

**CHEECHAKO TEACHER:
NARRATIVES OF FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS IN RURAL ALASKA**

A

THESIS

**Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks**

**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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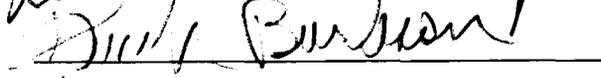
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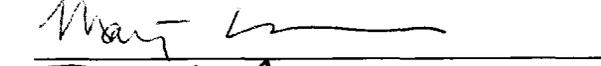
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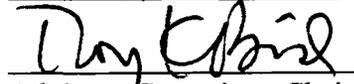
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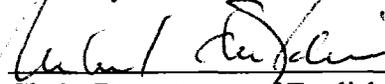








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Abstract

Seventy percent of teachers in rural Alaska come from the lower 48, most having little to no introduction to the culture they are entering or what will be asked of them as teachers. The turnover rate of teachers in rural Alaska far outstrips the national average; in some rural districts turnover is nearly 100 percent each year. This leads us to conclude that the first year of teaching in rural Alaska must be highly charged experience. Though many studies have been done on first-year teachers in rural Alaska, none has focused on the teachers' personal writings produced while in the midst of their experience.

This study is a narrative inquiry into the first-person accounts of first-year teachers in rural Alaska from 1896 to 2006. The study constructs "plot points" (meaning events and tensions that drive the teachers' narratives) that delimit the structure of the average first-year Alaskan teacher story. The accounts are divided into two sections: historical accounts and contemporary accounts. Each of these sections is divided according to a series of plot points, namely: (1) the decision, (2) the arrival, (3) the first day of school, (4) collisions, (5) integration, and (6) effectiveness (historical section only), and (7) the final decision (contemporary teachers only).

The study points out the similarities and contrasts between historical accounts and contemporary accounts and seeks to bring these into dialogue with Alaska-specific pedagogical theories. The study concludes that the utility of first-year teachers' writings is not derived from their prescriptions, but their descriptions.

Thus, the study recommends (1) that more first-person written narratives be gathered from first-year teachers in rural Alaska to facilitate a more in depth study, (2) that new teachers in Alaska avail themselves of the written narratives of their professional forebears, (3) that Alaska's public education system create room for first-year teachers to tell their stories in non-judgmental settings, and (4) that future study also focus on perceptions of first-year teachers by their students and village.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Many studies have been done on teachers in Alaska: what their orientation needs are (Dickerson), what elements play into their longevity as teachers (McDiarmid Larson and Hill, Overstreet), how to train them to be effective in a cross-cultural situation (Ray Barnhardt, Kawagley and Barnhardt, Carol Barnhardt, Kleinfeld). These studies have illuminated our understanding of teachers in Alaska. So far, however, we have very little to help us understand the teachers' experiences from the inside. What does a teacher think as he or she is experiencing the vicissitudes of teaching in a small village far away from home? How do teachers express those experiences in writing? What experiences continue to crop up over the years and in different teachers' lives? How have things changed? How do these writings converse with theories on teaching in rural Alaska?

1.2 Background of the Problem

Obviously complex, the history of teaching in Alaska has been fraught with problems and successes, but mostly with ambiguities. A steadily growing group of scholars has been kept busy theorizing on and teaching methods of education appropriate to rural Alaska. They have turned out many studies (Ray Barnhardt, Carol Barnhardt, Kleinfeld, Lipka) meant to help the new teacher get his or her footing in the village and become an effective teacher quickly. However, 70 percent of the teachers

in rural Alaska have come from the lower-48 (McDiarmid Larson and Hill 8) and have usually not encountered these studies. In fact, they usually know little or nothing about the culture they are immersing themselves in except for a cursory Google search and perhaps an attempt at reading James Michener's *Alaska*. They are usually referred to as "cheechako" teachers, meaning "tenderfoot" or "new ones."

Frequently these new teachers keep track of their experiences in rural Alaska through emails to family and friends, or by keeping a diary either in a book or on the computer. Their writings give us a unique insight into the cheechako teacher; however, until now they have not been collected. In fact, frequently they disappear into cyberspace or make the journey back to the lower-48 without ever returning to Alaska. This is a significant loss to the history of education in Alaska, as the writings can give us deep insights into the life of the new teacher unavailable to us through more traditional studies. These writings can help us think more reflectively about the issues new teachers face.

1.3 Importance of the Study

According to a 2002 survey, 70 percent of teachers in rural Alaska come from the lower-48. At least 30 percent of them leave their positions after the first year (McDiarmid, Larson and Hill 8). By the time three years have passed at least fifty percent of the teachers have left their positions. Most of these new teachers have little to no knowledge of the culture they are entering, of the issues surrounding cross-cultural education, or of the difficulties and rewards of living in such a unique

environment. These factors combine to keep rural Alaska's teaching force inexperienced, often shortchanging rural students.

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the study of teachers in Alaska: namely to focus on their experiences as *they* tell them. Such a collection and analysis can give us a new view of the first-year teacher's experience in rural Alaska and point the way for future study.

1.4 Purpose of Study

I have gathered together the diaries, letters, emails and publications of many first-year teachers in rural Alaska. My collection dates back to 1896 and continues to grow as teachers send me material. My purpose in collecting these materials is to find common themes and experiences in their writings, as well as to find differences between accounts. Perhaps from the writings of teachers themselves we can see what is important to them, and thus, what future studies should focus on.

The central metaphor I want to organize the writings around is that of the "plot point." Plot points, as defined by Syd Field in his book Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting, "is an incident, or event, that 'hooks' into the action and spins it around into another direction" (Field 111). Thus, I am going to be looking for those moments when the action of a teacher's "story" is spun in a different direction. We will then examine the implications of these plot points in the life of a teacher.

1.5 Research Questions

The writings of first-year teachers in rural Alaska are rarely limited just to information about the school context. Usually there is much about the Alaskan landscape, personal relationships, and activities unrelated to school. With thousands of pages worth of material a series of research questions is necessary to guide the analysis:

1. What similar experiences, attitudes and reflections can we find in the writings of these teachers?
2. What differences can we find among the writings? What seems to have changed from the point of view of the teachers during the 110 years we will be surveying?
3. When taken together, what could we call the “plot points” of the average rural Alaskan teacher’s story?
4. How do the writings of these teachers converse with some of the theories of teaching in rural Alaska?

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

Since this survey covers 110 years worth of material, I knew that I would see many differences among the writings. However, I came with a few assumptions about what I would find from my time as an English and technology consultant traveling to small villages in rural Alaska. Most of the teachers I have worked with are very new to the profession. During the professional time I spent with them, and then in more

informal settings, I started hearing their stories about what it is like to make the sudden jump from suburban America to rural Alaska. The stories were often similar and had to do with changes in the culture, the teachers' expectations for school and the students, and challenges in overcoming cultural gaps and transitioning between suburban American and rural Native situations.

Thus I assumed that I would find a basic "plot arc" in the writings of these teachers: starting with them as untrained teachers with naïve expectations, following them through their disillusionment and the struggle to understand their situation. I also expected to find moments of understanding and, finally at the end, evidence that the teachers had matured during their stay and had come to a decision about whether they would be returning the next year. In this last assumption, I was mostly wrong. Since the writings I read were mostly emails, they always tapered off just before the teacher's returned home and thus usually left their final weeks silent, often leaving the audience without an "ending."

Since I am approaching this analysis from a plot point-based metaphor, I also assumed that I would be able to find generic occurrences could show us where the teachers' "stories" were "spinning" off to.

However, since I am approaching material as idiosyncratic as personal writings, I also expected to find a lot of messiness that won't fit neatly in categories. The nature of qualitative research, however, allows the luxury of considering these as well.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses on narratives I have gathered together, including published memoirs, letter collections, and novels, as well as unpublished letters, journal entries, emails, and blogs from many different sources such as libraries, archives, and personal contact with individuals. The writings cover the period between 1896 and 2006. The writings of these teachers are unique, and tied to their character, setting, and circumstances. Therefore, it is difficult to draw generalizations from an analysis of their writings. However, as Judith Kleinfeld has argued,

As a heuristic device, the teacher tale has a number of advantages. First it is memorable. Rural teachers have told us that these kinds of stories remain in their minds when they go out to the villages and that with time they see fresh meanings in the same stories. Second, the story is accepted as valid. Teachers are not hostile to the story the way they so often are to “research” because the story only claims to be one person’s experience; it does not make claims to universal truth. Third, the stories are stimulating. They encourage critical reflection on experience. They place the teacher in the role not of the skeptic questioning “findings” but of the researcher trying to construct meaning from the kaleidoscope of particular experiences. (Kleinfeld et al. 29)

The primary data collection methodology was sending out emails to various districts, schools and teachers throughout Alaska, and finding former teachers who still had their writings on hand. I collected as much of their writing as the respondents were

willing to give me, either in person, or by email. In all cases, these teachers did not know at the time of their teaching that their writings would be analyzed as part of a scholarly project. The main audiences for their writings were usually themselves or friends and family. This method gives us, I believe, a candid and personal look at these teachers' lives. In all cases, I have remained as faithful to the original writings as possible, changing names, locales and details just enough to maintain the confidentiality of all involved.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

Since I had no control over who would answer my emails, or who would have the time or inclination to work with me, the data collection is far from representing a cross section of rural Alaska teachers. In addition, the accounts here are idiosyncratic and can only be construed as representing the opinion of the teacher. The study group is also heavily weighted toward people that like to write or communicate with people in the "outside world," as well as toward people who are willing to let their writings be more public. Many teachers I talked with were unwilling to share their writings without significant editing.

Thus, it would be irresponsible to propose authoritative generalizations from this material. The purpose of this study is to gather an idea of what the "plot points" in a beginning teacher's career might be and how they interact with theories of teaching in Alaska.

1.9 Summary

The written narratives of first-year teachers in rural Alaska are always unique and interesting. They invariably present a person significantly different from the other teachers who have written about their experiences. Also, the landscape of Alaska varies greatly, from the rain forests of southeast Alaska, to the wind-whipped, treeless tundra of Point Barrow, affecting the experiences and perceptions of the teachers. The people also differ. Alaska is home to many indigenous people: the Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Aleuts and Yupiks to name only a few. There are significant differences among these people, the stories they tell, and the way they live their lives.

While honoring the differences that must arise from these teachers and their unique encounters with unique cultures, we are also looking for the similarities that bind these teachers together. And they are many.

Though few of the new teachers who come to Alaska know anything about the history of public education in Alaska, it is important to do so. When one enters a situation, there is always its history, complete with successes, failures and ambiguities, to deal with. In Chapter 2 I will briefly trace education from the Russian period to the territorial period to the current period of statehood.

Next, I will review the current discussion on first-year teachers in general: the general findings on the teachers' experiences, and how scholars are formulating those experiences. Finally, I will summarize similar studies done on Alaska's teachers.

One element that separates the experience of new teachers in Alaska from those in the lower-48 is that of culture. Most teachers who come to Alaska have little

to no knowledge of the culture they are diving into. I will briefly review education from the point of view of Alaska Natives in order to help us place the teachers' experiences in a cultural context. This will complete the literature review.

In Chapter 3 I will present my methodology: how I collected my data and the narrative inquiry and qualitative analysis methods I will use to interpret the data.

Chapters 4 and 5 are presentations and analysis of the narratives. Chapter 4 covers historical narratives, and Chapter 5 covers contemporary narratives. I will present an overview of historic teacher narratives and then contemporary narratives presented and analyzed under 7 categories:

- (1) the initial decision
- (2) the arrival
- (3) the first day of school
- (4) collisions
- (5) integration
- (6) effectiveness (historical teachers only) and
- (7) the final decision

In "the initial decision" we will examine how the teachers came to decide to teach in Alaska. "The arrival" will describe the initial impressions these teachers have of their new home, and how those impressions affected them. "The first day of school" will cover the teachers' initial experiences in the school context and how they interacted with their preconceptions. "Collisions" dwells on the inevitable misunderstandings and cultural friction that arise from these teachers' interaction with

Alaska Native cultures. “Integration” will show us those moments when the teachers are able to connect with the village and their work. The “effectiveness” section will go over what the teachers actually felt they accomplished in their work when the school year is up. And finally, we will see why these teachers decided to stay in Alaska, or why they chose to leave.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 History of Education in Alaska

2.1.1 Russian Period: 1783 - 1867

The history of western education in Alaska starts with the coming of the Russians to the Aleutians and Kodiak Island. The first Russians who came into contact with the native people of the area were after furs, and stopped at very little to get at them. This early history is essentially a story of brutality and dominance on the part of the Russians, described by Dauenhauer as “an unchecked era of massacre and rape” (8). As these first sailors are reputed to have said, “Heaven and the Tsar are far away.”

Things changed only a little in 1783 when, according to Koponen,

“Gregory Shelikof established a settlement on Kodiak Island after a fierce struggle with the natives. To insure the uneasy and fragile peace he had taken twenty children of the most prominent Konjagmiut as hostages. For these children he set up the first school of which we have record. He himself taught ‘navigation and the practical arts.’ His wife, who had accompanied him, taught the domestic arts and religion. They apparently taught their charges to read and write simple Russian and some arithmetic. (20)

Shelikof had an idea that indirectly brought more humanity to Russian-Alaskan relationships. He wanted to develop a monopoly on the fur trade with Russia. But Queen Catharine, who considered herself an enlightened, humane ruler, insisted that the companies who worked within the monopoly charter provide schooling for the natives in the area: “Subsequently, a primary goal of education from the point of view of the Russian-American Company was to benefit itself by providing schooling that would support company middle management and clerical skills” (Darnell par. 8).

The less-than-altruistic motives of the Russian-American Company were contrasted by Ivan Veniaminov, a Russian Orthodox priest. He spent many of his early years in the Aleutians developing not only churches, but a written representation and grammar of the Aleut language. He also did much work with Tlingit and Yupik. He went on to become the Metropolitan of Moscow in his last years, and continued to fund education in Alaska, even after its transfer to the United States (Darnell par. 10).

2.1.2 Early American Period: 1867 – 1918

Later, after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, Alaska entered a 17-year period called by Governor Gruening “the era of total neglect” (Koponen 26). As Darnell puts it, “Regardless of how motives of American missionaries may now be perceived, they alone were the first American teachers in Alaska, the first school having been established in 1877 by a Presbyterian missionary” (par. 19). There were also some Russian schools left over and some initial educational forays by the Catholics, Moravians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians.

The towering figure of this era was Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian pastor. It was he who convinced the United States government to fund religious schools in Alaska, and introduced reindeer herds to the Seward Peninsula: “The idea was that the importation, propagation and management of reindeer was to be part of the scheme of industrial (i.e. vocational) education in the Eskimo country” (Koponen 32). He also convinced the various denominations to divide Alaska up in order to keep from duplicating efforts and “sheep stealing” (Koponen 31). According to Darnell, “By 1890 the total number of Alaska schools had increased to 54, but of this number only 16 appeared to be wholly controlled by the government” (Darnell par. 25).

In contrast to the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church, which, according to Dauenhauer, strove to bring education and religion to Alaska Natives in their own tongue, letting the culture remain even as Christianity was preached, Jackson’s philosophy of education conflated Christianity and Anglo-Saxon culture: “For Sheldon Jackson religion was inseparably linked with culture – specifically the American culture of his age” (11). He conceived of Alaska as a battlefield, exploitive miners and military and the alcohol they brought with them on the dark side, and the teachers and churches on the light. In some ways, Jackson was correct, as almost two decades without government intervention had led to a lawless state of affairs.

Jackson was very selective about whom he would allow a teaching position in Alaska. An applicant usually needed a letter of reference from the applicant’s pastor, and often one from a political figure or newspaper editor, in order to gain a position. Jackson required the first to make sure the applicant would be a zealous Christian, as

committed to teaching the gospel as he or she was to teaching the three R's, and the second to gain political and public support of education in Alaska (Henningsen 103-4).

Jackson's vision of the importance of culture being taught alongside academics showed itself in his mandate that English only should be spoken in the schools, and that those who spoke their native language should be punished (Alaska 1888).

Jackson's vision became firmly rooted in Alaskan educational thought and manifested itself later when boarding schools were introduced to Alaska.

As more people from the continental United States moved into Alaska, Congress passed the Nelson Act in 1900, which allowed towns to incorporate and establish school districts for white children (as the federally funded missionary schools were taking care of the Native population). Thus "Where there was both a Native and a non-Native population in the same town, two government schools, one for Natives, one for whites, were maintained alongside each other, a condition that lasted until 1967 when the remaining two schools in a single village were consolidated" (Darnell par. 30).

2.1.3 Territorial Era: 1912 – 1959

In 1917 the Territorial Department of Education was established by the Alaska Territorial Legislature. The department was responsible for all schools in Alaska excepting the federal schools.

A snapshot of the reasoning behind the dual system of education at the time is provided by a 1920 report from Lester D. Henderson, the Alaska Commissioner of Education:

There are several objectives to the maintenance of a unified system of schools for white and Native children, the principal ones being the irregularity of the attendance of Natives and their inability to conform to the standard of the whites in the matter of health and sanitation [. . .] The presence of two distinct races of people and the resulting mixing of blood creates difficulties in supervision and administration [. . .] Where the races must mingle, there is usually a certain degree of friction, the parents of white children often keeping them out of school and securing private teachers in order to avoid the close contact and what they consider the evil resulting therefrom. (Henderson 188)

Though there were attempts in the early 1920s to introduce Native culture into the curriculum, they didn't amount to much (Darnell par. 34). Then, in 1928 the Merriam Report was published:

The report's recommendations called for a major reformation of American Indian education with Indian involvement at all levels of the educational process and with specific recommendations that education be tied to communities, day schools extended, boarding schools reformed, Indian language and culture included in the development of

the curriculum, and field services decentralized. (Carol Barnhardt
“History” par. 47)

However, “Just about the time the new policy might have had an effect on the curriculum, World War II intervened and government attention to Native schooling became a low priority” (Darnell par. 43). Indeed, “several of these recommendations continue to be referenced, relevant, and unrealized over 70 years later” (Barnhardt “History” par. 47).

Meanwhile, precursors to the equal rights movement (and its backlash) were brewing in many Alaskan villages where attempts were being made to integrate the two school systems. In 1943 the Alaska Attorney General wrote his opinion paper on the rights of Native children to the services of territory-run schools: “A clean, wistful native child looks just as sweet in the school room as a white child similarly groomed, and therefore he may not be deprived of an education on account of his color alone” (Alaska “Opinion” n.pag.). Inclusion in the schools was more a matter of soap than race.

Indeed, many territory-run schools did educate Alaska Native students, but the curriculum, whether in territorial or federal schools, didn’t take the Native child into account, offering such courses as "Health and Sanitation; Agriculture and Industry; the Decencies, Safety, and Comforts of the Home; Healthful Recreation and Amusements; Basic Education and Industrial Schools" (U.S. Department of Interior, “*Biennial Survey*” 500).

2.1.4 Statehood Period: 1959 to Present

In 1959, Alaska was granted statehood, and along with it, a beginning to total control over its schools. Along with statehood came the Equal Rights Amendment debate, spurring a vigorous effort on the part of Alaska's natives to gain more political, economic and educational control of their lives. They "became sophisticated public advocates for indigenous causes by formally organizing into advocacy groups, and by using the established tools of other activist groups (e.g. lobbying, use of publicity, legal expertise, demonstrations, grass-roots efforts)" (Carol Barnhardt "History" par. 60). One of the results of these efforts was the creation of the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966.

The dual system that had been in place for so long began undergoing changes as well. In 1976 the state developed a Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAs) system, dividing "rural Alaska into 21 autonomous school districts along lines of regional ethnic and geographic identity, each with its own locally elected school board of directors charged with making local policy. [...] The last school administered by the federal government was closed in 1985, one century after the first federal school had been organized and two centuries following the opening of the first Russian school" (Darnell par. 59).

Until about the time of the REAA's development, high schools were still all but unavailable in rural areas. No moves were made by the government to improve this situation until 1974 when the "Molly Hooch" class action lawsuit was filed against the

state of Alaska charging racially discriminatory practice for not providing equal high school opportunities in both Native and non-Native populations.

In 1976, the Governor of Alaska settled the case out of court: “In the settlement, the state of Alaska agreed that it would establish a high school program in every community in Alaska where there was an elementary school (which required a minimum enrollment of eight students) and one or more secondary students, unless the community specifically declined such a program” (Carol Barnhardt “History” par. 82).

This settlement signaled the beginning of the end of the boarding school program that had been taking students from their villages to Wrangell, Nome, Mt. Edgecumbe (still in operation as of this writing), St. Mary’s and Copper Center since 1900. True to Jackson’s vision of cultural assimilation the schools were designed to take the students away from their village and culture in order to inculcate them with American culture and values. Studies done on the boarding schools have revealed reports across the spectrum, from horror stories of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of faculty, staff and students and rampant suicide, to glowing reports of caring teachers and the development of life-long friendships and a useful education (Kleinfeld and Bloom, Kleinfeld “Eskimo School”, Hirshberg and Sharp).

Alaska now has three types of school districts, administered by local school boards: “1) each first-class city in the unorganized borough is a district; 2) each organized borough, regardless of size, is a borough school district; and 3) the area outside organized boroughs and outside first-class cities (the unorganized borough) is divided into 23 Regional Education Attendance Areas (in 1992)” (Darnell par. 63).

“Today there are over 120 small high schools in Alaska villages, nearly all operated by the REAA in which they are located” (Carol Barnhardt “History” par. 85).

In 1990, Congress created the Alaska Natives Commission (officially, the Joint Federal-State Commission on Policies and Programs Affecting Alaska Natives). The Commission was to execute a thorough study of the status (social and economic) of Alaska Natives and the effect of government programs and policies on their status. From their work arose a comprehensive set of cultural standards upon which a culturally relevant curriculum could be built, and a group of Native educators and elders charged with seeing these plans and requirements implemented in Alaska’s schools. The results of their work can be found at www.ankn.uaf.edu.

As Carol Barnhardt writes: “The potential for students to become academically successful through culturally relevant approaches now exists in ways that were unimaginable just thirty years ago. Culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum is available, highly qualified Alaska Native educators live and work in every region of the state, and the legal requirement for local control and local school governance is in place. (“History” par. 115)

As has been mentioned before, the majority of new teachers coming to Alaska have no knowledge of Alaska’s educational history, or the cultural standards guidelines. These deficiencies will come into play during the narrative analysis to follow.

2.2 Alaska Native Educational Philosophy

In order to enter this part of the review we need to briefly dip into Alaskan

history again as seen through the eyes of Harold Napoleon. His work, Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being, has become an important element in the identity of Alaska's Natives.

According to Napoleon, a great blow was struck to Alaska Native culture and identity when the influenza epidemic of 1900 swept through the state: "This epidemic killed whole families and wiped out whole villages. It gave birth to a generation of orphans – our current grandparents and great-grandparents" (10). These orphans "woke to a world in shambles, many of their people and their beliefs strewn around them, dead. In their minds they had been overcome by evil. Their medicines and their medicine men and women had proven useless. Everything they had believed in had failed" (11).

The Native people abandoned their traditions and came under the influence of Christian missionaries who reinforced their disillusionment by teaching that the old traditions had been of the devil. Napoleon argues that this generation of orphans lived in a state of post-traumatic stress disorder, which they passed on to future generations by refusing to deal openly with their emotions, fearing they would be uncontrollable: "Several generations of suppressed emotions, confusion, and feelings of inferiority and powerlessness now permeate even the very young" (20).

Since the late 1960s, much work has been done to reclaim the lost traditions and to integrate them into public education, which has been dominated by the Western worldview.

A good metaphor to help us understand the essential difference between the

worldview of the new teacher from the lower 48 and that of his or her Alaska Native students is presented by Martha Aescher in her book The Organization and Modeling of Space. She suggests through two quotes that the Western worldview could be effectively compared to the straight line, while Native worldviews would be better compared to a circle. She quotes Davis and Hersh:

In raw nature, untouched by human activity, one sees straight lines in primitive form. [...] The world, so it would seem, has compelled us to create the straight line so as to optimize our activity. [...] By the time a child has grown up to become a philosopher, the concept of a straight line has become so intrinsic and fundamental a part of his thinking that he may imagine it as an Eternal Form, part of the Heavenly Host of Ideals which he recalls from before birth. (qtd. In Aescher 124)

And then from Black Elk:

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. [...] Our tepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Sprit meant for us to hatch our children. [...] When we were living by the power of the circle in the way we should, boys were men at twelve or thirteen years of age. But now it takes them very much longer to mature. (qtd.in Aescher 125)

As diametrically opposed as these two philosophies seem to be, they both have

succeeded in running their own civilizations. However, the Western worldview has been much more willing to impose itself on other worldviews, usually through a sense of righteousness and charity. This is certainly what happened in Alaska.

Kawagley and Barnhardt (“Education Indigenous”) paraphrase Knudtson and Suzuki’s further comparison of Native vs. Western worldviews. Spirituality, they say, is imbedded in all elements of the cosmos in Native thought, while in Western thought it is centered in a single Supreme Being.

For example, we can compare the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to a story related by Kawagley. In Kawagley’s story (“Worldview” 24), a male and female wake up in an abandoned village with no memory of their past. Much like Adam and Eve, they are naïve. However, the two stories diverge at this point. While Adam and Eve spend their initial lives in a garden that supports them completely, speaking regularly with God, the two in the village must experiment with the tools and materials around them, slowly building up knowledge between them. In the Biblical account, God gives humans dominion over the earth and its creatures. In Kawagley’s the humans feel that they are simply one part of a larger system: “After all, the Creator for many Native people is the Raven, so how could the human being be superior to the creatures of Mother Earth?” (Kawagley and Barnhardt “Education Indigenous” par. 28).

In fact, as Bakar argues, the animal world was considered a source of wisdom: “Careful observation was made of animal behavior and the inner qualities and the genius of a particular animal species with a view of deriving spiritual and moral

lessons from that animal species. There is a metaphysical basis for the belief that animals have much to teach man concerning the divine wisdom and about his own inner nature” (95).

