

SOS Cultural Awareness Program at Selawik and Shishmaref

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW

A child may well ask, "Does my school relate to anything else in my life? Does it have any meaning to the real world around me, the world in which I live?" Not too many years ago, the Eskimo and Indian child in Alaska had good reason to ask that question.

Going into its second year of operation, the Cultural Awareness Program begun by the

Alaska State Operated Schools in the remote villages of Noorvik, Selawik, and Shishmaref answers part of that question and is beginning to pay off in real dividends.

The pay-off is, first of all, increased pupil achievement because school now relates to the child's world, to village life, and to the activities of the adults of the community.

The second windfall is an increase in teacher sensitivity,

in educating the teachers as to what the child's life is all about. And the third benefit is community involvement.

When all three come together — the child, the teachers, and the cultural instructors of the village, old and young — something exciting begins to happen. It's called cooperation.

In the initial stages of the program, the villagers taught only cultural activities and the regular classroom teachers taught

the traditional subjects — reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Experiencing what school officials tactfully call "operational difficulties", the cultural awareness program fell far short of its goal.

It was soon evident that there would have to be more interaction, more flow of ideas back and forth, and more commitment from everyone to the concept of cultural exchange, to the reality of the child's question,

"What is my culture? And what does it have to do with school?"

The village people became more and more involved with seeing that the program worked. They donated time freely, giving demonstrations of ancient arts and crafts, skin-sewing, ivory carving, Eskimo games.

They told legends and stories in the centuries old Inupiat language. Some of the older people of the community related to the children the oral history about the region in which they lived, what had happened on the land around them.

They assembled a photographic history. Before long, it could be said that nearly every villager was participating in the cultural exchange.

The results were astonishing. The difference between participating schools and non-participating schools indicated that cultural awareness was more than an educational catchword.

Parents were better able to see the tremendous responsibility of educating children in public school. School began to mean more to everyone, including the teachers.

The teacher role changed subtly, not to mention teacher attitudes, but the biggest plus of all was the ability of the teachers to reach the children on a more sensitive level of understanding.

A locally elected advisory school board not only selected each of the cultural instructors but became more and more involved in program planning and decision-making in school policy.

The direction which the education of the village children would take became more a concern of local people and not an administrative judgment rendered from far off Juneau or Anchorage.