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# Native American Secondary Female Students' Perspectives On School Success

Frances Ann Rodenburg

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NATIVE AMERICAN SECONDARY FEMALE STUDENTS'  
PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL SUCCESS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Grand Forks, North Dakota

August  
2012

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This dissertation, submitted by Frances Ann Rodenburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

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Date

Title Native American Secondary Female Students' Perspectives on School Success

Department Educational Leadership

Degree Doctor of Education

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Frances Ann Rodenburg

7/25/12

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success; and (b) to document oral stories students shared about their experiences through transcribed interviews. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American students. Students interviewed were eight female, Native American students in Grades 8 through 10, living in poverty, and scoring at proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment in both reading and math.

Students attended various schools in the public school district involved in this study during 2011-2012. Data was collected through personal interviews. The following categories emerged from the data analysis: Family, School, and Students.

Every student attributed part of her success to relationships with others. Whether the relationship was with family, friends, or school personnel, relationships made a significant difference. The relationships that existed were the very reason some of the students met success. No matter how much disorder a family was affected by, the family still played an important role in the students' development. School provided an avenue for some students to break away from the harmful, destructive patterns and emotional impact occurring in the home setting. The importance of nurturing resilience in Native American females was also evident.

(Keywords: Native American, poverty, resiliency, relationships)

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." The intent was to provide equal education access for all students, especially students at risk of failing, and to establish high academic standards. Federally funded programs, such as Title I, were authorized and administered by states to support students struggling academically (State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.; Young, 2002).

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was commissioned as a report by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report contributed to the view that public schools in America were failing and initiated a surge of reform efforts at the local, state, and national levels. One of the reform efforts resulting from information included in the report was standards-based education. A major tenet of the standards-based reform movement has been that every student should have a quality education (Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2003).

In 2002, Congress took further action, amended ESEA, and reauthorized it as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.; Toppo, 2008). According to Sherman (2008), this Act has



been hailed as critical legislation for its acknowledgment that achievement gaps are unacceptable.

Since the passage of the NCLB legislation, schools have placed greater emphasis on student achievement and have invested time and energy on identifying how to better measure student growth and student proficiency. In order to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), schools have needed to concentrate on closing achievement gaps that existed in and between the following subgroups: economically disadvantaged, ethnic (Caucasian, Native American, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and others), students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, n.d.a).

While there has been a considerable amount of research focusing on effects of culture and poverty on student achievement among minority populations of African-American or Hispanic students, limited research is available regarding Native American students (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010; Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2009; Wiggan, 2007). Since Native American students regularly appear in the subgroup categories outlined above, and are not frequently making adequate yearly progress, pinpointing factors that could positively impact student learning and achievement for Native American students is an area deserving attention.

There are consequences a school or a district must implement if either one fails to show adequate yearly progress (AYP). One consequence is that program improvement plans are required of schools or districts that have not made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. Other consequences or interventions

include schools needing to offer school choice, supplemental services, corrective action, increased state oversight, and/or alternate governance (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, n.d.b, n.d.c).

By 2014, all nationwide public school districts will have been accountable for ensuring 100% of public school students are proficient on state reading and math assessments (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, n.d.a). Although NCLB can be hailed for its attention to achievement gaps, Sherman (2008) believed, “It fails to recognize the complexity of why minority students and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds often struggle in schools” (p. 677). Educators must gain a clearer, stronger understanding of the effects culture and poverty have on the achievement of minorities and students who fall in the subgroups not making AYP if they want to increase the likelihood of closing achievement gaps.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American students.

The Native American students considered for participation in this study had a higher percentage falling within a NCLB subgroup not achieving proficiency on their state assessment than Caucasian students. According to a personal communication (June 8, 2011) with a data assessment specialist at the district office of the public

school district in this study, the school district's 2008-2009 state assessment reading data indicated, when comparing all Caucasian students to all Native American students (in Grades 3-8 and 11), that 84.79% of Caucasian students were scoring at the proficient or advanced level, while only 63.51% of Native American students scored at the proficient or advanced level.

However, when student data were compared and poverty level was taken into account, 86.96% of Native American students who did not receive free or reduced meals actually scored slightly higher than the 86.28% of Caucasian students who did not receive free or reduced meals. Finally, when comparing those students who did receive free or reduced meals, 77.16% of Caucasian students scored at the proficient or advanced level as compared to 56.02% of Native American students (data specialist at school district in this study, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

I wanted to learn from Native American students by listening to them share their thoughts and reflections about their education. Oral tradition is important among Native American tribes. It is part of their heritage, their memory, and their voice. It is how children learn their traditions and develop pride that goes along with knowing their history. Stories and traditions often provide lessons and guidelines for Native American individuals (Rajotte, 2012).

This study provides insight about learning issues of female Native American students in Grades 8 through 10, living in poverty, and attending public schools in one school district in a Midwestern state in the U.S. Thus, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic

successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences.

#### Overview of EFR 520 Course Assignment

Because of my interest in the success of Native American students, I developed an assignment as part of an EFR 520 course. The assignment involved interviewing four Native American students. The criteria for selecting the interviewees included: female students who were Native American, in Grades 8 through 10, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced meals at school), and scoring at proficient or advanced levels on the 2009-2010 state assessment for reading in the state involved in this study. The course assignment enabled me to pilot test aspects for my anticipated dissertation methods. The course assignment data was later blended into this dissertation.

#### Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty, perceive their own academic success?
2. How do female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty, perceive their own learning experience?
3. What factors contribute to the success of female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty?

#### Researcher's Background

I have been an educator for the past twenty-six years. I have served as a special education teacher (in eight different school buildings). At one point in my career, I had

a dual role and served as a special education teacher and a Gifted/Talented Levels of Service resource teacher. I have served as an instructional strategist (K-12), eight years as an elementary principal (in three different school buildings), and as Elementary Assistant Superintendent. I currently serve as the Authorized Representative of McKinney-Vento grant funds and as the Homeless Coordinator for our district. Additionally, I am the authorized representative for the District's Title I, Title III, and Title VII programs. I have co-authored four Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grants to assist in school reform efforts.

The most beneficial experience I have, in relation to this research study, was obtained during four years of principalship experience in a school which had the largest percent of students living in poverty in the district and the highest percent of students who are Native American in the district. As the researcher, I knew it was important to take time to reflect on the biases I may possess and be mindful of predeterminations throughout the duration of the study. I have been an advocate for inclusive, strength-based education for many years and a critic of the more traditional education models. Strength-based programming builds on student's assets or strengths versus focusing on remediating deficits. I support approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment design that included the following aspects: a focus on multiple intelligences, project-based learning, brain-compatible instruction and design methods, integrated instruction, and the inclusion of study trips or being-there experiences. These approaches to curriculum can be used to provide a foundation to build concepts, language, vocabulary, and skills.

During this study, I may not have completely vacated myself of these preconceptions, but was aware of them. A goal of this study was to capture the student voices and stories. In doing so, the biases of the researcher were negated, while not completely eliminated. Several measures were taken to ensure validity of the results. These measures are discussed in detail in Chapter II.

Finally, a concern to some readers may be that this study was conducted in the district where I work. Therefore, it qualifies as a “backyard study.” Backyard studies can pose problems for qualitative researchers, and interfere with their ability to notice important details, because of being too close to the study. Some factors that likely reduced the impact of problems associated with this backyard study were: this study was limited to students in Grades 8-10; I oversee elementary programs, am not responsible for evaluating or supervising secondary staff, and had not met any of the students prior to the study.

In addition, I believe my position in the district may have helped create a sense of trust between myself and the students. The students appeared to be very open and amazingly honest throughout the interview process. This may not have occurred with an outside unknown researcher.

#### Parameters for Literature Review

As an educator of twenty-six years, I considered several possible concepts that could have emerged from student responses to interview questions prior to the initial phase of the literature review process. I also developed a conceptual framework (Appendix A). Student responses to open-ended interview questions did cause me to change some of my initial thinking regarding areas of focus for the literature review.

### Research Assumptions

1. Students who were interviewed answered the questions honestly.
2. Interview questions would evoke enough information to draw conclusions and recommendations.

### Delimitations

The following delimitations are identified to give clarity and direction to the study.

1. This study was conducted in a public school district in one Midwestern state in the U.S.
2. Data collection was limited to female Native American students in Grades 8-10, living in poverty.
3. Data for the study was collected during 2011-2012.
4. While all students were prompted by the same questions, the length of responses varied from student to student.

### List of Definitions

The following definitions are provided to support the reader's understanding of the topic.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) – A statewide accountability system that is required by federal regulations. It requires every state to ensure that all public schools and districts make AYP (State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – ESEA is the main federal law that impacts K-12 public education. The reauthorization of the ESEA Act as the No

Child Left Behind Act requires all students to be proficient in the core subjects by 2014 (“Elementary and Secondary Education Act,” n.d.).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a reauthorization of the ESEA. The NCLB legislation expanded the role of the federal government in education and took aim at improving the education of students at risk. A number of measures were designed to hold states, local districts, and schools more accountable for student achievement, such as annual testing which is aligned to state standards. Individual districts and schools must meet state "adequate yearly progress" targets for their composite group of students and for certain subgroups of students. States are required to bring all students up to the "proficient" level on state assessments by the 2014 school-year (“No Child Left Behind,” 2011; “No Child Left Behind Act,” 2012).

McKinney-Vento Act – “McKinney-Vento is the primary piece of federal legislation dealing with the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in U.S. public schools” (“McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act,” n.d., para. 1). The Act requires districts to ensure students who are homeless have access to education and other services they need to meet the same academic standards as all students (“McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act”, 2002). All school districts are required to designate a “homeless liaison.”

State Assessments –State assessments measure the progress of students in Grades 3 to 8, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Results from these assessments provide data that help parents, teachers, and students improve academic performance in reading,



language arts, math, and science. State assessments are used to determine each school's AYP.

Poverty – Students receiving free and/or reduced lunch at school were defined as living in poverty for this study.

Secondary Students – For the purposes of this study, this refers to students in Grades 8, 9, or 10. In the public school district involved in this study, any student who attends Grade 7 through Grade 12 is referred to as secondary student.

Staff – For the purposes of this study, this refers to all employees within a particular school building including teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Title I – Title I is the largest federally funded education program. It provides funding for high poverty schools to assist students who are at risk of falling behind academically. According to the definition provided by education.com: Many of NCLB's requirements – adequate yearly progress, highly qualified teachers and teacher assistant standards, accountability, sanctions for schools designated for improvement, achievement standards and assessments, annual state report cards, professional development and parent involvement – were first outlined in Title I (“Title 1,” n.d.).

Title III – Title III is the section of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act that provides federal funding for English Language Learners (ELL) and immigrant students for language instruction (“Title III,” n.d.).

Title VII – A federal law (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) that prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex

(including pregnancy), national origin, and genetic information (“Title VII,” n.d.).

### List of Acronyms

The following acronyms are utilized within this study. This list will clarify their meaning within the context of this study.

- AYP – Adequate Yearly Progress
- DPI – Department of Public Instruction
- EFR – Educational Foundations and Research
- ELL – English Language Learner
- ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- IRB – Institutional Review Board
- MHA – Mandan Hidatsa Arikara
- NCLB – No Child Left Behind
- SES – Socio-Economic Status

### Organization of the Study

Chapter I provided the reader with an introduction and a brief overview of issues concerning Native American education. Terms were defined, as well as acronyms used within the study. In addition, the purpose of the study, a brief overview of an EFR 520 study which served as the foundation for this dissertation research study, research questions, parameters for literature review, assumptions, delimitations of the study, and the researcher’s background and experiences were highlighted.

Chapter II includes the methodology utilized in this study, and includes a discussion of the IRB application and approval process. It also includes the rationale

for choosing qualitative research methods for this study, a description of the process used for selecting students, study methods, and a review of the profiles of students. Methods of data collection are shared, including the development of the interview questions, and the specific techniques used to code, analyze, and synthesize data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of validity issues.

In Chapter III, the reader is introduced to the students' experiences and perceptions. Three themes emerged from student interviews and are presented with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the interviews.

Chapter IV includes the literature review aligned with the findings of the study.

Finally, Chapter V provides the summary of the data, conclusions, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American female students living in poverty.

Chapter II includes the methodology utilized in this study. Methods of data collection are identified, including the development of the interview questions, and the specific techniques used to code, analyze, and synthesize data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of validity issues.

#### IRB Application and District Approval

I applied for and gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct a study, for a course assignment in EFR 520: Advanced Qualitative Research Methods on “Native American Secondary Students’ Perspectives on School Success.” Approval became effective on March 18, 2010. I submitted two reviews of my progress to the IRB. Upon completion of the course assignment, I submitted an IRB protocol change form and requested permission to build upon the course assignment

for my dissertation. Permission was granted (#IRB-201003-282) on February 28, 2012, and an extension of the original timeframe of approval was included.

To document district support and approval, I submitted a request to the superintendent of the public school district involved in this study and asked for written approval of the research study. The superintendent granted approval to access and utilize student data for the purposes outlined in the proposal (Appendix B).

### Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods

My professional experiences served as a catalyst for this study. As a former principal, I recognized there are many factors which the school system or educators have little or no control over when educating students living in poverty, and often times students who were Native American. Yet, despite the odds, some of these students are successful. I wanted to know if there were specific, identifiable factors that existed within the school experience which seemed to be beneficial for Native American students, living in poverty, and scoring in the proficient or advanced level on their state assessment. I wanted to understand what factors students found to be beneficial, and to identify these factors for educators.

My main reason for wanting to engage in a qualitative, grounded theory study was that I am intrigued by the idea of building theory from the “ground up” or from data obtained from specific individuals. According to Maxwell (2005), grounded theory refers to “theory that is inductively developed during a study . . . and in constant interaction with the data from that study” (p. 42). In this case, I was interested in interviewing students to derive “meaning” from what they had experienced throughout their formal education. By utilizing the grounded theory approach and the

interviewing process, I was given an opportunity to build relationships and gather data that may impact the success of future Native American female students in our district.

This study provided an opportunity for student voices to be heard regarding the challenges Native American students living in poverty face and factors that contribute to their success in school. The information learned from students can be used to assist educators in closing the achievement gap that exists between Caucasian students and Native American students, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch at school), based on state assessment results.

#### Selection of Students

Criteria for inclusion in the study were: female students who were Native American, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced meals at school), and scoring at proficient or advanced levels on their state assessment in reading. Since the individuals in the EFR 520 course assignment were also proficient on their math assessment scores, I requested IRB approval to add that criteria as part of the continued study for dissertation purposes.

After reviewing the district's student information system and state assessment scores for interview candidates, only thirteen of fifty Native American female students, in this district, met all criteria, that is:

- Native American
- Female – Because the sample size was small, I reduced the variables to a minimum. All students interviewed were females. Johnny Saldaña (2009) stated in his book titled, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, that “educational qualitative studies should make concerted efforts to

separate and compare boys' and girls' data" (p. 57). His reasoning was based on brain-based learning which "suggests marked differences exist between the way children of both genders process information" (p. 57-58).

- Living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch at school)
- Academically proficient or advanced as measured by the 2009-2010 state assessment for the school district involved in this study in reading and math
- Secondary student – Interviews had been conducted with students who were in seventh or eighth grade when they took their state assessment exams during the 2009-2010 school year. Professional experience caused me to believe secondary students would be able to provide more information in response to interview questions than students in lower or elementary grades.

Since I already interviewed four of the thirteen students for the EFR 520 course assignment, I sought participation from the remaining nine candidates. I was concerned parents or guardians of potential interviewees would not be willing to sign my consent form, as the Internal Review Board (IRB) required that I include the following statement: "As an educator, I am considered a mandatory reporter. If in the unlikely event, your child expresses anything concerning harming themselves or others, I am required to report this." For this reason, I asked the Native American Title VII Coordinator of the school district involved in this study to personally call each of

the families. She was a Native American and knew the families. I thought if she would explain the purpose of my study and seek each family's support for their child's participation, I might receive a better return rate on consent forms.

After the Native American Title VII Coordinator contacted parents via phone, I mailed out a cover letter explaining the study and asked for the parents' support. I asked the parents and interviewees for permission to interview and record the interviews. I included the consent form (Appendix C) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope and asked parent(s)/guardian(s) to sign the consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided. I assured the parents and students that data from interviews would not be linked back to the students, as indicated on the consent form.

