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Excerpts from the Bilingual-Bicultural Conference held in Anchorage, Alaska on February 25-27, 1976

Moses Wassillie, moderator

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Bernard Spolsky talked about bilingual education in America and some of the problems associated with it. He said since the first WW there was just the "one language" idea. Everyone learned just English. He said when one looks at the effects of this policy two very different things happen. The first effect happens in the case of those groups that still continue to speak their own language with their own children. When the children start school they find it hard to get a good education. The first problem that bilingual education is concerned about is saying that it is not legal to educate somebody in a language that he or she doesn't understand. The first aim of bilingual education for a group that still speaks its own language at home is to make it possible for their children to learn in their own language all the time while they are learning English. It turns out that during the first stage the main thing they are talk about is who has the right to education. Even if somebody doesn't know English they still have a right to education. A second question arises. As soon as anybody has a right to education we have to make it possible for children to learn in their own language. When they start educating children in their own language they start bringing in people from their own community speaking their own language. They start asking some basic questions about education, what they want their children to be, do they want them to save something from their own traditional background. The question of why is anybody being educated. This second question is the one that bilingual education is starting to be concerned with all over the world. In most kinds of bilingual programs if the language is still widely used the bilingual program will have the effect of leading to much more use of the standard language. He talked about English use by Navajos and the question about maintaining the use of the Navajo language. With a bilingual program there will be much more of an opportunity to maintain the language. For much of the world the school is a fairly new and alien institution introduced during a period of western colonization. Many communities had a system of education, but the school as an institution has spread out all over the world. One of the most difficult problems is whether the school can be integrated into the community or whether it remains alien. One of the most interesting and important effects of bilingual education is giving the community access to the school. The community can talk to the teachers in their own language and start influencing the school. The school becomes an integrated part of the community and is not an alien institution.

Song by Floyd Westerman

Elaine Ramos with UAF headed a self-determination panel. She talked about her experiences with the Alaska bilingual movement. Nora Dell Howard was one of the first Tlingit language teachers. Others were motivated through her. They had 30-40 participants in Southeast Alaska. They began to get more Haida teachers and now have Tsimsians. The work throughout the whole state of Alaska has been

fragmented. In 1972-73 she worked as an administrator at the Alaska Native Language Center and tried to coordinate the language efforts throughout the state. They began the Copper River Native language attempt. She said she met Millie Buck and Virginia Peet there who are doing a fantastic job. She would like to give as much support to the Alaska Native language efforts as possible so they can begin to coordinate and begin to do the kind of training that is needed for Alaskan Natives. Self-determination has been a popular topic in Alaska especially in the last two or three years before the introduction of Senate Bill 39. She remembers when Bobby Clark and others came down to begin the fight so there can be local determination and local control of schools. The movement began to move and there was an army in Juneau lobbying with the legislators. Out of S.B 39 there is centralization of schools and election of boards. She feels self-determination can come about through education. They can get the legislators to pass laws so that they have the opportunity to determine what education can be. She said they must train the school boards and the Native people have to be trained. She talked about Peter Kalifornsky who is beginning to be literate in his Native language. She mentioned other people in the audience. She thinks that is where self-determination comes. She said you must unite together to back these favorable legislation and be involved with drafting the legislation. She talked about Arnold Booth's parents and grandparents who were determined that he would learn how to speak Tsimshian. She said if you are want your language to continue you have to be determined.

Song by Buffy Sainte Marie.

Mo Wassillie said in a workshop at the conference some teachers involved in bilingual education talked about their programs, demonstrated use of the language in the classroom and sang in their Native tongue. An unidentified person talked about the lack of workbooks being a disadvantage to bilingual teachers. Another person said she enjoyed teaching the children because she likes to see them learn their language and culture. She said the Native language should be their first language. They teach it as a second language. She said the Athabaskan language is very difficult even though she is a fluent Ahtna speaker. She talked about teaching the children how to count. They liked the sound of some of the words. She sang a song. A group of teachers sang songs in Inupiaq and in Inupiaq/English.

Mo Wassillie said Joe Coolidge of Kuskokwim Community College talked about Native language and culture. Joe Coolidge said he respected the older Natives. He said they have a knowledge he doesn't have. They have a knowledge in their own culture. They know their culture. If they didn't have a culture they wouldn't have a language. To have a language you must have a culture. When he was born he didn't have a language. He started listening to the wind that was blowing over him. It was making a whistling sound which he can imitate. He heard the water ripple. It was a beautiful sound. And those were in the wilderness. If you analyze the wilderness it is wild. When he went to school he went to school with his language and was forced to learn English. He wasn't permitted to use his language. He didn't know how to express himself in the classroom. He would have been able to express himself if he had had a bilingual education at that time. Starting school was a new language. He can see the educators concerns. He thought that was the way to learn from the white man's point of view. They forced you to learn. When he went to Mt. Edgecumbe English teachers taught him English but he was having a difficult time expressing himself in English. Up to this point English is not his language. He wished everybody could understand his language, his presentation would be better. He attended

electronic school in the lower forty-eight. He thought they made it up to him. He stayed at school and then worked. He did not like it out there. There was no wilderness.