

Pioneer bilingual program looks good

By LAEL MORGAN

In 1966 Walt Featherly took his first teaching job with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Kwethluk.

"My wife and I had 96 kids between us," he recalls. "We traded off and the first year I got the first and second graders. They couldn't understand Eskimo. I couldn't understand Yupik. And I said, 'this is absurd!'

"I can't learn to speak Yupik very fast. I can make a teacher out of someone who can speak Yupik a lot faster than the other way around—I didn't know anything about the bilingual concept but I began to toy with it. The Bureau had been against it but they were getting pressure from the Lower '48. They took it on."

They took it on to the point where today Cal Lundy, education specialist for BIA out

of Bethel, says unequivocally: "I think we have a better bilingual program than anyone in the nation. We've been nominated for exemplary status (through the U. S. Department of Education) and I think eventually we'll get it."

Until the late 1960s it was illegal to teach in the United States in any language other than English and the BIA—which was dedicated to acculturation—refused to consider it.

Dr. Frank Darnell, head of the Center for Northern Education, thinks the change might have come about through the Conference on Cross Cultural Education in Circumpolar Nations in 1969.

Shortly thereafter, BIA educators sat down with Irene Reed, who had been developing written Yupik for the University

of Alaska, and worked out the pioneering program.

Not that the Indian agency changed its assimilation policy. That appears as firm today as it ever did.

"It's not our business to keep a language alive. It's our business to educate children," explains Bill Benton who has worked with Yupik bilingual out of Bethel since its beginnings. "If in the process we keep the language alive, that's just fine."

The experiment was started in 1970 with high enthusiasm and very little printed material in the first grades of Nunapitchuk, Akiachak and Napakiak, with similar villages selected for control schools.

Dr. Thomas Hopkins, Chief of the BIA's Division of Curriculum Development and Review in Washington, D.C., was optimistic: "If the program continues as it has started, it should prove one of the most exciting in the annals of history of schooling Alaska Native children."

Founders admitted privately they would have done better to wait a year to develop teaching materials, and an informal survey (mine) of fifth and sixth grade teachers who now have the product of those early bilingual classes bear this out. Pioneer students are not much different—gradewise—from those who struggled on without benefit of initial bilingual training.

It's a different story, though, with those who entered the program in 1973 and thereafter.

"My oldest is fourth grade and my boy in third grade is doing better than his older sister in fourth," notes Mary Ann Lomack, who has taught from the beginning of the bilingual program at Akiachak. "We've changed the program a lot."

One major change is a strong, carefully structured curriculum—the things that worked best in those early years—compiled by the Native teachers and formally trained English-as-a-Second-Language teachers, under Irene Reed, Yupik Language Workshop, and Jim Macdiarmid, director of the BIA Bilingual Education Center.

Today this teaching plan is well enforced with colorful books, aids and a solid set of tests in Yupik, so that even teachers with little formal training have a chance at success.

The whole program is still regarded as somewhat of an experiment though, and backers—top to bottom—are cautious in claiming they have

all the answers.

"In this agency you don't go overboard and go with it. You have to prove it," Cal Lundy explains.

For this reason, BIA has been slow to expand bilingual, even in the face of a state law that requires bilingual programs wherever 15 or more youngsters speak a language other than English.

In 1971 the three pioneer programs were expanded to include third year and Kasigluk, Kipnuk, Quinhagak and Tuntutuliak were added to the list. In 1975 Chefornak, Eek, Kwethluk, Kwingillingok, Nightmute and Tununak were included, bringing the total to only 13 out of the 32 BIA schools in the area.

"When they ask questions about how our program is working, we have to say we don't know yet," considers James Berlin who started with the program in Nunapitchuk in 1970. "We have to wait until early students get to high school so we can fully compare."

"But we do know they like school better. Express themselves more freely now. I was teaching here before the program started when they all had to speak English. Those little beginners, they were just real quiet. They whispered when they talked."

Not so, now. The advent of bilingual put an end to the stereotype of "shy little Eskimo kids". A recent visit to Marie Napoka's first grade at Kwethluk found her youngsters bellowing thier lungs out at a math contest in English.

There are problems—especially when the youngsters make the transition from third to fourth grade, which usually marks the end of bilingual instruction.

Some teachers complain that their students are confusing English phonics with those of Yupik. And some testers report a fall off in the rate of improvement as students advance through the bilingual grades.

Researcher James Orvik puzzled over this in a 1975 study. Perhaps the children who pioneered the program as the "leading edge" might feel unusual pressure.

Another theory might be that the "total concept of bilingual education is questionable and may not come through on its initial promise to provide a quality education program for Yupik-speaking children," Orvik wrote.

"But such a theory is easily weakened by the remarkable performance of children in the early primary grades experiencing the bilingual classes."

Some educators credit gains more to the fact that at last there is structured curriculum within the school, than to bilingual. Clearly it is too early to tell. But overall, backers are optimistic.

"Results from the above battery of tests (BIA developed in Yupik) indicated that pupils in the bilingual program show significantly higher conceptual and linguistic development in Yupik than do the control pupils in English," BIA recently reported in its "Primary Eskimo Program" newsletter.

"Equally strong evidence indicated a significantly rapid growth in English language skills for pupils in the bilingual program with only a fraction of instruction to which control pupils were exposed".

And evaluators within the Bureau gave Bethel a bilingual star.

In the final evaluation report it was declared "The primary Eskimo Program ranks overall as the most impressive North American bilingual program we have studied."

There is no list of how many North American bilingual programs the BIA evaluators had studied, but guesses are good that exemplary status isn't far off for the Bethel pioneers.