These basic beliefs lead the two cultures in completely different directions. The Native path leads toward maintaining harmonious relationships with the natural world, while the Western mindset has veered increasingly toward exercising its dominion for personal and economic gain.

Taking this difference in worldview to an educational point, Knudtson and Suzuki say that the Native worldview holds the universe to be “a holistic, integrative system with a unifying life force,” while the Western worldview sees the universe as being “compartmentalized in dualistic forms and reduced to progressively smaller conceptual parts” (qtd. in Kawagley and Barnhardt “Education Indigenous” par 13).

Thus, as the Caucasian America, bearing the Western worldview, has moved into Alaska, it has brought with it a completely alien worldview that in most cases is dramatically at odds with the Native worldview. Caucasian Americans have created their educational system in the image of their worldview, slicing knowledge up into parts to be consumed discreetly, often without the student understanding the relationship of the piece of information to the larger world. This educational approach poses quite a difficulty for Native students (not to mention their Western counterparts):

“Students in indigenous societies around the world have, for the most part, demonstrated a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the experience of

schooling in its conventional form, an aversion that is most often attributable to an alien school culture, rather than any lack of innate intelligence, ingenuity, or problem-solving skills on the part of the students” (Kawagley and Barnhardt “Education Indigenous” par. 1)

Whereas Aristotle divided the earth into the elements of air, earth, fire and water, Kawagley says that the Native worldview adds one more element: spirit. It is spirit that brings the elements together into an integrated whole and helps people learn. And the way one deals with the “spirit” that holds the world together is through myth: “Myths are the Alaska Native’s tool for teaching” (“Worldview” 31):

To hear stories being told in the qasegiq (community house) allowed the children and other hearers to savor the words and visualize the events. For the duration of the story, they became a part of the imagery. [...] In the qasegiq, the hearer becomes a part of the story, an essential participant-observer in the events. [...] The children learn and the grown-ups are reminded of who and what they are, where they came from, and how they are to interact with others, with natural things and with spirits. This is truly living history. (Kawagley “Worldview” 17)

Kawagley (“Worldview”) and Napoleon say knowledge was also passed down narratively in the form of dances and rituals. However, on the more pragmatic side, the essential method of traditional Native education is through observation. The young man accompanies his father and others on a seal hunt, watching what they do and gathering nuggets of information from the talk around him before he tries his hand at

the process. Similarly, a young girl may sit by her grandmother's side for months observing her cutting fish before picking up an ulu knife.

This cultural reliance on observational learning is in conflict with the way most classrooms are set up with their preference for abstraction, explanation, individual work, and competition: "To translate Yupiaq teaching and learning into current educational jargon, one could state that teaching strongly emphasizes modeling and guided practice, and that cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and hands-on learning are essential strategies" (Kawagley Norris-Tull and Norris-Tull 137).

Education is not seen in the Native community as separate from everyday life. It is completely integrated. And, frequently, the education is carried out by the elders of the village, who are afforded great respect (Wilson). Compare this with the teachers who often come into the villages while in their 20s, having no knowledge of the people in the village, and with a separatist perspective on schooling.

Kawagley suggests a much different approach to schooling, one rooted in myth. He suggests in [A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit](#) that an effective curriculum could be put together around a fish camp (123). The curriculum could take on the form of the Hegelian triad, with the Native worldview acting as thesis and coming into interaction with the Western worldview as antithesis. The purpose of the meeting would not be for battle, but for synthesis. For example, the story of Adam and Eve could be told along side the story of the boy and girl who wake to find themselves alone. Lessons in math, chemistry, botany, etc., could be drawn from everyday encounters with fish, rivers, bogs, and camp life. Myths, the scientific

method, and everyday life would all provide a structure for integrating observations and fact into a holistic view of the world.

So, for example, rather than,

'You received a C- on your hydrodynamics project,' a teacher might say, 'You nicked your propeller a little when you tried that channel. Look at the way the river comes off that cut-bank and try to figure out where the least amount of gravel got deposited.' If a student does not yet grasp a particular skill, the student might be given further modeling of the skill and then be given another opportunity to attempt it on his or her own. The student continues practicing and further modeling is provided until the skill is mastered. (Kawagley Norris-Tull and Norris-Tull 143)

The Alaska Native Knowledge Network has put together many materials to assist teachers, Native and non-Native, to teach in a more culturally effective manner. Many of these can be found at their website: <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu>.

Kawagley and Barnhardt envision the day when Alaska Native culture can rebuild its vitality and come into a more reciprocal relationship with Western culture:

Then the individual and community can allow selected outside values and traditions which they think will strengthen their minds, bodies and spirits to filter in. The Alaska Native people will again become whole people and know what to be and what to do to make a life and a living. They will have reached into the profound silence of self to attain

happiness and harmony in a world of their own making. (Kawagley and Barnhardt “Education Indigenous” par 40)

2.3 First-Year Teachers

Most teachers come into their training and eventually into their first jobs with a missionary zeal. A study by Younger et al. showed that 40 percent of pre-service teachers surveyed in the U.K. entered the field because of their own positive experiences with their own education. Thirty percent talked about deciding to teach in “strong idealistic” terms, and represented their decision in terms of “moral positioning.” In fact, 80 percent had been advised against taking up teaching as a profession. However, most of the teachers took the discouragement as a challenge, increasing their desire to continue (249).

Rust gives us an excellent example of this “moral positioning” and missionary zeal in the following excerpt from the journal writings of a fledgling teacher:

[M]y primary reason for going into teaching was my love for children. I see now, however, that that is not enough. I want to be a teacher now even more than before because now I have important reasons. Mainly, I think change is needed in education. Education today is not treating children fairly; it is not considering what is in the best interest of children, it is failing future society. I want to be a teacher so I can do my part to reverse these. (“First Year” 211)

However, as Simon Veenman states in his meta-analysis of major studies of beginning teachers in Europe, the United States and Australia since 1960, most beginning teachers experience “reality shock,” meaning “the collapse of missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life” (143). Teachers experiencing reality shock tend to change their in-class behavior, even when it goes against their pedagogical beliefs, eventually changing their attitudes and personality. For some, “the disillusion may be so great, that the beginning teacher leaves the profession early” (144).

Rust gives us a more visceral look at reality shock and its effects on behaviors and attitudes with stories from two first-year teachers:

Both experienced tremendous loneliness and insecurity, they were conflicted between their need to be in control and their belief in interactive learning, thus confrontations with children over things like bathroom use became power struggles which left them feeling angry and ashamed. Both have ended up behaving in ways that are inconsistent with their images of the good teacher. (“Not What” 215)

Lundeen gives us an interesting metaphor through which to view the experience of new teachers.

Young children entering school need a safe, protective, nurturing environment where they are free to take risks, apply sound moral judgments, practice burgeoning pro-social skills and receive validation as well as positive reinforcement as they grow and develop: a list of

needs that is essentially identical for the new teacher. They are parallel journeys. (560)

Indeed, Veenman presents us with three levels of teacher development, which also reflect the concerns of children entering a classroom for the first time:

1. Survival: in this phase, new teachers are concerned about “class control, being liked by pupils, and being valued.”
2. Situation: in this phase, new teachers are concerned about “limitations and frustrations in the teaching situation, methods and materials,” and how to master certain skills within the teaching/learning situation.
3. Pupil Concern: in this phase teachers become more adept at relating to pupils as individuals, the teachers are concerned about their students’ learning, social and emotional needs. (161)

‘Most studies agree that beginning teachers do not begin to enter the second or third level of development until at least their second year (Flores, Lundeen).

The main problems faced by new teachers, according to Veenman’s study, are

1. Disciplining students
2. Motivating students
3. Dealing with individual differences
4. Assessing student work
5. Relating with parents
6. Organizing class work
7. Dealing with insufficient materials and supplies

8. Managing the problems of individual students
9. Dealing with the infringement of heavy teaching loads on preparation time
10. Relating with colleagues (154)

Again, Rust gives us a narrative rendition of Veenman's list from the first two days of a teacher's experience.

The first 2 days of school have been a nightmare for her. She has a classroom with no supplies, not even chalk. There was nothing in the room, nothing but student desks and a wooden table with splinters. She and her mother taped over it and then covered it with a cloth. There was a box of books that she was told to go through. All were years out of date. Marcy went out and bought \$400 worth of supplies. She has 27 fifth graders in her class.

The first days were very hard for her. The weather was hot, the classroom close. The kids threw her pattern blocks out the window. They kept hitting each other, moving around the room, refusing to listen to her. She found herself yelling. It was the only way that she could get their attention. She was shocked by what she called "their lack of respect." Once they left, she cried all afternoon. The next day was equally difficult.

They are supposed to be a group of "gifted students." Marcy says that, "most of them cannot complete a sentence." "They have no social skills," she says. ("Not What" 179)

Marcy quit her job on the fifth day of school, which leads us to Veenman's critique of teacher education programs: "Studies of attitude changes seem to suggest that the impact of teacher education courses is "washed out" by everyday experience in the schools"("Not What"147).

This washing out occurs mainly because, according to Veenman's paraphrasing of Ryan, "(a) [teachers] are essentially undertrained for the demands of their work; (b) there are no clear selection criteria in teacher training, and (c) beginning teachers have had a general training and are not trained for specific jobs in specific schools. (147)

Rust further observes that "Beginning teachers focus on the 'front stage' behaviors that are obvious and well known to them [...] they are unaware of the complexities of teaching that are hidden from view" ("Not What" 205).

So new teachers early on enter into the survival phase where, according to Flores, they start to do "what works" in practice, even if they believed in the opposite. [...] Second, they became 'socialized' into the ethos of teaching, and consequently, they started acting as their colleagues and the school administration did, instead of trying to keep with their own ideas." Most of this change occurs during the second term (22).

Lundeen sees new teachers as frequently having not "achieved the developmental readiness to provide for others when they are self-centered on simply making it through the day" (560).

Indeed, one of Rust's subjects, the one who had talked of loving children as her first motivation to enter teaching, ranked "enjoy kids" as fifth place in her reasoning for continuing to teach at the end of her first year. Her beginning dedication to progressive teaching practices had been replaced by a greater focus on discipline ("Not What" 214):

However, positive changes have occurred by the end of the year as well.

Galvanized by simply surviving the year, the new teachers studied eventually gained the knowledge and experience to attend to the instruction and needs of others in the classroom context. Over time, their focus shifted significantly from 'self as teacher' to 'teacher of children.' However, can children afford to 'wait' for the kind of instruction and attention they deserve while the novices 'get it together'? (Lundeen 559)

Later chapters will deal with many of the same findings and questions raised by these researchers. The experiences of first-year teachers in Alaska are, in many ways, very much the same as those of their colleagues elsewhere.

2.4 Summary

In this chapter I have set up a context for approaching the written narratives of historical and especially contemporary teachers.

The history of Western education in Alaska has been mainly a history of acculturating Alaska Natives. The Russian period was marked both by exploitation (on

the side of the traders) and deep humanity (on the side of Russian Orthodox missionaries).

The American period was originally marked by governmental neglect and then by the joint venture by churches and the government to begin educating and Christianizing Alaska Natives. Further government actions resulted in a dual school system, one for the children of White settlers, and the other for Natives. Eventually, the state gained control of the schools and divided Alaska into autonomous, locally governed districts. Alaska Natives have made great strides in introducing culturally relevant curriculum to public schools. But much is yet to be done.

Alaska Native learning theories are often in conflict with Western pedagogical approaches. Natives tend to learn through “modeling and guided practice, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and hands-on learning” (Kawagley Norris-Tull and Norris-Tull 137), while Western pedagogy tends to emphasize abstract learning out of context with the surrounding world. This difference in worldviews tends to make communication between teachers from the lower 48 and their Alaska Native students difficult.

New teachers during their first year seem to share a similar set of experiences often described as “reality shock” (Veenman). They usually enter their first teaching job straight out of college with grand ideals and plans for sweeping change. These ideals and plans, however, are often deflated by the realities of day-to-day teaching duties. Frequently first-year teachers find their energies being diverted from pedagogy to classroom discipline. They find themselves effectively abandoning their earlier liberal ideals, and instead taking up a more conservative approach, despite still holding

liberal ideologies in their hearts. Frequently, the success, or lack thereof, of the teachers' first year dictates whether they will continue teaching, and how they view their roles as teachers.

The next chapter will discuss the theories of qualitative analysis and narrative inquiry to be used in analyzing the collected writings. Chapter 4 will contain a survey and analysis of teacher writings prior to 1950. Chapter 5 will survey and analyze the writings of contemporary teachers. Chapter 6 will summarize my findings, present their implications, and recommend paths for future research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Background

My decision to approach the new teacher in rural Alaska from a narrative viewpoint arose from my years as a news reporter and my later training in fiction writing. While I worked as a news reporter I was often confused to hear from people I had interviewed for articles that I had completely misrepresented them, that I had taken their quotes out of context and twisted them to say something they hadn't intended. This confused me because, from my point of view, I had stayed true to their quotes, and had given them sense by locating them within particular contexts. Though this didn't happen too often, it happened just often enough to perturb me.

As I trained in fiction writing, I came across a quote from Robert McKee that threw a little light on my confusion. Stories, McKee argues, are not meant to say something about the real world. They are meant as metaphors. In other words, a story says, This, dear reader, is what life is *like*. Life is like living in a world where the androids want to be human. Life is like finding out that your father is the lord of the dark side. Life is like voting for Pedro.

I want to steer a course between the two: between stories as having a connection with reality, and stories as being metaphorical.

3.2 Analytical Tools

Malcom Gladwell, in his book Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, argues that often we can come to accurate conclusions by “thin-slicing.” We take in only a thin slice of information on a person, event, or object, and analyze it subconsciously, automatically comparing it with the numerous bits of information and impressions we have gathered over the years, and generate an impression more visceral than rational.

Elliot Eisner focuses more on conscious analysis, but brings Gladwell’s argument further, when he describes three kinds of generalization. Formal inference is wrought from randomized samplings, assuming that the results drawn from a random sampling of a population can give us fodder for generalizations about that particular population. Formal inference is often associated with scientific research. But then Eisner presents attribute analysis: “our image of the specific attributes that mark a particular class of objects or processes [...] can be used to identify their presence in our experience. We can and do make inferences on the basis of partial information. With enough partial information, we make classifications and judgments in which we have some confidence” (Eisner 201). Finally, we have image matching, where we start with a generalized image, “a gestalt, and find that we are seeking not by looking for specific attributes, but by matching a pattern seen with an image remembered” (Eisner 201).

It is these second two methods of generalization that Gladwell was referring to, and those I think will be most helpful in approaching my data. When we see a teacher

struggling with a cultural barrier, we may learn something about the culture she is immersed in, and it may be helpful to some teachers who will find themselves in the same culture, but the results of the story and the way the teacher handled it don't describe how *another* teacher would react. We will see attributes that can be a part of a culture, or a person, but those attributes could be arranged in any way. And they certainly might be, as life tends to be messy. Thus, we also need to make use of the gestalt image, looking for familiar patterns that will help us to arrange individual images fluidly.

One of my main goals in this dissertation is to reveal and arrange the experience of the beginning teachers I have studied so that others who may be considering entering the teaching field in Alaska will have a set of stories that can help them approach their experience reflectively. As Eisner says, "another extremely important source is secured vicariously through parables, pictures, and precepts. One of the most useful of human abilities is the ability to learn from the experience of others. [...] We listen to story-tellers and learn about how things were, and we use what we have been told to make decisions about what will be" (Eisner 202).

3.2.1 Alaska Teachers' Stories

Judith Kleinfeld led pioneering work in studying Alaskan teachers through their stories. Her efforts came about as a result of a study she did with G. Williamson McDiarmid, Steve Grubis, and William Parrett. They attempted to find ways to identify and quantify characteristics and methods of teaching in order to help Alaska

teachers to improve their craft. However, they found that, first, it was almost impossible to quantify “good teaching,” and, second, that what really made a difference in teachers’ lives and practice were the stories they told.

As we ourselves read through the research literature, we found that we could not even remember many of the generalizations about effective teachers. What we found stimulating, what we remembered, what we thought about and talked about to our colleagues, were the concrete cases. (Kleinfeld, et al. 25)

Furthermore, as I have quoted earlier:

As a heuristic device, the teacher tale has a number of advantages. First it is memorable. Rural teachers have told us that these kinds of stories remain in their minds when they go out to the villages and that with time they see fresh meanings in the same stories. Second, the story is accepted as valid. Teachers are not hostile to the story the way they so often are to “research” because the story only claims to be one person’s experience; it does not make claims to universal truth. Third, the stories are stimulating. They encourage critical reflection on experience. They place the teacher in the role not of the skeptic questioning “findings” but of the researcher trying to construct meaning from the kaleidoscope of particular experiences. (Kleinfeld et al. 29)

Their conclusions resulted in the creation of the “Teaching Cases for Cross-Cultural Education Series.” This series covered the experiences of student teachers,

first-year teachers, full-time teachers, principals, and others, all written with deft use of storytelling tools: characterization, suspense, plot points, etc. As the introduction to the fifth work in the series, “A Student Teacher’s Troubled Teaching Experience in Rural Alaska,” says,

The teaching case is intended to capture the ambiguities and indeterminacies of contemporary professional roles where both means and ends are problematic. In this teaching case, interpretations are left open and loose ends are not tied. Relevant information is not known, and known information is not necessarily relevant. The purpose of the case is not to establish “truth” but rather to prepare students for “wise action.” Professional practice demands wise action, even when the truth is unknowable. (Kleinfeld 1)

Kleinfeld blazed a trail, delving even deeper into the area between the story as reality and the story as metaphor. The stories these teachers tell are certainly rooted in their experience, which, in their estimation, is rooted in fact. However, their connection to the real world is important to us only incidentally; what really matters is how their experiences resonate as fertile metaphors to our own experience. Jerome Bruner wrote, “The good story and the well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness” (“Actual Minds” 11).

As Eisner puts it,

Several features of stories and of educational criticism contribute to their importance as generalizing vehicles. First, when we limit the content of generalization to what can be said in a literal mode, we limit what can be said. The epistemological utility of the literary narrative or that metaphorical characterization is precisely that such forms convey what literal language cannot represent – or at least cannot represent as well. The form of a text is a part of its meaning, and when meaning is restricted to the literal, those meanings that require other forms must remain voiceless. (Eisner 203)

3.2.2 What Has Been Missing?

Those experiences that lack a voice in more literal contexts are the emotional ones according to Anna Richert. The emotional state of the teacher, she argues, usually acts as a barometer of how well the teacher's classroom experience is going. Yet this emotional aspect of their lives and work are rarely discussed (Richert 57). We will see that emotions indeed play an important and frequent role in the lives of the teachers we will be reading about, and we will pay close attention to these indicators as Richert proposes:

In the narrative methodology described here, however, the emotional side of teaching is seen as not only legitimate, but essential. [...]

Teacher narratives provide extraordinary witness to the emotional

demands of teaching – witness that is seldom revealed when teachers talk about their work to others who are not teachers. (Richert 57)

Richert's observations were corroborated by a teacher who wrote me this email:

We can try to explain the aurora, because they have at least seen pictures. And we can talk about the crazy toothless guy at rec who kept smiling at me, because it's funny, and my parents and sisters can make connections. But to try to explain a whole culture that just doesn't care about formal education at all without sounding condescending or mean, or superior is just too hard. If I try and be bluntly honest, it comes out sounding really, really mean. So I just don't talk about it, because my dad will think I'm miserable, and I'm not. I like it up here. I'm happy here. I feel like I'm doing some good, but it is like trying to run in two feet of water. I feel myself pushing so hard, but I'm not moving as much as I feel I should be.

This inability to find voice for their experiences can often lead to difficulties.

“Without the opportunity to look systematically at their practice,” Richert writes, “teachers often find themselves feeling feelings they cannot attach to accurate or appropriate causes. Understandably, their frustrations mount. Unexamined, these frustrations lead to misunderstandings” (Richert 55). As misunderstandings accrue, Ershler has found that beginning teachers tend to move themselves to the margins of their conception of the classroom:

It appears in reading their [teachers'] narratives that the uncertain world of teaching – which is rigid and hierarchical on the one hand and changing and chaotic on the other – causes many novices to remove themselves early on in their teaching careers from the center of the text of their teaching practice to a place more on the outskirts. (Ershler 164)

It is often through writing in a journal that teachers are able to take narrative control of the experience and turn them into “experience texts” (Ershler 162), which they can use to understand the daily complexity of their jobs. As Richert points out, “Telling their stories of practice provides teachers with an opportunity to focus on particular instances of teaching and to examine those instances more deeply than they are able to during the busyness of their classroom work” (Richert 56).

Though the lives of first-year teachers in Rural Alaska have been examined through a number of lenses, one approach that has not been taken yet is gathering up first-person written narratives from Alaska teachers. This method is important because in all the other studies, the teachers have either responded through surveys, interviews, or by allowing their stories to be written up secondhand. No one, as far as I have found, has gathered a history and portrait of Alaska teachers from their personal writings.

3.3 Data Gathering

I gathered these writings over the course of two years as I traveled through Alaska on various duties with the UAF School of Education. I visited a number of

rural schools and participated in district conferences where I met with teachers and ascertained whether they had kept a journal of their first year, and whether they would be willing to share it with me. The process was entirely voluntary. The materials I received, both electronic and paper-based, were kept in secure areas such as a locked filing cabinet or a secure server with password protection in order to protect the participants' identity. Throughout the data presentation and analysis I have changed names and locales, as well as some identifying details to maintain confidentiality. This project was approved by the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Institutional Review Board.

Gathering teachers' personal writings give us access to a number of elements that I think are important to delving into the first-year teaching experience. First, we are able to access the teachers' private musings, more personal in nature, which would be less likely to find their way into a survey or interview. Writing a journal or letter also represents a time and place that can often be a transformative experience. For example, Joanne Cooper tells of a college journal-writing class she ran.

I was startled by the power of this process [journal keeping] when our journal writing class met for the second time. When I asked what keeping a journal had felt like for the students, one student announced that she had quit her job as a director of a nursing home. She said writing down what she did every day and how she felt about it drew her to the gradual realization that it was *not* what she wanted to be doing with her life. So she quit! (Cooper 99)

I think it is also important that, while writing these diaries or emails, none of the teachers knew that someone would be analyzing them. This circumstance should bring us even closer to the teachers' experience.

Second, the writings are often directed to family members, such as in letters and emails. This gives them a very conversational tone and a directness that is harder to find when they write for an unknown or large audience. They tend to be more open about their attitudes, less worried that they will appear bigoted or insensitive. After all, their family and friends know them well, and know how to interpret the teachers' writings.

I also feel it is important to take these writings from as close to the experiences they narrate as possible. When telling stories of events in the far past, one tends to cast them in light of current experiences and attitudes (Bruner, "Research Currents" 575). The story takes on a cast reflecting how the person sees it now, rather than how they initially experienced it. Eisner calls this tendency "retrospective generalization" (205). I want to bypass retrospective generalization as much as possible. I want to stay with the feeling of the teacher wrestling with life right now, because that is how the teacher experiences life. He or she doesn't have the luxury of hindsight until the experience is far in the past. The teacher must wrestle with the experiences as they come, not knowing what the future holds.

New teachers also struggle with placing their experience within the master narrative of education, the district, and the school. Clandinin and Connelly hypothesize that teachers are very aware of the "sacred story," or in other words, the

set of expectations imposed upon them from research, academics, school boards, and the general tradition of education. However, what the teachers live from day to day frequently deviates from the sacred story. These experiences are what Clandinin and Connelly call “secret stories”: “Classrooms are, for the most part, safe places, generally free from scrutiny, where teachers are free to live stories of practice. These lived stories are essentially secret ones. Furthermore, when these secretly lived stories are told, they are, for the most part, told to other teachers in other secret places” (Clandinin and Connelly 25).

However, the teachers’ ability to tell their secret stories butts up against the sacred story when they try to tell their stories to outsiders:

When teachers move out of their classrooms into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, they often live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as experts, certain characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of the story of school being lived in the school. Cover stories enable teachers whose teacher stories are marginalized by whatever the current story of school is to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher stories (Clandinin and Connelly 25).

Frances Rust performed a study where teachers in training met with first-year teachers and second-year teachers, a group where secret stories could be told, to discuss their experiences and resulting attitudes about teaching. She noticed a significant difference between teachers who had a “good” first year, and those who

had a “bad” first year. Those who had a good first year “told stories about their classes in which they used words like ‘my class,’ ‘my kids,’ and ‘my school’” (Rust “Professional” 181). Meanwhile those who had a bad first-year experience “rarely told upbeat stories about their classes. They complained about their students’ skills, attitudes, behavior, and families. Unlike the successful first-year teachers, they never spoke of their students as theirs” (Rust “Professional” 182).

Rust found that the second-year teachers tended to say little: “None of them were experiencing the angst that characterized the conversation of the first-year teachers. They seemed to know what they were doing. They exuded confidence. They were unhurried, not frantic” (Rust “Professional” 183).

Rust’s and Clandinin and Connelly’s findings underscore why I want to stay as close to the original experience as possible, without intervening reflection or audience concerns. Second-year teachers have had time to reconstruct their experiences, and have usually reformulated the original flavor of their first year in service to their evolving selves as teachers. We want as much access to the secret stories as possible without the intervention of cover stories.

However, most of the accounts I have gathered from published sources have a good deal of retrospective generalization inherent in them, as they were written years after the fact, and most likely went through much editing, sometimes the editing even being done by someone other than the author, as in Hannah Breece’s case (Jacobs). Her granddaughter, Jane Jacobs, edited her unwieldy memoirs. But in all cases, I have

tried to get as close as possible to the original experience. The rest of my data are first-hand, unedited.

3.4 Analytical Approach

We know that we are separated by many degrees from the original experiences of these teachers. As Katherine Riessman has written, the act of narrative inquiry usually finds itself at the end of five different filters. The primary experience, where one is taking the surroundings “for granted, not thinking about and analyzing it” (9), is followed by “attending” to the experience, where one makes “discrete certain features in the stream of consciousness – reflecting, remembering, recollecting them into observations” (9). Attending is quite a personal affair, as one’s history and attitudes direct what is important.