I waited two weeks and had not received any additional signed consent forms back. I visited with the Title VII Coordinator again, and she agreed to call the parents once more. I resent the information regarding the study and another consent form in a self-addressed stamped envelope to nine families. After the second phone call from the Title VII Coordinator and the second mailing containing the study information and consent form, I received four additional signed consent forms. The Title VII Coordinator discovered that four of the nine potential students had moved out of the district. One parent expressed interest in having her daughter participate in the study/interview process, but the young lady preferred not to participate, and I did not pursue it any further. In all, I interviewed eight students.



## Description of Students

The eight students interviewed represent the following six tribes:

1. *Three Affiliated Tribes*: The Three Affiliated Tribes is a union of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara peoples. The Three Affiliated Tribes consists of approximately 12,600 members. Nearly 4,500 live on the Fort Berthold Reservation which is located in North Dakota (Fettig, 2012; “Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation,” 2011; Wikipedia, 2011).
2. *Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe*: The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has a reported population of 8,470 people living on the reservation based on the 2000 census report. The Cheyenne River Indian Reservation is located in South Dakota (“Cheyenne River Indian Reservation,” 2012; “South Dakota Within the Border . . .,” 2009).
3. *Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe*: In 2005, the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe had 6,677 enrolled members, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The reservation is located on the southern shores of Devils Lake, in east-central North Dakota (“Spirit Lake Tribe,” 2010; “Spirit Lake Tribe,” 2011).
4. *Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*: The Standing Rock Indian Reservation is located in both North and South Dakota. The reservation land straddles the borders of the two states. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has a population of 8,250 as of the 2000 census (“Standing Rock Indian Reservation,” 2012; “Standing Rock Sioux Tribe: History,” 2012).

5. *Rosebud Sioux Tribe*: The Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota is the home of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. According to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Enrollment Office, there are 24,426 enrolled members with 3,664 living off the reservation (“Le Oyate Ki,” 2010; “Rosebud Indian Reservation,” 2012).
6. *Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe*: The Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux or Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribe is a federally recognized tribe comprising two bands and two sub-divisions of the Santee Dakota people. The Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe is located in northeast South Dakota on the Lake Traverse Reservation. The enrollment of the tribe is approximately 12,300 members (“Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate,” 2012; “Welcome to Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate . . .,” 2009).

I conducted all eight of the student interviews at the school each student attended. I called each of the building principals and requested permission to interview each student during the school day. I worked with principals to arrange interview times and locations. My hope was to pose the least amount of disruption as possible for each student.

I interviewed seven of the students twice, for approximately 40-45 minutes each time. The eighth student interviewed required three interview sessions as the student shared stories and life experiences in more detail.

My approach was to introduce myself to each of the students and describe my study to them. I shared the reason for needing to audio record the interviews. The students were told they could opt out of answering any question(s) they did not want

to address for any reason. I recorded written observational field notes during the interviews, when there appeared to be something to make note of, such as when one individual teared up and began to cry during a conversation about her father (whom she wasn't able to see very often due to her parents being divorced or separated).

### Profiles

The eight student interviews are reported with the use of fictitious names. I chose to use pseudo-names rather than using a heading such as Interviewee A, for ease of reading. The profiles that follow are reported in random order, not in the order they were interviewed. When reporting this data out, the content under each student may vary in length because of how little or how much the students shared. Some student responses were limited. All students were prompted by the same questions.

#### *Ayianna*

Ayianna was a member of the Three Affiliated Tribes. I interviewed her twice during home-base period in the school's conference room. At the time of her interviews, Ayianna was a fourteen year-old ninth grader and had two younger brothers.

Ayianna attended preschool and three different schools in Grades K-6, although she has always lived in the same city. She attended the same middle school for Grades 7, 8, and 9.

In her eighth grade school year, Ayianna received an award for reading over 350 books in a year. Her favorite class was art. She enjoyed talking to friends between classes and at lunch. Ayianna had a strong interest in the Japanese culture and enjoyed

reading manga comic books. She hoped to travel to Japan someday. She participated in Tae-Kwon-Do and choir. She appreciated quiet time.

Ayianna described herself as someone who procrastinates a lot and said she finds it difficult to speak in front of groups. She said she tries to avoid conflict as much as possible; but when it does happen, she tries to “keep calm about it.” She shared goals of wanting to keep her grades up, finish high school, and indicated her parents wanted her to go to college. She described success as being happy, healthy, holding down a job, and having family and friends around her.

Getting up early was difficult for Ayianna. She felt the school day was too long, and she would have liked to see a thirty minute nap time incorporated into the school day. A 10:30 a.m. start time would be something she would have recommended, and she would have appreciated a little quiet time within the school day.

### *Bethany*

Bethany was a member of the Spirit Lake Sioux tribe. I interviewed Bethany during her home-base period. She was a fourteen year-old freshman. The first interview occurred in a counselor’s office and Bethany was quite talkative. The second interview was held in the school’s conference room. It was difficult to engage Bethany during the second interview. She complained of being really tired and said, “I can’t even think today.” She then shared she had gotten up over an hour late and was feeling frustrated about running late. She said when “I’m having one of my days, then I’ll just sit there.”

Bethany was born in the city in which she lived at the time of this study. When she was younger, she and her family moved to another state for three years and then moved back. She reported attending pre-school and then not remembering where she went to school.

Bethany enjoyed playing volleyball and participating in track. She said she probably wouldn't be playing volleyball anymore because "I'm not the best volleyball player." She shared that she didn't go to any volleyball camps in the summer and attributed that to her skill level in volleyball. Her favorite classes were gym and choir. Her least favorite subjects were English, reading, and writing.

### *Cecilia*

Cecilia was an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux. I interviewed Cecilia during her home-base period. The first interview occurred in a principal's office. The second interview was held in the social worker's office. She was a fourteen year-old eighth grader who presented herself as being rather quiet and reserved.

Cecilia shared how she attended two years of Head Start. She explained she had moved multiple times and gave a few examples of some of her experiences. Cecilia expressed that she was very good at math. She shared that her sister was a teen mom and "she actually did something good 'cause she took me and my little brother in even though she already has two kids, and she goes to college at [college's name] and she's going for criminal justice."

Cecilia was proud of her grades because "no one in my family really has good grades." She liked to share the new things she learned at school with her sister. She

said, “I like coming to school ’cause I get to learn something new every day, and I get to go home and share it with my sister.”

Taking work home is one thing Cecilia disliked. She said, “I’d like it better if we just kept it at school instead of having to take it home ’cause, some people have things they have to do at home, or responsibilities and . . . We don’t always hand it in on time.”

### *Jacy*

Jacy was a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe. I interviewed Jacy on the first occasion during her home-base and during part of what would have been the student’s physical education class. The first interview occurred in a principal’s office. Initially, it was difficult to establish rapport with Jacy because she was upset about being “kicked out of phy. ed.” class for two weeks. We spent some time processing the physical education situation before she was ready to begin the actual interview.

The second interview was held during the student’s choir class and was held in the social worker’s office. Jacy shared that she attended a boarding school in Grade 1, part of Grade 2, and half of third grade. It was difficult to follow the discussion of her movement between schools in Grades 2 and 3 during the interview. She moved again to another new school in fifth grade (when she went to live with her dad for a few weeks) and moved again in sixth grade.

At the time of this study, Jacy was a thirteen year-old eighth grader and had attended the same middle school for both the seventh and eighth grade school-years. Her favorite classes were math, science, art, and tech. ed. Jacy liked to draw and enjoyed doing labs and experiments. She liked working in the shop and would have

liked to learn how to work on cars. English, health, and history were her least favorite subjects. She would have liked to take Spanish.

Jacy had four siblings. She described herself as being good at helping her mom by taking care of her younger brothers and the baby.

### *Yepa*

Yepa was a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. I interviewed Yepa during her home-base period in the school's conference room on both occasions. At the time of these interviews, Yepa was a fourteen year-old eighth grader.

From kindergarten to fourth grade, Yepa attended four different schools. Yepa was the second oldest of five children. Her parents did not live together. She said her older sister was like a best friend. She said, "It was okay. I had lots of friends so whenever I moved, they'd be happy to see me again."

Yepa enjoyed volleyball, basketball, hockey, baseball, football, and ice skating. She also liked math, and she liked to "fix" all kinds of things. Her dad told her she would make a really good lawyer because, "[She] can over-talk other people."

Yepa shared memories of a friend getting in a car accident while driving with people who were drinking, and another time when a friend disappeared and came back very disheveled looking. She said the girl's mom called the cops and put out an "Amber Alert." Based on Yepa's description, my impression was the young lady she was talking about was taken by people in a vehicle, beaten, perhaps raped, and dropped off. She shared pieces of information such as "her hair was, like, all ragged, and like, she had bruises everywhere. . . . She wasn't the same. . . . She was so

different . . . like she was shy, and if someone barely touched her, then she would start screaming. . . . Whenever someone would talk to her, she'd kind of just looked away.”

### *Tatiana*

Tatiana was a fourteen year-old ninth grader, who lived with her dad and step-mom. Her biological mother lived on a reservation, and she “doesn't really see her much.” She had eight brothers and sisters and two half-sisters, but she only knew two of them. She had never met her other siblings. Tatiana's mother was enrolled in the Three Affiliated Tribes, and her father was enrolled as a Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux. It was not certain, but Tatiana may have been enrolled with the Three Affiliated Tribes.

Tatiana liked art, physical science, English, and global studies. She did not like math; in fact, she says, “I absolutely hate math. . . . I'm just not good at math.”

A recent incident involved alcohol poisoning. She said her “alcohol level was .27” and she was found passed out in a snow bank. She said, “I had to be on the ventilator because, I don't know, I stopped breathing. . . .” When asked what led to her drinking, she said, “Hanging out with different people . . . everyone you know gets in that stage where drinking comes about. . . . I just went along with everything and . . . I started drinking a lot, every weekend, or every other day, sometimes every day, I just liked it.”

### *Dyani*

Dyani's mother was enrolled at Standing Rock Sioux tribe and her father was enrolled in Spirit Lake's Sioux tribe. Dyani was not enrolled on either reservation. She lived with her mother. Her mom and step-dad got divorced when she was in seventh



grade. Unlike most of the other students, Dyani had lived in the same city her whole life.

Dyani played a lot of sports (cross country, volleyball, track, and basketball). She was a ninth grader and was on the A-1 basketball team. Her favorite classes were health, life science, and global studies. She thought of herself as a really quiet and shy person.

Dyani spoke about the encouragement her family provided when it came to playing sports and studying. Her mom, grandmother, and step-dad were all mentioned several times for their role in supporting a strong work ethic. Dyani also spoke about her friends and how they “wanna do good in school.”

#### *Willow*

Willow was an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Sioux. She was a sophomore in high school. She was very articulate during the interview process and had a highly developed vocabulary. Willow shared that she liked the indoors. She expressed a love for school and for reading. She read her first “chapter book” in second grade. It was the first “Harry Potter” book. She said, “I have just always loved reading. It’s kind’ve my escape from everything.”

Willow’s biological mother and father were not together. She had four siblings. She had an older brother, two older sisters, and a younger brother. Both she and her younger brother had been adopted by the same family. Her oldest brother lived with his father. The interview data gathered did not specify where the two older sisters were living at the time of this study.

Willow loved art, books, and writing. She enjoyed classical music, and Indy Rock. She had many interests including: journalism, film production, and graphic design. She said, she has “never been a big science or math fan.” As a young person, she viewed the public library as a refuge and reported she would wake up before her siblings and go to the library to check out books.

At the time of this study, Willow was teaching herself to play guitar. She wanted to graduate and go to college. She wanted to “make something of my life and not just be about alcohol.”

### Methodology

Interview data, obtained from the original four students was integrated with data from four additional female, Native American students, in Grades 8 through 10, living in poverty (as defined by the families’ participation in the school district’s free or reduced meals program), who scored at proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment exams in reading and math. The final number of students interviewed was eight of thirteen potential students who met the study criteria. The final number of students was based on the number of parents/guardians who granted permission and provided signed consent forms. Four of the thirteen students who were potential participants in the study moved out of district before the study commenced. The parents of the one remaining potential participant did agree to have their child participate in the study/interview process. However, the child preferred not to participate.

I analyzed the interview data to identify patterns, themes, or concepts in the students’ statements regarding factors or strategies contributing to their school

success. The findings are shared in the result's section of the dissertation in Chapter III and are based on synthesizing numerous codes identified in the data into categories and themes (Lichtman, 2010).

#### Methods of Data Collection

Student interviews were used as the primary source of data collection for this study. Seidman (2006) said, "At the root of . . . interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Field notes included documentation such as descriptions of students, comments made by students before or after interviews, and observable behaviors during the interviews; and impressions of students' attitudes during interviews were also utilized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

All interviews utilized a semi-structured line of questioning, and each interview lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. Each of the students' interview sessions were scheduled approximately three to seven days apart. This allowed a bit of time for both the students and me to reflect about the preceding interview(s).

I recorded each interview with a digital voice recorder. I also took notes during each interview to capture key words or phrases used by students, as well as any gestures, mannerisms, or signs of emotion that were displayed. After each interview, I reviewed my notes and identified items I wanted to revisit in the next interview. It was helpful to start subsequent interviews with comments made by students in the preceding interview. Personal identifiers were given a code when transcribing the digital audio-tapes, and pseudonyms were substituted for actual names. After the

transcription process was complete, I made hard copies of the documents and also kept an electronic copy on my computer.

All data was coded and analyzed for emerging themes. Themes emerging from the data were analyzed to identify factors influencing Native American female students, in Grades 8 through 10, living in poverty.

#### Interview Questions

As a teacher, principal, and current assistant superintendent, I have experienced reluctance by many Native American students to engage in conversation, especially with unfamiliar people. My professional experience caused me to approach the interviews with more than only four to five questions. My concern was the end result would be the acquisition of very little information or data if I limited my number of questions. My professional experience prompted me to preemptively prepare questions in order to encourage communication (Appendix D). Several people reviewed the interview questions; including the Public School District's Title VII Coordinator, my committee chair, dissertation committee members, and the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Dakota. I was cautious not to over-rely on the questions in order to encourage and engage in more free-flowing conversation with students. A combination of open-ended questions and direct questions were utilized for a semi-structured approach to the interview. Follow-up questions and probing questions were also used to clarify students' initial responses and often resulted in additional information.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis is an ongoing process in a qualitative research study. It occurs simultaneously with the data collection process. The goal of the qualitative interview process was to learn from the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs the students had regarding factors that seemed to influence their success in school.

When coding student interviews during the initial coding process, I ran copies of the transcripts with a two-inch margin on the right side of each page. I read and re-read each interview and jotted words or phrases in the margins. The margin notes became my initial codes. After coding all eight interviews, I transferred all of my initial coding into an Excel spreadsheet for visual clarity and began the process of consolidating the codes into a more manageable number. Interview data was analyzed using the constant-comparative method in relation to the research questions to identify emerging codes, categories, concepts, and themes. The constant-comparative method is a way to analyze data closely associated with grounded theory (Lichtman, 2010). According to Bernard and Ryan (2010), this method “involves searching for similarities and differences by making systematic comparisons across units of data” (p. 58).

I looked for similarities among the codes, and grouped and regrouped those codes which seemed to relate to one another. The similar findings began to emerge as focused codes. The focused codes were then grouped to help me identify recurring ideas that connected to emerging categories. The codes and categories were then utilized to formulate three themes that emerged from the research (see Figure 1).

