradigm. Further, by presenting a place-based approach to data-collection that privileges Native-to-Native comparisons and a brief report of research on Alaska Native conceptions of success, she explains how role-centered success can inform Indigenous education policy and development.*

Alaska is a land of many sorts, especially when it comes to Alaska Native peoples. Linguists explain that there are two major language families among our first people, Eskimo-Aleut and Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit; and anthropologists remind us that there are three primary people groups, the Eskimo, Aleut, and Indian. In these larger categories are at least 20 particular languages, eight major cultures, and hundreds of village communities. On December 18, 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was passed into legislation as the largest land claims settlement between the United States federal government and an Indigenous group, creating yet another type of Alaska Native, the corporation shareholder. ANCSA settled Aboriginal land title in the State of Alaska by among other village-level provisions, establishing 12 in-state regional corporations that would enroll shareholders and manage settlement funds and land allotments. Without getting into the many intricacies of this legislation, essentially Alaska Natives with at least one quarter Native blood born on or before December 18, 1971 could enroll as original shareholders in regional corporations and receive 100 shares of corporate stock.

Efforts were made to set corporate boundaries along customary tribal and cultural groupings. For example, Inupiaq peoples who have roots in the north and northwest parts of the state are typically enrolled as shareholders in the Arctic Slope or NANA corporations based in north and northwest Alaska; whereas Tlingit, Haida, and Tshimsian peoples with roots in southeast Alaska are typically enrolled shareholders of

Sealaska, which is the regional corporation for the southeast. These corporations are responsible for managing the \$963-million settlement and the surface and subsurface rights to at least 16 million of the 44 million acres of land returned, with the other acreage designated for village corporations, former reserves, and other situations (e.g., cemeteries and historical sites).

I am an after-born, as I was born after December 18, 1971, and until my mother, grandmother, or other relative gifts me shares in one of our regional or village corporations, I have no legal relationship to my ancestral land or any say in the corporate decisions that affect its development. And yet I am connected to these lands, and I feel a responsibility to my Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people and our many relations across Alaska. In summer 2005, I enacted this responsibility by becoming a part of the First Alaskans Institute (FAI)<sup>1</sup> Leadership Program. With professional experience in Indigenous education in Arizona and Alaska and paternal family roots in Hawai'i, I had already developed a commitment to cross-community development. An internship with the Alaska Native Policy Center (Policy Center) at FAI provided an opportunity to develop research on Alaska Native education and to apply some of my earlier education and policy experience. The Policy Center had convened a number of community discussions to present Alaska Native education data and to solicit insight from community members about policy and research development. There was widespread concern about what these data showed about Alaska Native students' persistence and achievement, as well as frustration about whether the indicators reflected students' experiences and whether the trend data were accurate and useful in community planning. As part of these discussions, participants lamented the fact that so much research in Alaska Native education served to document what was not working rather than highlighting and developing success. With this feedback, my first internship task was to develop a preliminary review of research on effective schools for Alaska Natives. I found that existing research used school success rather than student success as the primary indicator. A review of research also indicated that the schools that were most successful were those that were able to decrease, close, or otherwise bridge the gap either between school and Alaska Native community or between Alaska Native student achievement and that of their white or Asian peers. In fact everywhere I looked in the research, I found rhetoric and discussions about *gaps*. The subsequent study of Alaska Native community conceptions of student success represents an effort to reorient the inquiry into Alaska Native education toward strength, cultural meaning, and Indigenous knowledge. In what follows, I present various aspects of this research journey that have resulted in a preference for what I am calling a cosmogonic<sup>2</sup> paradigm in Alaska Native education over one based around gaps and in a standards-and-accountability paradigm.

The cosmogonic paradigm emerges from a set of beliefs about how the world came to be. It is centrally concerned with how knowledge, and here Indigenous knowledge, about the world and human purposes in it is developed and shared. Key concepts in this paradigm include genealogy,<sup>3</sup> place-based orientation, and role-based responsibilities. Thus this paradigm privileges relationships in places; over time; and across human, natural, and spiritual realms. One of the first steps in moving toward a cosmogonic paradigm was to develop an understanding of the limits of a gap-centered model of education.

### *Standards-and-Accountability Paradigm*

For almost 30 years, a standards-and-accountability paradigm has been the predominant framework in US education. This paradigm relies on the use of high-stakes tests to monitor student and school achievement along established standards and thus determines individual and institutional accountability for public investment. High-stakes testing is characterized by the use of student performance on a single test or measure (e.g., high school graduation qualifying exam) to make high-stakes decisions about a student's education and life opportunities such as whether a student can proceed to the next grade level or graduate to high school. The early history of high-stakes testing in the US is based on concerns about the effectiveness of public schools in producing quality curriculum and instruction that ensures a highly skilled workforce readiness and global competitiveness of US high school graduates (Jossey-Bass, 2001; Mathison & Ross, 2008; Meier, 2000; Ravitch, 1995). Researchers note that advocates of this approach cite the usefulness of a high-stakes testing approach to align education systems across the many US states and to monitor and measure school effectiveness and student quality (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Superfine, 2008). Yet although "systemic reform" (O'Day & Smith, 1993) has become one rallying cry of this paradigm, the schools and the students themselves face the most real consequences for poor performance.