Next comes the “telling” of the experience, where one presents one’s impressions to others, using the context of the discussion, as well as one’s own context, which formed the initial impressions: “By talking and listening we produce a narrative together” (Riessman 10).

Transcribing the narrative is the third level of narrative analysis. This act is often fraught with difficulties as one has to transfer a verbal conversation, with its reliance on body language, pauses, and intonations, into writing, which has a much narrower range of inflections. So one must choose what one will represent in the conversation. Fortunately for us, we don’t have to deal with this problem, as I only

gathered written accounts. Thus, the teller is also the writer and puts down his or her observations the way he or she deems best suited to tell the story.

At the fourth level, the researcher's job is to analyze the narratives: "The challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation. [...] There are decisions about form, ordering, style of presentation, and how the fragments of lives [...] will be housed. [...] In the end, the analyst creates a metastory" (Riessman 13).

There are many approaches to analyzing the narratives. Labov has given us a chronological approach, arguing that narratives have formal properties which each have discreet functions. He describes six common elements: an abstract (the prologue), orientation (setting the scene and characters), complicating action (inciting event and other value shifts), evaluation (the significance and meaning of the actions), resolution (the climax), and coda (the epilogue).

Kenneth Burke gives us dramatism, drawing on the language of the theater. The narrative, Burke argues, will have the following parts: the act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Translated, these parts mean, "What was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (Burke xv).

Other approaches have been offered for narrative inquiry, but they rely on the oral component of narrative, which does not enter into this research.

To approach these teachers' experiences, I'm going to make use of parts of both Labov's and Burke's approach, but I want the discussion to revolve mainly

around a term from the craft of screenwriting: the “plot point.” A plot point is a place in the story where values shift, where the story changes directions, where the character goes through significant change (Field, McKee). In the construction and analysis of stories, one first sets down, or (in our case) discovers the values each character has. These values are the attitudes that guide the teachers’ decisions, and can demonstrate their character. Then, as the story progresses, one looks for plot points, those charged areas where two or more important decisions are available to the teachers. The revelation of the teachers’ character comes when they make a decision. Thus, plot points are essential to revealing the character of the teachers.

Many of the teachers we will be reading about share similar cultural backgrounds, and similar reactions to the cultures they enter in Alaska. So, frequently they face the same plot points. How the teachers react to these plot points is different because they are all different people, though often they seem to be variations on a theme.

From my survey of Alaska teachers’ writings from 1886 to 2006, I have found that the following plot points are characteristic of most contemporary teachers’ experience:

- (1) the initial decision
- (2) the arrival
- (3) the first day of school
- (4) collisions
- (5) integration and
- (6) the final decision

These plot points are frequently put in just this order, creating, as Jerome Bruner would call it, a “recipe” (“Research Currents” 575) for autobiography. In each of these choice-laden areas the teachers make decisions based on their own values and the values they perceive in others. Toward the end of their experience, the results of their experience begin to emerge. These results interact with the teachers’ original attitudes and reformed attitudes.

Thus, we will be approaching these writings as “thin slices” of many teachers’ experiences. We will use them as “plot points” to understand their character, and how their character is revealed and altered during the course of their first year.

Now we come to the last level of Riessman’s narrative inquiry taxonomy: the reader. The original narratives, the transcription, the analysis and the writing of the final product will eventually be read by other people, who will have completely different sets of experiences and attitudes. This results in a complete recreation of the text, as filtered through the mind of the reader. As Eisner has written, “In qualitative case studies the researcher can also generalize, but it is more likely that readers will determine whether the research findings fit the situation in which they work. [...] The logic in qualitative studies is softer – it’s more analogical” (204). Riessman further argues that the meaning of a text is never really solidified: “Written texts are created within, and against, particular traditions and audiences, and these contexts can be brought to bear by readers. The point is that all texts stand on moving ground: (14-15).

So as we explore these texts, we will find that sometimes our sensibilities are offended by remarks that seem to us racist or bigoted. We may find places where the

teacher seems unable or unwilling to leave his or her rigid conceptions of the world in order to accommodate new experiences. Or we may find some places where the teachers make deft use of current teaching philosophies that may someday lose their cachet in light of further research. Goodman has written, “We must obviously look for truth not in the relation of a version to something outside it that it refers to, but in characteristics of the version itself and its relationships to other versions” (37).

Thus, we will not come to grand conclusions on the way rural Alaskan teachers should go about their jobs. But we will get an idiosyncratic sense of how they perceive their experiences, and perhaps find our own perceptions of the world changing. As the Personal Narratives Group has put it,

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they *are* revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past “as it actually was,” aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences [...] Unlike the Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. Sometimes the truths we see in personal narratives jar us from our complacent security as interpreters “outside” the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them. (261)

3.5 Summary

Having gathered together the personal writings of a number of first-year teachers in Alaska, I will be taking “thin slices” from them to show instances where I see common themes, or surprising differences. As the quotes must necessarily be taken out of context, the original authors may wonder whatever became of their writing, so removed from its original environment, perhaps used to bolster an argument they disagree with. This is the very reason why I am insisting on leaving their original voices in the writing. My narrative analysis and arrangements perhaps will only be peripheral to the real value of this work, namely, the stories and the voices behind those stories. As Schubert found during a study of teacher narratives in Chicago, “portrayals of what teachers say and write about their lives and work [...] lose their vigor when summarized” (219).

Chapter 4

Historical Teacher Narratives

“There are two reasons to be here if you’re white,” a man said, reflectively, [...] “If you’re looking for something you haven’t found; or if you’ve stopped looking and don’t have any reason to go anywhere else.” (McNamara 251)

4.1 Introduction

This beginning quote points toward the basic attitude I have found surrounding the writings of first-year teachers in Alaska. As I’ve read through the accounts I have been able to find, both from published and unpublished sources, I have been struck by the similarities in the stories. The authors are all giddy with a sense of adventure, of writing down the elements of life in the arctic that contrast so vividly with life in the lower-48. All of them are full of idealism that, through many collisions and near misses, steadily tapers off into a more realistic approach to their new lives. Some accounts are well written, some pass only on the novelty of the events they describe.

The outlines of each story are quite similar. I have separated them into plot points:

1. the decision
2. the arrival
3. the first day of school

4. collisions
5. integration, and
6. effectiveness

The plot points for this chapter are not the same as in the next chapter on contemporary teachers. I found that few of the historical teachers talked about their decisions to stay in their teaching positions, most likely because they wrote the books years after the fact. Since the premise for their memoirs was that they stayed in Alaska for a certain period of time, they probably did not think to include their wrestlings over whether they would stay from year to year.

As you can see, the outline presented above doesn't follow a standard action-based story structure. I have found that few of the accounts keep up an interest in the school as a stage for drama. They're more interested in epic trips across the tundra, or documenting the many other roles teachers had to play: doctor, communications specialist, social worker, psychologist. So school rarely gets a complete plot arc in published works. Some exceptions to this rule can be found in Tisha (Specht), Letters from Pelly Bay (Gray), Wolf River (Gilliland), and Tundra Teacher (Foley). However, most of these works are set in contemporary times.

Indeed, most of the time we barely remember that the author came in as a teacher by the end of the book, either because, as Kenneth L. Cohen writes in his unpublished letter dated February 28, 1938, from King Cove, Alaska, "Many people say that school teachers are boresome as all they want to talk about is school, so I try

and stay away from that in these letters” (Cohen Box 9, Folder 150), or just because there are so many other things to write about.

The teacher’s narrative structures are organized in a more abstract vein to track the various significant attitude changes the teachers seem to go through, whether they are recorded or not. Many of these plot points are still very much a part of the contemporary first-year teacher’s experience in Alaska.

My training in creative writing and documentary filmmaking has cultivated in me an appreciation for the way people tell their own stories. The telling may not always be polished, but it is inevitably unique. And many times, you can find out as much about a person from the way he or she tells a story as from the actual contents. I like to taste the salt on a story (or in this case, the sourdough), from Hannah Breece’s no-nonsense pioneer sensibility, to Margaret Richardson’s refined, but impish humor. It’s as much fun to get a feel for the personalities behind the stories as it is to read the stories themselves. As I assembled this chapter, I did it as if I were editing raw footage for a documentary film, foraging through the stacks and stacks of information to find the one or two bits that say exactly what needs to be said, and then putting those pieces into an order that would allow them to converse and build on one another’s themes in order to build a dramatic structure.

4.2 The Decision

As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, most of these teachers come to find something. They usually aren’t sure what it is. Whether it is to find a

mission in life, or to uplift the natives, or to escape something, they all seem “called.” I think “called” is a good word to use in this case because most of the teachers record their decision to come to Alaska in a way that most people might consider providential, if a bit hurried.

For example, in a letter dated April 11, 1892, from Ellen Kittredge to her parents, she writes,

I must tell you how I happened to get so far into the business without asking you. I didn't know I was getting in until I was in all over. ...

Miss Grace Hance, a teacher friend and boarding house roommate of mine, tried to convince me no one would offer to go [to Alaska]. I thought it would be too bad with me wanting to go, so I sat down and wrote: “Have you received many applications for the position in Alaska spoken of in *The Advance*? Have you received any?” That was all I wrote. I received an immediate answer stating that they had received ten or twelve applications and, speaking in a way that made me think that it was just possible they would want me, asking if I meant to offer my services. Before they received my answer they sent this telegram: “Do you think favorably of accepting appointment to Alaska? Telegraph answer.” And there I am, so of course I had to accept, and it isn't but a few days since the business first began. (Smith and Smith 18)

Things are no better thought out in 1916 by May Wynne Lamb, who accompanies a friend to an interview with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and there meets John and Edith Kilbuck, Moravian missionaries:

Later that evening when I was feeling depressed over having let opportunity pass, I was summoned to the telephone. A man with a deep voice spoke: "Is this Miss Wynne?"

"Yes, it is," I replied, rather morosely.

Then he continued, "Would you like to come to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for an interview tomorrow afternoon?"

All in a jitter, but happily, I answered, "yes."

When the appointed hour arrived, I dashed to the office to see what was in the wind, too full of enthusiasm to be really sober. Mr. and Mrs. Kilbuck were waiting in the inner office. They both smiled as I entered and rose to greet me. "I am glad you came," she said. Then without any preliminaries, she asked, "Would you like to go to Alaska to teach school?" (Lamb 12)

She accepts instantly.

We might expect a little more rationality from a married couple, but we join Ed and Abbie Madenwald in 1931 as they take perhaps a few minutes more than Wynne did to make their decision:

That evening we sat at the kitchen table with a sheet of paper before us and Spike asleep at our feet. Ed drew a line down the center and labeled

one side “For” and the other “Against.” The first item on the “for” side was “hopelessness of finding work in the States during the Depression years.” ... Also in the “For” column he wrote in big letters, “ADVENTURE – frontier country.”

On the “Against” side he wrote “No. 1” and looked questioningly at me. Suddenly the cautious side was all mine. Resting my elbows on the table, I counted with my fingers. “Number one, distance from our families. Number two, the three credits you lack for your degree. Number three, the contract I signed to teach here next year.”

We need not have listed those items. We knew we were on our way.

(Madenwald 3-4)

Of course, the other thing we have to say about these adventurers is that they’re usually young and full of energy. But not always. There’s the case of Hannah Breece in A School Teacher in Old Alaska, who comes to teach in Alaska in 1904 at age 45. But she has the same sense of calling which shows through bright and clear in her reflections on visiting the Sheldon Jackson Museum:

I was impressed by the ways these inventions had been contrived to overcome hard circumstances, and also by the values they expressed. [...] There were many, many implements, coming down from unknown time, for cooking and building, for fishing and hunting, for warfare, for amusement, and of course carved totem poles telling their mute stately stories of legendary family trees.

It flashed through my mind that these wonders were clues to the hidden powers of the minds of the people to whom I was being sent, to help them overcome ignorance, poverty, disease and superstition. My job was to bring them benefits now available to them from civilizations and from Uncle Sam's care for his less fortunate children. (Jacobs 5)

This is a premise that underlies most of the accounts I have read. Each of these teachers feels a special sense of mission to bring something to Alaska: religion, education, science – in other words, Western civilization. They have a zeal I would call religious, very steeped in the Christian mandate, “Proclaim the gospel to the four corners of the earth.”

These teachers are good-hearted people. They want to share what they love. They're certain that their values, their science, their education, are exactly what the Alaska Natives need. Whether they do or do not need these things is a subject for another dissertation. But I don't think we can overstress how mission-based many of these teachers were. Smith, for example, continues in her letter to her parents, “[...]you brought me up for the sole purpose of being of use in the world, didn't you? So surely you won't say anything against my doing it in the way I feel that God has called me to” (Smith and Smith 18).

Admittedly, Smith was very religious, though her particular interpretation of religion leaned toward humanist rather than dogmatic values. Breece, also religious but more secular in the presentation of her experiences, presents her attitudes that smack of a bit more chauvinism:

I have always been careful when working among inferior races to convey to them that I have their interests at heart and love and respect them as people, but that I do not come among them to sink to their level but to uplift them. If this standard is not adhered to, little can be done to improve their lives. I am superior to an uneducated native woman and give her to understand that I realize it. She knows it herself. But I want them to realize I have faith that the ability is within them to improve themselves and their lives and their children's lives. They are more uncivilized in many ways than I may say here. But I want to draw a line between "whitizing" and civilizing them. (Jacobs 104)

As you can see, Breece is steeped in the colonialist attitudes of her day, but she is also an equal opportunity colonialist. She is a firm believer in the "rags to riches" paradigm, or from "uncivilized to civilized." And she feels her mission is to help Alaska Natives toward a "better" life.

Fifty years later as described in Empire on Ice, Willy Lou Warbelow tells about her husband's revolutionary fervor in trying to convince the people of the village to start their own store.

Marvin's sales pitch was evident everywhere – at Council meetings, village meetings, and at every gathering on the foot path or around a dog food fire.

"Look fellows," I'd hear him say, "You can't just remain static. Sure, you've gone to Kobuk for years to get your grub, but don't you

ever want to better yourselves? Your grandfathers were satisfied to pole up river all the way from Kotzebue, but do you do it? No! You want outboard motors. They lived without salt and canned peaches and radios. But are you willing to do it? No! So why go on making these long trips to Kobuk when we could have a store right here in Shungnak? Did you ever think about the fact that the supplies for the store at Kobuk go right by your front door on the barge every fall and then you have to go ten miles up river to bring them back? If the barge can take supplies to Kobuk, it can bring supplies to Shungnak.”

(Warbelow 203)

Admittedly, not all teachers were so idealistic and helpful. As Kitteridge writes, “Alaska missionaries are not much like the ideal missionaries I used to believe in before I went behind the scenes, but a government teacher is worse. I had much rather the buildings would be vacant than have such men as two government teachers I know of occupy them” (Smith and Smith 112). I haven’t found any books written by these lesser teachers. Perhaps they didn’t have the motivation.

4.3 The Arrival

So, with fierce ideals burning in their hearts, the teachers fly, sail, or sled their way to their new home. Their journals are always rife with descriptions of the Alaskan landscape, cast in breathless, epic prose. But these descriptions are beyond the scope

of this work. One way or another, they make it to their final destination – which is where they are often jolted out of their fantasy world.

As Helen Wheaton describes it in her book Prekaska's Wife,

According to Thornie, they [teachers] arrived full of enthusiasm and plans for uplifting the natives as much as possible, but both they and their progressive ideas were soon worn out in the fish-smelling atmosphere of a schoolroom occupied by pupils of ages ranging from six to sixteen. (Wheaton 208)

Walter V. Ashworth, a government teacher in Tyonek from 1941-1942, describes his own moment of truth:

When the last of our freight was lying in heaps on the shore, we stood with noisy natives around us and watched the silhouette of our mail boat disappear into the darkness. It was then that Evelyn turned to me with a trembling voice and asked, “Walter, do you think we have done the right thing? (Ashworth 11)

Most of these teachers probably asked themselves that question quite a number of times. Alaska can seem awfully big, especially when no one realizes you've arrived, which could even happen to a woman as imposing as Hannah Breece:

My attention was then caught by a row of white men standing in front of the schoolhouse. I plumed myself that they had come to welcome me, and in all that rain too! We had a dreadful time landing the rowboat in the breakers and struggling up the bluff, leaving my luggage behind

under a tarpaulin. I wondered why the welcoming committee did not come to our aid. It had vanished. Nobody was in sight. (Jacobs 9)

But that lonely debut was only shared by about a fourth of the teachers. The others were all but crushed by the welcoming committee:

Out of the darkness from the forms milling around us came short, chopped-up questions:

“You our teacher?”

“You goin’ teach us?”

“We start school tomorrow?”

“You come Kobuk in airplane? We see airplane go over.”

He led us into the office and from there to the kitchen, just in time to make way for a thundering herd behind us. The whole crew that had followed us up the hill, crowded in to the entryway; the overflow filled the office. Someone must have given them a cue of some sort, because in unison they began to hoot and yell at the tops of their voices and began a rhythmic jumping up and down with every foot hitting the floor at the same time, like a battalion of marching soldiers, until the whole building was jumping with them. (Warbelow 40-42)

Sometimes the former teachers are just packing up when the new teachers come in. They inevitably play the omen-giver before disappearing into the wilderness:

Virginia and I stepped inside the living room of the teacher’s quarters and met the former teacher and his wife, who were making last-minute

preparations to leave. They both seemed excited. The teacher said, “Toby will show you around. We have to go now. We only stayed here one year and our stay wasn’t all that pleasant. Charlie K ... threatened to kill me several times.” He pulled back his jacket, displaying a gun in a shoulder holster. “You’ll have trouble with Charlie!”

We gave no further thought to our predicament till later that night when we lay down to sleep. Virginia cried, and I felt like doing the same. (Corbin 20)

And sometimes, though the former teacher is not there in body, he or she still haunts the place, as in Malach’s case, who follows an elderly female teacher who had threatened the villagers with a fanny full of buckshot if they approached her house at night.

But there are also some optimistic notes: “‘These are the swellest doggone people in the world,’ Glen Greene told us. ‘You won’t have a bit of trouble with ‘em...’” (Oliver 25).

Nevertheless, plenty of obstacles still await even those with the rosier of outlooks. Roman Malach, in his unpublished memoir “Laugh and Cry with Alaska, or Teacher Discovers Alaska,” arrives in Ninilchik to find that no one knows where the keys to the school are. Finally, by dint of crowbar and a bit of elbow grease, he gains access to the school:

What I found inside was not to my expectations, the walls were dirty and dingy, almost black from smoke and soot. The inside had not been

painted for a few years, and burning coal in five stoves was not helping the rooms to stay clean and bright.

The one classroom which was in use certainly was not inviting me to any school work. Its floor was covered with black oil mixed with dirt. The second classroom was full of junk, trash, ashes, old and unfit school materials and books.

The schoolhouse made such a depressing impression on me, that I wanted to run away from it, and not to see it again. (Malach 40)

This initial impression of the classroom is pretty universal in all the accounts I have read. But the thing that separates the sheep from the goats is what the new teachers do about it. Breece immediately drafts some boys and girls from the village and has her classroom clean within an afternoon. For Malach, it takes a month to whip things into shape. The Warbelows even do a little impromptu remodeling:

We had two good-sized classrooms off the main entryway with a long hall that opened into both rooms. The partition between the classrooms was made of four-foot-wide pieces of wallboard; but the building had settled over the years and must have been resting its elbows on the top of the partition because several sections of wallboard were badly bulged.

We were working in our rooms one day when I called through the wall to Marvin, “ I think it would be nice if we had a door between our two rooms.”

He was evidently standing within a foot of the section with the most damage, because the words were hardly out of my mouth before he put a fist into the bulgiest part of the bulge, and the wallboard collapsed on my classroom floor. (49)

But all that is only preparation for the actual work: teaching. And as the new teachers get to know the village and the children, there seems to be a cartoon question mark that grows larger and larger over the teachers' heads:

Later in the day, again while I was alone, there was a pounding at the front door. I answered it to find the porch full of smiling children clad in parkas.

“Hello,” I said, “Won’t you come in?”

They crowded into the schoolroom and huddled together near the windows. The odor of fish and of smoke from burned grass was strong and heavy.

“I’m so glad you came to see me. Won’t you sit down?”

No answer. Their round little faces were expressionless, and their eyes were downcast.

“Did all of your go to school last year?”

No answer. [...]

Thinking that some sweets would help overcome the children’s shyness, I went to the supply room and filled a dish with hard candies from one of the thirty-five-pound pails we had brought. From the

supply room I could hear giggling and whispering. When I offered the candy, the children stood silent and expressionless as little Buddhas. Finally, in desperation, I picked up several pieces and held them out to a child. She accepted, and I heard a faint, timid murmur. “Quyana.”

How could I ever break down that shyness? How much English did they really understand, and how much could they speak? And would I ever become accustomed to the odor of fish and grass smoke?

(Madenwald 35)

Eventually the first day of school arrives. For Breece it comes the day after she arrives. Others have up to a month to prepare. But the night before the first day of school frequently calls forth a reflective pose in the teachers’ recollections.

So there I was on Sunday, twenty miles from the International Date Line, preparing for the first day of school and feeling insecure. I looked out the office window across the strait and saw the mountaintops on East Cape in Siberia, where it was already Monday, and mused, “Monday will arrive here tomorrow, the first day of school for me at Wales.” (Corbin 29)

Meanwhile, in the Aleutians Ethel Oliver and her husband are trying to get some sleep:

For a long time that night, after we had gone to bed, we lay and talked of our first day in Atka and of the many things we had been told – all of the little details and the tremendous responsibilities. We remembered

that Glenn Green had said in comforting tones, “It seems like an impossible thing, I know, but as time goes on the answers, and all that we’ve told you, will come to you. Besides, the people themselves will be your greatest help.” (Oliver 26)

4.4 The First Day of School

The much-anticipated morning finally breaks, and Margaret Richardson begins the first day of school for 1924, as excerpted from two different letters:

I got breakfast, built roaring fires in all stoves, and then watched the hands creep toward nine. I wondered if I had the courage to ring that bell, what it sounded like, and what would happen afterward. Well, it was a nice, silvery sounding bell (Richardson Box 1: Folder 7).

I faced a whole school of pupils (Eskimos, in this case), who couldn’t understand the Teacher. I couldn’t even spell their names. So I just took a bunch of common names, like Dick and Tom and Betty and Sally, and put them on the blackboard. Then I started in and renamed the whole shebang. It was the only way that I could keep them straight. (Childs 14)

Many of the teachers face language barriers, though some overcome them more gracefully. Ethel Ross Oliver, author of Journal of an Aleutian Year, attempts to learn the language of her students from an elder, but he refuses to teach her, saying that the children will need her language in their future, but she won’t need theirs.

Fifty years earlier in Wales, William Thomas Lopp also made an attempt to learn the Inupiaq language, which he considered a rich one.

Not very long after, we discovered, much to our surprise, that their language, like the Greek, had the singular, dual, and plural numbers. Not only that that, but we learned that every child of ten or twelve knew how to use the inflected forms of their nouns correctly. ... It delighted them to see us write these dual and plural forms of their nouns on the blackboards as they called them off to us.

With visions of pages of paradigms and conjugations, we decided to be satisfied with mastering just enough of their language to enable us to teach them the English understandably. (Smith and Smith 365-66)

Sometimes, as in Oliver's case, the children have three half-learned languages playing tag in their heads, and here she is bringing another one:

They all spoke their native dialects at home, chanted in Russian in church, and were to learn English in school. To complicate matters even more, the four little Attuans, who had been forced to speak Japanese while in Japan, now also had to learn the Atkan dialect, which was quite different from their own. (Oliver 60)

Of course, there were other kinds of languages to learn, too:

Once, while trying to communicate with little Victor Ongtowasruk, a first grade student, I found myself getting absolutely nowhere. I had asked him a very simple question, which should require only a simple

“yes” or “no” answer. But he only stared at me with a frozen expression. I repeated the question gently, in the most concise, broken-English terms I knew, and that I was certain Victor should understand. But again, I received no reply. Instead, he seemed only to get upset. I was dumbfounded that he didn’t respond. I looked at Toby. He was grinning. He said, “He’s answering you!” [...]

“Yes, Us Eskimos sometimes talk with our eyes. We open our eyes a little more to say ‘yes’ and close them a little to say ‘no’.” He demonstrated to me, then turned to Victor and said something in Eskimo. Victor smiled!

I also felt then, as I felt many times at Wales, how ironic it was that I, as teacher, spoke only one language while my students spoke mine and theirs, and, as little Victor with his eyes had taught me, a third language as well. (Corbin 75-76)

4.5 Collisions and Integration

Though I have put collisions and integration into separate plot points, I think it’s important to notice that collisions and integration often go hand in hand, one leading to the next. Points of collision can be used by a teacher as opportunities to understand the people and their culture better. Some of these teachers were more effective than others at using the collisions as learning experiences.

In many ways the chips were stacked against these teachers. They were lone Caucasians in the middle of a culture and a land completely different from their own. There were bound to be collisions and misunderstandings, even outright hostility from both parties. Remember Malach's predecessor and her shotgun.

However, it seems that it was never difficult to integrate with the children. As Kitteridge reports from Wales on July 3, 1892, "There have been some Eskimos around the house every minute, night and day, since we landed. They are looking the window most of the time ... We have made sash curtains for two windows, but I do not like to see them shut out" (Smith and Smith 10). And then in a letter dated January 8, 1893, "There are six children sitting in the room now. We have visitors most of the time when we are at home, as many as sixteen at a time. We don't have to do much to entertain them. When we are having dinner, they can look at pictures and magazines. (Smith and Smith 50)

It often was integration with the rest of the village that posed the problem. The differences in culture, combined with the strong will of most of the teachers (how else would they survive in rural Alaska?) often results in cultural collisions. One of the most darkly humorous comes from Richardson, whose school had been built next to a cemetery:

Eskimos do not bury their dead in the same way we do. As soon as a person dies, he is doubled up like a jack-knife, and placed in a small wooden coffin. ... Then the coffin is tied around with wires; the Eskimos never nail coffins. It's a superstition they have. So after a time,

the wiring becomes loose and the skeletons emerge. I had to wind my way between grinning skulls and bones before I entered my schoolroom.

I held a conference with the village Fathers to discuss the situation. After some deliberation, they agreed to dispose of the bodies in the Yukon River, which ran alongside the schoolhouse. ... Early the next morning after the discussion, I persuaded a couple of Eskimo boys to gather up all of the coffins and dump them into the river. When the ice broke on the river, the coffins would float out to the Bering Sea.

At least that is what I anticipated. But this was one of the few years that didn't happen. All of the bones, coffins, and skulls were at the bottom of the Yukon River all right, but right in front of the schoolhouse. We had been using the water for drinking, and it wasn't rare for me to pass a little Eskimo child who would point his finger to an object in the river and say, "eechoiska (Eskimo, for teacher), there's my aunt." Then another child would hurriedly say, almost in the same breath, "Oh no, that's my grandmother." (Childs 15)

Like most of the cultural collisions the teachers recorded, this one arose from a teacher trying to improve village life. And they're constantly at it. "Uplifting the native" was the main motivation that propelled most of these people to Alaska to begin with. So whenever they saw a chance at improvement (at least from their point of view), they were more than likely to take it – with a vengeance. Breece writes,

We got school under way in an orderly fashion, with afternoon sewing sessions for women who were not squirrel hunting, but something was wrong. The women, normally so pleasant and eager to make school clothes for their children, were lazy and saucy. They struck me as intoxicated. I suspected hooch but although I peered everywhere in the camp where something could have been hidden, I could find none.

Then one day I noticed a barrel in the corner of one of the best tents. It attracted my attention because it was piled with old clothes. This was not natural because I was always having to remind the women not to stuff dirty or old clothes under the beds and that barrel looked too carefully loaded. I made a dive for it. It was a whole barrel of hooch in a brown foam, ready for drinking. [...]

I commanded the two young men to carry the barrel to the water. They pled with me not to throw it over but I dumped it down the bank and the entire yeasty, sour mess went trailing into the water. (Jacobs 137)

Despite their initial enthusiasm, many of the teachers feel as if they are getting nowhere at first:

Those first days in the classroom were frustrating and, at times, disheartening. At the end of the week I still wondered if the children could speak any English. Their expressionless faces remained as blank

as clean paper when I spoke to them or asked a question. If there was any response at all, it was “naamikika [I don’t know].”

If I could just get a child to talk to Ed or me, and feel at ease doing so, I would be very happy. At night, I lay awake thinking of ways to break down that barrier of shyness. The children were more timid than any I had ever tried to teach. (Madenwald 38-39)

Of course, most of the teachers can’t help but pick up the language, and the best teachers, like Ethel Oliver, use this to their advantage:

In any event, the children taught me Aleut words as I taught them English words. Much was accomplished with pictures and familiar objects and games. These children, like their parents, were intellectually keen and sensitive. The Aleut language has many back-of-the-throat sounds, which I found difficult to reproduce accurately. It did not bother me that the children should see and hear me struggle to pronounce their language, which tripped so easily from their tongues. They were pleased that they could do something better than Teacher could. Often they had difficulty in trying to control their amusement. We would all laugh together and try again. Because I tried their language, they tried mine. Rainy mornings in the classroom passed happily. (Oliver 60-61)

But there is a lot more to deal with than just language barriers. There is also the issue of racism, which crops up mostly in locales with a mixed student body. Breece's school is one of those places:

The pupils came from both villages. But the Aleut children were a ragged, unkempt lot and the Russian village children treated them shamefully. During the first week, when I was teaching little children a game during the recess period, the Russian pupils rounded up every single one of the twenty Aleut children, big and small, and before I knew it the Aleuts were fleeing to their village with the Russians in pursuit. Then the Russian children came back triumphantly. Now they had the school to themselves.

I asked the Russian children to tell me about the situation and listened to their scorn and complaints. I laughed along with them and told them I did not wonder they had chased the Aleuts away, they were so ragged and dirty. I reminded them that I had not seated them alongside the Aleut children but kept them apart as far as that was possible.

But then I asked them how many had a grandmother or grandfather who lived in the Aleut village. While I would see they were thinking about that, I proposed a compact with them. If I tried to be patient and was willing to teach such ragged pupils, would they help me tame them and teach them? If we all worked together, I said, soon there would be

no dirty Aleut section in our nice school. I pictured how it could be when the Aleuts were clean and neat and could talk English and we could be like one big school family. How many would like to train the Aleuts?

Everyone volunteered to help. So at once I sent three or four of the ringleaders to bring back the children they had just driven away. Rather to my surprise, every Aleut child was willing to return. (Jacobs 17-18)

Our contemporary sensibilities recoil at Breece's method of fighting fire with fire; the racism that fueled the Russian students' actions is strong in Breece's proposed solution. Still, she reveals a keen political acuity; and, as usual, she is an equal opportunity civilizer.

Anne Hobbs had similar problems as presented in her biography by Robert Specht, Tisha: The Story of a Young Teacher in the Alaska Wilderness. Hobbs teaches in Chicken, Alaska, a fading gold rush town populated mostly by Caucasians from the United States and Canada. As it turns out, there is a mean streak of prejudice against the Native population. When a Native boy named Chuck attempts to join Hobbs' class, the other students constantly harass him, as does the rest of the town. Being the basic Alaska teacher type we've already discussed, Hobbs cleans Chuck up after a particularly messy incident and gets him some new clothes:

When the kids saw him the next day they almost didn't recognize him. It didn't make them any friendlier to him, though. When they found out I'd given him a bath and got him some new clothes they called him

teacher's pet. But he kept coming. Whatever he had to put up with it was better than just hanging around that awful shack he lived in. I thought I'd been poor when I was a kid, but he didn't have anything. The lunches he brought were the worst I ever saw – stringy rabbit that was half-cooked, or fried bannocks that were little more than flour and water. After a couple of days I started making him sandwiches. (Specht 123)

Here we can see, again, the “uplifting the native” theme arising, this time with plenty of villains to set it off. Tisha is a difficult book to evaluate. It is classified as a biography, but it reads like a novel. Its strong plot arc and vivid, perfectly-placed characters tend to make me suspicious of how close to the facts this book remains and how many liberties it took for the sake of a well-crafted plot. Hobbs is set up as the only person in all of Chicken who is willing to “stand up” for the natives by allowing them to attend school.

Yet, Hobbs herself harbors the very values that motivate the prejudice in the other citizens of Chicken. This attitude is shown in a description of Hobbs' visit to a native village.

I'd seen a couple of Indian villages from the riverboat coming down the Yukon, but never close up. [...] The village looked so picturesque I could wait to get there.

But when we drew near I was shocked. It was a shanty-town, worse than any of the worst sections I'd seen in all the coal towns I'd lived in.

[...] The whole place looked as if all the garbage and slipp from Eagle had been dumped there. Rusting tin cans, rags, paper, shreds of hide bottles and fishbones littered the ground. There was no breeze blowing and the stench that hung over everything was nauseating.

Mangy dogs, half starved and chained to stakes, snarled and leaped at us as we went by. They were jerked back and landed in their own dung. A few children kept pace with us, giving the horses plenty of room. Barefoot and in rags, noses running, they were having a good time. One little boy, with open running sores all over his head, tripped over one of the dogs and barely avoided being bitten. (Specht 34-35)

When Chuck's mom commits suicide, Hobbs informally adopts him and his little sister, which brings even more wrath down on her from the locals. She does so in order to save them from the fate of returning to the native village. The rest of the book is spent with Hobbs battling her neighbors, the children getting kidnapped by a white man from Eagle, and a breathless race to catch the kidnapper before he reaches the village. It's all very exciting. In the end, after an impossible descent, a furious dog-sled race, a fistfight on a frozen lake and an encounter with the village chief, Hobbs regains the children. Then, on the way home, she rescues a woman from Chicken, getting her back into the good graces of the town.

The epilogue notes that not only did Hobbs keep these Native children, but she adopted many more.

The heroism is exciting; the values appeal to a modern American sensibility. We like cleanliness, we like healthy people, we like civil rights, we like people taking care of children. But the shadow to all these values lies in the Native village. It represents everything that Hobbs is fighting against. If the children are returned to their village, all is lost.

The imperialism is obvious, though the book tries to put a smiley face on it. One character is constantly warning Hobbs not to judge the Natives by “white standards.” But when we really get down to it, the reason she shouldn’t judge them rests on a queasy premise. As one articulate Native (most of them speak in broken English) tells her:

“You’ve heard that faith moves mountains. Well, it does. Gives people strength. And it gave those Kutchins strength too. Faith. ‘Today I’m going to bed so hungry I could eat my dog,’ they’d think, ‘but tomorrow I’m gonna come across a nice fat caribou and the whole bunch of us will have a big cook and eat till we’re sick. Something’ll turn up.’ Something always did, too. And one day something else turned up – the *unjyit*, the white man. Yep, the white man. And by God, here was the answer to a hunter’s prayer. ‘Behold!’ that Indian said, ‘Just look at that white critter, will you? Comes into this country out of nowhere and before you know it he’s building himself cabins ten times bigger than a sweathouse. And grub? Great Spirit, look at it all! He’s go

it stacked in tin cans, in sacks, in boxes, shoots it without the least trouble.’

“So the Indian went to this white man and he said, ‘Bud, I like your style. Want to live the way you do. How do I do it?’

“‘Bring me furs,’ the white man says, ‘all kinds – lynx, muskrat and marten, black fox, red fox and wolf. I’ll take ‘em all. ‘Easy,’ says the Indian. And he did it – stopped hunting food and started hunting fur, started trading for axes and traps and guns, flour and tea. [...]

“Well, I tell you, for a good many years that Indian was like a bear in a blueberry patch [...] until the day it all went bad. The price of fur went down. [...] That Indian was stuck. From living in one place and eating the white man’s food, he’d gotten weak. [...] You need meat in the winter, good fresh meat with plenty of fat on it. But there wasn’t any meat around, at least not nearby. The white man had chased it away and the Indian, not being a hunter anymore, didn’t have the strength to go any long distance for it. [...]

“But no matter how weak or sick he got, he still held onto the faith that’d kept him going when he was a hunger – ‘Something’ll turn up.’ [...] And that’s the awful part of it. This time it looks like it’s not going to. [...] They’ve hit the sunset trail and they’re dying. All because of faith.” (Specht 208-9)

Hobbs builds her perception of the generic Native on the premise that he/she is part of a dying race, and therefore, eminently in need of saving. The people in the villages may be worthwhile, but their lifestyle is in need of an extreme makeover, and their village is not a fit place for children.

The initial impressions the new teachers have of the people they work with are varied, but for the most part, quite positive. In Tisha, for example, Chuck is portrayed as quite a bright student. William Lopp Smith describes the first few days of instruction in Wales as a learning frenzy:

For a few days we were occupied almost exclusively with an Eskimo-English vocabulary, drilling them on the spelling of every word. Their interest in phonetic spelling was soon aroused, especially of the Eskimo words. The magic of representing sounds by letters and “making paper talk” gripped them. Their progress was remarkable, and soon we were going on to arithmetic, geography, and music with singing. (Smith and Smith 365)

A few years later Breece finds that her students, though away from her influence for a season, have been hard at work:

At the fishing camp I half expected the children to have forgotten all they had learned the summer before. Not so. Both they and their parents were proud to show me how much more they had learned over the winter. I had left books and writing materials in Zackar’s care and he had seen to it they were used. Older children had taught younger ones

as far as they could, and went on to read all the books I had left. They had done all the arithmetic problems as far as they had knowledge. So this summer we had a good foundation, and we all made the most of it. (Jacobs 150)

Malach is similarly impressed by his students:

I found the Ninilchick school children studious, able to make good progress if properly inspired, and some of them displayed special ability to memorize hundreds of spelling words and retain this knowledge without a great effort. Their artistic abilities in drawing and painting were noticeable also. (Malach 42)

There also are reports of slow learners, but they are usually attributed to external causes like language barriers and, in Breece's case, the language of the gastric juices:

As winter wore on, it seemed to me the Aleut children were looking wan and they tended to get restless or listless. One day several found some laundry starch I had used and set out to throw away. They ate it ravenously. I bought a sack of flour and made a thick porridge, adding native cranberries that were small, dark red and had a very rich flavor, along with some sugar. The children loved this experimental dish, so each morning Aleut pupils came early and had all the porridge they wanted. Their main food was fish, and plenty of it, but evidently a supplement was needed. Children seldom learn well when they are

undernourished. With the daily porridge their restlessness disappeared and it seemed to me they were learning twice as fast as they had been. They were bright, and wanted to learn. (Jacobs 21)

Some of the teachers did try to analyze why their students were so bright. Malach describes his own conclusion in the his unpublished manuscript “Alaska Elementary Schools...”:

There is one basic difference between a pupil’s thinking in Alaska, and a pupil’s thinking in Oklahoma – or any part of continental USA. A rural school for an Alaskan child is the only place to find new and enjoyable experiences. A school for an Oklahoma child is a place he goes to of necessity, where he does not always expect new and enjoyable experience. An average child in continental USA has so many sources of new experiences: television, radio, theatre, car, church, playgrounds, highways, social gatherings, and a variety of other things pleasant to his ear or eye. An Alaskan child comes to a rural school willing and wanting to learn. Alaskan children in a rural area are easy material for teaching. It is easy to “mold” the mind of an Alaskan child, because he accepts the teacher’s guidance with enthusiasm and willingness. He comes to school fresh and vigorous, unspoiled by those attractions with which a child in continental USA is surrounded. He is attracted to the school work instead of being distracted from it. (Box 2, Folder 8)

I am struck at how idyllic these accounts seem. The teachers make it sound like miracles were occurring right and left. It was like they'd finally found Rousseau's mythical *noble savage*, a clean, pure soul unhindered by Western culture, and therefore eminently able to learn. Either that, or perhaps they hadn't expected much of their pupils and were willing to be tickled by anything that happened. But, in any case, these Native students are often portrayed as being ideal students, needing only the benevolent hand of the teacher to guide their energies.

Nevertheless, we get to hear about the difficulties as well, such as this surprisingly candid passage from Breece,

Getting up in the morning was not delightful, but I kept my parka and fur boots beside the bed and first thing slipped into them. [...]

Once the fires were going, I put on fur mittens, and on the coldest mornings took a warm iron in my hands, swung a lantern on my arm and set off in the dark for the schoolhouse along that abominable trail. With the bitter wind shrieking at me, this was an ordeal. There are times when I wept like a child and the warm iron in my hands seemed to do no good. (Jacobs 113)

And then in Malach's neck of the woods,

During this first month not a soul from the village visited me in the schoolhouse or offered any help. Of course, the village people were busy with fishing, but in addition to it, I had heard that some of them did not have any use for a teacher. (Malach 41)

Every once in a while, though, a teacher and the village would finally see eye-to-eye, as in Corbin's case as he sits in on a council meeting:

Chief Angnaboogok turned to me and asked, "Do you have anything to bring up for discussion?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm getting concerned about the children coming late to school each morning. I know it's daylight now and the children like to play out on the beach late at night, but some of them are playing past midnight and are coming late to school. Is there something we can do about that?"

Toby talked awhile in Eskimo, then members of the council took turns speaking. The conversation continued for twenty minutes, then stopped. There was about a thirty-second pause, then Roland turned to me and said, "How about you just start school around ten o'clock?"

(Corbin 133)

Corbin agreed. After all: When in Rome.

But sometimes even seemingly innocuous actions could cause a rupture, as Willy Lou found after getting introduced to the village:

I didn't realize until we were back in the privacy of our own house what a social blunder I had made on that first visit to the village. But mine was a typical cheechako reaction. Every time we walked into a home, there was a period of what seemed an eternity of silence. No one said anything. I interpreted this as an awkward situation that no one but

I had the finesse to cope with, so I began to enter each house with an overdone “Hello” or “How are you?” My greeting was always followed by the same stony silence until Daniel saw fit to start introductions.

Back home I couldn’t wait to make my comments about the situation. “They surely don’t know much about greeting people, do they? If I hadn’t broken the ice in some of those homes, we’d probably still be standing in one of them waiting for something to happen!”

Marvin arched an eyebrow. “I’m afraid you were quite out of order, young lady. Eskimos can chatter and laugh a mile a minute once they’re warmed up to the occasion, but they’re never in any hurry to get started. Next time you go into one of their homes, it will be best just to outwait them. (Warbelow 55)

But waiting wasn’t on most of the teachers’ agendas. The fact that they were “go-getters” got them to Alaska in the first place, and they weren’t about to quit when it came to being friendly. Many of them sought integration into the village by becoming its social hub. Ed and Maddie Morgan, for example, start sponsoring dances at their home:

At first they [the children] sat and watched as Ed and I struggled to entertain them at the parties. We played the half-dozen scratchy records we had, and I did my best pumping the wheezy organ. Gradually, we got them into the games. We had taffy pulls in the kitchen, went on hikes, and played games in which they had to speak English. Children

who thanked me with “quyana” won only a smile from me, while those who said “thank you” were praised. And they were anxious to earn the scholarista’s favor. (Madenwald 39)

And their efforts seem to work. The children always come, and the adults begin to peer in the windows, eventually succumbing to invitations to enter the house, though they never join the dancing itself.

The Ashworths manage to find the pulse of their community at the very beginning of their stay.

We were invited to attend their church and after a Sunday or two we accepted their invitation. [...] We were pleasantly welcomed and given orange crates to sit on between the two groups. The congregation sang songs from memory led by a man up front with a tuning fork for the correct pitch. Other men took turns reading from their church ritual, much of it in Tlinget Indian language. It was an interesting experience and we attended several Sundays. It was beneficial to them and us alike. It showed that, through our attendance, we were interested in their religion as well as their community life. In other words, we were “one of them.” (Ashworth 41)

Others, like the Van Valins, let their noses and taste buds decide when they have gained access to the community, as recorded in William Van Valin’s unpublished journal dated February 21, 1913:

I am certainly becoming somewhat Eskimofied but it is not without a series of continual shocks to my optics, olfactories, sense of propriety, and last but not least, my poor stomach ...

Ethel and I can eat seal meat now and not bat an eye. At first it was a fearful shock to my sense of smell to even enter a native cabin because of its extreme odoriferousness, but now it has to be something fierce if I can't stand it. (Van Valin 1:3)

But, universally, it is the people themselves who eventually win the hearts of the teachers. Margaret Richardson records in a letter from Hamilton, Alaska, dated June 7, 1925:

You told me down there to look at the inhabitants as just "people on a screen." I tried, but couldn't. You saw how I got personally attached and felt it when they went away. That's just what happened here. Yesterday in cleaning up after the school year, I burned a lot of things Alex had made, or lessons he had written. Also many things Edwards had given me. I felt lonesome terribly. Do you think I'll be able to look at associates as people on a screen? Have you learned to? (Richardson Box 1: Folder 8: Page 43)

Hannah Breece writes about a similar feeling toward the end of her memoir: "Among people who were away from much of civilization, and perhaps isolated for periods of the year, stronger friendships could form in a month than would develop in years where there was much that was distracting and artificial" (Jacobs 50).

Sometimes, Alaska demands more than these teachers are willing to part with. And I think it is partially these unwilling sacrifices that bring these teachers' hearts so close to their communities. Margaret Richardson's beloved dog is carried away by spring fever. The Ashworths' young son, Billy Bob, dies within 24 hours of contact with another sick child. Maddie Madenwald's husband, Ed, freezes to death after his sled wrecks.

4.6 Effectiveness

But after all this work, after all this idealism, after all these sacrifices, the only thing these teachers want to know is, "Have I done any good?" At first, they all have optimism. Van Valin waxes eloquent in his first annual report to the State office, May 31, 1912:

We feel we have done what we could this year for the natives, as far as opportunity, means and conception of their needs permitted us. The experience has enlarged our vision and equipped us with broader minds and plans for a greater sphere of usefulness and efficiency among them in the future. We can but feel in closing, (If any little word of mine can make a heart the lighter, If any little song of mine can make the world the brighter, God help me say that little word, That little song keep singing, And drop them in some lonely vale To set some sad heart ringing.) (Van Valin Box 1: Folder 1)

And, indeed, there were often many small hints of gratitude to these teachers:

Peter made the trip to Togiak before dogsled travel became impossible, bringing me a letter written on soiled, crumpled paper, in little George's pinched, uphill handwriting.

Dear Morgan,

Please come back, Mrs. Morgan. I like to go to school.

Your friend,

George

I sent an answer to my little first grader and later learned of his boundless joy and pride in receiving it. He carried it about in the pocket of his jeans and read it so often that it finally fell apart at the folds.

(Madenwald 194)

But Wilford Corbin, finishing his first year of teaching, meets up with a strange predicament. As he gives his students their final grades, he talks with the building steward, "I said to Toby as he was moving desks, picking up papers and sweeping the floor, 'I couldn't believe it! More than half of the children never missed a day of school. I never heard of such perfect attendance records'" (Corbin 155). But just then a group of students approach him with their report cards clutched in their hands and meekly ask to be held back. The reason? They don't want to get through school too quickly, or else they'll have to go to the boarding schools, thousands of miles away from their village. He balks, but they persist, and finally, bewildered, he drops their grades and holds them back for a year (Corbin 155-6).

As time moves on, the picture these teachers have of their mission and its desired outcomes becomes more and more complicated. The original idealism that fueled them turns into reflection. Malach, for example, writes in his memoir,

Why is it that more Alaskan youth from Dillingham, Ninilchik, Kenai, Seldovia and other Alaskan communities do not enter, complete their college education and return with their professions to the Alaskan life?

A number of reasons could be mentioned.

There are not enough incentives for them to follow college careers. It is always easier to hang on to old ways of life to fish or work, or marry in the village. There is not enough encouragement from older people, not enough examples to follow in their community, where the young eople [sic] live.

Good material for college education was there in Dillingham among young people of high school age and their ability to study and learn could not be questioned.

Many of those young people in villages and communities could be teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers or nurses. All are sure needed in Alaska.

It appears to too many of those young people that the road to college education is too long and too difficult to travel compared with the, on the surface, easy life of a salmon fisherman, cannery worker or employee in any other seasonal work.

But the glamour, if there was any, of making good money in fishing is disappearing slowly but definitely and there will have to be a program of incentive encouragement for those young people to go to college, to keep them there and to help them to complete their higher education. (Malach 147)

Breece, forty years earlier, puts forth a similar observation.

Southeastern Alaska had long interested me because it was home of hundreds of native people who had been sent to the United States for their education, in hopes that they would be able to solve problems for their race at home when they returned. The older native people had looked forward to bright days when these educated young people returned. But often, instead, the educated sons and daughters turned into one more problem. [...]

The possibilities of splendid pupils like Walter, and the creditable achievements of a few of those sent out of Alaska, seemed hopeful and made the questions of sending pupils away from their homes and people well worth studying. But on the other hand, happy outcomes seldom occurred.

Were the disappointments and tragedies of these young people a transition stage that must be passed through in a race's development? This question had long bothered me.

My last Alaska assignment, after two years in Wrangell, was in nearby Douglas, an island across from Juneau, where the same puzzle presented itself. Observing cases instance by instance, it seemed to me that the returned students were usually so uprooted and dissatisfied that their unhappiness annulled what knowledge they may have gained in distant places of how to improve conditions for their people. I finally reached the conclusion that native children and young people should be taught in their own settlements, in schools adapted to their own ways of life. (Jacobs 188-9)

Most of the teachers I surveyed left Alaska after teaching for only a few years such as the Ashworths, the Corbins, the Olivers and Abbie Morgan Madenwald. But a few stayed on for longer, such as Hannah Breece, who stayed for 10 years, and the Warbelows, who stayed long enough that when they finally left,

As we circled to gain altitude before we nosed off to the southeast, I took one long last look at the spot that had been our honeymoon home. The big yellow school at the top of the hill suddenly seemed like a mansion to me. And the neat log building on the river bank with its proud sign, "Shungana Coop Store, Post Office" Implanted itself in my memory forever.

In a matter of seconds, it seemed, the village diminished almost to nothingness. A stranger looking down from my seat might have called it a little black spot out in the middle of a mass of wasteland, just as I

had mentally described it the first time I saw it from the air. But now it was no longer a little black spot of nothingness. Saungnak was a wonderful little world all of its own with friendly fires, cozy cabins, and warm-hearted people who taught the teachers, as together we built their small empire on ice. (Warbelow 251)

4.7 Summary

The written narratives of historical teachers in Alaska share similar plot points:

The Initial Decision

The Arrival

The First Day of School

Collisions

Integration

Effectiveness

Through the lens of these plot points we can make out a number of themes. We can see that many teachers felt “called” to their work and they approached it accordingly. Their attitudes toward Alaska Natives were frequently tainted by feelings of superiority. However, the teachers were always willing to “uplift the Native.” This seemed to be the main mission of teachers during this time.

The teachers I studied described their initial experiences in Alaska as being one of significant culture shock. To deal with this shock, they usually clung tightly to their roles as teachers and role models, cementing in them a sense of identity.

The teachers often found themselves in cultural collision with Alaska Natives. The roots of the collisions were often embedded in a teacher wanting to “help” the village. For some teachers, these collisions opened up integration opportunities. Others treated them as battles to win, for better or worse.

Though the bulk of this survey and analysis focused on the teachers’ experiences in the classroom, most of their writing takes place outside the school, showing us that merely living life in the village took up more of their time and thought than school did.

In evaluating their efforts, the teachers often met with mixed results. Sometimes they saw great learning taking place, and other times they felt they were doing more harm than good. Other times, cultural imperatives worked directly against the outcomes hoped for by the teacher.

Chapter 5 will survey and analyze the writings of several contemporary teachers in diverse parts of Alaska. As with this chapter, the analysis of their experience will proceed through plot points. I will also bring studies on Alaskan pedagogy to bear on the teachers’ experiences.