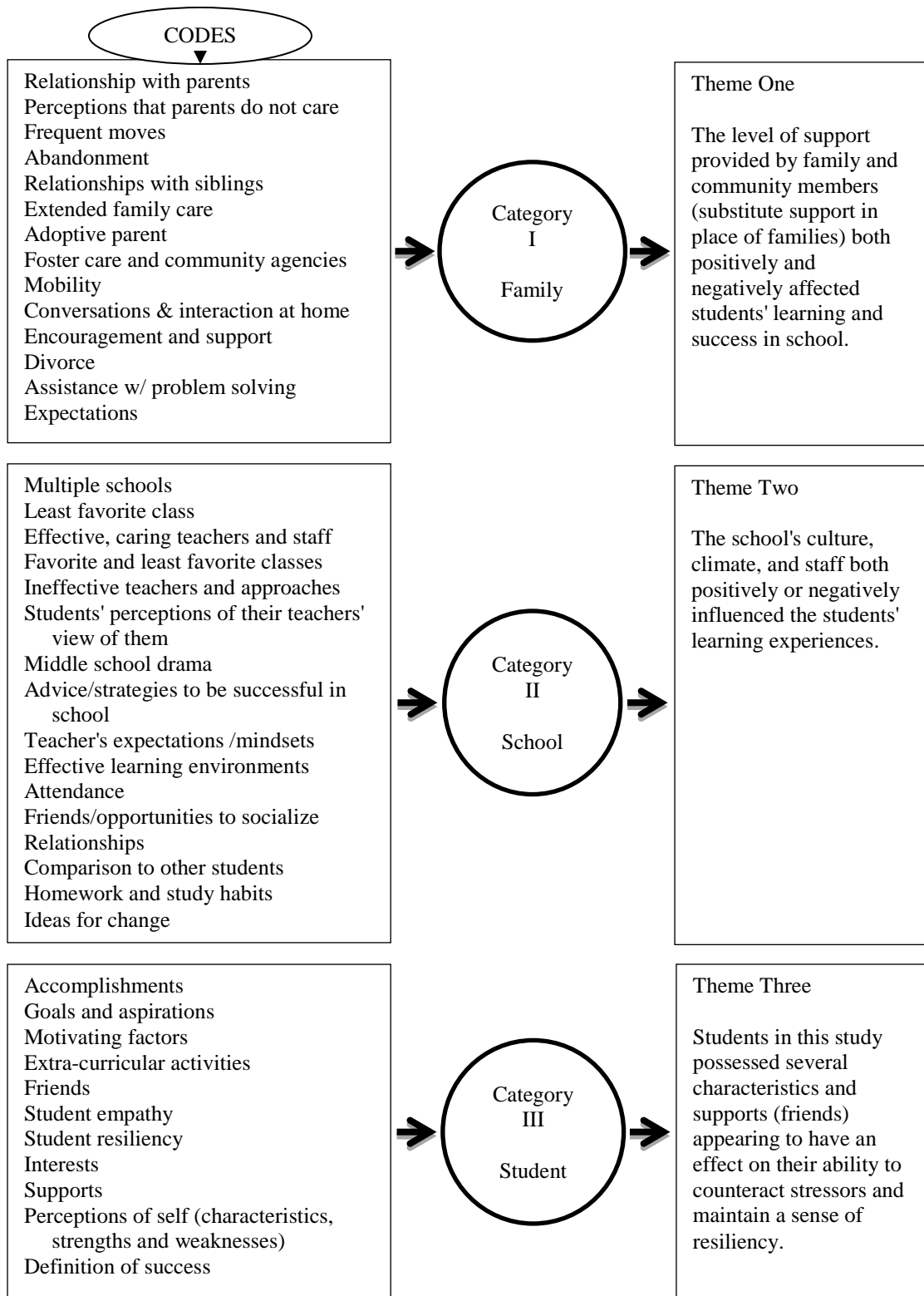


Figure 1. Concept Map Depicting Codes, Categories, and Themes of Factors Impacting Success.

## Grounded Theory

The continual analysis of interview data and field notes, as described above,

led to the development of a grounded theory map (see Figure 2).

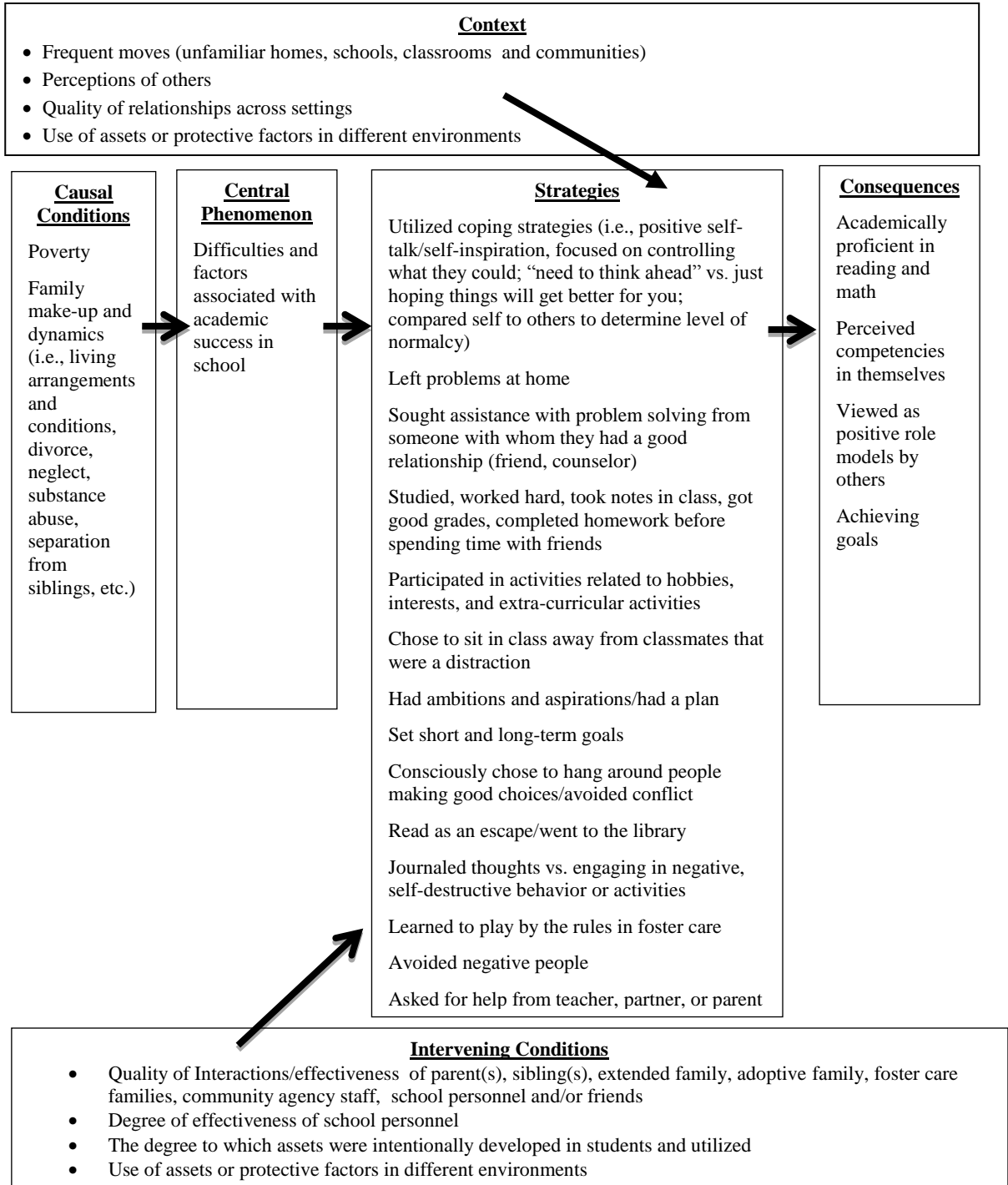


Figure 2. Visual Representation of the Data, Academic Success.

According to Merriam (2009), “A grounded theory study seeks not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest” (p. 23).

Maxwell (2005) said, grounded theory:

“ . . . is inductively developed during a study . . . and in constant interaction with the data from that study. The theory is ‘grounded’ in the actual data collected, in contrast to theory that is developed conceptually and then simply tested against empirical data.” (pp. 42-43)

The data for the grounded theory map developed as a result of this study came from interviews with students about lived experiences and about the factors the students believed shaped those experiences.

When interviewing students for this study, each student had a unique experience; each student had a unique story to tell. The similarities were revealed when the data was analyzed for patterns in those unique stories (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). According to Bernard and Ryan, “That’s where grounded theory . . . comes in. . . . As the title implies, the aim is to discover theories . . . grounded in empirical data, about how things work” (p. 267). The grounded theory map in Figure 2 supports a reader’s understanding of the central phenomenon as it depicts the relationships within the context: causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences to the central phenomenon.

### *Central Phenomenon*

When utilizing a grounded theory approach for analysis, Creswell (2007) believed a visual model called the axial coding paradigm helps researchers identify the central phenomenon of a study, as well as be clearer about the elements around the



central phenomenon. Based on Creswell's work, elements around a central phenomenon consist of the context, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

The focus of this study was to gain an understanding of how students perceived their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contributed to their successes. The central phenomenon, or the idea most frequently expressed by students, focused on the difficulties and factors associated with academic success in school.

#### *Causal Conditions*

According to Creswell (2007), the term "causal conditions" refers to "conditions that influence the phenomenon" (p. 67). In this study, the first causal condition identified was the level of poverty in which students were living. While the poverty level varied, the effects of poverty impacted each student and the approach each student used to navigate success in school. Relatedly, the family make-up and dynamics such as living arrangements and conditions also varied from student to student. None of the students interviewed lived with both biological parents. The students dealt with issues associated with divorce, neglect, substance abuse, and separation from parents and siblings.

#### *Context*

Context refers to specific conditions that influence strategies students use to cope with a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). For students in this study, their degree of mobility, whether it was from home to home, school to school, or city to city, created new contexts (or conditions) for students to cope with each time they

moved and required students to learn new strategies to adjust to new living situations, conditions, and to new schools and classroom environments. The students also had to learn to adjust to new societal and cultural norms with every move.

The students' perceptions of the way people viewed them, the quality of relationships, and the level of support and encouragement they received also shifted based on where they were living and where they went to school. Thus strategies they learned to deal with various conditions changed with each move.

### *Intervening Conditions*

Intervening conditions refer to broad conditions that influence students' choices of coping strategies (Creswell, 2007). The quality of interactions and relationships between students and others had a direct influence on the central phenomenon. The central phenomenon became either positive or negative depending on the conditions. One example was whether a parent or teacher was effective or ineffective which had an influence on the strategies students utilized to be successful or cope with undesirable realities.

Fortunately, students were able to take personal strengths or assets, such as having a sense of humor, with them whenever they moved which helped them maintain their success from place to place and from relationship to relationship. For example, Willow's competence as a reader was something she could use to "escape" regardless of the home or school setting.

### *Strategies*

Strategies are actions students use to cope with a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Students assumed a number of strategies to deal with foreseen and

unforeseen difficulties (real or perceived) they. Some of the strategies voiced by students included:

- using positive self-talk to help them focus on controlling what they could control;
- comparing themselves to others to determine the level of normalcy of the situation they were facing;
- planning ahead and setting short- and long-term goals versus just hoping things would get better for them;
- intentionally shifting focus and attention away from problems and leaving the problems at home;
- seeking assistance with problem solving from someone they had a good relationship with such as a parent, friend, counselor, and teacher;
- studying, working hard, taking notes in class, getting good grades, and completing homework before spending time with friends;
- participating in activities related to hobbies, interests, and extra-curricular activities;
- choosing to sit away from classmates who were a distraction;
- consciously choosing to hang around people who were making good choices and avoiding conflict;
- reading as an escape/or going to the library;
- journaling thoughts versus engaging in negative, self-destructive behavior or activities;
- learning to play by the rules in foster care; and

- avoiding negative people.

### *Consequences*

According to Creswell (2007), consequences are the outcomes that occur as a result of using the strategies to address the central phenomenon. Creswell (2007) noted that Strauss and Corbin acknowledged consequences can be positive, negative, or neutral. Some of the consequences for the students appeared to be:

- every student was academically proficient in reading and math based on the NDSA 2009-2010 results;
- every student perceived themselves as having strengths and competencies and was able to talk about individual strengths and weaknesses;
- some of the students shared they were viewed as positive role models by others, such as family members, friends, and teachers (i.e., they were the first in their family to get good grades or to make it as far as they had);  
and
- the students expressed self-satisfaction with achieving their goals thus far.

Six of the students appeared to face challenges with optimism and confidence.

I was inspired merely by being in their presence and listening to them talk. On the other hand, I worried about two of the students. They appeared to be in more volatile places during the interviews. I sensed a different attitude when listening to them talk about their lives at home and at school. Their mannerisms and mindsets appeared to be more downbeat, pessimistic, and defensive, not directed at me as the interviewer, but at the interview topics when discussing them. The students' behaviors were reflective

of individuals who were experiencing degrees of unhappiness or despair. The negative, depressed tones were apparent during both interviews with both students.

### Validity Issues

I chose to interview students within the district where I work so school personnel, within our district, may be able to use findings from the research study to improve the learning environments and conditions for students who are Native American and living in poverty.

As the interviewer, I was not in a position to evaluate the performance of students being interviewed or to evaluate the performance of staff at the schools in which the students attended. Our district culture has been perceived as being fairly collaborative in nature. Data has been used to help us improve as a district, collectively, not for isolating low-performing schools or staff members. Data has been used for growth purposes not to impose punitive measures.

A typical method for checking for validity is called peer review. I utilized a peer examination or peer review strategy in order to assess the validity of my findings. This was one of several strategies shared by Merriam (2009), in her book titled, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. I asked “a knowledgeable peer to review the raw data and assess whether or not they thought the findings were credible based on the data” (p. 220). A data specialist from the school district involved in this study reviewed the data, as well as the findings, to assess validity. The Title VII Coordinator also provided guidance in this area. Both of these peer reviewers were familiar with the data and Native American students in the district.

I also kept field notes or records on how the study was conducted and how the data was analyzed during the analysis and interpretation process. This is another way to help provide credibility, dependability, and confirmability. All transcribed interviews and documentation have been maintained so appropriate colleagues can assess the adequacy of the study.

### Summary

Chapter II included methods used for the study. The IRB application and approval process, as well as the process for obtaining the school district's permission to interview students, were shared. The students of the study were described, along with the data collection, and analysis processes.

In Chapter III, the reader is introduced to the students' experiences and perceptions. Three themes that emerged from the student interviews are presented along with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the interviews.

## CHAPTER III

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences through transcribed interviews. The eight students interviewed were female, Native Americans, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced lunches at school), in Grades 8-10, and scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment exams in reading and math. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American female students, living in poverty.

In Chapter III, the reader is introduced to more of the student's experiences and perceptions beyond what was presented in Chapter II with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from interviews. The chapter includes the findings that emerged from the analysis of data acquired.

The three themes identified are:

1. Category One: Family

Theme One: The level of support provided by family and community members (substitute support in place of families) both positively and negatively affected students' learning and success in school.

2. Category Two: School

Theme Two: The school's culture, climate, and staff both positively or negatively influenced the students' learning experiences.

3. Category Three: Students

Theme Three: Students in this study possessed several characteristics and supports (friends) appearing to have an effect on their ability to counteract stressors and maintain a sense of resiliency.

To assist in the presentation of the findings, each theme is broken down into additional sub-topics.

Category One: Family

Theme One: The level of support provided by family-and community members (substitute support in place of families) both positively and negatively affected students' learning and success in school.

*Parents*

At the time of this study, Ayianna lived with her father and her two younger brothers. She did not have contact with her mother. In the interviews, while she mentioned she had two younger brothers, she spoke more about the role her friends have had in her life than any role her brothers may have played.

Bethany lived with her mom and step-dad. She said, "I don't really talk to my [biological] dad ever." Bethany's step-dad was the reason she wanted to become an immigration lawyer. She explained the difficulties he encountered when he moved here from another country. She wanted "to help people get here." She mentioned the help and support she has received from her step-dad when studying Spanish.



Cecilia was in the sixth grade. She moved in with her sister. Other than saying her mom and dad “really didn’t get along well” when she was younger and that she “moved around a lot” because she was “switching” between the two of them, she did not speak of her father. She said when she left her mom’s home, “there were reasons why I had to move.” She later made a comment about her mom starting school to become a nurse, but said, “She hasn’t become very successful in it. . . . She wasn’t encouraging herself enough to become more successful in life.”

Jacy lived with her mom and four siblings. She did not mention her father during the interview. She said her mom was often very tired from working and taking care of her younger siblings. She liked helping her mom care for her brothers and the baby when her mom had to work. She said her mom was “always tired, so I help her out with the baby and stuff.” She spoke about the support she has received from her older sister and her friends.

Yepa lived with her mother. Her parents separated when she was about six. She described this as a very difficult time. In fact, when she spoke about it, she cried. Her biological father lived in another town, and she did get to visit him once in a while. She was the second oldest of five children and said her older sister has been “like a best friend.” She did share a conversation she and her mom had about choosing to hang around friends that are positive.

Tatiana described the most difficult decision she had to face as “having to choose who I wanted to live with between my mom and my dad.” Tatiana lived with her dad. She said if she was with her mom, “I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be anywhere. . . . She has no support for me. Well, she says she does, but she doesn’t show it.”

Tatiana said her dad “has a lot of support for me. He shows that in every single way. He, like every time I do something little, he says, he’s happy for me, or he’s proud of me.” She expressed a desire to keep her dad happy. She shared that her dad gave up his addiction for her.