Critiques of the use of high-stakes testing are not new as there are strong concerns about "teaching to the test"; an emphasis on the dumbing down of content and standards; a focus on math and reading to the detriment of science, social studies, and art; inequity in resulting outcomes with worries about low-income and culturally diverse students facing consequences at higher rates than their white and mid- to high-income peers; and a disregard for the importance of relationships in student learning and school development (Mathison & Ross, 2008; Meier, 2000; Superfine, 2008). Although I agree with most of these critiques, in this article I seek to lay bare the more deeply sinister rationale behind a standards-and-accountability paradigm by tracing the genealogy of high-stakes testing.

*Tracing the Genealogy of High-Stakes Testing*

A standards-and-accountability paradigm is based in a much older model, one called the civilization-savagism paradigm by Adams (2008). Adams explains that the civilization-savagism paradigm was initially developed by Europeans and adopted by European-Americans. It locates diverse human cultures at various stages along a continuum that runs from the least developed cultures—or the “savages”—to the most highly developed cultures—or the “civilized.” Not surprisingly, European culture was deemed among the most civilized, whereas Indigenous peoples who “indulged in barbaric religious practices, relied on hunting and gathering for subsistence, were disdainful of private property and wealth, and generally lived out their lives in pagan ignorance of all things civilized” were declared “culturally worthless” (p. 19). Sentiment about Native peoples did not stop at dislike or distaste, however, as Europeans used this notion of Indigenous savagery to justify the dislocation of whole communities of Natives, genocide, and assimilation through schooling initiatives (Adams; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). These scholars assert that all these efforts were tied to a European desire for the land on which Native peoples lived.

The tribalness, or tribal nature, of Indigenous communities stood in the way of white settlers’ goals to possess large tracts of land and were viewed as limiting the proliferation of democratic ideals based in Protestant and capitalist values. The settlers’ desire for land led early educators to use schooling as a mechanism to destroy tribes and tribalism to free up more land for purchase. Schools sought to develop in Native children the desire to participate in the capitalist system where land was an object that could be bought and sold instead of as a living entity with its own sacred life force that was to be stewarded. I recognize that these are strong and large-scale claims, but many scholars have identified complex evidence that supports these assertions. Consider the summaries of two such arguments in what follows.

Standing Rock Sioux scholar Deloria (1969) analyzed the varied patterns of acculturation between Native peoples in the US and African slaves and their descendents in his chapter entitled “The Red and the Black.” Deloria explains that African slaves and their descendants faced exclusionary policies, whereas Indigenous peoples faced assimilation policies. He asks why one group was forced to remain outside the bounds of everyday white society, whereas the other was forced to participate in ways deemed appropriate by those whites in power. His answer is that the “Red” had access to land, whereas the “Black” did not. Thus the US government could afford to exclude Blacks, and yet it needed a system to break down the tribalism, collective sharing, and community use of land and its resources among Native peoples to establish the country as a unified, new, and growing nation.

Picking up this argument that links the need to assimilate Native peoples with the strength of the new American nation, other scholars explain how efforts were made to frame Native peoples as part of a primitive and long-gone history to justify the philosophy and practice of Manifest Destiny (Adams, 2008; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Manifest Destiny is the idea that God ordained Western expansion into North America because its lands were uninhabited and thus ripe for taming and settlement (Adams). Around the turn of the 20th century, images of the vanishing Indian race proliferated (see photography of E.S. Curtis or the compelling description of this phenomenon in Dipple, 2007). The “logic” here was that if there were Indigenous groups legitimately claiming to be prior inhabitants of the land, US claims of nationhood could be challenged. So Native peoples and their cultures were deemed savage, primitive, and dying to further the needs of the new nation.

Of course, neither the West nor the Americas were uninhabited, and Native peoples had not vanished. So in addition to advancing ideas about the “vanishing Indian race,” the US government needed a system that would assimilate American Indians and Alaska Natives quickly: one that would categorically replace one set of values for another deemed more appropriate to national goals. Schooling became that system. Adams (2008) poignantly explains that schooling in these early years became “an all-out assault on the [Indian] child’s ‘otherness’” (p. 14). It did so by requiring students to attend school off reserve and away from their families and communities in off-reserve boarding schools, by attempting to correct and change every aspect of how Indian children looked and behaved, and by teaching Indian children to internalize their own supposed inferiority (Adams). American Indian students’ cultural differences were seen as the root of what was holding their social and evolutionary development back, and schooling was their way forward. The purpose of schooling, then, was to separate Indian students from their cultures by changing their physical location and instituting behavioral and moral mandates.

Early education reformers relied on notions of American Indian and Alaska Native cultural difference to justify federal attempts to acquire treaty land. The image of the savage Indian eased white consciences by suggesting that forced relocation and “schooling” efforts were established in the best interests of, and for the good of, the Indian. These efforts explicitly targeted tribal structures and sovereignty in order to undermine communal land holdings and do away with the “Indian problem” by eliminating Indigenous culture, values, and ways of being. The notion of “kill the Indian, save the man” first uttered by Captain Richard Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian Industrial School,<sup>4</sup> reflects the sentiment of the times. Quoting the main sponsor of the Dawes Act<sup>5</sup> in the *Annual Report of*



*the Board of Indian Commissioners*,<sup>6</sup> Adams (2008) explains that a major goal of schooling was to teach Native students to value accumulation.

For U.S. Senator Henry Dawes, the solution to the Indian problem was to "teach him to stand alone first, then to walk, then to dig, then to plant, then to hoe, then to gather, and then to Keep. (p. 14)

Adams (2008) goes on to argue that the Protestant ideology that drove many assimilation efforts sought to work against the values of collectivity and shared use of land and resources. As such, these efforts specifically sought to break down the relationship between tribal peoples and the land to which they were responsible as stewards. By fostering an ethic of individualism and accumulation, the US government and early settlers could undermine this relationship based on notions of responsibility and interdependence to gain access to more and more of the North American land base (Adams; Deloria, 1969).

Boarding schools and forced attendance at mission and government schools contributed to the dissolution of the relationship between Native peoples and the land in which they lived by fostering Protestant values in Indigenous youth. In this paradigm, success is tied to economic gain that one achieved through hard work and toil and that benefited the individual. In this value system, the emphasis on the individual was explicitly tied to consumerism and capitalism. In this way, early American Indian education reformers endeavored to undermine the tribal nature of Indigenous peoples. Quechua scholar Grande (2004) explains,

Whitestream America has never really understood what it means to be Indian and even less about what it means to be tribal. Such ignorance has deep historical roots and wide political implications of not understanding what it means to be tribal, since the U.S. government determined long ago that to be "tribal" runs deeply counter to the notion of democracy and the proliferation of (individual) civil rights. (p. 94)

These policies served to undermine tribal communities because the US was built on the philosophy of "one nation ... indivisible," and the existence of nations-within-nations stands contrary to this ideal and poses an enduring threat to the American mythic.

The civilization-savagism paradigm remained alive and well through the 1960s and 1970s, and we have since come to know it by another name: the deficit model of education. In this model, American Indian, Alaska Native, and other communities of color were framed as having fewer educational resources (e.g., number of books in the home, members with professional degrees) than many white communities. In addition, American Indian and Alaska Native cultural values, parenting styles, and community systems were framed as limiting these students' achievement and contributing to the development of at-risk behaviors in students (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Grady Johnson, 2003). For Alaska Natives and American Indians, the proliferation of this deficit model is also clear when one considers the expanded early education efforts to remove Native

children from their families at younger and younger ages in order to minimize the effects of perceived poor parenting.

As part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the Head Start program was initiated in 1965 as a summer pilot program to provide preschool to low-income 3-5-year-olds. The same year that the program was piloted nationwide, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs were launched in 14 states with 43 grantees (Illinois Head Start Association, 2000). Whereas later programs targeted students with disabilities and migrant populations, American Indians and Alaska Natives are the only cultural groups targeted in this legislation. Anecdotally, the proportion of American Indian and Alaska Natives served in Head Start is more than triple their proportion in the US population. Thus although tribes and tribalism were the targets of the early policies based on the civilization-savagism paradigm, in the 1960s and 1970s Native families became the more likely policy targets as parents were framed as unable to meet the educational needs of their young children.

This deficit model contributed to the burgeoning interest in intelligence testing (Jensen, 1969) that took hold in the 1980s in the form of standardized testing and continues today as the era of high-stakes testing. The emphasis on intelligence testing began to shift the burden of "progress" from families to the students themselves and sought to establish "scientifically" the relationship between race, class, and achievement (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), which always seems to result in a hierarchy with whites at the top and people of color at the bottom. Perhaps not surprisingly, this hierarchy is remarkably similar to the continuum of progress that Adams (2008) describes as the civilization-savagism paradigm.

In an effort to shift the burden from the shoulders of students to society and its institutions, sociologists introduced the cultural difference model, which emphasized the cultural mismatch between many students' home experiences and their school experiences (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). In this frame, Native students did not lack knowledge or educational readiness so much as they had other "funds of knowledge" to draw on (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). For American Indian students, research of this sort often discusses student success as living or walking in two worlds (Henze & Vanett, 1993). Successful students, then, are those who are able to persevere in the Western world of school and in the Native world of culture: note that the burden remains on students to balance both worlds. Cultural difference theory spawned various strands of research including that on the role of multiculturalism in the classroom and the importance of acknowledging and teaching to various learning styles (Pewewardy, 1992; Swisher, 1991; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989). This theory in name and practice emphasizes Native students' cultural differences.

Although it could be argued that a focus on cultural difference carved out the space in the realms of education research and practice that allowed

for culturally based efforts to sprout, in many ways it also opened the door to the latest iteration of the civilization-savagism paradigm. One of the most common and readily accepted concepts in education today is that of the achievement gap. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, student achievement on standardized tests in schools that receive federal funds must be disaggregated by a variety of student demographic indicators including race and ethnicity, special education designation, and family socioeconomic status as determined by students' participation in free or reduced-price lunch programs.

The idea is that by disaggregating these data, resources can be targeted in particular ways for distinct groups of students, and schools can be held accountable for equity, because culture and difference matter. For example, if data show that students with low socioeconomic status in a particular school are underperforming compared with some achievement norm (e.g., state levels, levels at other similar schools, that school's baseline from previous years), the school might be eligible to receive supplementary services (e.g., private-sector tutoring) for students at federal expense or face consequences as extreme as takeover, where the school principal could be replaced if student performance did not improve to a certain level over a specified time.

Although mandates about disaggregating scores have drawn attention to the fact that many students, schools, and communities are not receiving the types of resources needed to achieve at specified levels, more often than not the assessment results are not used to discuss the resourcing or underresourcing of schools. Rather, they are used to highlight gaps and deficiencies in students' performance. Consider that the educational rhetoric centers on the *achievement gap*, not the *equity* or *resource gap*.

This achievement gap is said to measure the apparent dissimilarity in the performance of diverse groups of students (e.g., by race and ethnicity or family socioeconomic status) on state and national assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and writing and on common achievement indicators such as graduation, dropout, and rates of college attendance and persistence. It is important to note that these measures focus heavily on student-level characteristics often to the exclusion of other measures that might take into account the complex interrelationships and contributions that the structures of society, community, and family make to these student-level characteristics. In addition, on most state and national tests, a student's "proficiency" is determined through a process of "norming" where the "standard" of success is set by the past performance of all students on similar assessments. This process of norming has led to ongoing discussions about why some groups of students cannot keep up with their peers. The result is a picture that places the "burden" of achievement squarely on the shoulders of largely African-American, Hispanic, and



Native students, who are described as not able to keep pace with white and/or Asian students.

We must alter the fundamental paradigm of high-stakes testing underlying this damaging system of education. Although several scholars have established that this paradigm concerns greed over land and its resources, one could argue that those in power no longer need to threaten Native youth: they control most of the land base in the US, which has enabled America to be a world power. Yet Native peoples know better than most that disputes over land are not limited to concerns about the actual ground or acreage. For example, the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* specifies surface and subsurface rights to land, the latter of which relates to resource rights to oil, natural gas, minerals, sand, and gravel. And many Indigenous peoples around the world live in places where land and sea resources remain abundant and pristine (Mander, 2006). So perhaps the paradigm is built on something even more damaging and pervasive than greed over land such as a deep-seated fear about the scarcity of resources: a fear driven by the notion that there will never be enough to go around, so one must use any means necessary to get what is needed to survive.

Many reformers are concerned that this high-stakes era of accountability is simply the most recent tool of those in power to use schooling to replicate the status quo and preserve national (and now global) stratification (Lipman, 2004). By pushing groups of students out of the public education system, high-stakes testing justifies the redistribution of education resources from those who fail to those who are deemed proficient. A system of schooling based on values of competition, merit, and individual success justifies the redistribution of resources from the “non-proficient” to the “proficient” and blames those deemed failing for their circumstances—reminiscent again of the savage-civilized duality and its usefulness in redistributing land.

Through even this brief genealogy, we observe how pervasive the civilization-savagism paradigm is and the danger of developing educational research and initiatives out of fear based in resource scarcity and the need to teach our youth to “Keep.” A concern about resource scarcity often privileges the needs of humans and can jeopardize the delicate balance across human, natural, and spiritual domains that sits at the heart of many Indigenous cultures and world views (Cajete, 1994; Kawagley, 1999) and runs counter to many Indigenous values wherein those who were the most wealthy and successful often were those who gave the most away. Thus a genealogical approach is useful in guiding the development of educational approaches based in Indigenous knowledges. It aids in the identification of damaging patterns and trends and helps to ensure that relationships form the core of educational planning and intervention. The relationships that were the most salient for us at the Alaska Native Policy Center were those based in our cultural and land-based communities.

### *Place-Based Orientation*

Following the passage of the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* and beginning with the 1990 survey, the US Census uses Alaska Native Regional Corporation as one of its geographical areas by which to collect data. In 2005 the Alaska Native Policy Center released the *Alaska Native K-12 Education Indicators Report*. This document used Census data to report annual information on Alaska Native education by ANCSA region. Although at least one other organization<sup>7</sup> had previously reported education data by ANCSA Region, most research and state data continued to report statewide totals, large-scale "racial and ethnic group" comparisons, and generic urban and rural variations that did not account for cultural or place-based particularities.

In addition, the Policy Center's development and release of this report led to a unique policy and research stance based on Alaska Native regions, or places, that are both culturally and politically inscribed. Consider that reports on Alaska Native educational persistence and achievement by ANCSA region not only provide data that are more local and culturally specific, but they allow for Native-to-Native comparisons. In contrast to the standards-and-accountability paradigm that hinges on the achievement gap, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of what may support and limit Native students' learning. Where comparisons of Native students with non-Native students fuel gap analyses, Native-to-Native comparisons allow for a strengths-based analysis. For example, instead of being frustrated with data that show Alaska Native student graduation rates falling below state averages and the rates of non-Native students, ANCSA regional data allow us to determine if Alaska Native students in any particular region have higher rates of graduation than those in other regions and thus can offer insight into what is working well for Native students in particular. Such an approach centers on community-level strengths and resource richness rather than on what is lacking or deficient. It also allows for and values the diversity that already exists across Alaska Native communities: some communities will be better able to provide Native language resources, for example, whereas others will be more capable of supporting students' transition to high school.

These efforts are an essential part of a cosmogonic paradigm because such initiatives rely on each region identifying its own place-based strengths and capacities. Therefore, education development is not about chasing some norm or bridging gaps, but instead becomes an effort to make the best use of local capabilities. As each region gains in its own sense of itself, it will be better able to share insights beyond its own locale and to accept support from other regions. For example, efforts are emerging to develop relationships across communities of Indigenous peoples living along or in the Pacific Ocean in order to acknowledge our connections across this place. Just as we need Arctic peoples to share insights

about glacial melting and its effects, we will need those in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and the Pacific Islands to share their perspectives on the effects of rising sea levels.

### *Role-Based Responsibilities*

Although the Policy Center's work with place-based data and Native-to-Native comparisons is useful, we also had to consider that many Alaska Native parents, community members, and leaders still felt that typical indicators such as student attendance, achievement on state standardized tests, and graduation and dropout rates did not reflect students' experiences. So in 2005 we began to develop what would become the Alaska Native Student Vitality: Community Perceptions on Student Success project. This study explored the question of "How do Alaska Native leaders and community members understand and characterize Alaska Native student success?" Our goal was to establish a working conception of Alaska Native student success and identify more useful indicators to guide our data-collection, analyses, and policy work.

For this qualitative study, we used a purposive sample of 31 recognized Alaska Native community educational leaders<sup>8</sup> identified through the Policy Center's extensive network and through snowball sampling (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). The sample includes slightly more women than men, with 18 women interviewed to 13 men. Twenty-two participants have extensive experience in rural Alaska, either having grown up there, living in a rural or remote region when interviewed, or having worked in rural Alaska communities. Yet at the time of the interviews, most participants were living in urban areas of Alaska. Study participants represent at least six community sectors or roles including staff of community-based nonprofit organizations, directors of educational nonprofit entities of the ANCSA regional corporations, K-12 educators, educators from institutes of higher education, Elders, and civic leaders (e.g., business and political officials). This group represents a large proportion of those Alaska Native people who were in a position to affect state education policy at the time. Although preliminary analyses were reported in the 2005 report, I developed a more comprehensive analysis in 2007 as part of my doctoral program requirements. I used thematic analysis of the interview data using close reading, coding, and categorizing strategies to identify concepts and themes within each participant's narrative and thematic matrices to identify cross-cutting themes and discrepant data (Bernard, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Boyatzis, 1998; Maxwell, 2005).

With such a strong emphasis on cultural difference in the research on American Indian education, I had certain expectations as to what I might find when I explored how Alaska Native community leaders defined student success. I expected that respondents would focus on what schools were not doing to support student success; to hear an emphasis on community values over those of the individual; and to hear more about the

two-worlds paradigm in which students bear responsibility for knowing how to succeed in the Native world of culture and in the White world of school. These three expectations are based on a cultural-difference framework where Indigenous culture is set in opposition to Western and white US culture. What I found explicitly challenged this cultural difference model and presented a unique conception of student success.

Specifically, what emerged was a conception of success centered on students' sense of belonging at various levels: belonging as a human being in terms of one's responsibility to natural and spiritual realms, belonging in community in terms of one's responsibility to others, and belonging in an individual role in terms of one's own unique skills and talents (see Figure 1).

