

Eskimo games and language all part of education

By EMILY IVANOFF BROWN

The value of cross-cultural education in Alaska has become increasingly apparent to me upon traveling to Nome for one or two weeks each fall, to teach schoolchildren in Nome about Eskimo literature.

This year I visited only the elementary and junior high schools, but in 1975 and '76 I also visited the high school students.

The Eskimo literature I speak of is made up of stories, songs and dances that tell about the life of the Eskimo people. When speaking to the elementary school classes I told stories first and then sang the folktale songs that accompany these stories. I mostly taught Eskimo games to the upper grades. Much of the attention was drawn by a stick game called "Kattagaat," and also by many of the legends that were told.

The fourth-grade children presented to me a book called "Gnome of Nome," written by Stephen Cosgrove. The story tells about how a gnome and a sea otter found that they could stay warm in the Alaskan cold, by sharing love and friendship with each other. It is very popular, especially with the third, fourth, and fifth-grade children.

Nome schools are cross-culturally oriented, as children representing many regions and countries, and therefore cultures, attend. For example, Alaskan Natives include Inupiat, Yupik, Kawerat, Unaalit and Siberian language-speaking people. If the children were taught their Native language, each group would have teachers who could teach their dialect to the school children from their area. There is a demand for Eskimo language specialists in all of the schools in northwestern Alaska. The Native children in the Nome school system are prone to speak only the English language in the classroom, because their teachers speak only English. In the meantime, the children will have forgotten their mother tongue.

Eskimo languages ought to be taught every day, not just periodically.

Furthermore, when the arts and crafts are taught to the Native students, especially in the high schools, the instructor should speak in the Eskimo language, because students would then gain more insight into their culture. This would provide much motivation for the students.

What is happening to the bicultural and bilingual education of the Alaska Natives now? Will the typical Alaska Natives' education be worthwhile to teach, if it is done haphazardly—a bit here and a splash there? It will not be effective for the retrieving of our way of life.

Another custom that is being left out is the Eskimo games that were once played by the entire family. Each Eskimo game illustrates an activity that is of functional value to the Eskimo way of life. For example, the well-known blanket toss, which is seen at many Native festivities, provided a way for hunters to spot animals from up in the air. Physical exercise is another benefit of these games, as is seen in the Eskimos' own football game. This is played entirely out of doors on any smooth surface, such as frozen lakes, frozen rivers, or in parks. Imagine the intake of oxygen and the discharging of carbon dioxide, as they play in the open air rather than in a small enclosure. Fall and spring are ideal times to play these games.

There are many competitive games that the Eskimos play. Why not teach them their own games, to help them gain back respect for themselves and their culture? Similarly, Eskimo folklore teaches Natives to be creative in telling stories, singing songs, and performing dances.

We know that the traditional folklore and games of every culture in the world has a tendency to calm the souls of the busy little children. The schoolchildren in Nome loved hearing the Eskimo stories and seeing Eskimo games, in the atmosphere of the local school. These school children know the value of the games and stories because every person, even the kindergarten children, have always wanted me to come back again.



EMILY IVANOFF BROWN SPEAKS TO NOME STUDENTS