Tatiana said when she is having a tough situation:

I usually go to my dad. . . . My dad has always been there for me and like he gave up his addiction for me because he’s an alcoholic and so is my mom. But, he figured he might as well sober up for me, somebody needed to take care of me, so he’s sober and I can talk to him about anything. He doesn’t judge me.

Dyani lived with her mom. Her mom and step-dad divorced when she was in seventh grade. She communicated how difficult this was for her and her two younger half-sisters. She said, “I just wanted them to be together, but there was just problems between them. . . . It’s not like I, like, really had a say in if they get a divorce.” She did not mention her biological father in the interviews. She said her family members talk to her about needing to “make good decisions, and like, I shouldn’t get involved in bad stuff because I could get out of sports . . . and sports are a huge thing for me.” She said, “Yeah, my family really supports me, like encourages me.”

Willow’s parents did not live together, and I gathered from the interview that it had been that way for some time. It was never clear if her biological parents were ever married. Willow described life with her mother as “really bad.” She shared that she was in and out of her mother’s care and custody repeatedly, depending on her mother’s level of drinking and her mother’s ability to care for her children. Willow lived with extended family members for a time, her Dad for a while, was “in the foster

care system” and had many “failed” foster care placements in between living with her mother. She was elated to be adopted at age eleven by a single parent. She referred to her adoption as a “turning point.”

Willow’s biological mom was an alcoholic as far back as she could remember. Willow shared that her mom got pregnant at about sixteen years of age, and she had “like a total of six kids.” She reported her “dad had favorites” and had biological children he “didn’t pick . . . to favor” and didn’t “claim.” She said she was one of two siblings “he claimed.” Willow said, “He didn’t accept [some of her siblings], so it just didn’t feel right” to live with him.

#### *Perception That Parents Do Not Care*

None of the students in this study lived in the same household with both of their biological parents. They lived in single parent homes, in homes with a biological parent and a step-parent, with a sister, or with an adoptive parent. While each of the students had supportive people in their lives, they were all experiencing some kind of separation with one or both of their biological parents.

Ayianna did not spend much time talking about either of her parents in the interviews.

At the time of this study, Bethany did not talk to her biological dad but shared various levels of support she has received from her mom and step-dad.

Cecilia had lived with her sister since she was in sixth grade. She spoke very little of either of her parents. She did share that her sister wanted to be a social worker “so she could be more aware of what’s going on with me and my brother’s situation with my mom.”

Jacy lived with her mom and four siblings. She did not mention her father during the interview.

Yepa lived with her mother. Her biological father lived in another town and she did get to visit him once in a while. She was the second oldest of five children.

Tatiana said if she was with her mom, “I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be anywhere. . . . She has no support for me. Well, she says she does, but she doesn’t show it.”

Dyani mentioned receiving a great deal of support from her family. This included her mom, step-dad, and grandma. She did not mention her biological father.

Willow shared that her mom would spend a lot of time sleeping at home. It became apparent throughout the interview that rather than sleeping, it was more likely her mother was intoxicated and passed out. Willow also disclosed that she and her siblings were often left alone for days or weeks at a time. In her words:

There were some weekends where she was gone, she’d leave on Friday nights and sometimes she would not be back until. . . . One time, she was gone for a full week. We didn’t know where she was . . . nothing. So, my older brother had to take care of us when she was gone. . . . It was . . . us against the world . . . and I think that’s where it starts . . . where [we thought] everyone was judging us.

Willow said her sisters would repeatedly say, “It’s us and the white girls.” She mentioned her sisters felt they were different and weren’t even going to try. She said, “I don’t immediately single myself out . . .” She said it wouldn’t have been so bad,

If at home I felt, you know, how they say at school you're different, but then at home you just feel like you fit in? Well, I didn't feel like I fit in there either . . . like it felt like we were all just kind of thrown together. . . . I felt always out of place.

Willow expressed, "all my life they've kind've singled me out because I was the only one in my family that read a lot, and I liked school."

Willow explained:

I was really resentful because my biological mom . . . she didn't like me, like, honestly, I would swear to God, there was not one time where she hugged me. I don't remember one time where she hugged me or kissed me or told me that she loved me actually. . . . I couldn't figure out for the longest time 'cause she was always hugging my sisters, and she treated my two older sisters like they were best friends. She told them everything, and they, those three, they were so close, and I was wondering, was I singled out? . . . and why she couldn't talk to me? Of course, they were older, and yeah, she could talk to them, but I, it just like honestly. I felt like she hated me. . . .

Before her adoption, Willow also expressed feeling isolated at school, even though she liked school. She said, "I didn't have that much friends, either, because I was different. . . . It showed through my clothing. I wasn't rich. . . . I just wasn't the typical kid, basically." She said the girls in school "wouldn't talk to me . . . that was the one question in my head, why?" She shared that she would look at their clothes, and then she would look at her clothes; she would look at their families, "and immediately, I'd look at their mothers. I'd always look at how their mothers were, like

they'd come and pick them up from school, and I was, just like you know, I want that, I always said that.”

Willow said,

There was just something in the back of my mind, telling me that this isn't normal, that it could be better. . . . I'd look at my life, where I had this mom, who really didn't know if she loved her kids . . . . Why did she choose that life for her kids?

Willow ended our first interview session together with powerful quote. She said, “It wasn't only the life she chose for herself, but the life she chose for her kids.”

Willow reported her “dad had favorites” and had biological children he “didn't pick . . . to favor” and didn't “claim.” She said she was one of two siblings “he claimed.” Willow said, “He didn't accept [some of her siblings], so it just didn't feel right” to live with him.

While two of the students were very open in their interview about feeling they had a parent or even two parents that didn't care about them, other students only hinted at this as a possibility. The remaining students didn't indicate they had any thoughts about a parent not caring.

### *Siblings*

During this study, Ayianna had two younger brothers. She did not speak about them in the interviews.

Bethany only mentioned a step-brother briefly in one of the interviews. She shared how difficult it was for her step-dad and his son to become residents of the U.S.

Cecilia moved to another town to live with her sister when she was a sixth grader. She said, “It was kind’ve beneficial because there were reasons why I had to move, and. . . . My sister felt it was more better if I came to live up here.”

It was evident that Cecilia held her sister in high regard. She shared:

My sister . . . she was a teen mom, so her daughters go to school at ---  
. . . She actually did something good ’cause she took me and my little brother in, even though she already has two kids, and she goes to college . . . and she’s going for criminal justice. . . . She wants to be a social worker, so that way she could be more aware of what’s going on with me and my brother’s situation with my mom.

Jacy initially said, “I talk to my sister about problems. My sister usually talks to me, too; and it’s like, a little relationship, we understand each other. We don’t tell anybody else ’cause we keep a lot of each other’s secrets and stuff, like, problems and stuff.” Later in the interview, she contradicted these comments and said, “I like my sister, but she really don’t like me most of the time. I’m pretty annoying.”

Yepa shared that her older sister was “like a best friend to me.” She recalled a few memories that involved her sisters. One time, Yepa took her younger sister to a neighbor’s house for help when she broke her arm while jumping on a trampoline. She pulled her sister to the neighbor’s in a wagon. Yepa reported feeling really good about being able to help her little sister. Another incident involved her older sister. She was able to get a man to help her sister when she got her foot stuck on the railroad track. She said one of her greatest strengths at home is “helping out around the house . . . with my five siblings.”

Tatiana shared that she had eight brothers and sisters, but she only knew two of them. She also said she had two half-sisters. She did not speak about them in the interviews.

Dyani had two younger half-sisters. She talked about her role in consoling them when her mom and step-dad got divorced.

Willow referred to her siblings many times throughout the interviews. She shared how her older brother took on the fatherly figure in the home (when they were living with their mother) and was responsible for cooking supper, helping with the baths, and ensuring the kids had their homework completed. She shared how he used to read to her when she was younger which served as an inspiration for her and increased her desire to read.

Willow also spoke with high regard for her younger brother. She had a strong desire to serve as a positive role model for him. She and her younger brother were both adopted by the same woman. She said one day her younger brother made her cry when he told her that “he looked up to [her].” She said she “always wanted that. I’ve never had any one look up to me before.” She also shared:

. . . like I can talk to my brother sometimes. . . . He’s not, like, the most wise advice giver, but I like that he’s willing to listen . . . and sometimes when you talk, you don’t always want to get feedback, you just want someone you can talk to about it, and when I’m in that situation, I go to him.

When Willow spoke of her two older sisters, she conveyed that they went down the wrong path. She referred to the two older sisters as being “best friends.” They had difficulty with foster places because they broke “the rules.” She did not see



them very often, but when she did see them, she said it was more like visiting with people at a family reunion.

### *Adoptive Parent*

Willow was adopted at eleven years of age. She was a fifth grader at the time. She shared how excited she was about the upcoming adoption. She was so proud to have a new last name. So much so, that she started signing her name, with the last name she would receive after her adoption, for three weeks prior to the adoption. She said:

I felt when I said my name, it wasn't a last name they would immediately recognize because they saw my mom's name in the paper for something bad, you know. It was a name that I could have that I felt proud, and they took me into their family, and they treated me like I was just their own you know, like I had been there all of my life. That was something I was searching for all along. I found it. . . .

Her adoptive mother has been a very "influential person in [her] life." Willow elaborated on the close relationship that existed between the two of them. She shared, "Me and my mom have a lot in common. We read the same type of books. . . . We get along really well because we both love art, and we both love books."

Willow relayed information about her adoptive mom in this manner:

She is a different person. She is very accepting of everything and everyone.

She is not really a judgmental person. . . . She's just not the average person. . . .

She likes being different from everyone else and that has always been

something that I really admire about her. . . . Sometimes, we spend Saturdays

at Hobby Lobby or we go to Best Buy and we get CDs to listen to in the car, and we just drive around.

Willow stated with assurance, “My [adopted] mom now, she . . . she stays away from alcohol. She never . . . I’ve never seen her drink at all, and I see that there’s a certain bond that you can form with someone, ’cause when you’re drinking all the time, you can’t have relationships. You can’t have hardly anything.” Willow’s adopted mother shared a love for reading and for listening to “Indy Rock.” She regularly has told Cecilia that she “can be someone.”

#### *Foster Care and Community Agencies*

Willow and Tatiana were the only two study participants associated with foster care or with a community agency placement such as Day Treatment. Willow was placed with many different foster care families during her childhood. At age twelve, she was adopted by one of her foster parents and remains in her adoptive mother’s care and custody. In Tatiana’s case, she described a connection she had with a teacher at Day Treatment that indicated she felt a great deal of support, much like the support an extended family often provides. For these reasons, the subheading of *Foster Care and Community Agencies* was placed under the broader heading of *Family*.

When speaking about relationships with staff from the Day Treatment Center, Tatiana made comments such as, “Oh, I loved him!” She went on to say she had him for a teacher several years ago, when she was an elementary-aged student. She said, “I guess we’ve just always been close . . . like I can always talk to him about stuff.” She described their relationship in this manner:

He's not like a normal teacher, like he connects with you personally . . . like you can talk to him. If you need someone to talk to, he has, like, a sense of humor. You can joke with him. I don't know. I guess I have just always liked that about him. My dad likes him, too.

Tatiana felt bad when she was first admitted to Day Treatment and realized this teacher worked at the treatment center. She was concerned her placement at the center would disappoint the teacher. Tatiana expressed her concern by saying, “[I] thought he'd think I would, like, succeed.” She said, “He thought I'd be good, but here I am, in Day Treatment 'cause I got expelled.”

Willow spent several years in the “foster care system” going “from home to home.” She talked about how difficult it was when foster families could not take all of the siblings in their homes at once, which resulted in the siblings being split apart. She shared a vivid memory about having to “choose” between siblings as a sixth grader. Willow was asked to write a paper about a past experience. She said:

I couldn't find a way to get that pain out, and I was getting to that age where there was people experimenting with every kind of way to get that pain out, and I'm really glad I got that assignment in sixth grade. . . . Instead of drinking or making really destructive decisions . . . I was able to take a piece of paper and just write it all out. . . .

Willow's teacher had asked her to put her thoughts and emotions onto paper. Willow talked about the experience she chose to write about; and as Willow shared her story with me, she began to cry. Willow spoke of when she repeatedly asked to live with the same foster family as her younger brother. When much to her surprise,

her request was granted. She said she had “a mixture of emotions.” She was happy, yet when she saw the look in her sister’s eyes, Willow said, “In my sister’s eyes, there was something I will never forget because she didn’t know that I had asked to leave.”

Willow cried, and said:

The look in her eyes, like she knew I was already gone, and there was no way she could persuade me to stay. . . . So, I felt really bad because I knew immediately when she heard [that I was leaving], she knew I had chosen my younger brother over her.

Willow disclosed that she felt like she had to make a choice between two of her siblings. She said this choice was necessary because of the foster care living arrangements. She and her siblings were split between several foster care homes.

Willow discussed a number of failed placements because of her older sisters fighting and arguing. She spoke of the importance of playing “by the rules.” She described how she and her younger brother played by the rules.

If the foster care system told us . . . “Don’t do this. Don’t do that.” We wanted to stick with that because being in a home felt like it was a reward, you know, because if you stick with the rules, you get put with a good family.

She shared that one of her older sisters “pushed those rules a lot,” and then, she was put in a “group home.”

### *Stability vs. Mobility*

While Ayianna has always lived in the same city, she reported attending at least four different schools from pre-kindergarten to Grade 6. At the time of our visit, she was a ninth grader and had attended the same middle school all three years.

Bethany struggled a bit when trying to recall the number of schools she had attended. She recollected:

I went to preschool; and then, I think, I don't remember. We lived here for like, until I was seven, maybe. I don't even remember, and I went to school. I don't remember where I went to school then, and then we went to [state's name], and we moved around a lot, and I went to a bunch of different schools. Yeah, and then we moved back, and I was jumping around from like [school's name] in [city's name] to, and then I came to [school's name] and I stayed there for only fourth through sixth grade. And then after that, I came here, and I haven't moved since. . . . I actually like it a lot staying in one place.

She said moving around a lot was hard. "For friends, it was hard; and for school, I guess it was hard too, because in different schools, they are in different places, and it was harder to like catch on." She also described a time when she "was getting, like, Fs, because [she] had no idea what they were doing."

When Cecilia was asked if she could change one thing about her school experience, she said, "First, I would make a law that you couldn't change schools more than once a year." Cecilia then explained she moved multiple times and gave a few examples of some of her experiences:

And then I went to kindergarten. Well, I moved around a lot in [state's name], but there were, like, close by schools, but I always had to be switching 'cause my mom and dad really didn't get along well. So, I had to switch every time I had to move with either of them. Well, like every year I changed schools, except for in the seventh grade and fourth grade, I think it was, and I don't

know. It was a big transition for me every single time, and I met a lot of people, but I kind of wished I would have stayed in one school. So that way, I wouldn't have been so, hmm, like some things I don't know, and some things I know about. So every time, they are like little things, too; and like they don't really take a big effect on my school learning, but I wished that I wouldn't have had to move. That way, I could have stayed on track instead of just kind of popping around to different schools and learning different things, yeah.

It was apparent Cecilia struggled to track her movement from school to school as later in the interview process she commented, "Well in fourth grade, I came up here for a month, and then I moved back down, and when I came here again, the teachers that I had here in fourth grade . . . remembered me." She shared that because teachers recognized her, it made the moving back and forth a bit easier. This statement was inconsistent with the comment noted in the paragraph above that quoted her saying, "Well, like every year I changed schools, except for in the seventh grade and fourth grade, I think it was, and I don't know."

Cecilia shared that one of the most difficult situations she has faced was dealing with all of the moving and the transitions from school to school. She said, with a great deal of sincerity:

It was kind of hard because I didn't know what to do when I sat down in that desk, and everyone was learning something new, and then I just had to go along with it, and then gradually, I learned about the whole thing, and then if I went back to the same school again, then they would be learning about the same thing I learned from before, and yeah. It just, like, would drive me crazy,

how I didn't know what we were learning every time I went to a different school.

Cecilia disclosed, "There were reasons why I had to move and . . . my sister felt it was more better if I came to live up here." Her biological mother lived in another state at the time of this study. She also shared that her little brother came to live with her and her sister last year. She shared she has tried to keep the problems she has at home, at home, and has tried "not to bring it to school . . . 'cause . . . it will just make [her] day worse."

Jacy lived in several different places and attended a number of schools, including a boarding school. In her words:

My mom was telling me about the boarding school, but I was only in kindergarten. . . . So, well, I thought it'd be fun, so I left. And then during the middle of my second year, my sister kept making fun of me. She kept telling me my mom was not gonna come get me. Mom's not coming back. So, I was crying, and I was calling mom, so she came to get me, and I was home, um, I went to --- Elementary. It's the second semester; then I went back in second grade, and I was there a full year, then I went back in third grade, and I was only there for half the year because my mom moved up here, and she didn't want me there by myself, 'cause my sister had my grandma. So, then we moved up here, and my mom was going to college out at ---. So, she just decided to put us all in school out at --- and then, well, when we were out at

---, my mom stopped going to school there. So we couldn't go to school there, 'cause you have to . . . your parents have to go to school for you to go to school. . . . So, then we started going to [a different school].

Yepa attended multiple schools. She reported on the litany of school moves she made from kindergarten to eighth grade. To recap a few, she said:

Uh, when I went to [city's name], I went here from kindergarten to first grade. Then I transferred to [city's name] in second grade, and I transferred back to [city's name] for third, and then I went back to [city's name] for fourth.

She said, "I had lots of friends, so whenever I moved, they'd be happy to see me again."

I did not get comprehensive information regarding the number of schools Tatiana attended. During the interviews, she said she had lived in the same town her "whole life." However, at one point she discussed the fact that when she was younger, she lived in another state with her mother. She said she attended preschool out-of-state on the "res." There is a gap in information. She shared that she went to Grade 6 in one elementary school and went to one middle school in seventh grade, switched schools for her eighth grade year; and then, she switched back to the middle school she attended as a seventh grader, and attended that same school as a ninth grader.

Dyani also lived in the same city her whole life. When I spoke with her, she lived with her mom and her two half-sisters. Her mom and her step-dad got divorced when she was a seventh grader. She did not mention her biological dad. She went to kindergarten and first grade at the same school then switched to another school for



second to sixth grades. She was a ninth grader and had been at the same middle school for Grades 7-9.

Prior to her adoption at age eleven, Willow said, “I was everywhere.” She mentioned living with her biological mom, with her biological dad, with her aunt, with a foster family that took her and three of her siblings in, with a foster family that took her and her two sisters in, and with a foster family that took her and her younger brother in . . . and then later adopted her and her younger brother.

There were too many placements to track. She had lived in more homes and foster placements than one can imagine.

Willow shared her experiences:

I was everywhere. I was . . . first, I lived with my real mom on [the] reservation. Things got really bad there. . . . We all got split up, like my two sisters. . . . They went with a relative . . . and then me and my brother got put with grandparents because they could only take the two younger ones. So they took me and [my younger brother], and we stayed with them about two years; and then finally, my mom started getting back on track. . . . We went back with her, and we were all back together again. . . . And then we lived together for probably only about two years, and they weren't really the best years. Like, it started out awesome. Like she was back on track; she had a job. I really thought things were going to get better, but then she started drinking again, and it just got bad again. So, when I was eight . . . we got put back into the foster care system, and then from there we just went from home to home. . . . There's only, I think, two homes all of us got to stay together, but it just got bad.

### *Encouragement*

Ayianna made the statement that her “parents want me to go to college; so yeah, I just got to get there.” She said, “They’ll be on me if I forget something . . . telling me to get it done.”

Bethany shared her goal for this semester was to get all As “because my parents are going to pay for all my car stuff.”

About her sister, Cecilia said she “encourages me to do my work and do the best I can. . . . If I don’t get something, [I] try my best to learn because there isn’t that many people around to help me out, and she thinks . . . I’m doing a good job because I, so far, have good grades.” She went on to say, “I like coming to school ’cause I get to learn something new every day and I get to go home and share it with my sister.”

Yepa shared that she does not do as well as she’d like in English and said, “I’ll go to my mom because my mom’s really good at it.” Yepa shared:

My mom, she’s been kind of strict lately about, like, me getting, like, me going to college and getting good grades. So like, she’s like . . . if I ask to go with someone, she’ll first want to know if I’ve done my homework and everything, and then I’ll have to say “yes,” and then she’ll . . . I’ll have to kind’ve show it to her to make sure.

When asked what motivates her, she said, “My mom . . . my dad motivates me a lot since I get to see him and everything.” She stated that her mom and her dad motivate her because they tell her “to keep going and don’t look back. . . . Keep moving forward.”

Tatiana says her dad “has a lot of support for me. He shows that in every single way. He, like, every time I do something little, he says, he’s happy for me, or he’s proud of me.” When she is having a tough situation, Tatiana said, “I usually go to my dad. . . . My dad has always been there for me.”

Dyani reported receiving a lot of support from her family members, especially her mom, grandma, and step-dad. She explained:

My mom and grandma and like everyone . . . they’re always . . . you gotta . . . go to practice, and you have to study and get good grades, and like, they always knew that I wanted to be a nurse or doctor, and my grandma is always like . . . “You need to study. You need to do your homework. You have to work hard if you wanna do good.”

She said her step-dad would also say, “You need to go to the gym. You need to go work out so you can get better.” This advice seemed to have paid off, as Dyani is on the A1 basketball team, which is reserved for the best athletes and considered an honor.

Willow said when she has a problem to deal with, she first turns to herself and will self-talk and say, “Like it’s gonna be okay.” She said, “You can’t always depend on other people believing in you. You have to believe in yourself, that you can do something.” Her adoptive mom and friends then serve as “the second reassuring voices that can tell [her] that everything’s gonna be fine; and you know, this is just one small step to reaching the top.” She disclosed that “I look to my [adoptive] mom actually a lot for that one, and I’m really lucky to have her. . . . She’s very inspirational. She’s great.”

## Category Two: School

Theme Two: The school's culture, climate, and staff both positively or negatively influenced the students' learning experiences. The students in the study shared many stories and characteristics of both effective teachers and less effective teachers.

The students openly discussed what they believed their teacher's view or perception has been of them as students. Many of the students also disclosed stories or personal experiences that occurred at the middle school level which proved to be very difficult. Each of the students shared advice or strategies to potentially help new students be more successful in school.

### *School Staff*

Some of the students shared incidents or situations which clearly indicated school staff members were supportive. Yet, in other cases, students felt school staff members were not supportive at all. At any rate, the mindset of a teacher appears to have made a difference in whether that teacher chose to be supportive or unsupportive.

Jacy did not share any information about any specific staff members at school.

Yepa said when she didn't understand the content in school, she would "go and ask a teacher; or if we have partners, then I'll get someone who does understand it, and they'll help me through it."

Tatiana was quick to point out she has not trusted school staff. She said, "I just don't trust any of them." She went on to say, "I don't really like talking to any of these teachers here." She also made a comment, "I don't get along with like a lot of the aides and stuff."

Willow also shared stories about support and encouragement she received from her first grade teacher, second grade teacher, sixth grade teacher, and her high school journalism teacher. She shared that her first grade teacher sensed something wasn't quite right at home, and "she'd always say, you know, is everything okay at home?" Willow would reply, "Everything was fine at home. . . . There's nothing wrong." Her teacher would say, "Well, let me know if you need anything." Willow said, "I never really went to her, 'cause I felt like it wasn't right to go to my teacher and say this is what is going on, because I felt like they couldn't do anything." Willow said her teacher would say, "I'm always here to help you." But, Willow "always felt like, you know, what could you do?"

Willow said she often wondered what her teacher would have been able to change, if she actually had known more about the home situation. Willow was reluctant to tell her teacher because she wanted to be viewed as someone who was really trying to keep her grades up and was embarrassed about the circumstances.

Willow said:

And that was always the first question in my mind, was, if I did tell you, I don't know if you'd be able to change it, and I didn't want them to see me differently. I wanted to be seen as, I am trying, because I was trying, and I really tried to keep my grades up when I was in school, to try really hard, and I didn't want to tell them . . . 'cause I was embarrassed, I think.

Willow also talked about one time the principal made a home visit because the children had missed so much school, and their mother wasn't returning the school's phone calls. Willow said her mom told the principal, "Oh, they're sick." Willow

expressed disappointment that the principal “took that right away,” and “He didn’t pursue it. He didn’t figure out what was wrong. . . . They kind’ve let it go.” She went on to say, “It might be normal for . . . Native American kids to be gone from school a lot, but I feel like sometimes more can be done.”

In first grade, Willow’s teacher would suggest books for her to read. She would say, “This book just came out, and I think you’d really like [it].” Willow said this caused her to start “reading and reading.” Willow would finish a series and the teacher would say, “Maybe you should move up a grade level, it won’t hurt if you start reading second grade.” It got to the point where she would check out two books from the school library to bring home, because “you can’t check out like more than two books.” Willow would also go to the public library “and check out books there, too . . . just in case [she’d] finish [the] books over the weekend.” It was her second grade teacher who suggested that she start reading “Harry Potter.”

Willow recalled a time when she wrote a story in sixth grade and was “scared” to have her teacher read it. The class was instructed to write a story about a past experience, “something really vivid in our memory, that we can take our thoughts and emotions, and put it onto paper.” Willow chose to write about a time when she and her siblings were living in different foster homes. She was with one of her older sisters, and her younger brother was with the family who later adopted him. Willow had requested several times to be able to move to the foster home with her younger brother, and a day came where that became a reality. However, Willow reported, it was not without difficulty. Willow said she felt like she was choosing her younger

brother over her older sister. She “felt really bad” because her sister was very hurt by this move. Willow said when she turned the writing assignment in to her teacher:

My hands were, seriously, just like shaking from remembering all that, and there were tears in my eyes when I handed it in, because that was the first time I ever thought about that day, that hard, and put it down on paper, and she read it, and she cried.

Willow said her journalism teacher was “the first teacher ever to say, ‘I believe in you, I know you can do this.’” Willow said about this teacher, “She’s always saying . . . ‘I better get your first signed copy if you ever publish a book.’”

Willow shared she “took choir like the whole three years [she] was in middle school, ’cause [she] really liked the choir teacher.” She said:

He was almost, like, the only teacher there who really . . . believed in the students. . . . He wasn’t a judgmental person. . . . He looked at someone, and he didn’t look at them right away and see their appearance, and like immediately say, “I know where you’ve been, and I know what kind of person you are.”

Immediately, he judged you on what kind of effort you put forth. . . . Like he, right away, put you and everyone on the same level, and he just basically let us work up to whatever level we want to be at. . . . He was the reason I stayed in choir.

Willow discussed feeling traumatized in middle school, especially in seventh grade. She said, “I just kind of felt alone; and the counselors, I think, helped me through it.”

*Effective, Caring Teachers*

Ayianna says, “I like the teachers . . . who know how to have fun in class, but still keep them under control.” She liked teachers who could joke around but keep the students interested. Willow believed it helps to have teachers who “like you” and teachers that students can “get along with” to be successful in school. She said some of the qualities of a successful teacher include leadership, the capacity to show they care for their students, the knack of being able to laugh with students, and the ability “to teach the right things and just get to the point, [and] don’t carry on for too long.” Ayianna said she didn’t “really like learning just straight from the book.” She liked it when teachers “make a project out of it or . . . play a game.” When she described the best teacher she ever had she said, “He was fun. . . . He knew how to make us laugh but would also keep us under control, and he knew exactly what we needed to learn and if we needed help, then he would go back and review it.” She went on to say, “He’s really understanding.”

Bethany thought teachers need to “be nice.” They should be willing to explain information to students in a way the students understand. She said, “They have to be willing to give extra help.”

As Cecilia recalled the many moves she made from school to school in her elementary years, she expressed appreciation for the way a teacher helped her transition into the classroom. She said the teacher created a welcoming environment. In her words, “It was fun, ’cause . . . the teacher said that everybody guesses that there was a new student coming . . . and yeah, I made a lot of friends when I first came.”



Cecilia said she likes teachers who “help you be more successful in their class without just letting you fail. . . . They . . . actually interact with you so that way you can learn in their class.” She gave a specific example of how her science teacher helped her learn by doing activities. She described the teacher in this way:

Like, in science class, I kind of studied for this test, and it didn’t work out so well, ’cause my notes were bad, and so I got a bad grade on my test, and so now, our science teacher is having us re-learn it, and so he’s doing activities with us, the ones who need help . . . more hands-on things, like he’s telling us and giving us notes.

Cecilia thought teachers should interact with their students to get to know them better. She believed teachers should want to have their students succeed and be there to help them and provide “extra help if the student needs it.”

Jacy said her favorite teacher is really funny. “He, like, messes around with us, and all the other teachers are serious.” She said, “He makes school fun.” She liked it when they “work with kids and explain stuff good, and at least try to have fun, instead of being serious all the time.”

When she thought of characteristics of her favorite teachers, Tatiana thought of “the teacher that’s like, you can actually talk to them, and you can like socialize with them and joke around with them.” She wanted to be able to “talk to them” and trust them. She described an “amazing teacher” and said what made that teacher “amazing” was “just being able to connect with the kids . . . and like see from their point of view, too, not just from the teacher’s point of view.” Tatiana emphasized the importance of

teachers connecting with kids. She said, “Just like communicating with them, like smiling, actually like recognizing them you know.”

Working in groups with friends was enjoyable for Dyani. She also liked it when teachers “joke around with the students.” She said it was more fun because it made the class laugh. She went on to say, “You’re still learning at the same time when they’re joking around. . . . It just makes the experience more fun when you’re learning.” She appreciated teachers who have been friendly, caring, loving, and who made a person feel comfortable.

Willow said, “I really like the teachers that . . . take the time to look at how each student learns, and what level they’re at, and how they can take the time for each student when they’re teaching.” She went into great detail to describe the best teacher she has ever had. She said this teacher had been:

Energetic and, uh, weird. . . . She’s really quirky. . . . She kind of speaks what’s on her mind. . . . I love her energy. . . . She came to school sick one day, and the day before that she was really sick and out, and she didn’t feel up to getting to school at all. But when she got there, you would have never guessed that she didn’t want to be there. She was just happy and saying, “I missed you guys all so much,” and then, she kind of went on with the lesson and . . . you wouldn’t ever guess that she didn’t want to be there. . . . You can get from the teachers, like, uh, they’re saying, we have to be here, I’m just telling you how it is, do your homework . . . but, she just, you know, “I missed you guys,” and she kind of treated us like family almost, like friends, and I like that she does that.

Willow revealed that she “learned some of my morals in school from teachers that I really looked up to.” She said she learned more than academics in school. She learned “the values of the teachers.” She shared, “I don’t know what I would have done without school honestly.”

### *Ineffective Teachers and Approaches*

Ayianna did not like it when teachers “just keep reading over and over really boring.” She said some of the teachers “don’t know how to . . . control our classes.” She thought it was “kinda hard to learn when they’re stopping and yelling at someone to pay attention. . . . They just freak out and start yelling.” She suggested, “It would be easier just to send them [misbehaving students] to the office or out in the hall, not giving them chances over and over.” When we discussed what she disliked about school, she said, “some of the teachers.” She went on to say, “Some of ’em are just really crabby, and they’re not really all too nice.” She shared an example. She said,

It’s kind of hard in algebra. She’s kinda mean. When I ask a question, she comes over, and she’s kind of snotty, and she kinda expects us to get it when we have it down in our notes, but I don’t get the notes sometimes, and she kinda thinks that’s all we need to know is the notes, and we’ll know everything.

Ayianna thought “if she was a little nicer and could explain a little more” that would have helped.

Tatiana made it clear she did not trust any of the school personnel. She wanted to “go back to Day Treatment. I actually really liked it there.” She liked that there were fewer students and more teachers in Day Treatment. This meant she didn’t have

to wait when she needed help. At her current middle school, she is in classes with people she does not “like at all.” She said, “my parole officer even told me I couldn’t go back [to Day Treatment], so, I guess I was kind’ve bummed about that.”

She reported feeling like the school was setting her up to fail by placing her in Algebra I. She believed she should have been placed in the Introduction to Algebra class. She expressed frustration and said, “The teacher, his methods, I don’t really get. . . . I just give up.”

Tatiana described specific frustrations she has had with the way her Algebra I math course is instructed:

It’s just like a, in math, the math we’re studying, he gives you like a first step, then he gives you a second step, and then you need to use the first step to follow that step, like you need to know all of the steps, and I don’t know like any of them, so how am I supposed to do it when I don’t know any of the steps? It gets me mad a lot!

She went on to say she was not passing Algebra I. She said, “I knew exactly what we were doing in [the Intro. to Algebra course], but now, I have no idea what we’re doing so . . .”

She also described what appeared to be a situation of her math teacher having low expectations of her. She said she and another guy in the classroom have been called upon by the teacher, he has walked around looking at their homework assignments and said something like, “I’m guessing you didn’t do yours,” and she has just replied, “Yeah, so.” At times, when she has completed her assignment, the teacher

has said, “Oh, I’m surprised.” Tatiana’s comment to me, as the interviewer, was “like, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Even though morning and after-school tutoring were available, her response to those options was, “that’s just not what I do.” Tatiana mentioned she had tried to “get out of school as soon as possible.” She said, “I’m failing it.” She was well aware that she needed “to get that credit to move on.” She said:

Yeah, my friends helped me a lot, and I am in STARS too, and that helps me a lot with math, so I don’t know, I guess I’m just trying to make the best of it, but I thought schools were supposed to help you, not set you up for failure.

For Tatiana, when “Teachers . . . are just like, ‘Do this and this,’ like that just gets boring.” She said, “Don’t just like . . . ‘I’m the teacher, you’re the student. . . . I give you work, you do it.’ Just, like, connect with them, and actually talk with them, and if they’re having problems . . . actually sit down and help them.” She also believed there was too much homework and verbalized, “We have lives outside of school. . . . Our life does not just revolve around that. . . . There’s just too much homework.”

Tatiana would like at least one teacher to loosen up. She declared:

Some of the teachers, I can tell that they go after certain students. . . . They watch after them, stuff like that. . . . I just wish the teachers were more laid back. They’re always mad. . . . They always seem not happy . . . like that they hate their jobs. . . . I kinda feel bad for them.

Dyani thought it was “kind of hard to pay attention [to what a teacher is saying] at the same time and get everything down.” She went on to say:

Some teachers . . . have you write it down, and then they'll . . . go into more detail about it and that . . . helps a lot. But then some teachers, they'll just . . . quickly explain it, and it's hard to, like, try to write and try to, like, get what they are saying at the same time.

Willow shared she:

. . . didn't like that when in middle school, they kind of looked at you like you're the student, and I'm the teacher. I'm right and this is . . . how it's gonna be. . . . I really don't like when someone . . . look[s] at me like a kid, like I don't know anything, like I wouldn't know anything.

She said in middle school, many of the teachers appeared to have low expectations of the students. She said teachers would give homework and say things like, "a majority of you won't hand it in" or "I know a lot of you guys aren't gonna get this done, but I'm gonna assign it anyway," and Willow thought, "It's like setting you up for failure." Willow said,

I felt like they were really downgrading us, like they really didn't think much of us . . . saying like, "Well, you're gonna fail, but I'm just gonna push you on to the next grade," and like basically saying, "You don't have to put an effort forth because I basically expect it of you, to not try at all."

Willow reported struggling with asking teachers questions in school. She said, "Sometimes they explain it in a way, where, after they've explained it, I still don't understand it. I'm like, I really don't get it." She went on to say:

I definitely know that some of them get irritated . . . when I say I still don't understand, and it's almost like they're saying, "You know, duh, it's like right

in front of you,” and then, they kind of make me feel stupid, but, um then, sometimes I feel like I’m forced to say, “Yeah, I get it now,” but I don’t, and um, it’s kind of become a thing where if I feel too stupid to ask about something, maybe I should just sit and try to figure it out. . . . In math . . . sometimes, I feel like he gets really irritated, and you know, we’ve been through this, and I explained it to you in class, and you still don’t get it. I just feel like something isn’t really clicking upstairs.

Willow discussed some of the difficulties she experienced regarding homework completion. She felt it was “important not to completely . . . have the student drowning.” She shared when she would get a “huge” school-related project to complete:

It was almost like the light bulb would burn out above me. It was like, “How am I gonna do a project at home now,” because I know some kids definitely can’t do projects at home, like it’s hard because . . . the environment. I would definitely stay after school sometimes and do my project after school because I knew I would not get it done if I took it home.

She went on to say:

The kids . . . struggling academically . . . you [need to] look at . . . what kind of environment are they in; and sometimes, it’s not always their fault. . . . They could have younger siblings to take care of. I know my older brother . . . struggled really bad in school because he couldn’t get anything done. Like immediately when he came home, my mom kind of looked at him as the . . . father figure, you know. Your younger siblings need to be fed. You need to get

them ready for bed, and make sure they get all their homework done, on top of all the stuff he had at school. . . . I kind of feel sympathy for the kids here, who you know, they say, “Well, I was babysitting” or “I had to help my mom out” because they have single parents, and I feel sympathy for them. But, I do not feel sympathy at all, for the kids that don’t take advantage of the education that they are getting now because it’s definitely important. . . . They say that getting your high school diploma is nothing. But really, it’s everything because without that, where can you go from there?

Willow conveyed that her older brother was often embarrassed about the inability to complete school-related projects, and he “tried not to make excuses about his work.” She said, he would just tell his teacher “it’s not done.” This made it difficult for him to go to school. She shared:

We didn’t have a car, either, so he really couldn’t get to places he was supposed to, either, for his projects, and it’s just, he really didn’t have the things he needed for his projects either, but he was too embarrassed to say anything like, “I don’t have a car” or “I don’t have the materials to do this.”

When talking about needing specific supplies, Willow shared, “We’d get free school supplies from Indian Education, but . . . they’d give us the basic stuff . . . but when we’d go to school . . . they’d say well you need more, there’s still things you don’t have.” She reported, “Sometimes, we’d just have to go without.” She said some teachers would offer to borrow them supplies that they would need to return. She said teachers seemed “conscious about sending the stuff home . . . because . . . it didn’t always come back.”



Not having a television was frustrating for Willow, especially when the teachers would say, “Go home and watch the news and bring back a little report on something you learned on the news.” Sometimes, her brother would go to the library to find a current event, but it “didn’t seem like it was enough.” She recalled times when her siblings had to do “a research paper or something that needed to be typed.” They would go to the library “but then they’d have us pay money for everything we printed out and . . . we couldn’t really do that either.”

Willow explained that her brother had a lot of stress and pressure between home and school and that even though “he liked school a lot,” he developed an attitude as he got older of “what’s the point in trying in school anymore because I don’t see it going anywhere anyways.” She shared that he ended up being “put on medication . . . because he would get really depressed at times.” She said, “He knew he had to be a good role model to us, so he tried to get up and keep going” but did eventually drop out of high school.

#### *Students’ Perceptions of Their Teachers’ Views of Them*

If I asked different teachers to describe her, Ayianna said her teachers would say she is “quiet” and “listens.”

When asked how she thought her teachers would describe her, Jacy said, “that I . . . work good, but I don’t really pay attention that much because . . . I have a short attention span.” She elaborated and said if I were to ask her English teacher:

I don’t really think he likes me very much ’cause I don’t really like doing anything in there ’cause . . . even if I try to do my work good . . . and I try to do

my best . . . I always get a bad grade on them anyways, so I get mad. . . . He always says . . . my organization and stuff is bad, but I don't know how.

Jacy openly shared examples of factors she believed contributed to people's perceptions of her in school by saying she was, "always in trouble and stuff" in Grades 5 and 6. She elaborated,

Me and my brother have ADHD, so I can't sit still and stuff. Sometimes, we'd get in trouble. . . . I'd always get sent to the principal's office and . . . girls started rumors and stuff about me. . . . They'd start saying that I beat up this one chick, so I got cited, and I got put on probation and stuff.

Tatiana thought "they'd probably all give you different answers." She said the Algebra I math teacher at her current middle school would describe her as "annoying and loud . . . disruptive, [and would say] I don't do my work." In other classes, she said, "I'm really quiet." She went on to say she and her science teacher "don't get along because there was some racial thing going on." She said:

I was partners with this white girl, and he told her she should pick a partner that won't get her in trouble, that would help her with her work, and I was doing a lot of the work, like, what's that about? Whatever, you know, so I don't really get along with him, but I'm really good in that class.

Tatiana said, "If I don't like something or someone said something annoying, I'll say it in class, I'll be like, 'Stop,' you know, but in some classes, I'm really quiet." She believed the teacher she had in Day Treatment would say, "I have a good sense of humor, and I'm social. I like talking, stuff like that."

Dyani believed if her teachers were asked to describe her, they would say she was quiet in class, a good student, and she pays attention and gets her work done. She said, “They would probably say she’s a really good student and she’s doing really good. . . . She has a few weaknesses, but she’ll improve on them.”

### *Middle School Drama*

Ayianna said, “There’s, like, a lot of bullying going on” at her middle school. She shared that it has not been happening directly to her, but she sees it. She said it happens when staff members are “not around.” She has witnessed people “saying something or trip[ping] another person.”

Bethany described the “middle school drama” as making it difficult for her to concentrate or pay attention in class. She said, “There was a bunch of drama. . . . I was called down to the office a bunch of times. . . . If I could have changed that, I would have gotten better grades because I would have been in class more to pay attention.” She wished teachers would have called her down during class periods she was doing well in, or during class times where the subject matter was less demanding, such as choir, so she would not have missed instruction to deal with the drama.

Bethany said after getting called down to the office, it was hard to concentrate in class. She said, “In class, you’ll be sitting there, thinking about it and can’t pay attention. Least, that’s what happened to me during last semester.”

If she could change one thing about her school experience, Jacy said it would be:

All the fighting through my school years, like, I fight with a lot of girls . . . and I don’t know why. I think it may be because I hang out with . . . a lot of boys.

. . . I don't really hang out with girls, and like, get along more with boys. . . .

So . . . girls . . . are always mad because I talk to . . . their boyfriends.

She said girls always wanted to fight with her. They called her names and talked about her behind her back.

Tatiana said, "In middle school, there's like a lot of drama, like using, just everything." Tatiana shared she had been expelled for "getting in fights with girls" and being "mouthy with teachers, but that's just 'cause I was drinking and stuff." She said she would "get mad at girls and . . . yell at them," but she doesn't "like go up to them and try to fight them [anymore]." She thought the actual fights were a result of her drinking alcohol. She said, "I was just like a ticking time bomb, like, I would snap at everyone, if like someone looked at me wrong, I would try to fight them." She added, "I was a total bitch when I was drinking." She said, "Like when you drink, you have that I don't care attitude." When she was in eighth grade, she received citations for disorderly conduct and simple assaults. She was on probation at the time of our visits. She completed substance abuse treatment the week before our first interview and started an aftercare program. Since she has been refraining from alcohol use, she reported the urge to physically fight has diminished.

Tatiana described the cliques she believed existed in her middle school. She said:

Well, there's like the preps, and then there's like the potheads, the alcoholics, the kids who really don't care, the kids that are, you know, like nerds. As soon as they're done with school, they go home and play games or read or

something; and then, yeah, the preps, like I said, the jocks . . . and the slutty ones.

She admitted she wasn't in the "best group" and that her "friends don't make the best decisions."

One of the things she disliked about middle school was:

How they always have . . . those drug prevention things. . . . I just think that is nonsense. . . . We just laugh at that. . . . They should have it for kids who want to hear about it, because kids that are already smoking weed and stuff . . . don't care. Like, I know I don't.

Tatiana went on to say, "That doesn't help any . . . that probably just makes us want to go out and use."

Willow revealed that middle school was "full of drama." She elaborated by saying, "There'd be rumors about people and girls spreading gossip, and all this stuff. And, I'm here trying to study, and there's someone next to me, and I hear my name and all these things, and it was hurtful. . . . To be honest, I cried." She said, "The girls were seriously vicious." She went on to say, "I hated being a seventh grader at that school. . . . I felt, if you're a seventh grader, you're definitely way at the bottom . . . like you're trapped, there's no way you can ever work yourself to the top." She said it "was almost a crushing point, because it was worse than I ever imagined." She shared a time when rumors were being spread around about her being pregnant and how difficult it was to deal with that situation. She said, "It just hurt. . . . I couldn't understand why it hurt so much when it was just a rumor, and I knew it wasn't true.

. . . It was just the idea that people were believing it. . . . Guys were saying just really obscene things in gym class.” Willow said the change from elementary school to middle school “was a really big, drastic change. . . . It wasn’t what I expected at all. It was a really harsh blow. . . . I just kind of felt alone.”

*Advice/Strategies to be Successful in School*

If Jacy were talking to another student about to start school at the middle school she has attended, Jacy would give him/her the following advice “Have good grades. . . . Do your homework whenever it needs to be turned in. . . . Study for tests and stuff. . . . You have to listen to the teachers and behave and . . . be respectful.”

Tatiana believed it important not to let the “negative people or teachers . . . keep [you] from . . . doing what . . . you want in school. . . . Just ’cause a teacher makes you mad in a certain class, doesn’t mean you have to fail his class. . . . That’s not doing anything good for you.” She said, “Every time I think about dropping out and school gets hard, like when a teacher makes me mad, like, just ’cause the teacher made me mad, I’m not gonna drop out and ruin my future.”

She went on to say, “Just stay on the good teacher’s side, don’t get in trouble, ’cause once you’re in trouble, well the teachers, like look at you, and watch you, ’cause . . . they do that to me.” I asked a follow up question about her feeling “watched” and she said, “You’re gonna watch a kid that gets in trouble more than a kid that doesn’t.” She advised students to “watch who you hang out with,” be on time for school, and not to skip out of classes. She said, “middle school is way more harder [than elementary school].”

Dyani's advice for other students was to do their homework and take good notes in all of their classes. She would encourage others to always do their work, and be prepared for quizzes. Dyani also said she was "hanging around good people."

When asked what she thought it takes to be successful in school, Yepa's response was,

First of all, you have friends, and then you can't hang around bad people, or they'll, like, make you do bad things, and you won't do good in school, so you gotta be positive and hang around good friends, and you'll make it through school.

Willow believed success in school can be achieved by "working hard." She said, "It's not about being better [than someone else]. It's about being your best." Willow shared how as a little girl she saw herself as "two completely different people." She said the people at school saw her differently than the people at home saw her. She said she "had no choice but to balance it." She described herself as balancing her life between "school mode" and life as it was at home. She said she had to learn to "focus." Sometimes, when she was at school, she'd start thinking about home, and it was a "downer." She said her mind, "would wander off and think about, 'Well, I'm gonna be walking home alone today, and I'm gonna be going home to, like what is my mom doing today? Is she home today? . . . What is my brother up to?'" She said this worried her because when she was in first grade, and her younger brother was in preschool, he was at home most of the time. She frequently wondered, "Is he okay? Is he at home? Who's watching him . . . ? What if mom isn't home?" She had to learn a coping strategy of switching to "school mode" so she could "focus on what was in

front of her” in order to keep her grades up. She said “school mode” meant “focus on what’s around you and not focus on where you were at home.” She said, “Being in school mode is like looking at your surroundings and saying, um, I’m here now and I’m not at home anymore and this is the place where I can get things accomplished that I want to get accomplished.” She said the ability to switch “modes” took a “lot of training” and she referred to it as similar to learning a new language. In her words:

You see it as impossible at first, but after you get the hang of it, it just comes easy, and you don’t even realize you are doing it. . . . It just kind of flows. Like you get to school, and you don’t realize you’ve even switched, and you’re not thinking about home until. . . . It’s almost like an on and off switch. . . . I just flicked the switch, and say, almost like a light turned on, because I would see what’s around me, I wouldn’t be in the dark, and just sit there dwelling about what I had to go home to. . . . It was just kind of flick the switch, see what’s around me, see what I have to do, this is what needs to be done, and then. . . . It was really disappointing, at the end of the day, after school was done, and I’d have to flick that switch and be kind of plunged into the darkness.

Willow’s use of the coping strategy to switch from “school mode” to “home mode” reminded me of Stephen Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey (1989) wrote about how effective people focus on what they can control. Brooks and Goldstein (2004) added to this belief by saying:

If there is a situation you do not like, you must assume responsibility to change the situation, regardless of its roots. This stance is not one of blame, but rather



one that empowers. Having control over one's life appears to be a basic drive for all human beings. (p. 9)

Willow also appeared to believe there was real benefit to participating in extra-curricular activities. She said, "When you join clubs that you're interested in or if you just get involved in your school. . . . The more you belong, and the more they accept you for who you are . . ."

### Category Three: Students

Theme Three: Students in this study possessed several characteristics and supports (friends) appearing to have an effect on their ability to counteract stressors and maintain a sense of resiliency.

#### *Accomplishments, Goals, and Aspirations*

Ayianna received an award for reading over 350 books in a year. She wanted to finish high school and go to college. She also said she had a goal of being able "to get to Japan."

Bethany had a goal of attending law school and becoming an immigration lawyer. She did not want to end up "like a drop-out." Her step-dad's experience when immigrating to the United States from Mexico served as a catalyst for her desire to assist other immigrants when she became a lawyer.

Keeping her grades high so she could get into a good college was important to Cecilia. Cecilia wanted to be able to say she "had good grades in school, all through [her] years in school, and, just to be able to say that [she] . . . graduated." She was interested in being involved with criminal justice or being a police officer.

Jacy said she got her grades back up “by turning [her] work in” and that’s what she wanted to do ’cause she “missed a bunch of school.” She wants to be a pediatrician or a cop (like her mom).

Yepa wanted to get “good grades and an education and actually [go] to college.” She shared, “If I want to be a lawyer, I’ll have to go to college and everything for that.”

Tatiana felt really proud of completing treatment for alcohol abuse. She said, “I am kinda happy I graduated treatment.” She wanted to go to college and had a goal of becoming a social worker. She thought she could help other kids because she’s “been through a lot of situations like that. . . . I know how it feels.” She said, “I want to graduate. . . . I want to actually make it through without dropping out or anything.” When I inquired about where she might want to go to school, she said, “Well, there are a lot of places I can go because, you know, I’m Native. . . . So, people will support me and stuff.”

Dyani was asked to play on the A1 basketball team. She wanted to get a basketball scholarship to assist her in attending college. Dyani knew she wanted to go to college. She had wanted to be a doctor or a nurse since she had been in second grade so she could help people.

Willow wanted to go the New York Film Academy. She was fascinated by “the whole film industry.” Willow also made another commitment to herself, which she shared during the interview. She said,

I swear to myself, I am going to break that chain (referring to her mother’s problem with alcohol abuse); ’cause for generations now, this has been going

on where kids go through so much, and then when they get older, they end up going into the same thing.

### *Motivating Factors*

When Bethany was asked what motivates her to do well in school, she said, “Um, succeeding and passing and not ending up like a drop out.”

Cecilia was motivated by trying to be one of the first in her family to get good grades. She said, “No one else in my family has really done anything, like how I’m doing, and there’s people that have gotten good grades in my family, but so far, I’m the only one that keeps that grade thing steady.” She said, “I try to keep my eye on the main thing that I’m working to.” She wanted to finish high school and go to college.

Jacy admitted she was motivated because she was unhappy with her grades. She said, “Well, I didn’t like that my grades were all, like, bad grades and . . . I don’t know, it’s just I can’t stand having bad grades, or my brothers having bad grades, or my sister.”

Yepa said, “What motivates me, probably, again, my mom, but then, like I said, my dad motivates me a lot since I get to see him and everything.”

When Tatiana was asked about motivation she said,

My dad . . . Well, he’s always been there for me, and like, he gave up his addiction for me because he’s an alcoholic, and so is my mom, but he figured he might as well sober up for me. Somebody needed to take care of me, so he’s been sober, and I can talk to him about anything. He doesn’t judge me.

When asked what motivates her, Dyani’s response was,

Um, probably just my family and my friends, like, they tell me that I do good, and . . . some of my friends are really good at math, and they'll, like, explain to me and help me out and show me what I need to do, and it helps for a while.

One of the factors Willow has thought about is that she could be a person “a lot of other people look up to” because she has gotten “so far in life.” She said when she thinks about her experiences in life, she could either look at the experiences in “a bad way and feel sorry for [herself]” or she could look at those experiences and say they shaped her into who she is today. She believed you can learn from mistakes. She used her mother as an example. She said, “My mom, she made a lot of mistakes and . . . I'm not going to hate her for it, she's my mom, I can't.” Willow elaborated and said:

I might be grateful, because she showed me . . . how much she can put a child through with little decisions that she made . . . how much they can hurt a child, and when I have children someday, I'm gonna think of how I felt when I was that age, and the hurt that I felt, and I would never want anyone to experience that because it's the worst feeling that anyone can have. . . . So, for me, I look at it almost as like, thank you for showing me what not to do. . . . I'm glad I didn't have to learn from my mistakes, and I learned from yours.

Willow appeared to use “self” inspiration as an effective coping strategy. It is evident in the details of the interview conversation that follow. Willow said:

You don't always have to be looking for the inspiration around you. . . .

Sometimes, you look for the inspiration in yourself . . . 'cause other people might be looking for inspiration, too. . . . You can be an inspiration to a lot of

people and not even know it. . . . Hopefully, younger girls that are in the situation that I was in can look up to me and say . . . “I can get there.”

### *Academics*

When asked to tell me about their favorite classes and why they were one of their favorites, the student responses varied.

Ayianna said, “I like art class the best. . . . I love to draw and just art things, you know, draw, painting, clay . . . and I like the Japanese culture, so I draw like you know, *Animae*.”

Bethany answered, “Gym and choir.” Her least favorite class was English “because we have to do, like, a lot of writing and reading.”

Cecilia also felt math was a strong subject area for her. Her response was, “Math . . . I’m very good at it. And, um, it’s easy for me.”

Jacy’s response was, “I’m really good at math, and science is really fun ’cause we get to do experiments and stuff.”

Yepa shared, “I like math because, well, it’s really easy, and that’s my strongest subject. I’m really good at it.”

Tatiana’s reply was:

I like art just because, I don’t know, it’s like free time basically. We just draw and stuff, and I like physical science; stuff like that just interests me. I like English, I’m really good at that, and I absolutely hate math. I’m good at science and global studies. I’m just not good at math.

Dyani’s response was, “Um, I like math because, well, it’s really easy and that’s my strongest subject. I’m really good at it.”

Willow said:

Definitely English literature because I like that [the teacher] gives us books that . . . I don't see it as required reading. I see it as books that can teach us things. There are so many morals and stuff in books, and that's what I love about English. . . . I'm reading the book with the [other classmates], and I love getting to hear what they're getting out of it. I'm like, "You know this last part, did you get that?" And they're like, "Well," they get the basics, but it's like they don't get the moral of it, and I love that the teacher [is] teaching . . . what the author is trying to tell you, and she gets like the hidden message under it. . . . English has always been one of my favorite classes.

### *Friends*

Ayianna shared repeatedly that she struggles with procrastination and explained how procrastination interferes with her ability to get her school work done. When I asked her what motivates her to get it done, she emphatically responded, "My friends, I want to keep going to school for them. I don't want to get held back and miss them." She said, "They're always there for me, you know, if I need help with something, and they're in my class. . . . I can always ask them." When asked what she likes most about school she said, "My friends . . . just getting to see them."

When asked what she likes most about school, Bethany said, "Seeing friends." She liked working on school-related projects with her friends and shared she was planning to go to a friend's house after school to work on an English project. She also shared that her friends help her get through difficult situations.

Cecilia made very few comments related to friends.

When asked what she thought it took to be successful in school, Yepa said, “Well, first of all you have friends, and then you can’t hang around bad people or they’ll . . . make you do bad things, and you won’t do good in school. So you gotta be positive and hang around good friends, and you’ll make it through school.”

Jacy also shared that what she likes most about school is “that I can see my friends every day.”

Yepa said:

[At] the beginning of the year, I had this group of friends. . . . They were really good to me, but everyone was like, no, they are bad and everything . . . and then throughout the year . . . I was starting to see how they were, and they were all negatives, and, well, people say I’m a positive, so I went to go find my other friends, and then, I don’t know, it’s like they just kind’ve took me in and everything. . . . My mom said if I was just, like, still hanging around my other friends that I would be a negative, and I really wouldn’t care about anything. She’s like, you made, you make really good decisions, and you should keep them that way and everything.

When I asked Yepa what she meant by a “negative” she said, “A negative person. . . . They do bad things. They . . . drink and smoke. They’re talking behind people’s back. . . . They’re just not doing really good, and they . . . blame things on other people.” Yepa said what she likes most about school is seeing her friends. She said when she is having a bad day, she likes seeing her friends “’cause they always make me smile.”

Tatiana said when she is having a tough situation, “I usually go to . . . my friends.” When she spoke about her friends, she said, “Well, they are always there for me, and I know I can trust them, like we have that bond there I guess.” What she liked most about school was “being with friends.” She liked socializing with them in class, at lunch, and hanging out with friends after school.

Dyani also reported that she liked to hang out with her friends during the weekends. She said, “Even my friends, like, they wanna do good in school, and it’s like, well, if they’re doing good, I wanna do good, too.” She said she is not “really good” at algebra. She said she will ask her friends for help, and they will explain it to her and show her what she needs to do. She said when she is able to take classes with friends it “is more fun.”

Willow would say that next to her relationship with her adoptive mom and a few of her favorite teachers, friends were a source of support for her. When asked what can help her when she’s having a bad day, her response was:

Oh, friends. I rely on them a lot now, when it’s just a bad day. . . . The worst thing you can do is try to keep it all in, and try to keep composed . . . and not really letting anything out, and trying to go through the day like that. Because when you have all that going on inside your mind, and um, you can’t find any other way to get it out, besides talking about it, you can’t focus on school work. . . . So, I usually talk to my friends about it.



### *Student Empathy*

Becoming a social worker is what Tatiana aspires to do. She said, “I just think it would be interesting helping kids . . . ’cause I know how it feels. . . . I can tell them, like, I’ve been through that.”

Ever since second grade, Dyani has wanted to become a nurse or a doctor. She said, “I like to help people.”

When she’s tried to accomplish something, Willow has looked at “who else it will benefit when I do that, because it’s the feeling you get when you help someone . . . when you do something and you know that you helped someone else or you brought relief to someone else.”

Willow shared a story about her oldest brother and sacrifices he made to care for younger siblings, when her mom wasn’t able to because of drinking. She believed one of the reasons her brother dropped out of school was because he felt overwhelmed by trying to serve as the father figure and not having the time and support he needed to keep up in school. It was too difficult and demanding.

### *Summary*

In conclusion, every student was living in poverty, as defined by receiving free or reduced lunches, at the time of this study. None of the students were living with both biological parents. Four students lived with their biological mothers, two students lived with their biological fathers, one student lived with a sister, and another lived with an adoptive mother. Nearly all of the students had attended numerous schools. Several students talked about qualities of effective and ineffective teachers. Some students thought teachers had positive perceptions of them as students; others thought

some teachers' perception of them would be negative. Mobility had been a factor in many of the students' lives. Most of the students indicated the lack of home and/or school stability posed additional challenges when navigating their efforts toward school success. Every student referred to one or more individuals that had supported and encouraged them to this point in their lives.

In Chapter III, the reader was introduced to students' experiences and perceptions. The three themes that emerged from student interviews were presented along with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the interviews.

Chapter IV is the findings of the study with reference to the literature. Chapter V summarizes the paper and provides conclusions and recommendations related to the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS WITH REFERENCE TO THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences through transcribed interviews. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American female students living in poverty.

The eight students interviewed were female, Native American, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced lunches at school), and scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment exams in reading and math. This study was conducted to gain insight from students that could be shared with educators as a way of possibly improving outcomes for future Native American female students.

Chapter IV will focus on integrating the findings of the study with a review of the literature. The topics and subtopics include: culture, poverty, mobility, relationships, effective learning environments, teacher expectations/mindsets, and resiliency.

A reminder to the reader, Chapter III introduced some of the students' experiences and perceptions with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from

interviews. The chapter presented the findings that emerged from the analysis of data acquired during 2011-2012. From the numerous codes and categories, three themes were developed. The three themes that resulted are:

1. Theme One:

The level of support provided by family and community members (substitute support in place of families) both positively and negatively affected students' learning and success in school.

2. Theme Two:

The school's culture, climate, and staff both positively or negatively influenced the students' learning experiences.

3. Theme Three:

Students in this study possessed several characteristics and supports (friends) appearing to have an effect on their ability to counteract stressors and maintain a sense of resiliency.

These themes will be discussed in this chapter with reference to the literature. The focus will be to use the literature to verify findings in Chapter III.

### Theme One

The level of support provided by family and community members (substitute support in place of families) both positively and negatively affected students' learning and success in school. Upon analysis of the data, and review of the codes and categories, the focus of the literature review for Theme One was centered on the following areas:

1. culture;

2. poverty and its impact on the home environment, a family's stability, and learning; and
3. relationships.

### *Culture*

While there has been a considerable amount of research focusing on effects of culture and poverty on student achievement among minority populations of African-American or Hispanic students, little research is available regarding Native American students (Cooper et al., 2010; Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2009; Wiggan, 2007). Capriccioso (2005) said:

Though historically, small sample sizes have made it difficult to assess the performance results for this population, the results to date have indicated that achievement levels are lower for Indians than for their white, Hispanic and African American counterparts. Research also indicates that American Indian and Alaska Native students have a drop-out rate twice the national average – the highest rate of any U.S. ethnic or racial group. (“The Problem,” para. 1)

It was interesting to note that only two of the eight students referenced being Native American or any particular incidents or issues related to ethnicity. The comments they did share in relation to their ethnicity were limited.

The reader may recall from Chapter III that Tatiana discussed being Native American in relation to her desire to go to college and her belief that because she was “native,” there were a lot of places she could go and that people would support her. When I asked Tatiana about the groups or cliques in school, she also shared that in her elementary school years, it was, “Like the natives, the whites, you know like that, but

then in, like, seventh grade, I started hanging out with this other girl that was white, and then we just all started hanging out, and that's how it still is." In Chapter III, Willow also said, "It might be normal for . . . Native American kids to be gone from school a lot, but I feel like sometimes more can be done."

In their book, *Why Culture Counts: Teaching Children of Poverty*, Tileston and Darling (2008) raised a question about whether it is "culture or poverty that creates the discrepancies in achievement among groups that we find in the classroom today" (p. 7). They said, studies indicate it is "culture *and* poverty" (p. 7). Tileston and Darling were in agreement that "the focus of our interventions to close the achievement gap must be to attend to the culture of the learner and to build the supports necessary for learners to build resilience" (p. 25). Sirin (2005) also believed "racial and cultural background continues to be a critical factor in academic achievement in the United States" (p. 420).

Again, this is interesting to note given only two of eight students mentioned any reference to culture during the interview process. As I began the research project, I thought one of the key findings would relate specifically to difficulties associated with students' ethnicity, culture, or to topics of racism or prejudice. In contrast, the effects or impact of living in poverty turned out to be a bigger barrier for students and became evident as students discussed factors impacting academic success in school. Every student in the study indicated they had at least one significant person in their lives who helped "to build resilience" (p. 25).

According to the SEARCH Institute (2012), an organization that for over 50 years has focused on what students need to succeed, there are forty developmental

assets that have been proven to help children and youth grow up to be healthy, responsible, and caring adults. Several of these assets were mentioned by students in their responses to interview questions and in the stories they shared. For example, some of the external developmental assets referred to by students included: family support or other adult relationships, positive family communication, caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling, safety, family and school boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, creative activities such as music or arts, youth programs like sports or clubs, high expectations, and service to others. These external developmental assets fall into broader categories identified by the SEARCH Institute known as support, empowerment, boundaries & expectations, and constructive use of time.

Internal assets identified by the SEARCH Institute (2012) and mentioned by students in the study included: achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure, caring, equality and social justice, restraint, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, resistance skills, and positive view of personal future. These internal developmental assets fall into broader categories identified by the SEARCH Institute known as: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

Tileston and Darling (2008) supported the concept of building resilience in learners but also advocated strongly that culture defines “what [children] will focus their attention on, how they interpret the world to give it meaning, what background knowledge they bring to learning, and how they will value learning” (p. 25). These two authors agreed “culture trumps poverty in its impact on [student] achievement (p.

26). They believed in order to effectively address the issues of poverty, educators “must first deal with differences based on culture” (p. 26).

Tileston and Darling (2008) suggested:

If we truly want to raise the learning levels of our students, we must first know the culture from which they come. We must know how that culture learns, the value it places on education, and how, within that culture, motivation is triggered. (p. 7)

Capriccioso (2005) appeared to agree with Tileston and Darling (2008) regarding the importance of educators understanding the culture from which students come. He said, “There can be dangerous consequences for Indian students when educators fail to appreciate Indian languages and cultures: historically, Indians have been over-identified as learning disabled, mentally retarded, or have been more likely to be subject to disciplinary actions” (“Culture’s Role,” para. 3).

Morgan (2010) added, “Culturally responsive teaching affirms the backgrounds of the students, considers their cultures as strengths, and reflects and utilizes students’ learning styles” (p. 47). Morgan stressed the importance of teachers understanding the way students learn best and of including contributions made by various cultures within the curriculum in order to include and engage every learner.

Starnes (2006) elaborated by saying “three powerful strands of findings have emerged” regarding what works most often for Native American children regardless of the research methods, the instruments used, or the specific Indian Nations studied (p. 386). The three strands are:



First, most Native children learn best when hands-on, experiential teaching and learning approaches are used. Second, there is a positive relationship between students' academics and their strong sense of cultural identity. And third, informal and flexible learning environments enhance Native students' learning (p. 386).

Even though students participating in this study did not highlight the importance of culture or ethnicity in relation to success, research would suggest it should be an area of emphasis in schools. The implications of not teaching in a manner that is culturally responsive may have many negative consequences for students, including the possibility of alienation or increasing the likelihood of students' dropping out of school. Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009), emphasized the importance of "establishing a curriculum with the Native American culture to build pride and self-respect" (p. 17).

### *Poverty*

During the study, all eight of the students indicated their biological parents were not living in the same household. Four of the students lived with their biological mother (one of these families also had a step-dad in the home), two lived with their biological father (each of these families had a step-mom in the home), one lived with a sister, and one lived with an adoptive parent. Five of the families received free lunch (all of these were single parent homes) and three of the families received reduced price meals (these homes all had a biological parent and a step-parent in the home).

Ruby Payne (2001) defined poverty as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p. 16). The resources Payne was referring to in this definition

included: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. Payne believed, “The ability to leave poverty is more dependent upon other resources than it is upon financial resources” (p. 17).

According to Payne’s framework for understanding of poverty, it is not surprising that many of the students spoke of varying levels of distress their parents were entangled in or were facing, which is often associated with living in poverty. Some of the specific examples conveyed by students included alcohol or substance abuse, relationship problems such as divorce, or the fact that they (the participants in the study) were not able to have contact with a certain parent.

Several of the students shared stories about times they felt one or more of their parents did not provide appropriate care or supervision. Some of the students conveyed that their parents were working several jobs, and others spoke about their parent’s inability to maintain a job or to complete his/her education, whether it was a high school degree or a college degree. The student stories and situations were alarming for many reasons. Howard, Dresser, and Dunklee (2009) reminded readers:

We all know that school readiness expectations have been elevated dramatically since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 became law. Before NCLB, kindergarteners were expected to learn social skills, tie their shoes, and learn their colors, shapes, and some letters and numbers. Now it’s expected they’ll enter kindergarten with these skills in place and rapidly build on them, and children who haven’t mastered basic language, reading, and math skills enter school with barriers to their learning. (p. 9)

In Chapter III, as a recap for the reader, Willow also shared how not having a car, phone, newspaper, television, school supplies or money to print copies at the library impacted her brother's education. Many of these findings are consistent with information discovered in the literature review related to conditions relating to poverty. For example, according to Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, and Collins (2009), children living in conditions of poverty are more likely to live in households where there is "less parental supervision and more parental distress" (p. 4). Living in conditions of poverty is also an indicator that children will have parents/guardians who are single, are underemployed, have less access to quality health care, less capacity to obtain nutritious food, or a lower ability to provide enriching experiences for their children, all of which are prerequisites for students to be successful in school (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt, 2010; Rawlinson, 2011; Tileston & Darling, 2008). The children often start school with a gap in vocabulary development and other readiness skills required for school (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Lindsey et al., 2010; Rawlinson, 2011; Tileston & Darling, 2008).

In Bowman's (1994) article, *Cultural Diversity and Academic Achievement*, she asked readers to consider whether all child-rearing environments are equally good for helping children reach their developmental potential. Her response was, "The answer is no" (p. 3). Bowman acknowledged, "The evidence is clear that some early environments result in children's failing to thrive physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively. These environments are characterized by poverty, abuse, and neglect" (p. 3).

However, Bowman (1994) cautioned readers, “It is extremely difficult to predict how a particular environment will affect an individual child” (p. 3). She elaborated on this point by saying, “Environmental effects are buffered by social support systems, personal resiliency, and vulnerability, and the meaning that people attribute to the care and education they provide for children” (p. 3). This was evident in several of the stories shared by students. While many of the students endured difficult circumstances within the home environments, they benefited from the support of siblings, relatives, school staff members, and others. They also had personal strengths or characteristics which helped them persevere through the difficulties.

Noguera and Akom (2000) made the following assertion,

If the children of those who are most likely to be incarcerated, denied housing and employment, passed over for promotions or harassed by the police did just as well in school as those whose lives are largely free of such encumbrances, that would truly be remarkable news.” (p. 31)

This is exactly why support from others is critical. Ruby Payne (2001) shared that one of the four reasons individuals leave poverty is because “someone . . . ‘sponsors’ them (i.e., an educator or spouse or mentor or role model) . . . shows them a different way or convinces them that they could live differently” (p. 79). This was true for every student in the study. Each student referred to one or more individuals who helped provide them with a sense of encouragement and hope. Since students spend six and a half to seven hours a day at schools, five days a week, it is important that school personnel understand the difference they can make in students’ lives by serving as a mentor or role model, especially to those students living in conditions of poverty.

Rawlinson (2011) believed, “Education could be a way out of poverty” (p. xiv). Sirin (2005) encouraged educators to be mindful of the fact that “schools provide equalizing experiences, and thus the longer students stay in the schooling process, the more the impact of family SES on student achievement is diminished” (p. 420). Educators must focus on finding ways to engage students in the educational process as a way of possibly overcoming years or generations of living in poverty. Ruby Payne (2001) stated, “An **education** is the key to getting out of, and staying out of, generational poverty” (p. 79).

Lindsey et al. (2010) stated:

To mitigate poverty, school must be a place where all students feel supported with daily contributions to their future-focused goals and personal social capital. The broader social context of poverty can be managed using prosocial approaches and assets to build new mindsets and future realities. (p. 14-15)

#### *Stability vs. Mobility*

According to Howard, Dresser, and Dunklee (2009), a study was conducted that compared kindergarten students from the top five wealthiest communities in the nation with kindergarteners from the five poorest communities. One of the findings revealed that kindergarten students from the poorest communities had moved more. Forty-eight percent of the poorest students in the study had moved at least three times before kindergarten!

Most of the students involved in this study experienced many moves, traveling between one parent’s house and the other parent’s house, or from a parent’s home to a sibling’s or relative’s home, or from one foster family to another foster family, from

one reservation to another, or from one school or boarding school to another school. Mobility proved to be challenging. The students expressed concern over needing to learn new rules and procedures in the various homes and schools. They also discussed feeling behind when they went from school to school and described feeling like they had gaps in what they were learning. An example of this is when Cecilia said, “I wished that I wouldn’t have had to move, that way I could have stayed on track, instead of just kind of popping around to different schools and learning different things.”

Moore et al. (2009) described how poor children are more likely to experience frequent transitions (whether the transition is moving from one home to another within the same city or between cities or moving from one school to another school within the same city or between cities) and changes in family structure than more affluent children. Consequently, children who live such turbulent lives are more likely to have negative social and emotional outcomes than children who experience relatively stable lives.

### *Relationships*

Students interviewed for this study readily identified relationships they considered to be both helpful and hurtful. What students had in common was the fact that every one of them had at least two people they looked to for support and guidance (whether it was a parent, a sibling, an adoptive mother, a friend, a school staff member or a Day Treatment staff member). They all had people in their lives to encourage them and assist them with problem-solving.

Starkman, Scales, and Roberts (2006) believed, “Relationships are the basis for building assets” (p. 129). In their book, *Great Places to Learn: Creating Asset-Building Schools that Help Students Succeed*, the authors wrote about many benefits of relationships including engaging “students in learning, because [in doing so] students believe that someone cares about their achievement” and giving “everyone energy, which often translates into a motivation to succeed or an inspiration to exceed goals” (p. 129). Brooks and Goldstein (2003) stressed the importance of finding “each child’s island of competence since it is through our strengths and abilities that we find joy, pleasure, and success in life” (p. 149).

Some of the students had parents they described as not “being there” for them. For example, Willow shared that her mother would leave for several days at a time. Tatiana conveyed that her mother had “no support” for her. The basic roles of parenting typically include: taking care of a child’s basic biological needs; providing a safe, nurturing environment; protecting them from harm; teaching them by shaping their knowledge and character and preparing them to function in the real world; offering guidance and direction; supporting and motivating them to achieve goals; helping them acquire social/emotional skills; and disciplining them gently by providing corrective feedback (Lifeecho, n.d.).

In some cases, students shared openly that their parents’ lives had been adversely affected by a variety of issues such as poverty, marital or relationship issues, and alcoholism. Therefore, the parent(s) was (were) not capable of providing the essentials of basic parenting. One student even mentioned how she felt when her mother chose alcohol over her family. Willow said, “[My mom] was offered to go

through treatment so many times, but she chose not to, and I took that as a sign of choosing alcohol over your family.”

The importance of friends is apparent. Jensen (2009) stated:

Poor children have fewer and less supportive networks than their more affluent counterparts do; live in neighborhoods that are lower in social capital; and, as adolescents, are more likely to rely on peers than adults for social and emotional support. (p. 8)

Because true friends tend to be dependable, loyal, and unwavering, individuals who have real, genuine friends are more likely to see setbacks or obstacles as temporary (EntertainMates, n.d.).

While most of the students mentioned receiving some sort of help and support from teachers or someone a bit older than them, one student relied heavily on school personnel, especially in her elementary school years, to maintain a positive path or sense of direction. Willow spoke very specifically about teachers in first, second, sixth and tenth grade with a great deal of gratitude for what they had done to contribute to her success in school and in life.

The importance of relationships between students and adults who are encouraging and nurturing is noteworthy, well documented, and can be linked to successful achievement for students. According to Lindsey et al. (2010), these relationships help “shape how students create their worldview, future plans and expectations of themselves and others” (p. 22). Jensen (2009) conveyed the power of student-teacher relationships by saying, “The relationships that teachers build with



students form the single strongest access to student goals, socialization, motivation, and academic performance” (p. 20).

During the interviews, Ayianna shared how a particular teacher knew how to have a little fun, joke around, keep the students interested, and still was able to keep the class under control. Willow said she really liked teachers that took the time to find out how each student learned best and to determine what level of instruction each student would need.

According to Lewis (2001), “Although we cannot ignore the social, cultural, and home factors, much of the blame [for student failure] must be located in institutionalized racism in the classroom, school, and society” (p. 803). From lower teacher expectations to racially prejudiced attitudes and beliefs, there is no single factor that contributes to gaps in achievement (Sherman, 2008).

## Theme Two

The school’s culture, climate, and staff both positively or negatively influenced the students’ learning experiences. The students in the study shared many stories and characteristics of effective teachers and less effective teachers. The students openly discussed what they believed their teacher’s view or perception was of them (the students) as students. Many of the students also disclosed stories or personal experiences that occurred at the middle school level which proved to be very difficult. Each of the students shared advice or strategies they felt would help a student be more successful in school. The discussion for Theme Two is centered on the following factors:

1. effective learning environments, and

2. teacher expectations/mindsets.

### *Effective Learning Environments*

According to Lindsey et al. (2010), “Children born into poverty are as capable and bright as anyone, and it is our responsibility as educators to find the moral resolve and appropriate strategies to engage students” (p. 70). These authors believed formal education continues to remain “the one way to gain the literacy skills necessary that might support one having the choice to move away from the conditions of poverty” (p. 31). Life options are unquestionably diminished if students choose not to attend school. How then, do we keep our students engaged in education?

Superintendents cannot increase achievement for all students single-handedly; they must serve as activists or leaders and provide visions of change for stakeholders (Bjork & Gurley, 2005). Superintendents must be aware of test-score data and discrepancies existing between various subgroups, and be willing to discuss results openly with stakeholders if they want to increase the likelihood of all students reaching their potential. Data-driven decision-making, along with setting measurable action steps and timelines has been successful in improving outcomes for students. School district leaders need to be responsible for leading staff in learning to utilize effective instructional strategies to address the needs of all students (Sherman, 2008).

Tileston and Darling (2008) affirmed, “The highest predictor of academic achievement is the proficiency of teachers in effective instructional practice” (p. 19). Tileston and Darling referenced studies which have shown when teachers are provided with professional development on effective instruction, the impact of poverty can be overridden.

Eric Jensen (2009) revealed many strategies and techniques worthy of consideration when striving to create conditions for students to succeed in school. In his book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kid's Brains and What Schools Can Do About It*, Jensen shared the importance of supporting the whole child. He said, "Kids who get wraparound support are able to stop dwelling on their problems and limitations and . . . start focusing on the educational opportunities available to them" (p. 70). Jensen expanded on the fact that when students are engrossed in getting basic needs met, such as "essential safety, health, and relational issues," they are unable to focus on academic tasks (p. 72). Jensen added that academic excellence is a "highly unlikely goal" if schools do not find "ways to address the social, emotional, and health-related challenges that . . . kids face every day" (p. 70). Neuman (2008) concurred, she said, "Childcare, family support, and community-based programs working in public settings and social service agencies are a critical part of the 'closing the gap equation'" (p. 583).

Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) emphasized the importance of providing "quality preschool programming in high-poverty areas and to create funding systems for schools that recognize the differential funding required to address students' differential learning needs" (p. 430). Neuman (2008) reiterated this same point in her book, *Educating the Other America: Top Experts Tackle Poverty, Literacy, and Achievement in Our School*. She said:

It is known from previous research . . . that children of lower socioeconomic and minority status enter kindergarten with reading achievement scores well

below those of their more advantaged peers and that a child's incoming level of achievement is highly predictive of his or her later achievement. (p. 75)

Jensen (2009) shared that another way to close the gap between children living in poverty and their more affluent peers is to level the playing field by providing more field trips and real-life experiences. He shared an example of a school in San Antonio, Texas, where the principal "acknowledges to parents and staff that the school's students lack many of the benefits of a middle-class upbringing" (p. 95). Instead of complaining about the situation, the staff offer after-school enrichment activities and more study trips and real-life experiences.

Kovalik and Olsen (1997) whole-heartedly supported the idea of offering more "being there" or real-life experiences. They said, "Prior experience based on being there experiences literally builds neural wiring which becomes the base for new learning" (p. 39). When students have opportunities to engage in "being there experiences" with multiple senses being activated, the likelihood of being able to make connections between "being there experiences" and new concepts introduced is greater. Once a new concept is associated or linked with the "being there experience," students are able to attach new language and vocabulary to the concept and "being there experience" which increases understanding and allows them to make application to the real world. Kovalik and Olsen illustrated "how powerful, brain-compatible learning occurs." They said, "The brain readily learns (makes meaning) and applies (builds a *program* for using) information learned in this sequence" (p. 39).

The sequence they are referring to in the preceding quote is as follows:

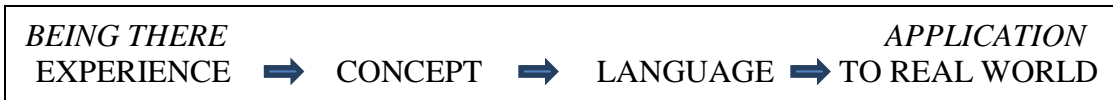


Figure 3. Brain-Compatible Learning Process. Reprinted from “ITI: The Model – Integrated Thematic Instruction (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)” by S. Kovalik and K. Olsen, 1997, p. 39. Copyright 1997 by Books for Educators.

Kovalik and Olsen (1997) compared this brain-compatible process to the more traditional approach used in many schools. They said, “In contrast, conventional schooling starts with language and definitions *about* things. Basing instruction on ‘the textbook’ when there is no prior experience makes it difficult or impossible for the brain to understand and learn” (p. 39). Jensen (1998) elaborated on this thought by saying, “We know that learners remember much more when the learning is connected to a field trip, music, a disaster, a guest speaker, or a novel learning location” (p. 110).

Kovalik and Olsen (1997) stressed the fact that “Experience, those ‘being-there’ opportunities, is the prerequisite for understanding. Reading comprehension and actual understanding are two very different concepts” (p. 39)!

Another effective practice for closing the achievement gap is to use ongoing data collection to drive instruction. According to Jensen (2009), the use of continual, short-cycle assessments, known as formative assessments “is a must for success in all schools but especially high-poverty ones” (p. 74-75). The reason formative assessments are so powerful is because they show educators “where [individual] students stand at any given time” (p. 75). Once a teacher understands a student’s level of performance toward a specific learning target, adjustments can be made to instruct accordingly.

Given the fact that many students living in poverty begin the kindergarten school year with limited academic readiness skills and with delays in vocabulary and language development, time is of the essence. Add in the issue of frequent mobility experienced by many families living in poverty, and it compounds the need to make use of as much time as possible to learn. Jensen (2009) shared an example of a school in Idaho that extends the school day and the school year. He said, “Students attend school from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday (on Fridays, they are released at 2:30) and on alternating Saturdays” (p. 84). This may seem extreme, but if education is a way out of a life of poverty, it becomes critical to provide every opportunity possible for students to learn.

Jensen (2009) revealed “looping” as another strategy “that keeps a cohort of students with the same teachers from one grade level to the next” (p. 88). