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READING CHOICES OF NATIVE CHILDREN-- AN INFORMAL ANALYSIS

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We teachers, librarians and parents are concerned about helping our children develop good reading habits. We know that children learn to read by reading (Huck, 1979) and that children's reading interests mature as they do (Purves and Beach, 1976). Studies of reading interests tell us that children like concrete stories about the familiar, and books they can relate to. From this information follows a reasonable assumption that Alaskan children will choose books about Alaska--her people, environment, animals and landscapes.

For several years I have been compiling a bibliography of children's books about Alaska. The bibliography has become quite extensive, and has been published by the Department of Education as part of the Elementary Language Arts Curriculum (Alaska DOE, 1986). Still, as I collect and read the books, I wonder what kids think about them.

Many librarians in the state have put a great deal of money and effort into adding to their collections of "children's Alaskana." One reason for this is the common assumption that Native children in particular may be enticed to read about familiar cultures and places in these books. Because previous research has indicated that children are not influenced by the ethnicity or culture of book characters when choosing books to read (Spangler, 1981), I have begun to wonder if spending so much time and money on children's Alaskana is worth it.

In this study, I chose to look at reading lists of Native children in one Alaskan school to see if any preferences toward books about Alaskan people were evident. These lists were compared to those of non-Native students. The

results may be useful to professionals when buying books and making recommendations about books for Native children.

The Project

This research was based on data collected by teachers and parent volunteers in a Juneau elementary school. Two teachers had received a federal Chapter 2 mini-grant to implement a reading incentive program they designed called "I Read 50 Books." All children in the school participated. Following reading a book, each child would turn in a form signed by a parent verifying that the book had been read. These titles were then compiled in reading lists for each child. When the child had read 50 books, a T-shirt emblazoned with "I READ 50 BOOKS" was awarded.

Grant funds were used to buy T-shirts and other promotional materials and to add books with Alaska content to the library. Volunteers compiled reading lists for each child.

The project offered me data on the recreational reading choices of a large number of children. In analyzing the booklists, I was able to find answers to my question: how popular are books about Alaska to Native and non-Native children?

The children: I found booklists for 335 children grades K-5 who had attended the school in 1985-86. Seventy-two of the children (21%) were identified by their teachers as Native.

The books: Children chose reading books from the school or public library or from home. A list of the "children's Alaskana" which was added to the library is included in the appendix. In defining "children's Alaskana", I had to limit my analysis to books with cultural content--that is, my criteria for including a book for analysis was that it included people and had something to do with Alaska. As a result, a large number of books about animals were not included in the study.

What I looked for: I had reading lists for each of the children who attended the school in the 1985-86 school year. I went over each reading list to identify the following information--1) all "children's Alaskana" read; 2) other general reading choice trends; 3) all children who received the "I Read 50 Books" award and all children

who did not read any books.

What I Found

Incentive Program: Ninety children, (27% of all children who attended the school that year) read 50 or more books. Twelve of these children were Native. Twenty-two children (6.5% of children who attended the school that year) did not read any books. Eight of the children who did not record any books read were Native. This table summarizes the breakdown of Native and non-Native readers:

	<u>Total Children</u>	<u>Read 50 Books</u>	<u>Read No Books</u>
Native	72	12 (16.5%)	8 (11%)
Non-Native	263	78 (29%)	14(5%)
	335	90 (27%)	22 (6.5%)

"Children's Alaskana" Books Chosen by Native Children
(n = 72)

- 1st A Salmon for Simon (2)
The Gnome from Nome (2)
- 2nd King Island Christmas (9)
- 3rd The Secred Moose (3)
- 4th The Art of the Northwest Coast Indians
- 5th Balto the Sled Dog

(The numbers in the left margin indicate the lowest grade level at which the book was chosen. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times a book was chosen.)

"Children's Alaskana" Chosen by a Matched Sample of non-Native Children: (n = 72)

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|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1st <u>A Salmon for Simon</u> (4) | 4th <u>Klondike Arthur</u> |
| <u>Secret Moose</u> (5) | 5th <u>Mary of Mile 18</u> |
| <u>King Island Christmas</u> (11) | <u>The Gnome from</u> |
| 2nd <u>Berry Woman's Children</u> | <u>Nome</u> |
| <u>Alaska ABC Book</u> | <u>Hannah's Alaska</u> |
| 3rd <u>Cremation of Sam McGee</u> | <u>The White Archer</u> |
| <u>Eskimo Songs and Stories</u> | <u>Kiana's Iditarod</u> |

"Children's Alaskana" were read a total of 18 times by Native children as compared to 30 times by a matched group of non-Native children.

Discussions and Conclusions

My first impression of this data was that the incentive program was very successful. The fact that over a quarter of all the children in the school read 50 or more books was most impressive. Some of the children read up to 100 books!

I found a bulletin board at the school with photographs of the children receiving their T-shirts. The proud, beaming faces in the pictures were clear testimony that the program was successful. All the teachers participated in the program too, and a number of them received T-shirts as well.

The program was less successful per capita with the Native children (See the chart above.) However, with a sixth of the Native children reading 50 or more books, any stereotypes that Native children are not voracious readers are not supported by this data.

The "children's Alaskana" was not more attractive to the Native children. In fact, in this small sample, the non-Native kids chose Alaskana more often. This finding is similar to research done with children of other minority ethnic groups in the United States. Content analysis done by the Council on Interracial Books for Children generally tells us that books with ethnic content are often unauthentic, stereotypical, and written by white Americans. These generalizations may hold for the "children's Alaskana." If that is true, maybe it is better that our Native children are not reading culturally inappropriate books.

I was surprised at how few of the Alaska books were actually read by the children. This may be because many of the books are typically read to classes by teachers and the librarian. (For example, Berry Woman's Children and On Mother's Lap are very popular read-alouds.) Perhaps the books are boring compared to more popular books by Judy Blume or Paula Danziger, or series such as "The Berenstain Bears," "Care Bears," and "Choose Your Own Adventure." Finally, there are still relatively few Alaska books to choose from (Alaska Department of Education,

1986), and the small numbers of them read may reflect a similar proportion of Alaska titles to all children's books available to these kids.

Three Alaska books were read frequently: A Salmon for Simon, The Secret Moose, and King Island Christmas. This is probably due to the high quality of these books. Jean Rogers, the author of the latter two books, was a weekly visitor to the school, so her presence was probably influential.

The children at this school read a large number of books about animals, particularly whales, other sea mammals and most of all bears. I was amazed at the number of bear books (about real bears and fantasy bears) that were chosen. The impact of living in a town where bears commonly roam the streets in the fall is clearly shown in these children's reading interests.

I also noted several instances of "I Read 50 Book" club members with the same last name, so I assumed there were from the same families. This shows again the powerful influence parents have on children's reading habits.

This informal look at a group of children's reading makes me wonder if all the energy expended on buying children's Alaskana is worth it for the children. Only four of the books the teachers bought with their grant money were read (The Fur Seals of the Pribilofs, Walpole, Mary of Mile 18, and The White Archer). In addition, the results of this informal case study provide no support for the assumption that Native children (or non-Native children) are particularly attracted to these books, or that providing Alaskana can influence reading behavior.

Instead, it seems that children of all ethnic groups are best served when teachers, parents and librarians choose the best of books for our children, regardless of cultural content. The study does indicate that modern, culturally sensitive portrayals of Native culture (such as King Island Christmas) and books about common Alaska animals are widely read by both Native and non-Native Alaskan children.

If we think that "children's Alaskana" is important,

we are going to have to lead children to the books through reading out loud, booktalking, meetings with authors, class assignments, discussions and other activities that may help the children appreciate what Alaskana has to offer. And hopefully, more writers will emerge from our state who are both sensitive and accurate, and will provide books that will appeal to all children, here and in the rest of the country.

Note: Keep in mind that this information was generalized from information from one school. It may not represent other schools in the state. What we need here is more data from other Alaskan schools. If you are aware of a school where comprehensive reading lists are kept, please let me know so we can begin to compile more information on the topic of Alaskan children's reading interests.

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