

Dr. Judy Kleinfeld Seeks New Avenues for Educating Natives

One of Alaska's most promising young educational researchers came to Alaska as a result of a school dance; a "mixer" she attended as a student at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

"'Do you want to go to Alaska?' was my husband's favorite question of the girls he met at dances," explains University of Alaska assistant professor, Dr. Judith Kleinfeld. "I guess he liked my answer, because we're here."

Dr. Kleinfeld, in her research work with the UA Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, is trying to develop teaching methods which will work with Eskimo and Indian children. To do this, she examines the many outstanding abilities these children have—talents which can be used by teachers in the classroom.

"Alaska will have to develop its own educational programs for its Native children," Dr. Kleinfeld explains.

"When I came to Alaska, I was shocked at how researchers took results from studies of culturally different children in the



DR. JUDY KLEINFELD

lower 48. Those studies were all done on black children, who are very different from the cultures in Alaska," explains the young graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Education and Wellesley.

While working on her Ed.D.

degree, Dr. Kleinfeld worked with culturally different children in the lower 48. During the summer of 1967, she taught at the Alaska Native Service hospital in Anchorage—her first experience with Eskimo and Indian

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children.

Since 1969, she has taught at UA in College and is presently working on a "resource" project for the Rural Student Boarding Home Program.

Despite impressive qualifications, Dr. Kleinfeld faces some unusual problems in her work. Some of them come from the fact that people don't expect a pretty young girl to be a top-notch expert in her chosen field—educational psychology.

"One of the problems I used to have was in submitting articles to some of the professional journals," she explained. "I used to sign them Judy Kleinfeld and get the most snippy replies. Then Andy suggested I sign Dr. J.R. Kleinfeld, and the change was amazing. I got the nicest answers," she explained as part of what it means to be a female professional.

Andy, Andrew Kleinfeld, is presently a law clerk for Alaska Supreme Court Justice Jay Rabinowitz. This spring, he expects to set up law practice in Fairbanks—a move which will establish the Kleinfelds as permanently transplanted Alaskans.

Another problem often comes in her frequent observation visits to Fairbanks schools, where she observes teachers and Native students in the classrooms as part of her work with the Boarding Home Program.

"I'm often mistaken for a high school student," Judy explains. "In a way, though, it's an advantage. I try to be inconspicuous so the children act normally in their classes. Otherwise, they'd feel self-conscious."

In her recent work, Dr. Kleinfeld examined accounts of explorers who remarked upon Eskimos' unusual abilities to find their way in the Arctic, skills which she thought might be evidence of unusual intellectual abilities.

"When we tested the children," she explained, "they scored unusually high in cognitive abilities. They came close to and surpassed national norms in those areas, despite the fact the tests are culturally biased."

These children, who may understand diagrams and graphs far better than their frequent problems with the English language show, may possess skills which are especially useful in several scientific and technical fields.

An explanation of these abilities is the basis of "Cognitive Strengths of Eskimos and Implication of Education," an ISEGR research note Dr. Kleinfeld published last month.

"We have to alert teachers to the fact that these children may have unusual abilities in these areas. Many teachers in the bush are already using image based instruction, but they have to make up their own materials. We may be able to develop standardized programs which will emphasize the abilities students do have, and use them to strengthen the ones they have trouble with."

As part of a 'resource program' for the Rural Boarding Home Program, Dr. Kleinfeld is trying to find out what makes some teachers successful with rural Native students.

"I've been observing teachers in the classroom, and then we interview students about their school and how they like the families they're living with," she explains about the methods used to try to improve the program.

"We've hired Eskimo college students, to interview both Indian and Eskimo students. They've taught us a lot about how to interview the kids. They can speak Eskimo to the students who speak the same dialect."

One of the things, the professor says she's learning is how to interview these high school students.

"We found out some of the children didn't know what an 'interview' was. It's a fairly complicated concept."

In the spring, the ISEGR researchers hope to run teacher workshops, to acquaint teachers who work with Eskimo and Indian students with methods which have proved effective when used by other teachers.

"One problem is the Eskimo kids are so quiet," Dr. Kleinfeld explained. "When they're in a class with white children, the white kids are often behavior problems, and the Eskimo children get ignored and don't get the help they need."

One thing which researchers are finding about the Boarding Home Program is it is excellent for a certain kind of student—the one who wants to stay in the city or go to college.

"The kids learn social skills in their homes, things like how to meet strangers and how to behave in social situations. For the student who wants to return to the village, however, it sepa-

rates him from his people."

During the past few weeks, the Boarding Home Program project has been studying various programs in Anchorage and other cities which are experimenting in ways to improve the education of their rural high school students.

"We examined the core programs in Anchorage," explained Dr. Kleinfeld and programs where Native rural students attended separate classes or were combined in classes with other kids."

"The unusual thing is that I found the success of any program usually depends on the teachers, rather than the organization. I ended up sitting in on classes trying to find out what makes one teacher successful and another class in the same program fail."

If the ISEGR work is successful, Alaskan students may find their non-Native teachers more aware of their abilities, and less apt to steer them away from college and professional careers.

If so, the next generation of educated Alaskan Natives may get a great deal of benefit from the research being done today by a young educational researcher from the lower 48.