I depict these layers of belonging as concentric circles because according to respondents, each connects to the others and is of equal importance for success. Here belonging means seeing oneself as a part of a group, both because of some unifying characteristic of identity and because of one's responsibility to contribute to that group's ability to thrive. Many Indigenous philosophies of education emphasize these ideas, yet not much has been written to help us understand what belonging means in a particular culture or context or how to foster this sense of belonging meaningfully in our youth. In this study, participants explained that fostering a

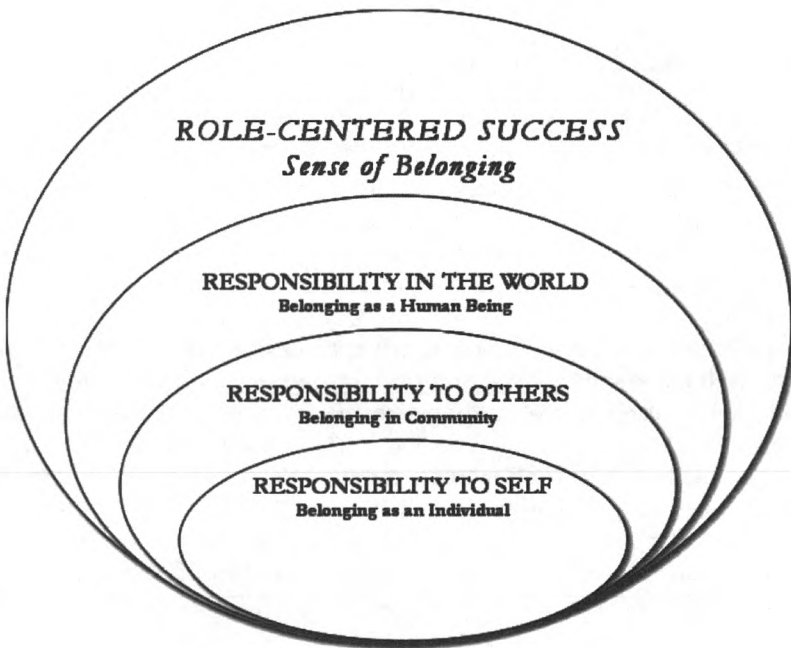


Figure 1. Role-centered conception of Alaska Native students' success.

sense of belonging meant helping students understand their particular role: as human beings, as community members, and as individuals. Thus this conception is role-centered success, and it stands in contrast to both school-centered success and community-centered success prevalent in past research on Alaska Native and American Indian education. It also relies on cosmogonic understandings of what it means to be a human being, as belief systems that draw on distinct creation stories will probably dictate particular roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

*Success as Having a Sense of Belonging*

Respondents defined success along four primary areas: (a) knowing and accepting who you are; (b) being able to provide for yourself and your family; (c) contributing to the community; and (d) making progress in achieving goals. For example, one respondent might emphasize "making progress at achieving goals" by describing the importance of attending school, making grade-level progress, and/or graduating from high school. Those respondents who solely focused on these school-specific goals we described as holding a school-centered concept of success because the domain of school figured prominently in their definition of Alaska Native student success. Importantly, however, no respondent emphasized school-specific goals without also emphasizing some greater purpose such as learning skills to provide for one's family, developing greater confidence and pride in oneself, or having a choice of future paths. Consider this quote:

I think a successful Alaska Native student is one who has completed some form of higher education that has equipped the individual to become a contributing member of society and earn a good living, or a living if you will for themselves as well as their family, and in turn contribute through the community. (Business leader, June 30, 2005)

For these Alaska Native leaders, academic success is not an end in and of itself, but rather, it contributes to some larger purpose. So a focus solely on school success may not foster Alaska Native students' success because it does not encapsulate what success means in a place-based, cosmogonic context.

This critique of a school-centered approach is consistent with past research that has shown how American Indian students perform better in school when their home cultures are made relevant in the classroom (Demmert, 2001; Demmert & Towner, 2003). These researchers assert that a culture-centered conception of success views Indigenous culture as the driving force in promoting student success. Here several respondents focused on the importance of having cultural knowledge in education, which includes knowing about family and community histories, social and spiritual customs, and ongoing relations with other groups such as non-Natives and the federal government.



For me, [a successful Alaska Native student] is someone who in a knowledgeable and informed way, whether or not they stay in an Alaska Native community, they still understand themselves and they understand our societies as Alaska Natives. And they see themselves as contributing to these societies ... but they see that as a part of who they are, and they understand it, they're informed. (Higher education leader, June 28, 2005)

However, many of those who initially seemed to evidence a culture-centered conception of success explained that coming to understand cultural knowledge works in service of improving students' sense of self and of strengthening community. So knowledge of culture is necessary, but without the emergence of students who feel "good about themselves and [practice] a lot of common sense," there can be no success. It is this development of a sense of belonging and the action that results that constitutes success.

In fact although several of the responses suggest school- and culture-centered conceptions of success, I found that 20 of the 31 respondents in this analysis actually adopted a role-centered concept of success. In defining success, these respondents emphasized the importance of Alaska Native students having a sense of their roles and responsibilities in a particular group, family, community, or other setting. Students must have both the knowledge of appropriate relationships and the opportunity to enact their roles based on shared understandings of responsibilities dictated by age, sex, relationship, community needs, and individual skills:

Both those are what I look for—are students who have a sense of an awareness about their sociopolitical status and a sense of belonging. They know how to participate in an informed way in our communities. They know about our—perhaps our norms of behavior. They might not follow all of them, but they are aware of which ones they are not following. They are making choices about that. (Higher education leader, June 28, 2005)

For role-centered success, having cultural knowledge is necessary but not sufficient, and similarly, performing well in school is necessary but not sufficient. Youth must "know how to participate" and act on this. The process of developing a sense of belonging in youth lies at the heart of role-centered success:

[Success] is living in tune with nature, living with others with civility and common sense ... and that is going to become more important in urban areas, which have been removed from nature and humanity. We do not teach these kids to be able to think, or who they are and where they came from.... And history is nothing but the history of power, and how it has been attained by certain individuals, by certain groups. Whereas heritage is the story of us and needs to be told over and over in our rural schools—our mythology, our stories ... our ways of seeing death and drumming, our place names ... and all these other traditions that we have. That's the story of us. (Elder, July 25, 2005)

Respondents used terms like "our ways of seeing," "the story of us," and understanding "who they are" as ways of describing how essential it is to help students feel that they belong and are connected to a unique collective narrative about the world and have a place that is theirs. It is important to note that these elements of success are largely about who students

are and how they live rather than what they do or accomplish. Although this respondent emphasized cultural knowledge here in discussing “heritage” and “our mythology, our stories,” he explicitly described success as a way of being or “living in tune with nature, living with others with civility and common sense” as opposed to solely holding cultural knowledge. This emphasis on *being* versus *doing* (or how students perform) was a running theme, and respondents affirmed the importance of students’ understandings about themselves as Alaska Natives for success.

A standards-and-accountability paradigm does not allow for this role-centered conception of success, because it relies on cultural difference in order to maintain the status quo and afford those in the mainstream the continued opportunity to distribute scarce resources. In contrast, a role-centered concept does not hinge on a hierarchical system of cultural differences, nor does it emphasize how we are distinct from one another. That is not to say that role-centered success does not allow for or celebrate cultural difference. In fact this conception encourages us to determine what special contribution we each have to offer one another and the world as human beings who are unique at the same moment that we are related. In this way, our uniqueness does not get lost, but serves a purpose.

In this context, cultural difference is a strength rather than a liability, but only when students are grounded in their home cultures and are able to carry out their roles. Rather than a focus on the disconnection between a student’s home and school cultures, these Alaska Native leaders emphasize connection, relationship, and belongingness and explain that schools, parents, leaders, and students all must take on and enact their roles to ensure success. Success, then, lives at the intersection between personal and shared domains. Thus the Alaska Native Student Vitality project crafted the following definition of Alaska Native student success:

A successful Alaska Native student is a human being—one who knows who s/he is and where s/he comes from, feels a responsibility to contribute to community, and has a choice of life paths.

A clear interdependence is noted here between individual and community success, and school effectiveness itself is not of central importance. Thus the indicators of success are much broader and interrelated than the typical measures cited above (see Table 1).

### *Conclusion*

A cosmogonic paradigm emerges from cultural understandings about what we humans were created for and the roles and responsibilities we have as a result of our purpose in the cosmos. Relationships rather than resources are at the core of this model; and educational development serves to acknowledge and strengthen relationships. And yet human relationships and those occurring in the present are not given greater value or

**Table 1**  
*Suggested Measures of Success*

<i>Student Measures</i>	<i>School Measures</i>	<i>Community Measures</i>
Attendance and graduation rates (Butterfield, 1994)	Administrative leadership (NWREL, 2002)	Communication between communities and schools
Belonging (Strand & Peacock, 2002)	Communication between communities and schools	Community health/wellness
Community service or contribution to the community	District support for local education initiatives	Community involvement in schools (Butterfield, 1994; NWREL, 2002)
Competence in knowledge and skills needed for the immediate environment (Thiebaut, 1997)	Use of community and peers in learning	Families with a strong basis in traditional knowledge (Clarke, 2002)
Competence necessary to compete at national levels (Thiebaut, 1997)	Improvements in facilities (Butterfield, 1994)	Incarceration rates
Cultural competence (Thiebaut, 1997)	Improvements in staff development (Butterfield, 1994)	Literacy rates
Employment levels and types	Non-competitive learning in school	Parent involvement in schools (ANSV; Butterfield, 1994; NWREL, 2002)
Extracurricular participation rates (Butterfield, 1994)	Instructional information used as a baseline assessment of school effectiveness (NWREL, 2002)	Parents as teachers
Generosity (Strand & Peacock, 2002)	Rates of local, Native people teaching	Preservation of Native lands
Independence (Strand & Peacock, 2002)	Staff retention (Butterfield, 1994)	Rates of local, Native people teaching
Mastery (Strand & Peacock, 2002)	Behavioral climate and policies (NWREL, 2002)	Urban, rural education and economic trends
Postsecondary success	Implementation of new curricular initiatives (Butterfield, 1994)	Use of traditional tribal values in schools
Rates of completion of degree/certification	Use of criterion-referenced tests (Butterfield, 1994)	What communities deem as meaningful
Rates of participation in AP courses	Use of traditional tribal values in schools	
Rates of students taking leadership roles	Use of portfolio-based assessments (ANSV; Butterfield, 1994)	
Rates student take jobs in local communities	Visioning, planning, school improvement (NWREL, 2002)	
Rates students take jobs in Native organizations		
School vandalism rates (Butterfield, 1994)		
Student health/wellness		
Student reputation in community		
Student retention rates (ANSV; Butterfield, 1994)		
Students' feelings about themselves		

Note. ANSV notation or no notation indicates that the source was a respondent of the Alaska Native Student Vitality (ANSV) project.

importance than others. Notions of balance and reciprocity are essential to ensure that life in all its forms is honored.

The cosmogonic paradigm has direct applicability for research in Alaska Native education as I demonstrate, and I encourage other researchers to consider how conceptual tools such as genealogy; place-based approaches to data collection, analyses, and reporting; and role-based responsibilities might transform our understandings and practices in education. I leave you with the words of one of my Elders that communicate the spirit of this Indigenous paradigm:

The measure of success, as far as I'm concerned, when they get done, is their feelings about themselves. Are they in peace with themselves? Are the things that they do—do they do it with heart—with heart? And that means there's a lot of civility, there's a lot of common sense. And do they practice the golden rule—not only to the human beings, but to the flora, the fauna, and all the elements of Mother Earth? That to me would be success—one who is at peace with oneself and feels good about themselves ... and when you do that you're delving into what it means to be human.... They have to know who they are, and they have to also recognize just the place names that their ancestors gave and maybe the people give to new places today. They give them Native names. But the landscape forms their mindscape. And that forms the cosmology, and they in turn form the landscape the world is going to be. (Elder, July 25, 2005)

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>First Alaskans Institute was originally established as the Alaska Federation of Natives Foundation in 1995 after the political advocacy organization, the Alaska Federation of Natives, negotiated a settlement from the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company for its failure to meet Native hire requirements in the trans-Alaska pipeline construction efforts. It became independent in 2000 and serves as a nonprofit organization established to strengthen Alaska Native peoples and communities through engaging communities; developing and disseminating information, research, and policy analyses; organizational and community collaboration; and leadership development.

<sup>2</sup>Cosmogony has to do with theories of the origin of the universe. Many Indigenous peoples may refer to these as creation or origin stories, which they often draw on to understand what it means to live as humans in the cosmos. Thus a cosmogonic paradigm is one that is based in cosmogony.

<sup>3</sup>Genealogy here is not based in a postmodern conception that emerges from Nietzsche (1887/1996) and has been taken up by others including Foucault (1994) and Deleuze (1983). Although this conception challenges pervasive dialectics of local-universal, subjective-objective, and past-present, it is often more concerned with how "knowledge of struggles" are brought to bear on our understandings, and the emphasis on "local memories" are not necessarily the same as place-based conceptions (Foucault, p. 42). Genealogy within a cosmogonic paradigm is concerned with knowledge of relationships and is distinctly connected to place-based understandings (Pohatu, 2002; Roberts et al., 2004; Smith, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>This was the first off-reserve boarding school, after which subsequent boarding schools for Alaska Native and American Indian youth were modeled.

<sup>5</sup>The Dawes Act authorized the President to select those reservations he deemed suitable for allotment, after which the following provisions came into effect: First the reservation would be divided into individual allotments, the head of each family receiving 160 acres, with smaller allotments made to unmarried women and orphans. Second, to protect the new landholders from land-hungry Whites, title to the land would be held by the government for a period of twenty-five years, after which it would pass to its lawful owner.

Third, holders of allotments would be granted U.S. citizenship. Finally, the surplus, unallotted lands would be sold off to Whites, the funds gained therefrom to be spent for the Indians' benefit, mainly for education. Reformers looked upon the Dawes Act as a major milestone in their crusade to solve the Indian problem. In a single piece of legislation they believed they had found the mechanism to smash tribalism, transform hunters into farmers, and grant the Indians U.S. citizenship" (Adams, 2008, pp. 27-28).

<sup>6</sup>1883, House Exec. Doc. No. 1, 48th Cong., 2nd sess., 1883-1884, Serial 219, pp. 731-732.

<sup>7</sup>The Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska Anchorage had reported demographic and socioeconomic data by ANCSA Region using its own tabulations of Census data as early as 1986.

<sup>8</sup>Leaders included in this sample are recognized leaders by virtue of the fact that they hold an elected position in education, have a key decision-making position in an educational or youth-serving organization, or hold a position that directly affects youth or the field of education.

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