Chapter 5

Contemporary Teacher Narratives

5.1 Introduction

The nature of contemporary new teacher narratives deviates from what we have come to expect from the “old timers” chapter in a very important way. In that chapter my main job was to go through the material and find the places where school was mentioned. And it wasn’t mentioned a whole lot. My favorite example of the lack of school-related material comes from Pioneer Teacher: Turn of the Century Classroom in Remote Northwestern Alaska, by Carrie M. McLain, which, despite its promising title, offers the reader approximately one collective page worth of material on school experiences. The bulk of them go along the lines of, “Little remains in my mind regarding this school, which means it must have progressed in an orderly way that winter” (44). Most of the books were taken up with descriptions of phenomena that wouldn’t be found in the lower-48, tales of derring-do on the tundra, or stories about the many other roles the teachers played in the villages.

Malach described this “old” style of teacher in his unpublished manuscript “Alaska Elementary Schools...”:

The teacher in the Alaska elementary rural school enjoys a position, which is probably unique in the world of education. He is often-times the spokesman for the community, the person whose opinions and advice are most often acted upon. He may act as “doctor,” “nurse,”

“lawyer” or whatever person of authority a situation may call for. The Alaska territorial school system needs to be discovered by a number of energetic and resourceful teachers who will like and enjoy their teaching life in the last frontier of our country. (Malach Box 2: Folder 68)

Alaska has certainly attracted “a number of energetic and resourceful teachers,” as Malach had hoped. But the nature of the teaching job has changed in its essentials. Now they’re often *just* teachers (though, as we’ll see, *just* being a teacher is quite demanding). In his foreword to Journal of An Aleutian Year, Moses L. Dirks, writes,

Although the elders of the community are well aware of how valuable teachers like Mrs. Oliver were in the past, the situation has now changed. School is no long the center of the village’s life, and teachers are not relied on to perform the variety of tasks that Mrs. Oliver took on. [...] Most residents now manage their own personal affairs and do not rely on teachers for help as they did in the past. Teachers are expected only to educate students. (Dirks xv)

That change in function seems to have significantly altered the way teachers write about their experiences. For one thing, they write a lot more about school itself, since it often consumes their lives. As Ellen Gray put it, “Since there are so few out-of-school distractions, school grows in importance and colours all my thinking: when

school is going well, I'm supremely happy; when it's not, I'm very depressed. I'll probably be completely psychotic by Christmas" (Gray 52).

I will present a survey and analysis of the narrative writings of contemporary teachers in rural Alaska under much the same rubric as that used in the previous chapter. I will divide the survey and analysis into several plot points:

The Initial Decision

The Arrival

The First Day of School

Collisions/Integration and

The Final Decision.

I have not included the effectiveness plot point in this chapter because the first-year teachers I surveyed often did not have a perspective on their students' or their own ultimate success. Usually, their accounts ended before that kind of reflection could take place.

Each plot point may have several sub points, especially when we get to Collisions, which is complex and must be approached carefully.

5.2 The Initial Decision

There is little doubt in my mind that the stories we have surveyed in the previous chapter have found their way into the Alaskan mythos that motivates so many teachers today to come to Alaska. The stories are certainly compelling, and, of course, much more went on in their lives than what I presented.

However, because of the nature of the writings I have collected for this section on contemporary teachers, we are missing a large part of the reasoning behind why contemporary teachers decided to move to Alaska. Most of the accounts in the previous chapter were taken from memoirs, published and unpublished, meaning that the author probably felt compelled to bring the Alaska decision into the picture in order to present the “whole story.” Most of the accounts from the contemporary teachers, however, I have gathered from journals or email collections, which are usually started during the arrival of the teacher at his or her new village. Naturally, with all the new sights and experiences around them, they wax eloquent only about their current circumstances to family and friends back home, who already know the story of why this particular teacher decided to come to Alaska.

However, there is some help in this direction. Research performed by David Dickerson in 1980 indicated that more than 90 percent of the teachers in Alaska came from the lower-48, which is quite commensurate with the previous chapter, as all of the narratives I was able to find were written by Alaska transplants (except McLain). Research done in 2002 puts the transplant rate at 70 percent (McDiarmid, Larson and Hill 8).

Dickerson’s survey asked teachers why they came to Alaska in the first place.

The most frequently cited attraction to Alaska was adventure, which was mentioned 18 times. This was followed by (1) the rural lifestyle, which was mentioned 13 times, (2) wilderness and outdoor recreation, mentioned 12 times, and (3) the environment; mentioned 11 times.

The most attractive aspect of teaching in an REAA was listed as opportunity, which was mentioned 14 times. The teaching opportunities in the REAAs are viewed as both a chance to work at the journeyman level, rather than in the sub-professions, and also as a way of gaining experiences in teaching and in the State. It gives them a foot in the door in teaching and in Alaska.

Other frequently mentioned attractions to teaching in an REAA were (1) the rural lifestyle, mentioned 10 times, (2) adventure, mentioned 8 times; and (3) cultural diversity, mentioned 7 times.

(Dickerson 89)

Interestingly, when Dickerson asked teachers why *other* teachers chose to teach in Alaska, they most frequently cited high salaries, while only 6 teachers from his pool actually cited money as an attractor. However, in personal interviews with many teachers, I have found that the money factor is high on their priority list when deciding on Alaska, but they have only told me this after we've been able to establish a personal rapport. For the purposes of this study, it is noteworthy that none of the teachers reported a missionary purpose or zeal as so many of our historical teachers claimed. "However, a missionary zeal was attributed to others three times" (Dickerson 90). We have seen from the review of first-year teachers in general that missionary-like zeal to change lives, improve education, and give back to society motivate the majority of new teachers.

Buried in one of the emails I gathered is this statement from one bush teacher to another: “Oh, I know about that ‘just feels right’ thing. When I hired on here, I had some idea that I wanted to come somewhere away from home, but I had no idea about G---. But the principal asked, and it was just right.” So there are at least two teachers who admit to a sense of calling, though perhaps not as pronounced as the historical teachers’.

From my interaction and interviews with first-year teachers I have found Dickerson’s findings generally accurate. Pretty much everyone who has come to Alaska has been looking for an adventure. And the districts in Alaska are quite willing to offer it as a carrot, as you can see in a popular recruitment poster showing an Alaska Native in a traditional parka sitting serenely in his kayak amidst mountainous icebergs. “Teach in the Land of Adventure!” it declares.

Certainly Malach’s sentiment still holds cachet (deserved or not) with many prospective Alaska teachers: “In Alaskan teaching, you still teach with a feeling of freedom, having the satisfaction of doing a job to the best of your knowledge and understanding” (Malach 142). And certainly it is far more exciting (not to mention lucrative) to jump right into a full-fledged teaching position, rather than working your way up the ladder in a more populated area where competition for teaching jobs would be higher. But, as we’ll see later on, such a jump often graduates you straight into the honors section of the School of Hard Knocks.

So now we ask, what can happen when these new teachers arrive?

5.3 The Arrival

There is a legend circulated among teachers and administrators in Alaska about a teacher in red high heels and a miniskirt who steps off the bush plane, takes one look at the village she is assigned to, and steps right back on. I'm not sure if this particular woman actually existed, but I've found a few of her brothers and sisters mentioned. The earliest I found was in a letter from Marion Campbell in 1920 from Council, Alaska: "Everyone treats me so nicely here. I guess they are afraid I'll do the same as the last teacher that came. She took one look at Council, turned right around and caught the stage back to Nome (Chrysler 12). Then a little more recently, from a principal:

I was waiting at the airstrip for my teaching couple to arrive. The plane sat down and I walked over to see if they were on board. There was a couple ... but they didn't seem to be getting out. The pilot said they were the Jones', but they saw Fishcamp Village from the air and said, 'Return us to Gold Town.' I tried to talk them off the plane but they said you'd have to be crazy to teach here. You know, they were right – you have to be tough or crazy, and after two years I'm a little of both (Rider 120).

As one frank teacher told me, "My first impressions of [the village] were not very nice." But she, at least, got off the plane, mostly because she hates flying.

5.3.1 Stacy

Stacy has just graduated from college with her elementary teaching certificate. She did her student teaching in an upper-middle class suburban area where she enjoyed a big classroom budget, personal administrative support, and the chance to teach children of educated professionals. She has just arrived in a village of 400 people, 98 percent Alaska Native. In her first email home she describes the village.

It's hard to describe. Part of it is beautiful, in a beachy sort of way.

Other parts...hmmm, tactfully, messy. Now most of you know that I'm a pretty messy person, but I'm more clothes messy. This place, it's like people use the yard as a trash can/dumpster.

Then we can watch her insistent optimism slowly fade as she takes her first look at her apartment:

I don't know what I was expecting, but not this. The steps look like half are ready to break, it's dirty and there's stuff all over left from the last tenant. It made me want to cry! The outside is so ugly. It's not painted at all, just weathered board, ugly brown/gray.

Our breaker box is rusty (rusted shut, actually) and has no power switch thingy. Half of our apartment's power goes on and off randomly and nobody really knows why. And the downstairs door? No lock. It's held shut by a piece of 2x4.

This is a concern that shows up in a number of contemporary teacher narratives. Though expecting to rough it somewhat, their expectations are usually a

little higher than what they end up with. Dickerson's research showed that many of the teachers who leave their position in Alaska do so because of inadequate housing. This is an interesting difficulty because on the whole the teachers live in housing far superior to what the rest of the villagers live in.

One teacher describes the physical facilities in the average village thusly:

[Our] trailer is intended to have indoor plumbing, but does not, so the school did not even provide us with an outhouse, which still infuriates me. Fortunately we are only a few feet from the school and can go over there to use the toilets and showers, but I'm still not satisfied.

Nevertheless, I feel lucky to be the only teachers without indoor plumbing, since the only people in the entire village who have indoor plumbing are the teachers, which creates a lot of understandable hostility. The village (300 people) all shares two washing machines and one dryer, while the teachers have one washing machine and dryer each. The village shares three showers, while the teachers have one shower each. The whole thing is so absurdly colonialist, it's embarrassing to be part of. Our lack of running water has gained us respect in the community.

In Gambell, John Foley, author of Tundra Teacher, performed his ablutions the old-fashioned way – in a plastic bucket:

When I told my mother in Iowa that we had a honey bucket, she said, "Isn't that charming. Are the bees much of a nuisance?" (Foley 50)

Some habits die hard, however, and I still found myself reaching over my shoulder to flush the honey bucket. There should be a psychological term for this tendency.

Air Flush, perhaps. (Foley 51)

Stacy ended up with a kind of compromise. She has running water, but she has to haul it to the tank attached to her house from the washeteria in the school's truck, which causes her roommate Elizabeth some trouble later that winter.

5.3.2 Elizabeth

Elizabeth is almost the exact opposite of Stacy. She comes from a fading rough and tumble neighborhood, imbuing her with a no-nonsense attitude and an attendant dry sense of humor. Her attitudes were further cemented when she did her student teaching and found herself saddled with a rambunctious class and a mentor teacher who had the habit of disappearing for weeks at a time. But under her rough exterior lies a heart of gold, if you're patient enough. It is from Elizabeth's point of view that we watch Stacy and her wrestle with hauling water:

I had to drive the truck by myself, and almost tipped it. I loaded all our garbage since Christmas on the truck, then drove halfway to the dump before I found out that the dump road was closed, and had to bring all my garbage back. I loaded all the water equipment into the truck, and got to the washeteria, only to find that the door was padlocked shut, and they were shut down. So I

get quarters to buy water with at the outside pump, and get back to realize just what a 2-man job this is.

I get the beaver trim of my mitten stuck to the lip of the water container (125 gallons) and have to rip a bunch of the fur off of my mitten to extract myself from the back of the pickup. I get the water home, only to find that our pump is dry, I can't open it, and the hoses are frozen anyway. So I call Mike, who has taken the day off to take care of his sick wife, because I haven't had water since last Friday in my house. I touch the pickup truck in -10 weather with bare, wet fingers. They freeze to the truck, and Beth (who has come over at this point) has to spit on me to get them to come off. Mike brings his own pump over, saws a bigger hole in our transport tank, and pumps our water for us.

With hauling water being what it is, getting water for baths cannot fit into Stacy and Elizabeth's busy schedules, so they shower at the school, as do the students, leading to a rather unexpected duty, as narrated by Elizabeth in her normal, understated style:

I've had to help the little girls on their shower day. They had a male teacher, and it wasn't appropriate for him to go in there, so I got called out of my classroom to go help them wash their hair. That's one thing that you wouldn't be able to do in the

lower 48. Step into a shower with three little kids, and they'd probably lynch you. But up here, it's their only chance for a shower that week, and they need help when they're little.

5.3.3 Terry and Ally

Meanwhile, in H---, a village of about 150 people, a married couple, Terry and Ally, gather their water the way everyone else does, as Ally, the journal keeper of the family, records,

Everyone captures rainwater to use for cleaning and drinking. We distill ours for drinking, but the villagers don't. Our house has a rain gutter that empties into a big garbage pail. In the winter I guess people take their snow machines out to far off ponds and cut huge chunks of ice to melt.

Terry and Ally have just arrived in their village from the northern plains of the United States. Terry grew up as an army brat, traveling the world but never having a place to call home, perhaps the reason he majored in social studies in college. Ally comes from an educated, tight-knit family and has a degree in the sciences, but absolutely no classroom experience. Which is OK, because she's only planning to work a few hours each day doing ESL activities with early elementary school children. Terry is going to teach high school science.

In the previous chapter Abbie Morgan Madenwald was immediately descended upon in her home by throngs of children who didn't speak English. This induction

happens in every village as far as I can tell, except now the visitors speak English just fine and slyly attempt to teach the cheechakos a few choice Native words. This phenomenon is commonly called “visiting.”

“I was just awakened by a knock on the door. It was a little boy wondering, ‘Can I visit?’” writes Ellen Gray in her book Letters from Pelly Bay (11). The quote she gives from her young visitor is word-for-word the salutation every potential young Alaska Native visitor gives when they want to get into the house of a teacher or visiting stranger. The interesting thing is, Pelly Bay is in Nunuvut, Canada. So apparently the greeting is not constrained by political boundaries. And neither are the customs once the youngster has gained access to the house. As Stacy writes in the grand tradition of The Devil’s Dictionary,

Can we visit? *translation:* Can we come in and run around like maniacs in your home, drink your water, use your bathroom and ask to eat everything we see?

This definition probably emerged from the following email home:

“Monday, I had thirteen kids in the house and someone locked my bathroom door shut. Ahh! I was NOT pleased! They also have almost finished off my entire Costco size bag of trail mix in three days. It's really hard to get them to leave. I set times and I still can't get them out!”

Ellen probably wishes she were so lucky,

One little girl asked to use the bathroom. She was gone a long time, and when I went to check on her I found another little girl there too. Both were about four years old, and one was sitting on the toilet while the other applied my lipstick to her friend's face. (Gray 40)

On the coast, Ally inadvertently invites the whole village over one day:

Word got around on Monday that we were baking cookies, and sharing them, and the next thing we knew, we had about a dozen people over to sell us ivory. Well, they bring the ivory that we've already said no to. Then we say no, and to appease our guilt, we give them a cookie. A kid actually brought a wolf skull to sell us, and we said no, and gave him a cookie, and ten minutes later, he's back with some ancient artifacts that his ancestors used, eyeing the cookie plate again.

But after a steep learning curve, Terry and Ally get creative with their visiting difficulties:

It's very hard to get time for ourselves. People will call to come over at midnight if they see even one light in the house on. Terry and I have started turning off all the lights by 9:30 or 10:00 on the weekends and watching TV in a dark corner. It makes me want to move out to the middle of nowhere (oh wait, that's where I am).

Lest we forget, in the midst of this significant change in location, culture and roles, Stacy, Elizabeth, Ellen, Alley and Terry are getting ready to teach school.

5.3.4 Getting Ready

“I got my classroom key! I feel like a real teacher. My own classroom!” That sums up Stacy’s feelings as she starts into the school year. She soon finds that in many rural Alaskan schools, the tradition of initial classroom cleanliness still holds strong. It is as if Hannah Breece and Stacy connect across a century.

My classroom is infested with flies! And we're not talking cute little flies. We are talking monster mutant flies. They are HUGE! And they are EVERYWHERE! I put up five fly strips and every single one of them has no less than ten. And yet, there are still flies in the air.
Ewww!

Elizabeth faces a similar scene with more reserve, tainted perhaps with a pinch of sarcasm:

I'd like to say that my classroom is coming together nicely, but it's more of a mess than when I got here. However, I'm doing what I can to NOT let it look like it did when the previous teacher left (don't want to compete).

Little do Elizabeth or the other teachers know, as they purge their classrooms, that they are part of an intricate ecosystem. Stacy emerges from her messy, but educational resource-bereft room:

...and eureka! Every other teacher in the building has the opposite problem I have, and the hallways are FILLED with stuff. So, I went "shopping." I got paper, files, file holders, markers, storage containers,

notebook paper, books.....yes, this is the way regular shopping should be. No money, just pick what you want and take. Yay!

Beyond this, however, there isn't much writing about preparing for school. Possibly because the teachers are so busy. Getting a classroom and curriculum together is quite a process. And besides that, the schools these teachers are in have a difficult time knowing exactly what's going to happen when the first day of school arrives. As Stacy describes it:

Once again I am in the dark and feeling more than slightly overwhelmed. Last time I said I'm teaching upper elementary, right? Well....(long dramatic pause)....guess again. I'm not junior high, but I'm not elementary either. Scratching your head yet? Yeah, me too. I am back in the position of having no idea exactly what I'm teaching. (Can you sense the stress building up yet?)

In Stacy and Elizabeth's case, they do not know exactly who or what they will be teaching until the third day of school. Which doesn't leave much time for preparation.

So, as you can imagine, everyone is hard at work, especially Elizabeth. "I stayed up till midnight last night working on lesson plans (except, of course, for the 3 hours playing poker and blackjack with clothespins for poker chips) so I have everything done for right now."

5.4 The First Day of School

The general feeling of shock all teachers seem to have felt after their first day of school is described in an email from Stacy:

So, after a nap, a long walk with Fred, a couple of ibuprofen, and "group therapy" time with my fellow new teachers, I'm ready to talk about today. One of the other teachers told me it can only get better, and that sure better be true!

Stacy enumerates her complaints:

These kids don't know how to behave! My first class, Career Development, with sophomores, I feel like I should bring a pin to poke them and see if they are still breathing! They hardly move! At least they're not running around like little heathens, but still a little participation would be nice. Writing class wasn't too bad, except that anything involving their brain just doesn't work.

A few feet away Elizabeth is trying to start her own students in on a writing project.

They wanted to do autobiographical writing, because that sounded easiest to them, but they won't write four independent paragraphs about simple memories they've had. They would rather sit there and complain and ask for directions again, AND THEN, while I'm giving directions for the fourth time, they turn to their neighbor, and start complaining about how I'm not Sue [their former teacher]. AHHHHHHH!!!!

And then, a few thousand miles to the east in Pelly Bay, Canada, Ellen is pulling out hair of her own.

If I don't keep on top of them all the time they will do nothing but toss plasticene at the ceiling, to make it stick, all day. They really resent it when I try to make them do work ("So boring!"). One of their favorite sayings is "You only always ask questions!" I have pointed out that that is, in fact, my job, but they still think I'm quite unreasonable. Or, when I'm writing on the board and I ask someone how to spell a word, all I hear is "You know how! You're the teacher." It gets a bit discouraging. I'm turning into a nag. I've even tried yelling and getting cross, but that is not effective – they just think that's amusing. (Gray 35)

Ally, starting into her tenure as a half-time ESL teacher in the elementary school, is dealing other, less visible, oddities:

They chew tobacco and they'll tell me about it, but it's hard to physically make them spit it out. I just say "ickmick is gross and I don't want you chewing it when you're with me, get rid of it now or I'll write your name on the board" but sometimes it's hard to prove they have it or they'll just grin and hide it. They are really good at keeping it hidden in their mouths.

Ellen, in Pelly Bay, nipped a similar problem in the bud: "So far I've pretty well eliminated chewing snuff in class and spitting it on the floor. Neither of those was mentioned in teachers' college" (Gray 51).

American teachers have been trying to get their Alaska Native students to quit chewing tobacco for a long time. Madenwald, for example, finds out that many of her little students stay home sick because they don't know enough to spit the tobacco juice out. Of course, there's more than one way to skin a cat, as narrated by Roman Malach:

There was a young lady teacher who decided to settle the smoking of her school children once and for good. She went to the store, bought a few boxes of cigars, cigarettes, and took them to the schoolhouse. At the end of the school day, she told the children to stay for a while. Then she opened cigar and cigarette boxes, and invited the children to smoke to their heart's content right there in the schoolhouse.

Quite a number of children accepted the invitation and smoked those cigars and cigarettes, as many as they wished. Some of them got sick, others hardly could walk to their homes, but the teacher made the point that the smoking was not a healthy thing for children. Yes, she made the point quite clearly, but her drastic actions brought upon her a lot of resentment and not necessarily the approval of superiors. (Malach 1:50:57-58)

Despite her initial shock at her tobacco chewing elementary students, Ally seems quite happy her first day:

Today I taught for the first time. Basically I teach a total of 2.25 hours to different groups of 1st and 2nd graders. I have to sing a lot and come up with fun games to play that help them learn English properly. It's

challenging right now since I've never even been in a classroom before.

Today went pretty well, though it's hard to keep little kids attention.

We move from one game to another very fast.

As time goes on, most teachers seem to be able to settle into a pattern. But that doesn't mean that the pattern is necessarily a comfortable one. Gray describes hers in Pelly Bay:

Monday: the kids are rotten! I spend the day feeling like a jailer. I come home wondering what I'm doing here, and counting the days till I can leave. Spend the evening preparing lessons.

Tuesday: school is a bit better. Spend the evening preparing lessons.

Might let kids visit a while.

Wednesday: the kids are almost bearable. Soccer from 5-6. Spend pm preparing lessons.

Thursday: School is fun. Might let kids visit. Spend the evening preparing lessons.

Friday: kids are great, life is wonderful, and tomorrow is Saturday! Shop at Co-op; have visitors till around 6:30; eat a gourmet frozen dinner; relax with a good book, write letters have a hot bath. (Gray 43)

5.4.1 The Cold

As the initial shock subsides, and as the year wears on, the teachers start noticing the temperature. Ally gets off to a good start,

It is COLD and WINDY! The snow, although not too heavy, is flying by sideways instead of down. The temp with wind chill is -70 F! Its so cold it almost feels hot on your skin. Everyone from here on out, I've been told, wears snow pants as a normal part of their apparel, indoors and out.

And then, being a good little Alaska transplant, even when things finally warm up enough to melt the snow, Ally's still at it.

Well, there was a huge blowing storm last night. 75 mph winds with wet snow. You could not see more than 5 feet in front of you. You couldn't open your eyes in the wind or your eyeballs would get ripped up from flying icy snow. I was outside for about 5 minutes walking to the post office with my eyes closed and was completely soaked. Last night the wind felt like it would take our house away at any moment. I don't think I like Alaskan weather.

Then, concerning the lack of sunlight during the winter, Elizabeth writes: "I assume the sun came up today, but I never saw it," writes Elizabeth. "Wait, yes, I saw it as I raced a quad to the dump today, and almost froze off some of my more favorite facial features (ears and nose), actually, I think my eyes started to freeze. Maybe we shouldn't have gone the long way.

Margaret Richardson, in 1925, on the other hand, has a more poetic bent: "I like to walk west in the evening, for the sun is red and just sinking, so cold and malicious looking" (Richardson Box 1: Folder 8: Page 40). "Mercy, there goes the

door of the children's toilet, blowing past down the wind." (Richardson Box 1: Folder 8: Page 128).

But Elizabeth isn't completely made of cynicism. Here's a bit of her heartfelt prose about the north:

Life is good here. We ran out of heating oil the other night. We both went to bed with sleeping bags over every other blanket we owned, along with a t-shirt under the flannel nightgown and a sweatshirt on over it. So we looked pretty funny, but what do we care, right? We were cold.

We got a call at 10:30ish, and Stacy comes running into my room, where I'm shivering under my sleeping bag, shouting that the Northern Lights are out. So we get dressed real fast and go running outside to see: nothing. Okay, not nothing, but it wasn't very special when we got there. Just what looked like some wispy little white clouds out in the sky. So we waited around and pretty soon they got bigger, but we didn't see them move, we'd be watching one spot, then turn around and ask: "Isn't that light spot bigger than the last time we looked?" But pretty soon it got amazing.

And then, they were spectacular. They were right above us. And they danced! And they were mostly green, but there were purple spots too. And there was a curtain (which just looked like light reflecting on clouds off of a city) and streams (which looked kind of like the EAC in

Finding Nemo, that current of water, different colored, running from horizon to horizon) and then there were the sparkly parts. And it looked, for a second, almost like the tentacles of a giant jellyfish floating in the air, but more like light beams, as they fall through trees in a wind. All in all, it was one amazing experience. And we stood right underneath them, and they looked to be about a hundred feet in the air, like we could climb up and touch them, but really they were thousands of feet up.

Frank and Marie [journalists] from Paris are here doing a piece on the village, and were giggling and running around under the lights, because they'd never seen them before, and they were that amazed. We were amazed too, but a little more dignified about it.

5.5 Collisions

5.5.1 Approaching the Conflicts

Along with their professional ancestors, modern-day first-year teachers find the first day of school quite challenging, and they spend a lot more time writing about the continuing challenges. If the number of words is any measure, contemporary teachers have a lot more in-school challenges than their predecessors. In 1954, which is when I started to find evidence of the willingness of teachers to go public with their

frustrations, John C. Coray was probably still licking his wounds, though he tried to be discreet about it:

The new teacher first confronted with the situation needs time to become oriented. He will surely develop strong feelings of inadequacy at the outset, as he naturally supposes his teaching is inferior. These feelings are not mitigated by his isolation and consequent inability to discuss things with a supervisor or another teacher. ...Although the new teacher must in time realize that troubles are not entirely a product of his inadequacy, and although he must come to realize that difficulties stem from the children themselves, it will take perhaps a few years to understand what factors underlie the situation. (Coray 6)

Essentially, Coray is saying that in a few years, the new teachers will start to understand what's going on, and nothing can really make the learning curve any shallower.

However, in 1975, Judith Kleinfeld contradicted Coray's thesis. Perhaps the fault really *was* with the teacher. She published an article wherein she described two kinds of teachers that she saw showing up regularly in rural Alaskan classrooms. The first she called the "ethnocentric teacher":

As many anthropologists have testified these teachers with their disapproval of Indian parents' 'permissiveness,' their shock at adolescents' 'promiscuity,' and their scorn for children who are 'noncompetitive,' undermine Indian students' sense of worth. [...]

These ethnocentric teachers find themselves confronted with class after class of silent, resistant students..." (Kleinfeld "Positive Stereotyping" 103)

The second she called the "cultural relativist":

This teacher has great admiration for Indian culture, at least in its aboriginal form, and is eager to learn more about it from his students. In his classes, he tries to introduce as much culturally relevant material as he can find. Disapproving of past education pressures toward acculturation, he urges his own Indian students to retain their culture. This teacher is acutely aware of his own cultural biases and wary of imposing any of his own values on Indian students. Yet, the cultural relativist often finds himself confronted with Indian students as silent and unresponsive to his teaching as they are in the classes of his opposite, the ethnocentric teacher. (Kleinfeld "Positive Stereotyping" 104)

Kleinfeld was of the opinion that the ethnocentric teacher was on the way out, and that the cultural relativist was gaining ascendancy. On the surface, she said she was pleased with this changing of the guard, but more deeply, she felt the same mistakes were being made. While the ethnocentric teacher imposed his or her values with no compromise, often the cultural relativist was so concerned that the students keep their culture that he or she lost effectiveness as a teacher:

These teachers' concern about cultural differences results in a pervasive anxiety and uncertainty in dealing with students. Their approach is inevitably hesitant, tentative, worried. [...] More important to the development of a healthy personality in children than a few isolated negative acts is the ability of adults to "represent to the child a deep, almost somatic conviction that there is meaning to what they are doing. (Kleinfeld "Positive Stereotyping" 106)

Interestingly, every one of the accounts of contemporary teachers I've read so far has included statements that would fit beautifully under either category. Here are some examples of ethnocentrism from three different teachers:

Terry

Remind me to never raise children around here. It would be too hard. If one kept them aloof from the society, they wouldn't have any friends, and to immerse them in the society just seems wrong, with the staying up too late, and the constant pop drinking, and the addictions etc.

Stacy

But you know, when my parents didn't want me somewhere, they told ME and it was MY responsibility to stay away. But wait, that would require PARENTING skills.

Elizabeth

Most parents don't tell them what to do – at all. They get up when, and if, they want, eat if they feel like it, wash or not and go to bed when, if and where they want, at any age. In some ways they are spoiled (they have lots of money to buy junk food), and in other ways I consider them quite deprived (in terms of parental attention).

It isn't hard to see these teachers imposing their own culture's values on the actions of the Native people they live among. Terry worrying about the effects of what she considers destructive behaviors, Stacy blaming the behaviors on bad "parenting skills," and Elizabeth expressing sadness at what she sees as the children's lack.

On the other hand, here are three quotes that manifest a leaning toward cultural relativism from the same teachers:

Terry

I think it's because of the nonstructured lifestyle of the culture. The kids are not used to being told what to do and there are little consequences if they don't listen to teacher. It's not that they talk back, really; they just smile and do exactly what you told them not to do.

Stacy

My main problem was a lack of organized disciplinary action. I couldn't back up my threats and found myself afraid of keeping students after class or of enforcing after school detention due to a lack of knowledge about what was acceptable at the school.

Elizabeth

We've been discussing, for example, the difference between Afro-American influences on modern culture and native influences. The students don't seem comfortable talking about the stuff but I'm not sure why – could be maybe my own hesitancy to get into it, but I'm not sure.

In these three quotes the teachers show more reflectiveness about how culture influences the way they perceive the situation. Terry, though frustrated, acknowledges that her students have a different set of perceptions than she does. That, in this case, they aren't acting maliciously, just in their own way. Stacy and Elizabeth both begin to realize that they do not quite grasp the school's culture, it being a meeting of their own (Western) culture and the Native culture. Thus these particular teachers seem to be a mix of the two types,

But Kleinfeld was quite aware of the complexity of teaching, and after being unable to come up with a quantifiable way of measuring effectiveness in rural Alaskan teachers, she and her colleagues came up with an interesting new approach.

As we ourselves read through the research literature, we found that we could not even remember many of the generalizations about effective

teachers. What we found stimulating, what we remembered, what we thought about and talked about to our colleagues, were the concrete cases. (Kleinfeld, et al. "Teacher Tales" 25)

As a heuristic device, the teacher tale has a number of advantages. First it is memorable. Rural teachers have told us that these kinds of stories remain in their minds when they go out to the villages and that with time they see fresh meanings in the same stories. Second, the story is accepted as valid. Teachers are not hostile to the story the way they so often are to "research" because the story only claims to be one person's experience; it does not make claims to universal truth. Third, the stories are stimulating. They encourage critical reflection on experience. They place the teacher in the role not of the skeptic questioning "findings" but of researcher trying to construct meaning from the kaleidoscope of particular experiences. (Kleinfeld et al. "Teacher Tales" 29)

Their conclusions resulted in the creation of the "Teaching Cases for Cross-Cultural Education Series." This series covered the experiences of student teachers, first-year teachers, full-time teachers, principals, and others. All are written with deft use of storytelling tools: characterization, suspense, plot points, etc. As the introduction to the fifth work in the series, "A Student Teacher's Troubled Teaching Experience in Rural Alaska," says,

The teaching case is intended to capture the ambiguities and indeterminacies of contemporary professional roles where both means and ends are problematic (Schon, 1983). In this teaching case, interpretations are left open and loose ends are not tied. Relevant information is not known, and known information is not necessarily relevant. The purpose of the case is not to establish “truth” but rather to prepare students’ for “wise action” (Christensen and Hansen, 1987). Professional practice demands wise action, even when the truth is unknowable. (Kleinfeld “Cross-Cultural Teaching Tales” 1)

5.5.2 Withholding Judgment

My own observation of rural teachers has led me to agree with Kleinfeld’s approach. I think it is far too easy to give advice from outside the situation, to be an armchair principal.

An interesting example of the armchair principal is Katherine McNamara in her memoir, Narrow Road to the Deep North: A Journey Into the Interior of Alaska. McNamara comes out of Paris in the mid-1970s (about the time Kleinfeld published her article on the two kinds of teachers) to be an itinerant poetry teacher in Alaska’s rural interior. She flies from village to village giving poetry seminars to the students. From her account, she doesn’t seem to stay in a village as a teacher for more than a few days, and rarely spends more than one day with a particular class. She does, however, make her home in rural Alaska for a few years.

Her encounters with the village schools seem to smack of distaste, not toward the students, but toward the teachers and administrators. For example, toward the beginning of her stay she visits a Native man who eloquently expresses his desire to get his GED:

The next day, the principal told me that Mike Fitka had asked for the GED courses before, and had not come to class. The teachers, he said, used to hold “adult night” every week; no one came, or very few people did.

“I’m all burned out from setting up program and not having them work,” he said, not crossly. He had nothing more to say.

What did the earnest man, who consulted his dictionary so as not be thought ignorant, desire to learn? He talked of home study; the principal talked of classes. What did school do for people in the bush? Were they embarrassed to go there? Why, I wondered, did so many adults not read or write? (McNamara 26)

McNamara does seem to be able to dig under the skin of a situation. At least she’s constantly at work at it. In one class she says she senses “strong feelings [...] churning through this school” (McNamara 156) and allows the students to begin banging on homemade drums:

...but the songs and drumming turned raucous and disruptive. I asked Bernie, the teacher, not to interfere. The students were trying to shout down school and, probably, to test me. I let them make their noise and

clap their sticks together, and only asked them to stop when the tumult grew loud enough to bother the junior high. They needed to shout out those feelings – to do something. I don't know what. Something is wrong here. (McNamara 156)

I have to admire McNamara's attempts at sensitivity. In fact, she reminds me very much of a first-year teacher trying to reach her students. But she is a temporary in that school. She will spend very little time with the students; she doesn't have to worry about the mounds of responsibilities, politics and work heaped upon teachers like Bernie. She isn't aware of how her actions are affecting the well being of the teachers whose lives are so bound up in their relationship to the students and the atmosphere of the school.

Later, she has dinner with Bernie and his wife.

At dinner they spoke respectfully of the school parent committee, but hedged when I asked about the students. From both of them a look, a tone in the voice, a hint of disillusionment; by dessert, grievance overcame hesitation. Last month, teenagers broke into their place, opened a locked cupboard, and took marijuana, whiskey, and incense. Two weeks later, they broke in again.

Julia is crushed by it: "We've tried to do so much for them! And we thought we were getting somewhere," she wailed. Bernie is trying to be tough, but feels he's been taken advantage of, and that hurts his pride.

[...]

The teachers were robbed; it was an ugly, worrisome matter. But robbed of what? Whiskey, grass, incense – things teenagers like. Things the teachers out of discretion and some unexpected measure of good sense, didn't share with students. Alcohol and marijuana are common, they're certainly legal, but people here can't afford them. Julie, with her fine sensibility, now sees life in the village as squalid and violent. Bernie knows, suddenly, shockingly, that he is powerless. They are beginning to realize they can survive here only if the village helps them. They are amazed and appalled at this fact. It undermines their sense of themselves.

The thefts are a warning. I'd say the boy and his friends were telling them not to bring those things into the village. There is their home. And then, the teachers didn't share what they had. Is this why the kids are so angry? [...]

Julia and Bernie see themselves as good. They aren't among the exploiters; they're doing good for these people! [...]

But they are foreign to the village, and not thinking of the consequences. (McNamara 156-157)

Beneath McNamara's lucid, sensitive prose, there is a lurking judgmentalism. The teachers are doing things wrong. They are not tapped into the disturbed pulse of the village, as McNamara seems to be. McNamara also seems to imply that the teachers' very nature is wrong for their circumstances. It is true that the teachers are

foreigners, but rather than letting that fact stand as judgment, let's let it stand as the premise for a story. The story of the rural Alaskan teacher. Real human beings.

What would have happened to McNamara if she had stayed for a year as a full-time teacher? We can get a hint from one class McNamara writes about:

The students were composing. I sat by the window and wrote in my notebook, and pretended to ignore the giggles and cellophane-rattling as they opened candy wrappers, and the skitter and swish of pencils crossing out and erasing. [...]

After class, a girl named Karen approached and asked, diffidently, if I wanted to read her paper. Of course, I said. Now? Yes.

I sat down and read a finely thought-out, lyrical essay on freedom. She had described the sunny day in loving detail, then described how it felt to be cooped up in darkness, in school all day, like a caged bird.

(McNamara 27)

We can see two themes arise from McNamara's experience. First, if she doesn't do something about that giggling and cellophane rattling, she's going to have a discipline problem on her hands in a matter of days. Second, she can see into the heart of a student for a moment. And it's a beautiful place. She would probably be pulled between these two forces without mercy while trying to balance paper work, administrative politics and her other six classes, just as so many other teachers must.

We also have Ally's case to help us think about the situation. She is a good example of someone who goes from handing out truisms to finding herself "down in it." Early in her stay she subs in her husband's high school classes:

The only time I subbed for Terry we watched movies, so it was easy.

The kids think of me as more a peer since I look very young to them and they only hang out with me out of school mainly. It makes teaching them more informal for me. Terry gets very frustrated because he has a hard time getting them to do things and take his rule seriously and keep on task. He hasn't had these sorts of problems so much before.

Ally acts the basic part of the person who doesn't have to deal with the situation day in and day out, the luxury McNamara had (a luxury I too have had, incidentally). She has the time and leisure to philosophize about her situation through the lens of the cultural relativist. Though she *does* have to deal with a husband who dealt with it day in and day out. But then the plot point arrives and a teacher takes maternity leave. Ally decides to be a long-term substitute for her:

I've decided to teach Jamie's class for her. I might even start right after Christmas break depending on how she's doing. So I guess I'll have my own class for about six weeks. Scary. I'm going to teach with her a bit next week and learn her routine. She's very strict so the kids are good for her, but I don't know how they will be for me.

And after that, things progress much like we've seen them before, and we watch Ally's poise and philosophical mindset slowly break down:

The kids are still at the “honeymoon” stage with me but I suspect they will start to try to take advantage this week so I want to feel better by tomorrow. [...]

The kids were horrible today. I finally got Charlie sent home after numerous threats and attempts over the past week. Every time I’d send him out, Shad (the dean) would send him back in after 3 minutes telling me that Charlie promised to be good. Well, this has set a bad example for the rest of the class, not to mention the disruption it has caused. So the kids are just starting to get out of control. I don’t know what to do. I never wanted to be a teacher in the first place! All these other people have chosen this as their profession. I’m tired of spending my days chasing kids around. [...]

I’m not having fun here anymore because I hate teaching and am sick of everything. Also today it’s rainy and windy and yucky out.

But despite these difficulties and feelings of failure and impotence, Ally finds herself strangely enraged when she becomes sick and someone must substitute for her:

I stayed home from school yesterday to get over this cold and watch Naam. I left very easy, explainable instructions with the sub, which took me an hour to get together. It made me so mad today when I find out she did not even attempt anything I asked her to, and played basketball and roller-skated with the kids all day yesterday. She’s

getting paid the same as me and not doing anything. That's exactly why I've been afraid to take a sick day even when I've been running a fever.

For some reason, Ally can't stand to see someone not go through the difficulties she has been weathering for so long, even when she sees her efforts as being next to wasted. But soon, the light shines at the end of the tunnel:

Jamie called today. She had a baby girl. Cally Sue, at about 3:30 this morning. They plan on being back in the village next week. I hope she feels up to teaching again soon. I can't take these little monsters much longer. One of them likes to verbally abuse me every day, and boy does he have a mouth for a ten-year old! [...]

Jamie's kids are angels since she's been back, which does make me feel bad, but the ESL kids are very excited that I'm their teacher again, and for right now, anyway, are being very good for me. I also realize that I have learned a lot of classroom management skills in Jamie's class, and it is making my ESL class better.

You can see Ally's journey from being secure in her position as a part-time ESL teacher, to losing her moorings in the thick of a context she can't get a hold of. And she comes out – a little wiser? She seems to think so. Hopefully, we too will be a little wiser, though perhaps not as battle scarred, as we watch these teachers struggle with their experiences.

5.5.3 The Pit

In Simon Veenman's review of literature on the topic of challenges new teachers face (1984), he observes that often new teachers find themselves pressured by classroom circumstances or colleagues to become strict disciplinarians, or rote-style teachers, though it may go against their personal teaching philosophies. Some may start out with hopes of serving the poor and disenfranchised, only to find out that their efforts are undermined by the difficulties of teaching impoverished children. He also points out that teachers' emotions can get out of control as they are overwhelmed by the demands of the job. As Alysia Roehrig writes in the introduction to *Stories of Beginning Teachers*, "[Teachers'] perceptions of themselves can be affected as well, as when the former honors college student in literature begins to perceive her- or himself as a failure because of unsuccessful struggles to get eighth graders to understand even short stories – or get them to read the stories at all" (Roehrig et al. 3).

Here we see the teachers at their most vulnerable, when their weaknesses are paraded and sometimes exploited publicly. It seems to happen to everyone. It's just a matter of when. I'll present all the passages from the teachers' writings first and then the analysis.

Stacy

I was trying to get my kids to give ideas of what good writing looks like. So, they give me a few ideas (very sparingly) and then I read them a student narrative (that's a teacher word for story). The story's written about this kid's friend who watches TV all the time and is a "little bit fat

because of it." (Are you guessing where this is going?) But then she gets her friend to run with her and now they spend all their time exercising together. So I get done reading it and ask, what was good in this paper. And this little jerk says, "That fat girl....it's you!" OOOOOOOOOOOO! (That's my scream) And you know, it wouldn't have been so hurtful, except that the kids have pretty much been complaining NON STOP the whole twenty minutes of the period so far how stupid this stuff is and how it's dumb and they hate it, when I have spent hours getting stuff together and planning for class. So I say, "Get up NOW and go to the principal." To which he replies, "I was just kidding." Yeah, right and I'm the pope.

So we go see Sid. By now I'm at the point, if I have to say anything, I'm going to start crying. So, I say, "Tell him why you're here." And he says, "Idonknow" (That's the blend they do, like it's all one big word.) And Sid says, "No, you wouldn't be here if you didn't know what you did." And once again, "Idonknow."

So I, trying to hold back the tears, try to explain in the fewest words possible. But of course the tears spill out anyway so I flee out the door [...]

Sid walks in [the classroom] and tells me to go take a break for the rest of the period (like 15 or 20 minutes). Great, I'm thinking, he thinks I'm totally incompetent and a total nincompoop. Later that day, he

thanked me for bringing the kid to him and said it was a great "teachable moment" to talk to the rest of the class. Yeah, "your teacher is a oversensitive twit, so be nice to her!" *sigh* I wish I wasn't so easily jerked like that.

Ellen

All day long I'd been cracking down on behaviour, and the minutes of lost gym time had been mounting. We don't have gym until tomorrow, and I think they'd habituated to the threat. [...] It took some nagging to get them all cleaning up. Anyway, time passed the room got sort of cleaned up, and I wanted to get everyone in their seats to dismiss them for recess, so I counted out loud (usually that's very effective). This time, though, they counted along with me, shouting at the top of their lungs. That is not acceptable, so I walked to the blackboard and added 5 minutes onto the "wasted gym time" chart. In their spirit of defiance (which by this time was almost class-wide) they weren't chastened. The boys yelled "we don't care!", they hooted, they slapped their desks. Even the girls muttered and talked out. I waited ... no result. There was total chaos, so I just left the room. [...]

I went to collect them, ready to be true bitch if the situation demanded it. I would have been fine, except that a few of the girls greeted me with shamed face and "I'm really sorry, Ellen". That did it;

the tears started behind my eyes, and although I didn't break down, I know my eyes got red. [...] Unfortunately, once I start crying I don't stop easily, and there is nowhere to hide in our school! [...]

I heard Randy say "Let's be bad again tomorrow!"

I had a long talk with Deb today. She says my students are taking advantage of me (not just yesterday) and that I need to get tough, strict and mean. She says (and this is her fourth year here) that my style (patient democratic when possible, quiet and relaxed) just does not work here. [...] Do I go as far as she said? I would hate teaching that way. I don't know which would be more stressful: teaching in a way that seems foreign to me, or being myself and dealing with the kinds of behaviour I'm experiencing now (and always being afraid of losing control again, and that's not a good attitude for a teacher to have!) Deb says that I have to accept that the kids will dislike me. I can't resolve my feelings about this. The problem is, I like my students and I can see things from their point of view. I want them to like me and to like school. But I don't want to be the type of teacher who sucks up to the kids and gives in to them so they'll like her! (Gray 139-141)

Rob

It is now 8:00 Sunday evening. Most details are taken care of – organization for my distance courses, travel plans, discussion board

participation, organization of my classroom and location of my initial set of lesson plans from the first three weeks after losing and then re-finding it, in the student lost and found, on several subsequent occasions, review of several new projects for the students including an exchange program with a mind-bending set of rules and regulations, review of a week's worth of email, unwrapping of several new bean-bags including but not limited to one that resembles a happy whale, laundry, organization of my finances, location of my school check which I have now located and lost five different times in succession and on different days, ordering of supplies for a variety of delightful and theoretically savory baked goods in order that I can host the next teacher get together and thus relieve myself from community disgust and alienation, realization that my long distance relationship will most likely at this point fail due to the fact that I have already begun the painful separation "nightmares" involving dead pets that are ironically part of the healing and re-birth process, one hour weighing of the value in flying to Seattle for two days in November to attend a wedding of college friends that would cost me at least a thousand bucks, roundtrip, a thousand bucks that I should be spending on my Christmas vacation to see my sister who I have not visited for the past six years, both of these situations being in direct conflict and ensuring severe offense to at least one (1) trusted and valuable member of my family/friend

community to which I have long since severed all ties anyway – but, by the way, my lesson plans for the upcoming week are completely blank. I now have to decide whether to assemble good plans for tomorrow and risk having to scramble like a wounded arctic ground-squirrel or beaten whistling marmot through the rest of the week (the social studies teacher is not yet back which means I'll be coaching volleyball again, which reminds me that I haven't looked up the schedule on line which could take roughly another half hour) or to throw together loose plans and suffer through another five days of feeling like I am wasting the students' time and continually losing their respect – a feeling that is, let's face it, pretty accurate. Either way I plan to be up late.

Ally

The kids were horrible today. I finally got Charlie sent home after numerous threats and attempts over the past week. Every time I'd send him out, Mark (the dean) would send him back in after 3 minutes telling me that Charlie promised to be good. Well, this has set a bad example for the rest of the class, not to mention the disruption it has caused. So the kids are just starting to get out of control. I don't know what to do. I never wanted to be a teacher in the first place! All these other people have chosen this as their profession. I'm tired of spending my days chasing kids around.

Later in the year, a disciplinary meeting was held with a group of students and the dean over some extreme behavior that had recently occurred. The principal stayed for five minutes and then sidled out the door, saying he had to go to another meeting. Ally, however, was suspicious:

I went to check if this was true and found him sitting on his computer. I was so angry I wanted to say calmly to him that he really should be present at the meeting to show the kids that he supported Mark and tell them that he too, was upset by their public disrespect for the people who try to help them have a good school. But when I saw him there I got so angry and I knew that if I said anything it would just come out very negative and I didn't want that. I also still find it hard to stand up to men twice my age.

Elizabeth

Here is what I've learned in the last 24 hours: If one has to become violently ill due to some old meat, let it be at home, and not anywhere else. My internal clock said: Hey, this roast beef is only 4 days old (Because I forgot about that week I was gone) and I had a piece before realizing that it was yucky, and spent the next 24 hours being violently ill. At school. Once in front of the kids. Fun, huh? They're all like: "Eww!!! GROSS!!!" And between bouts, I'm like: "go to lunch" and one pops off with: "I'm not hungry anymore" ha, so funny. Like this is

so fun for me. I toughed out the rest of the day, then I went home and crashed.

Stacy and Ellen's stories are quite parallel to each other and point up a characteristic that I think is quite universal with new teachers, namely, binding your success in the classroom with your own sense of personal worth. Ellen, for example, talks about her difficulties in separating her emotional well being from her school experiences. And now we see a school experience at its worst.

It is instructive to note that Stacy and Ellen both reported that they had already been putting up with nonstop complaints from their students before the final straw was laid upon their backs (though the final incidents certainly look more like anvils than straws). Under more rested, emotionally supportive circumstances, they would have reacted differently. Most likely they had encountered many very similar situations in the weeks previous and had reacted to them more evenly.

In fact, Rob gives us a detailed insight into the milieu Stacy and Ellen were probably mired in. Stresses don't just come through students, they also come through colleagues, social demands, paperwork, family, friends, obligations, unforeseen demands, worries about the future, etc. Sometimes not even the prospect of a beanbag shaped like a happy whale can buoy a teacher's soul.

We're almost tempted to overinterpret Rob's choice of a Halloween costume: "Yesterday I dressed up in long underwear and a yellow box for all classes, by the way."

The question that interests me most, but which I am completely unqualified to answer, is “What was going through the heads of the students in these cases? What were they trying to accomplish?” As I think back on my own childhood in a suburban public school, I can remember a smoldering dislike for school in general. My young mind often made the teacher stand in for the institution and its demands. There are many inhumane aspects to the institution of public school. It is often set up like a factory for the processing of student minds. The classes are far too large, often swamping even the most energetic teacher. Personal interaction with an adult (especially positive interaction) is hard to come by; thus, the teachers frequently become cardboard characters to the students (the impotent teacher in the movie Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, the menacing Miss Trunchbull from Roald Dahl’s Matilda). The children are left to create a culture of their own, which often turns into a brutishly enforced pecking order reminiscent of The Lord of the Flies. The students have much to contend with, and much of it insists on the students’ powerlessness. No wonder rebellion is on their minds.

Meanwhile, the teacher is putting in twelve hours or more a day in hopes of making the classroom experience rewarding. The chips seem stacked against everyone involved.

In the April-May 1955 issue of the Alaska Teacher newsletter, a list of survival commandments for teachers is proffered. The first thunders: “Thou shalt not lose thy sense of humor, for verily without it thou art lost and doomed surely to beat out thy brains up on thy blackboard” (“Ten Commandments” 15).

For one reason or another, Elizabeth seems to have a hold on this commandment. Note that even when she's tossing her cookies in front of her students, she's also tossing off dry jokes about her situation. Indeed, looking back over Elizabeth's writings we see that she constantly uses dry humor to distance herself from difficult situations. She seems to be able to cut the link between her perception of her self worth and the events in the classroom. I imagine she got some training in that during her student teaching days where she says she was thrown immediately to the lions and had to sink or swim (to mix metaphors).

Ally's story makes us aware of the effect administrative attitudes have on the new teacher. It's bad enough to have authority when one is so young and inexperienced in handling it. But what's worse is finding out you have no authority, as if the teacher finds out that the sword he or she had been given was cardboard, spray-painted silver.

Stacy, for example, mourns what she sees as an erosion of her authority when her principal revokes the teachers' ability to ban students from gym time for bad behavior. At the beginning of the school year she writes, "Rec started this week (open gym after school for the kids to run around) and telling them I will ban them from rec really works!" But then later, "Sid sent out an email to all the staff that the REC list is NOT to be used for behavior. So great. The teachers have absolutely no 'threats' to use for behavioral control."

But we have to look at it from the administration's viewpoint as well. There may be village politics to consider that the teachers are unaware of. Everyone seems caught in a web of influences, and any move they make affects the others.

5.6 Integration

One of the main focuses of new teacher orientation programs in rural Alaska is to help the new teachers integrate with the community. As we saw in the previous chapter, integration was once forced on teachers. It was either integrate or die. But now, with the advent of television and frequent air traffic, teachers have the option of leading lives insulated from the village. With the barriers of culture, language and economics standing between the teachers and the rest of the village, it is easy to see why it is difficult for some teachers to become a part of the village. Of the teachers I surveyed, Terry and Ally make the most effort to integrate into their village. During the first week of their stay, they're already heading out on the water with a local:

On Sunday Terry and I went with a local guy named Scotty on his boat to check his nets and see the site of old H---. [...] We saw a dead walrus by the ocean but no seals. Scotty was disappointed, he had his harpoon, which is a thick stick with a metal hook in it, ready. He did catch us a young cackling goose, though, with his bare hands. He let it go after we all looked at it though because they don't hunt them until fall.

After we got back Scotty gave us each two whitefish from the batch he caught. Terry and I then went over to his house and sat and watched football with his dad until his mom got home and showed us how to prepare the fish (basically just remove guts, chop up, scales and all, and boil). While Terry was working at the school that evening I cleaned my first fish and made it for supper. It wasn't all that bad either.

But, of course, routine is one thing that never quite seems to stick for rural Alaskan teachers. As Ally puts it,

Every day is a new experience here. Just when I'm starting to feel like I know this place, somebody says or does or eats something I wasn't expecting. Sometimes it makes you want to laugh and sometimes it makes you want to lock yourself in the house and cry, but they're all good experiences.

A lot of new experiences just find these teachers, since they're a part of everyday life in the village. Terry, teaching high school biology, experienced more than most, however, because he's such an extrovert. The day he finds out that most Yupik don't knock to go into each other's houses, and that it's a perfectly acceptable visit if you just sit and watch television with the family, he is dragging Ally off to their first visit. His persistence works, and he is soon hunting with the men. As Ally writes:

Terry went seal hunting yesterday. He has some stories to tell about floating on ice bergs in the Bering Sea and falling in up to his waist

until he was able to pull himself back into the boat! It's a dangerous job to hunt seals.

Elizabeth expounds further upon the dangers of seal hunting from her suburban point of view, showing her attempts at integrating Alaska Native culture into her own worldview:

The ivory comes from walrus. And it is not cute, nor soft, nor cuddly. In fact, the men take the biggest, strongest boats they have, then they all load all their guns full of ammo, and take at least 5 guys, then, when you get close, you shoot that walrus with everything you've got, or it will come after you, and if a walrus and a boat get in a fight, the walrus wins. Then, when it's mostly dead, you club it on the head for a while, till it's all dead (there's a difference, you see, mostly dead is still slightly alive). Then everyone works together to get the thing back into the boat, without capsizing the boat, or you die.

And then, when the party comes home (Terry has bagged five seals) the real fun begins. "This morning, there was a seal cutting demonstration," Stacy recounts in an email,

It was inside, which was nice because it was warmer, but bad because, in the words of my students, "Seals are STINK!" They gave everyone the opportunity to help cut, but I declined. If you get the blubber on your clothes, the smell never comes out. Wearing a pair of semi-new jeans, I decided this might not be the wisest idea! I got some really neat

pictures, though. But for the sensibilities of you all, I'm not sending them out with this. If you would like to see, email me and I'll send them.

Elizabeth has to agree with Stacy's aesthetics: "The seal was cute, but it's not anymore, believe me. The ladies were out scraping the fat off of the hides today, and what's left of those seals sitting there is none too pretty."

Ally, however, is not afraid of the blubber and dives right in. "It was very cool. I had Eliza take pictures of me cutting with the bloody uluaq in my hand and we took a goofy one of me smiling and holding up the seal's head."

After the processing of the seals, there's still plenty left to do. Elizabeth writes, "I went to sewing circle last night. I brought my counted cross-stitch with me. I refuse to compete against those women with sealskin sewing. Actually, they think it's funny to see me sew; I'm slow at it."

Stacy, however, gives it the old college try, and ends up bending the needle: "Seal skin is tougher than I thought!"

Then the bones of the seals and walrus, after undergoing the carving knife, find their way over to the teachers' houses in various shapes and sizes. Elizabeth, an inveterate collector of these arts and crafts, writes home:

Dad, I bought you a little ivory seal. The kid wanted 35 dollars, and, straight faced, I just said no. And then he decides that he'd like 30, and again I say no, never mind. And he says, maybe 25, and I tell him I'll check my wallet. So I go through what I've got, and tell him (lie to him)

and say all I have is \$22.53, and he thinks about that for a minute, and decides that he'll take it. So be proud of me, I talked the kid down 13 dollars (he didn't want my 53 cents).

In Canada, Ellen's little neighbors bring more ethereal manifestations of the recently departed seals:

One of my little visitors announced as she walked into the house: "I just fart!" She was right, and she continued to do so for the rest of the visit. She must have been eating seal: it produces extreme flatulence. The classroom atmosphere is not very pleasant when several students have been eating seal. (Gray 63)

5.6.1 Dogs

Some teachers try to jump start their integration into the village by bringing their pet dogs with them. However the way suburbanites views dogs and the way Alaska Natives view them are almost diametrically opposed. Still, dogs often act as a point around which new teachers start to interpret the culture they're surrounded by.

Stacy brings a rather large golden retriever with her, named after her favorite children's television personality. The one who wants to be your neighbor:

The local kids are fascinated with Fred. Here, dogs are tied up outside all the time. Even in the middle of winter when it's like -50 out! They love to play with Fred, because he's friendly. They also love to watch him fetch a ball, because their dogs don't do that. I took him for a walk

the other day and had six kids along with me, throwing balls for him.

And then they all came home with me.

Back in 1931, Abbie Morgan Madenwald brought a dog with her as well.

During the children's first visit to her home, her dog Spike makes an entrance into the room:

Spike trotted into the room and instantly all was confusion. The children shrieked in terror as Spike raced around the room barking excitedly. Youngsters climbed on desks, and several ran into the hall.

A dog as a pet was unknown to the children, and they, with reason, were afraid of a loose dog. (Madenwald 35-36)

Wilford Corbin, in 1955, recounts the story of a dog named Two Bits brought up in a village who is unable to learn the fine art of mushing. Despite Two Bits' popularity with the children, his owner finally puts him down. There's no room for a belly that doesn't pull its share (Corbin 171). Apparently, some things haven't changed much in 70 years.

Stacy also catches a bit of local dog lore when talking with a member of the village:

Evidently, her family had a puppy, but they had to kill it because it cried like a human. Weird. And you know why they "had" to kill it? Because, they believe that if a dog cries like a human, it's trying to become part of your family. And if you don't kill it, one of your family

members will become very sick and the dog will take over the person's body. How creepy is that?

The teachers' dogs are usually brought along for companionship, though they can also serve other functions. As Richardson writes in 1912, "Since I read the Bible every night, I suppose you will suggest that I might kneel beside the bed for a short prayer. ... [But] I always make a running dive from the kitchen door into the blankets. The dogs curl up on the reindeer robe beside the bed and wake me into an unwelcome morn promptly at seven" (Richardson Box 1: Folder 8: Page 128).

But quite frequently dogs seem to be more trouble than they're worth, taking up as much time and resources as a human child might. Dog food can cost up to two dollars a pound. And sometimes, homeless dogs can be even more persistent than the visiting children. Ally and Terry already have a dog, but,

We have been catering to a little gold mutt named Sally. The poor thing is so confused. Apparently she belonged to the people who used to live in our house and they left without taking her. I guess she is technically being looked after by a relative, but she thinks she still lives at our house, so sits outside quietly every night and waits hopefully to be let in. We've been letting her in because the weather has been so stormy and have made a bed for her in the arctic entryway. The poor dog smells like fish and is pretty ratty so we let her in sparingly.

And there are certainly moments when the Eskimo method of keeping dogs seems quite attractive"

Terry and I were really looking forward to having chicken salad sandwiches for dinner, but we got home only to see a pile of crumbs on the floor and a fat dog smiling at us. The next day this same fat dog rolled in fish guts and I had to haul buckets of water up from the lake to give her a bath! I found out today that she has been pooping under the bed so I had to do some major cleaning under there.

Meanwhile, Fred snatches himself a nice pecan pie for Thanksgiving, receiving a bonus high-speed boot to the stomach from Elizabeth. But, for all their trouble, sometimes the dogs just can't contain their generous natures. "Last night our puppy, after having disappeared into the night for about half an hour, came running through the door, into the living room, dragging with him the entire front leg of a caribou," Ally writes.

5.6.2 Finding the "Rhythm"

Carol Barnhardt, in her paper "Tuning In: Athabaskan Teachers and Athabaskan Students," reports on a study of hours of videotaped classroom sessions taught by Athabaskan teachers. She observed that, quite often, it seemed that the teacher fit herself into the rhythm the children had established, rather than trying to impose her own rhythm. Often, the teacher would wait outside the classroom until the students had established a steady rhythm and then meld into that rhythm as she entered. Her observations led Barnhardt to offer an interesting metaphor for teaching – that of a musical conductor:

Conductors use a wide range of styles as they direct musical groups. Some conductors stand in one spot on their podium and make only occasional small arm movements, some conductors move quickly from one side of the stage to another with much visible body movement, some conduct with their eyes closed, while others use their hand or nothing at all.

Just like conductors, classroom teachers also have a wide range of styles. (160)

Barnhardt goes on to compare the teaching style of Athabaskan teachers she and her colleagues observed to the conducting style of a jazz musician.

They felt no obligation to continually perform for their students. Instead, they used subtle and, sometimes, almost imperceptible ways to keep things flowing. They did not occupy a lot of space or use a lot of visible and audible signals to guarantee that their class maintained ensemble. Like the jazz conductor, they often became a part of the group. (Carol Barnhardt "Tuning In" 160)

Following are some instances where rhythms are established and what becomes of those particular situations. What does the teacher notice? What action, or non-action, does he or she take?

Stacy

So, guess who the new co-cheerleading coach is? The one who has NO experience! I have to read the rulebook and figure all this stuff out.

Cheerleading practice has been, umm, interesting. Thursday, we tried an aerobic tape and that was a colossal failure! The 5th and 6th graders did the best they could, but the 7th and 8th graders just gave up and sat down. I understand it was hard and different, but they are going to be in for a rude awakening when they don't make the squad and the younger ones do but the younger ones TRY!

Practice was alright, except my fourth alternate (read: the worst one...), who hasn't shown up since Tuesday, wanted to know why she wasn't going to travel. Gee, maybe the fact that you didn't bother to come to practice (her excuse, "I was sleeping!") or maybe the fact that you question everything I tell you to do, both in and out of class. I don't want to be responsible for you in another village when you can't obey me here.

Yesterday we had a wrestling/cheerleading exhibition and volleyball game. The cheerleaders did pretty well, except that one of my cheerleaders ABSOLUTELY REFUSED to perform here. So I gave her a pretty good chewing out, about how if she refused to do anything here, how could I trust her to do anything in Unalakleet. And

I still feel like I was a push over to even give her a chance. *sigh* Did I do the right thing, allowing her to come with us anyway?

Rob

On the basketball court, though, things went much better than expected. There is an emotional connection to the kids and a kind of loud-voiced relationship that fosters respect on the court that never really seems to exist in the classroom. Simple rules and tricks pulled me through on the court, and the team did very well at the one major tournament of the season. Also, there seemed to be some cross-over into the classroom as well – the students began to work harder in class and to respond to the same prompts that were working on the court. I enjoyed the relationship that I fostered with the students while working as a coach, and, since most of the players were seventh and eighth-graders, I look forward to working with them as freshmen next year.

Elizabeth

Also, I'm even getting patient enough for the special ed kids who used to drive me crazy. I just have learned to repeat what I say six times, (for the rest of the class) then walk over to them, and go through it again, slower.

It's pretty sad when I have to be the voice of reason. But I am an adult now, so that might have something to do with it. Seriously, I feel like an adult, all grown up and responsible.

Ally

Today we went out on the tundra and collected mousefood. Basically you dig up the mouse cache and take them (they are roots of the grasses and reeds). They use this to make soups and desserts. They're actually very good, sweet and nutty. We will also be digging up mouse anaq (poop) because they use it for medicine. I don't think I'll try that.

At the conference there was a Yupik potluck and all Yupik foods were served. I tried walrus blubber (weird to chew), dried salmon (yum), salmon soup (yum), dried herring eggs with oil (not sure how I feel), and then of course salmon berry aqutag (Eskimo ice cream) and Eskimo fry bread. They also had things like hardboiled (or maybe they were raw) ptarmigan eggs, seal soup and other stuff I didn't have a chance to try. I talked to a few different elders. One woman told me about living in Hooper Bay back when they still lived in earth houses.

I was also invited to my first steam. They didn't make it too hot since we had the baby in there with us. The steam took about two hours and was so nice and makes you feel so clean and refreshed and TIRED.

These cases give us an interesting insight into the different ways a particular personality can establish his/her relationship with the students and community. Or, to use Carol Barnhardt's metaphor, what kind of conductor they usually are.

We see Stacy as a kind of symphony conductor, wanting to have everything perfectly placed, timed, and coordinated. I think we can see this "conducting style" strongly in Stacy's description of her classroom. In many ways, we can't blame her for this penchant. After all, she is being paid by the district, which values order, progress and measurable results. Also, she is engaged in a very disciplined activity, cheerleading, which involves precision timing and movement. She knows that her students must practice the drills if they are to perform them according to national standards. So when students don't show up, they upset her plan, and weaken the group's ability to perform.

Rob, on the other hand, is engaged with basketball coaching, which is a mixture of precision movement and free play. Rob seems to be having an easier time connecting with his students when more physicality is involved. Indeed, in John Collier, Jr.'s book, Alaska Eskimo Education: A Film Analysis of Cultural Confrontation in the Schools, he discusses how the more effective teachers in his study ran classrooms where the students were in frequent physical contact with each other and the teacher. Rob also mentions emotions being involved during the practices, which seemed to act as a bond between teacher and student. There was a goal, students could see results from their training, and, let's be frank, they'd rather train in the gym than in the classroom.

I think Rob's experience on the court is an excellent example of a teacher finding a place in the rhythm of his or her students. He even records that the rhythm established on the court transferred to his classroom.

But then things went downhill. In Rob's journal, he records

One of the biggest setbacks of the month concerned the fact that we were unable to travel to the final two tournaments of the year due to weather issues. After all the practices and time put in by the players, not having a chance to prove their skills was a real downer. We kept practicing for as long as we could before finally giving in to the fact that we simply wouldn't play any more games.

Fortunately, Rob is able to salvage his classroom from the low morale resulting from the basketball games through his use of some new technology his school had brought in. He seems to do well getting full value out of a SMART board's novelty.

Elizabeth, who doesn't have any athletic extra-curricular activities to manage, seems to be becoming quite aware of the rhythms of her students anyway. She writes that she is beginning to know how many times she has to re-explain the directions. She knows whom she needs to help through step by step. It's as if she is participating in a jam session: she's changing to fit the rhythm of her students. She makes it all a part of her class time. As if she's learning an unfamiliar song with a *lot* of choruses.

But again, we wonder, is she doing the right thing? Shouldn't she be punching up the pace to match what she was used to during her student teaching days, keeping the kids up to standard?

It's hard to say because at the same time, Elizabeth says she's feeling more like an adult. She doesn't feel she is regressing as she accommodates the students. And being an adult seems odd to her, as if she is treading new territory. She seems to be discovering adulthood rather than insisting on it. Perhaps she's learning how to make the baseline sound good rather than insisting on the piccolo solo she used to play.

Meanwhile Ally is meeting many of the criteria the cross-cultural education experts have recommended. She's jumping right into daily life. She's trying things. She's getting out into the public, getting to know other people rather than just the students. She's trying to connect by mimicking the motions of the people around her, a rhythmical connection much like Elizabeth's, but broader.

5.6.3 The "Moments"

The lot of the new teacher is a difficult one. But, there are rewards. The problem is that not much is written about the nice moments, unless you're reading the poems on the walls of the faculty room. You know, the ones that compare the teacher to a sculptor of small brains. Or the ones that start

Why do I teach, you ask me,
And I in accents low,
say: where can I find another job
That holds and thrills me so? (Burgeson 3)

But I think the main reason why the nice moments are so little written about is because pleasant events aren't usually dramatic. Drama implies conflict. That's why in

well-structured dramas the nice parts either come just before things really go wrong, or they come at the end, when the show is over. There are rewards in teaching, but they come in different packages. Here are a few:

Elizabeth

And if the truth be told, yes, I am instigating riots, but in quiet ways. In the literature I chose to discuss with the students, with comments dropped about boys I've known and girls I've lived with. I discussed with the girls one day for half an hour while we were baking cookies the practice of giving each other hickeys to prove that you're "owned." And journal entries about when I'm an adult, how I want my life to be, how I'm not going to be like my parents because, or how I'm like them because..., I'm happy when..., etc interspersed with: if I had a million dollars, why I hate writing in journals, where I got my name, etc and of course the paragraphs to fix.

Ally

Mani asked me if I wanted to help her clean a seal. It was very cool. Her sister and mom were very impressed and they said that I was the first white woman they had ever seen clean a seal. Mani said I looked very natural and used the uluaq like a Yupik person. She said she could picture me cutting seals when I'm an old woman.

Stacy

The highlights of my weeks are when I get little kid time. I went to a birthday party for one of the native teachers and her first grader niece cuddled up next to me with a book for me to read to her. That's the stuff I live for! Awww!

Ally

We had graduation earlier today. Both of the seniors who spoke (the valedictorian and salutatorian, even though there are only 3 graduates) gave an extra thanks to Terry for pushing them to succeed and all three graduates are either attending college or a trade school next year thanks to their guidance counselor, Terry.

Rob

My spirits continue to be high in class – had a great exercise for review in Nonfiction/Poetry today that left all class members in throes of laughter and general enjoyment. This was good, though I can most likely look forward to a renewed testing of boundaries in tomorrow's class.

Ellen

I got delayed in the library and returned to the class just a couple of minutes before recess. As I got near my room, I could hear the “lookout” calling, “She’s coming! She’s coming!” as expected; I imagined all the antisocial things they might be doing. Just imagine my surprise – no, shock – to enter the room and find everyone at his/her own desk sitting on their chairs, with their hands folded, and the classroom tidy! Fortunately, I am well rested and rather calm at the moment, or I probably would have burst into tears. [...] Just like the vegetables – when you don’t get the nice moments too often, you really, really, appreciate them when they happen. (Gray 95)

The interesting thing about these stories is that most of them are set outside the classroom. And it did indeed seem like the places where I found the most contentment in the teachers was not in class. For example, Ellen writes,

When they [the students] come to my house to visit, the rules are different. They are guests, and if I don’t want them here, I don’t have to let them in. So, they’re on their best behaviour and we can have nice chats, as equals, rather than battling in a teacher-student relationship. (Gray 36)

Ally and Terry also seem to find much of their pleasure when participating in non school-related activities.

One teacher I talked with told me horror stories about her first year of teaching. By the end of her tales, I asked her why she stayed (she was going into her fourth year in the same school). She said, "I stayed because of what happened outside of school."

It's hard for me to resist recounting Mark Twain's observation that 90 percent of people die in a bed, and therefore we can most easily extend our lives by simply staying out of beds. However, there are also two incidents that did occur in school: Rob's hilarious poetry class, and Ellen's miraculously clean room. These two incidents point up what we observed in The Pit section; namely that teachers often tie their self-concept to their effectiveness in the classroom. Both Rob and Ellen experienced that connection here. It wasn't just that the lesson went well, or that Ellen didn't have to clean up after her students, it was that they felt validated as people and a gained a brief sense of being accepted by their students.

I don't think the role of validation and acceptance in the new Alaskan teacher's life can be over-emphasized. I'm not sure how healthy it is to maintain that connection in one's life, but it seems to be a fact that the connection is there. In this way, teachers have a hard lot. When a house painter comes to your house, you're not so interested in how interesting he is as in if the house is painted well when he or she leaves. And that painter, if he has done a good job, can say, "I'm a good house painter," without having to hand out evaluation forms.

Teaching is different in that respect. When you are painting a wall, or building a house, you can measure how effective you were very easily. And often you can increase your effectiveness merely by spending more time on the project or using

high-quality materials. But that isn't so with teaching. Even Parker Palmer, a veteran teacher and author of To Know As We Are Known, says he has plenty of days where he wonders what ever made him think he was a teacher in the first place. Teaching is a human endeavor, meaning that many lives, with their intricacies and difficulties, are coming together for a purpose. And often those intricacies, which the teacher has no control over, assert themselves and change the nature of the situation. It would be like starting to build a wall, only to find out that what is really needed is a well.

So even if a teacher does have a good day in class one day, it's no guarantee for the next. For example, Rob writes just after his description of his effective class: "This was good, though I can most likely look forward to a renewed testing of boundaries in tomorrow's class." And then he continues on the next day's entry:

Prediction correct concerning boundaries. Having fun with my class inevitably results in boundary testing that I'm powerless to control, I feel I have to continually reinvent my approaches to discipline because the kids quickly become desensitized to them (I don't care if I get gym-listed nahahahahah!!!!).

5.7 The Final Decision

During the 1959-1960 school year, William Overstreet reported that out of 330 teachers in the Rural School operation of the Department of Education Alaska, 110 were leaving their positions, exactly one-third of them. The great majority had been teaching there for less than three years, and a little less than half of them had only

taught for one year (Overstreet 10). Much later, in 2002, McDiarmid, Larson and Hill released a study showing a 2000-2001 school year turnover rate of 15 percent (McDiarmid, Larson and Hill 9). However, that number took both the urban and the rural districts into account. When compared, 60 percent of those teachers left rural schools, in contrast to 40 percent from urban schools. We should also note, that the McDiarmid study showed that “Some of the smaller, remote rural districts have experienced [turnover] rates near 100 percent in some years. [...] all the districts with annual turnover rates of 30 percent or more are rural districts far from the main road system” (McDiarmid, Larson and Hill 10).

So, though Alaska as a whole showed essentially the same teacher turnover rate as the rest of the nation (15 percent, compared to the national average of 13.7 percent), the turnover rate in Alaska’s rural schools has stayed significantly above the national average.

Why did those teachers decide to leave? In Overstreet’s study, he found that isolation, dissatisfaction with the community, inadequate housing, inadequate salary and limited opportunity for advancement were the most cited reasons for the teachers’ departure (Overstreet 15). McDiarmid, Larson and Hill’s study showed family and personal reasons, pursuing another career, dissatisfaction with job description or responsibilities, changed residence, and dissatisfaction with community support of school as the top reasons (McDiarmid, Larson and Hill 21).

These two studies are problematic to compare because they asked the exiting teachers different shades of questions. For example, while “inadequate housing” was

the first reason Overstreet offered to his respondents, the McDiarmid study didn't offer it at all. The same was true of isolation. Although the McDiarmid study did mirror the rest of Overstreet's questions, it did so in a much broader way.

I wonder, for example, if McDiarmid's "family/personal reasons" could have meant "isolation" to the respondents. It's certainly the closest thing on the list. Or did McDiarmid's "changed residences" mean Overstreet's "inadequate housing"? It's hard to tell because we don't know what was going on in the heads of the people responding. But if isolation and inadequate housing were meant by McDiarmid's respondents when they checked "family/personal reasons" and "changed residences," then we can see that all in all, the reasons teachers leave their positions in rural Alaska now aren't too different from what they were in 1960, especially when we note that dissatisfaction with job description or responsibilities placed high in McDiarmid's survey.

A quick look at Dickerson's research confirms the previous two surveys. He asked teachers what their major adjustments were. The most difficult adjustments, according to his 1980 survey, were working with a new culture, isolation, inadequate housing, and multi-grade/subject teaching (Dickerson 127). Ironically, these adjustments closely correlate to the major reasons the teachers came up in the first place: the rural lifestyle, adventure and cultural diversity (Dickerson 89). What they came up for was what drove them away.

The teachers I surveyed often seem to bounce from a decision to stay to a great desire to leave immediately.

“Well, happy Thanksgiving,” writes Stacy, “I’m thankful that I get out of this hell hole in three weeks. Right now, if I had three thousand dollars (the amount you forfeit to the district if you break contract), I would be home on the next plane.”

Elizabeth is a little more philosophical about the decision.

At this point in the year, I am refusing to think beyond next June. I have decided that I will not even begin to decide until February. That seems like a good month to see if I can handle the cold and dark for another year. It would be a waste to buy all this cold weather gear, and then figure everything out, just to head back to the mild, temperate lower 48.

Here we start to feel a sense of responsibility cropping up in the teachers’ reflections. Hope makes its first forays into the spring eternal as they contemplate their future effectiveness as teachers. As Ellen writes from Canada, “Ideally, I’d like to stay longer than one year. I’m making so many mistakes, and learning so much, that I know I would be able to do a better job next year. And I think I would feel a bit of a failure if I left after only one year” (Gray 149).

Rob has a little more guilt attached to his reflections:

Again the question comes up in my mind: how much damage am I doing to these kids by being in their classroom? The experience is a great and educational one for me but are they being harmed in the process? Sometimes I feel like they’re paying for my education, and this thought can be disturbing.”

Elizabeth continues Ellen's thought: "I haven't signed it [my contract]. But what does it look like on a resume to say that I was at a school for one year, then ran screaming from the state? A little stability would be nice. "

Quite frequently the acid test of the quality of a teacher's first year in rural Alaska is whether he or she decides to stay on for another year. As Overstreet's, Dickerson's and McDiarmid's research showed the turnover rate in rural schools can run from 30 to 100 percent each year. As we look through the decisions of the teachers we've been following we will detect some definite themes, most of which match up well with the aforementioned research. We will also get an idea of what kinds of personalities tend to fare well in rural Alaska.

Upon her decision to stay in Pelly Bay, Ellen wrote the following:

I've decided to come back to Pelly Bay next year. I guess I'd planned to do that all along, barring some violent emotion to the contrary I just realized that the reason I'm staying is very different from the reason I came here in the first place. I came for an adventure, to experience something foreign, and exciting, and novel. I remember reading the recruiting material, and feeling so excited at the details of life here: water delivery, and infrequent mail, and winter darkness. Now none of that is novel – it's just everyday – so I can't be staying for that reason. I guess I'm staying because I want to do a better job than I've done this year, and I'm pretty sure that I can. When I look back, I realize how much time and energy I wasted in getting both the class and my

program in shape. I don't think any of that could have been avoided as it was the only way to learn, but I'm very, very happy I won't have to go through that again. (Gray 149)

Stacy, however, makes the decision to leave teaching in Alaska to go back to home where she hopes to get a teaching job in more familiar surroundings. Perhaps, to use Neil Postman's metaphor, the soil just wasn't right for her. She's the kind of plant that grows elsewhere. Her standards are very rigid, and the students and village weren't willing to conform to those standards. When I interviewed Stacy toward the end of her stay, I asked her what kind of advice she would give to incoming teachers. Emphatically, she said, "Be oh so flexible." And I get the feeling that Stacy had been flexible in her own way. It was what helped her make it through the year.

Stacy also would have fallen under the "isolation" category in Overstreet's survey. She told me she wanted to get married and start a family soon. But she was not interested in the males in her village. And a little more than a year after she left Alaska, Stacy did indeed get married.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, decided to stay on for another year. In fact, she told me that she will at least stay to see the freshmen she taught graduate. Elizabeth's decision seems easy for us to swallow. As we've watched her through the year, we've seen an interesting mixture of flexibility and stubbornness. She insists on keeping her personality alive and kicking, yet she is also willing to make room for the variables that she had not anticipated. That doesn't mean she liked it. It just means she did it. Though she decided to stay another year, Elizabeth still has plenty of questions

unanswered in her mind. She still doesn't have a handle on what she's doing. She doesn't understand the village or the students, but she's plugging away nonetheless.

As she writes:

We can try to explain the Aurora [to outsiders], because [people] have at least seen pictures. And we can talk about the crazy toothless guy at rec who kept smiling at me, because it's funny, and my parents and sisters can make connections. But to try to explain a whole culture that just doesn't care about formal education at all without sounding condescending or mean, or superior is just too hard. If I try and be bluntly honest, it comes out sounding really, really mean. So I just don't talk about it, because my dad will think I'm miserable, and I'm not. I like it up here. I'm happy here. I feel like I'm doing some good, but it is like trying to run in two feet of water. I feel myself pushing so hard, but I'm not moving as much as I feel I should be.

Ally and Terry, however, make the decision to leave. Their decision seems confusing. They did everything according to the book: they integrated with the village, they participated in traditional activities, they made a lot of friends. They are both clearly attached to the village, and the village to them. As Ally writes:

I received a compliment from Ann the other day (at least I think it's a compliment). A couple of young white women came in to talk to the kids about diabetes and Ann said to me, "That's what you looked like to me the first time I saw you. You know, a really white, white person.

Like all soft who's never worked, but now you're Ally. You're just like the rest of us. And you even dress like us." Thanks Ann. I think. Well, no one can ever tell me that I'm not tough. I have a Yupik woman's approval.

On the school front, however, things were constantly up and down. As Ally writes toward the end of the school year, "Anyway, only a week and half left, which is good because another month and I think Terry would end up in a mental institution. [...] After ten months of them, Terry does not want to have to teach these kids ever again. I don't know if he got a job teaching next year, if he'd even take it." But then in the next paragraph, "We had graduation earlier today. Both of the seniors who spoke (the valedictorian and salutatorian, even though there are only 3 graduates) gave an extra thanks to Terry for pushing them to succeed, and all three graduates are either attending college or a trade school next year thanks to their guidance counselor, Terry."

Terry and Ally end up going back to school in the Midwest to continue their education. Terry does his thesis on subsistence activities in the village they taught in, returning to the village for a few months to do research with the people who had once been his students' parents. And he has a wonderful time. Terry told me in an interview that his arrival in the village was like coming home again; he had more dinner and tea invitations than he knew what to do with.

As Ally and Terry prepare to leave Alaska, Ally writes,

It makes me very sad to leave, especially knowing that for most white people it's so hard for them to acclimatize to the people and to teaching, and we've done OK. Terry is all the high schoolers' favorite teacher now and even the Yupik people who were harsh to us when we first came are warming up now.

There is one last thing on Ally's mind as she leaves Alaska, so she emails home these final words.

"Please tape the X-Files this coming Sunday. The season finale! Thanks."

5.8 Summary

This chapter was structured by the basic "plot structure" of the experience of being a first-year teacher in rural Alaska. We tracked this structure through the plot points of:

The Initial Decision

The Arrival

The First Day of School

Collisions

Integration and

The Final Decision

The Initial Decision section showed that missionary zeal is less pronounced in the attitudes of contemporary teachers when compared with their forebears; rather, they come for adventure, the rural lifestyle and for the chance to get a teaching job.

The Arrival section focused on how frequently teachers arrive with great expectations, and how quickly their illusions are usually shattered. Their first days in rural Alaska are taken up less with “adventure” than they are with frantically preparing for school and meeting up with the first unexpected oddities of life in a bush school.

The First Day of School section revolved around how the new teachers encountered the realities of school: the shocks they go through, and how they dealt with unforeseen challenges like elementary school tobacco chewers.

The Collisions section juxtaposed Kleinfeld’s “cultural relativist” and “ethnocentric teacher” and showed how these labels can often be applied to most teachers. We then prepared ourselves to approach the teachers as nonjudgmentally as possible, as the cross-cultural ground we tread upon is explosive. The Pit subsection showed the teachers at their lowest point, when everything that could go wrong, did, and how they dealt with it. These reactions gave us information to interpret the teachers’ ultimate decision to sign a contract for another year of teaching.

The Integration section showed how various types of teachers attempted to integrate themselves into the village and culture and their relative effectiveness, enumerating a number of methods these teachers used, such as becoming involved in the village through hunting and visiting, and learning culturally appropriate teaching methods such as “tuning in.” And finally we saw what these teachers consider as “rewards” and how often these rewards are found outside of school.

The Final Decision section showed what elements teachers use to decide whether to sign on for another year of teaching, and how certain personalities tend to

fare well in the bush school context. Frequently a sense of stubbornness and an unwillingness to feel like a failure keeps teachers at their posts. However, even teachers who become integrated into the villages still make the decision to leave.

In the final chapter, I will summarize this dissertation and present implications and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 6

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

6.1 Summary

This study was framed by the following research questions:

1. What similar and contrasting experiences, attitudes and reflections can we find in the writings of first-year teachers in rural Alaska?
2. When taken together, what could we call the “plot points” of the average rural Alaskan teacher’s life?
3. How do the writings of first-year rural Alaskan teachers converse with some of the theories of teaching in rural Alaska?

The similarities between the narratives of historic teachers and contemporary teachers are significant. On both sides of the spectrum the teachers experience a great degree of cultural shock that affects not only day-to-day life, but also how they approach their jobs as teachers. We’ve also seen that similar characters are often the most successful: namely, those with a strong character already in place (think of Hannah Breece and Elizabeth) but also the ability to be flexible in their practices and empathetic in their relations with the students and the village (think of Ethel Oliver, and Terry and Ally).

The plot points we have used to organize these narratives are the following:

1. the initial decision
2. the arrival
3. the first day of school

4. collisions
5. integration
6. effectiveness (historic teachers only) and
7. the final decision

6.1.1 Initial Decision

Through the lens of these plot points a number of themes come to the forefront. Many historic teachers felt “called” to their work and they approached it in a way we could call religious. Their attitudes toward Alaska Natives were frequently tainted by feelings of superiority. However, the teachers were always willing to “uplift the Native.”

In contrast, missionary zeal is less pronounced in the attitudes of contemporary teachers when compared with their forebears, though in many ways contemporary teachers retain many of the colonialist attitudes of the earlier teachers. However, contemporary teachers’ main motivation seems to be adventure, the rural lifestyle and for the chance to get a teaching job.

6.1.2 Arrival

The historic teachers described their initial experience in Alaska as being one of significant culture shock. To deal with this shock they usually clung tightly to their roles as teachers and role models, cementing in them a sense of identity. In the cases of both the historic and contemporary teachers, they frequently arrive with great

expectations and usually have their illusions shattered quickly. Their first days in rural Alaska are taken up less with “adventure” than they are with frantically preparing for school and meeting up with the first unexpected oddities of life in a bush school.

6.1.3 First Day of School

The initial shock of coming to Alaska carried through into the teachers’ school experiences. They dealt with the unforeseen challenges like elementary school tobacco chewers, racism (including their own), and communication barriers.

6.1.4 Collisions

The teachers often found themselves in cultural collision with Alaska Natives. The roots of the collisions were often embedded in a teacher wanting to “help” the village. For some teachers these collisions opened up integration opportunities. Others treated them as battles to win. Using Kleinfeld’s categories of “ethnocentric teacher” and “cultural relativist,” historic teachers tended to fall into the first category, while contemporary teachers tend to fall into both.

Part of the Collisions section focused on the worst moments in the teachers’ careers and how they handled them. Their reactions upheld the characteristics that we formulated above: the successful Alaskan teacher tends to be already formed in personality, flexible and empathetic, the characteristics of level three teachers as described by Veenman.

In evaluating their efforts and their expectations, the teachers saw themselves as meeting with mixed results. Sometimes they saw great learning taking place, and other times they felt they were doing more harm than good. Other times, cultural imperatives worked directly against the outcomes hoped for by the teacher.

6.1.5 Integration

In the Integration section we saw how various types of teachers attempted to integrate themselves into the village and culture and their relative effectiveness. There are a number of methods these teachers used, such as becoming involved in the village through hunting and visiting, and learning culturally appropriate teaching methods such as “tuning in.” And, finally, we saw what these teachers consider as “rewards” and that often these rewards are found outside of school.

6.1.6 Final Decision

The Final Decision section focused on which elements teachers use to decide whether to sign on for another year of teaching. Certain personalities tend to fare well in the bush school context, and frequently a sense of stubbornness and an unwillingness to feel like a failure keeps teachers at their posts. However, even teachers who become integrated into the villages still make the decision to leave after their first year.

This anomaly, however, is probably the most useful part of this study. As one of my professors was fond of saying, the most instructive thing about a metaphor is

how far you can stretch it before it breaks. Often the most important information lies in the anomalies. And stories, when being told by people attempting to make sense out of their lives, are always full of anomalies.

Our best strategy as we encounter these stories could be to pull back from analyzing them too quickly. Perhaps we could marinate ourselves in them instead to see what soaks under our skins.

6.2 Implications

There's one question I always ask bush teachers at the end of their first year: "Do you think you would have done a better job if, before your arrived here, you had read books about the culture you were coming into, or about what it is like to teach in rural Alaska?" Invariably, the answer I receive is "No." "You have to experience teaching in Alaska for yourself," they tell me. "You can't learn this from a book."

This answer strikes me as odd, almost as if I had asked a doctor whether he shouldn't have read up on the knee joint before he started performing surgery. Certainly there is plenty to be said for practice, but what about a bit of theory as an appetizer? These teachers' answer continues to puzzle me because the teachers I have talked to are reflective and intelligent. So I must take their answer seriously, and I have done so by studying their stories.

My experience with these stories reminds me of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein deciding to teach elementary school. Monk writes about a letter Wittgenstein wrote to his sister:

He was responding to his sister's dismay that he was going to "throw away" his academic career, as she put it, in order to teach elementary school in a remote Austrian village. His sister told him that, given his exceptional mind, he was acting like "somebody wanting to use a precision instrument to open crates." Wittgenstein told her how far she was from perceiving his thinking on the issue. "You remind me," he replied, "of somebody who is looking out through closed window and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passer-by. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet" (Monk 170).

So, though I have taken pains to integrate these teachers' stories with each other and with various pedagogical theories I still feel that I am looking through the shutters over a window, perceiving only the smallest part of the larger picture. However, I am intrigued by the commonalities I see among all these stories across the years: how similar their themes are, how often the same crucibles pop up, how similar the character arcs are, how frequently similar conclusions are arrived at. But at the same time, I am struck by how vastly different each of these people are from one another, and how differently they react to similar circumstances. There seems to be a tension running between the individuals and the stories they tell. Two contrasting theories of the production of stories may give us some insight into this tension.

The first is articulated by Robert Coles. In his book The Call of Stories, Coles writes about a unique mentor he worked under during his residency at a psychiatric hospital. While Coles' training and previous mentors has stressed method, diagnostics and analysis, Dr. Ludwig took a different approach. One day he took Coles into his office to tell him "a story" about one of the patients:

The doctor told me a great deal about her – where she'd grown up, her schooling, her hobbies and interests, the reading she did, the programs she watched on television, the clothes she bought, even where she bought them and most of all the events in her life: where she met her husband and how, where she traveled and why, where she spent her spare time and with whom. I was quite taken up by listening, even forgetting for a long spell that this was a patient's "clinical history" I was hearing.

Suddenly the story stopped: the patient had been struck by a car on the way to a lecture at an art museum. I was surprised, saddened. I felt questions welling up in me. What happened to her as a result of the injuries she sustained, and in general, as she got older? She had a name, and Dr. Ludwig had been using it; and I was using it too. [...] The silence was broken by his question: "Do you see her in you mind?" "Yes," I answered. "Good," he responded.

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough that we understand the truth of their lives.

They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is *their story*" (emphasis in original) (Coles 6-7).

Coles puts a heavy emphasis on his idea that people tell their own stories, and that those stories are as idiosyncratic as the person who tells them. In many ways, it is hard to disagree. So, as psychiatrists, Coles reflects,

If our job was to help our patients understand what they had experienced by getting them to tell their stories, our job was also to realize that as active listeners we give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own. (Coles 19)

As I delved into the stories of first-year teachers in Alaska, I tried to be an "active listener." I brought along theories and studies to help me interpret their stories. And the deeper I immersed myself in these stories, the more questions I found, the more paths I stumbled across. The theories gave me one method of interpreting the stories, but they by no means exhausted the potential meanings of the texts. The stories opened, rather than closed down, under scrutiny.

What I have tried to do with this study is take the first steps into understanding the lives of first-year teachers through their own idiosyncratic stories. This is only a first step. New teachers arrive in Alaska every year, and inevitably they will form their own stories here that may resonate with or completely contradict what I have presented.

However, seeing so many similarities in character arcs, themes and experiences among stories that could be one to 100 years apart has caused me to think that in some ways, by not availing themselves of the literature of their forbears, contemporary teachers are constantly reinventing the wheel. Their ignorance of their professional tradition has diminished the potential of their stories. Terry Pratchett puts it this way:

People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.

Stories exist independently of their players. [...]

Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

This is called the theory of narrative causality, and it means that a story, once started, takes a shape. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been.

This is why history keeps on repeating all the time. (3-4)

What we see in these stories from new teachers in Alaska, with their repeating themes, character arcs and experiences, could be interpreted as a life being taken over by the “first-year Alaska teacher story,” bending the teacher’s life and perceptions to its own structure. If the teacher can’t bend enough, he or she breaks.

These two concepts – Cole’s theory of the storyteller as creator of the story, and Pratchett’s of storyteller as servant to the story – may seem contradictory, but we could also see them as forming a creative paradox. Stories do tend to find ways to get

themselves told. When seeking to make meaning out of life, religious people will often reach for scriptures, or a child for a fairy tale, or a graduate student for the latest episode of South Park. We look for stories that cast our experiences into a relevant narrative.

Teachers are certainly engaged in the same exercise. Clandinin and Connelly give us the rubric of sacred story, secret story, and cover story to help us interpret the way teachers make sense of their professional lives. The sacred story exerts enormous influence over how a teacher will tell his or her stories outside safe confines; thus, they often develop cover stories to help the secret story pass muster. The stories we have seen in this dissertation are close to secret stories – stories that reveal the day-to-day lives of teachers without having to conform to the sacred story (espoused by district policy, parents, etc.) or adopt a cover story. Thus, many times through this study, we may have been surprised at what we perceive as a teacher's condescending attitude.

For example, when Elizabeth writes, "I'm even getting patient enough for the special ed kids who used to drive me crazy. I just have learned to repeat what I say six times, (for the rest of the class) then walk over to them, and go through it again, slower." We may have seen weaknesses of character and judgment popping up everywhere, almost unabashedly. Once again, this is probably so because we have access to these teachers' secret stories. Were they to tell the same stories to us at a meeting or in a formal survey, we would probably hear their cover story, which would be designed to not offend our sensibilities, but at the same time take us further from the emotionally relevant aspect of the teachers' conception of their experiences.

I'm grateful to the teachers who were willing to let me bring such public scrutiny to their private thoughts. So many of their words could be interpreted as unprofessional, bigoted or even racist. I suppose they would be all these things if they were the final word, if they reflected an unchanging attitude on the part of the teacher. However, we have seen through these writings that teachers in rural Alaska are in a constant state of change. Their opinions and values are constantly shifting as they attempt to integrate their new experiences into their character and teaching practice. I think it is to be expected that they tell their secret stories in a ham-handed way, that they express themselves bluntly sometimes. They're essentially learning to speak in a new language in order to make sense of their reality.

The teachers who have come to rural Alaska throughout the years have gone through many of the same trials and made similar mistakes. They have shared many of the same hopes and ideals. Their story has played itself out thousands of times. It seems that if our current teachers are unaware of the stories that have preceded them, they are more likely to become puppets of the first-year rural Alaskan teacher story.

One metaphor to illustrate this point is the rat maze. If a series of rats are let into the same maze, with the same dead ends, the same electrically charged wall here and there, the same food pods, and if they are given the time, they'll eventually learn how to get through it. But what if the rats could hear the stories of the rats that came out the other side? Doubtless those on the receiving end of the stories would benefit, and might come out of the maze with fewer singed hairs.

As we have seen, the “first-year rural Alaskan teacher story” tends to chew up and spit out a lot more new teachers than the average teacher story. Therefore, it seems to me that first-year teachers should eagerly avail themselves of the stories their predecessors have left for them. The stories aren’t gospel truth (if teaching in Alaska is a maze, it’s a maze that is constantly changing), but the stories can at least provide fodder for thought and informed action.

What would happen, for instance, if the frustrated first-year teacher encountered the writings of William Lopp, where he describes his view of the unique genius of Native Alaskans? Might a new teacher recognize her own strengths and weaknesses in Hannah Breece’s writings? How might a teacher’s view of his village change if he could read the diary of a teacher who had been in the same village 50 years before?

In response, I believe the Alaska public education system, and the parents and students that are a part of it, should make more room for new teachers’ secret stories. They should treat these stories, so raw and unfinished, as points of departure, as brief glimpses through a shuttered window, rather than a declaration of an unchanging attitude. If new teachers feel as though they must defend their actions in all cases, as if they must be as professional and competent as their experienced colleagues, they will travel a lonely road, one that will likely lead them out of Alaska very soon.

However, if new teachers feel as though the larger world is willing to help them explore their difficulties, rather than judge them, they will be more open about their struggles and will therefore be able to overcome them sooner. I think Alaska’s

rural education system would do itself a world of good if it would remember that when teachers tell their stories, “They hope they tell them well enough that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly” (Coles 6-7). We need to be more active listeners for these teachers.

The Alaska Teacher newsletter was originally started by Roman Malach in 1953 to address this need for dialogue on secret stories, and in the first issues a few teachers stepped forward to engage in conversation with their colleagues. But, for whatever reason, no one responded, and the newsletter quickly turned to reports on meetings and descriptions of new policies.

Parallels to the healing effects of sharing secret stories without fear of judgment can be found in Harold Napoleon’s Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being. As we’ve already discussed, Napoleon points to his own people’s ignorance of the stories that have shaped their lives. He shows how these invisible stories have become destructive and encourages his people to create safe places and begin to speak their own stories, so that the Story and the stories can come into dialogue.

Important steps in this direction have already been taken by the University of Alaska and the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development by instituting the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project in 2004. The program hires people who have already performed well in the rural Alaskan school context and makes them available to first- and second-year teachers. The mentors help new teachers prepare lesson plans and understand their new cultural context. Most importantly, they provide an empathetic ear for the struggling new teacher (Alaska Statewide Mentor Project).

Mentors in this program have told me that often they feel their best service is calling their assigned teachers each week to just listen.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

This survey of the narratives of first-year teachers, being the first of its kind, is necessarily lacking in depth. I could only scratch the surface of this huge body of literature. I did not take advantage of much material I gathered in order to keep this study focused. Also, my material covered only the first year of these teachers' experiences. I think it would be of great value for future researchers to conduct a longitudinal study, possibly spanning up to ten years, of rural Alaskan teachers' writings. This would allow us to have an intimate portrait of teachers growing and changing in the rural Alaskan context and give us much information on rural education from a teacher's point of view. It could also give future teachers mature, nuanced stories, as well as role models, to inform their own experiences and prepare them to be effective, reflective educators in Alaska.

Though there is a small collection of teacher tales in the University of Alaska system libraries, I think a more concerted effort should be made to collect teacher tales and make them available publicly. Education professors at the universities are in a good position to do this work. The collections could be categorized into themes and published by the University of Alaska or another public education entity and made available to all teachers and should be part of the School of Education elementary and secondary licensure programs. The more stories, the better.

Finally, and I think most importantly, future research can correct one glaring omission in this dissertation, namely the collection of data on how the first-year teaching experience looks from the students' and villages' point of view. How were/are these teachers perceived by students and by those in the village? What are their stories and their views of the public school system? These voices play a critical role in coming to a better understanding of how education in Alaska can proceed effectively and humanely.

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**Appendix A
IRB Approval Form**



Teresa Lyons, Research Compliance Administrator
Integrity
Chancellor's Director for Research Suite
Building
P.O. Box 75720
Fairbanks, AK 99775-7270

Office of Research
212 West Ridge Research
(907) 474-7800
email: fvirb@uaf.edu

November 30, 2005

Subject: IRB review of Human Subjects Application form 05-69

Dear Dr. Bird,

The Human Subjects Application for *First-Year Rural Alaska Teacher's Narratives* has received administrative review. This protocol was approved as exempted per CFR Title 45 §46.101 (2) (b)(5), Exemption 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

IRB Protocol Number:	05-69
Investigator/Instructor:	Roy Bird, PhD
Title of Project/Course:	<i>First-Year Rural Alaska Teacher's Narratives</i>
Date Approved:	November 30, 2005

Thank you, for the submission of the protocol. Review for human subject protection provides added demonstration of sensitivity to the Respect for People. Should there be any procedural changes or amendments necessary prior to implementation please submit a *Request for Modification*. Good luck with the work proposed.

Teresa Lyons
Research Administrator

Appendix B Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form First-Year Rural Alaska Teachers' Narratives

Description of the Study:

You are being asked to take part in a research study about first-year teachers in rural Alaska. The goal of this study is to collect the written narratives of first-year teachers and analyze their similarities and differences. You are being asked to take part in this study because at one point in your life you were a first-year teacher in Alaska. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will provide me with emails, letters, diaries, journals, other writings, or an interview that you believe are relevant to this study. You can do this via email, personally, or using the postal system. This will be a one-time event unless you express an interest in continued contact.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The risks to you if you take part in this study include possible identification with your manuscripts by people outside the research team. However, all measures will be taken to keep your manuscripts in a secured area, and your identity protected in all publications derived from your material.

There will be no direct benefit to you from this study. However, this study will benefit future teachers and students in rural Alaska.

Confidentiality:

- Any information obtained about you from the research including answers to questionnaires, diaries, journals, emails, letters, and other written and oral communication will be kept strictly confidential.
- Any information with your name attached will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.
- We will protect your confidentiality by coding your information with a number so no one can trace your answers to your name, properly disposing of computer sheets and other papers, limiting access to identifiable information, telling the research staff the importance of confidentiality, and storing research records in locked cabinets.
- The data derived from this study could be used in reports, presentations, publications, and videos but you will never be individually identified, nor your locale nor individuals identified in your writings.

Be advised that there are limitations to confidentiality that can be granted to you, for example identification of criminal wrongdoing.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have questions later, you may contact Stephen Carter at 907-474-7193, ftsrc@uaf.edu, PO Box 750527 Fairbanks AK 99775, or Roy Bird at 907-474-6361, ffrkb@uaf.edu. P.O. Box 756282, 520 Copper Lane Fairbanks AK 99775.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Research Coordinator in the Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (outside the Fairbanks area) or fyirb@uaf.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Signature of Subject & Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Date

Appendix C Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Stephen Carter. I'm a Ph.D. student in Cross-Cultural Education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I'm collecting the writings of first-year teachers in Alaska in order to write an ethnography based on them for my dissertation.

Strangely, for the number of teachers who have come through Alaska, very few of their writings have been collected, which is a shame. The experience of the new teacher in Alaska is a unique one, and an important part of Alaskan history.

I'm hoping that my research can both open the life of the first-year teacher, with all its difficulties and rewards, to the general reader, and to prepare future teachers to embark on the adventure you have already taken.

I've been able to collect writings from teachers as far back as 1890, and some current teachers have added me to their email list giving me up-to-the-minute insight into their teaching lives. I'm hoping to gather as much material as possible to provide a broad view of teachers' experiences all over Alaska.

So, if you have a minute, I was hoping you'd be willing to provide me with some material documenting your own first year of teaching. What I'm looking for are mainly emails home to family and friends. Many teachers compile these emails into a kind of journal. If you have such a collection, I would love to read it. If you have a series of emails you'd be willing to send me, I'd love to read those too. Or, if you kept a journal on your computer and would be willing to send me that file, I'd devour it. Pretty much, if you have any electronic writings from your first year, I'm interested.

I plan to put together a kind of ethnography of first-year teachers using the writings I receive from people like you. As a part of that, I have taken, and will take, all precautions to make sure that your identity remains confidential. If I quote from your writings, your name will not be attached to it, the people you reference will be given different names, and your locale will be fictionalized. I will also be making composite portraits of teachers from many different sources. In other words, all identifying information will be divorced from your writings so that you can use them yourself if you want to write a novel or memoirs later on, and so that I don't cause you or the locale you worked in any psychological or professional harm.

This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at UAF.

If you decide that you want to participate in this project just reply to this message, I'll send you a consent form that will give you all the information you'll need. I'd also be very willing to talk to you on the phone or through email.

This should be short and painless process for you. And when I finish the dissertation, I would be happy to send you an electronic copy.

My contact information is: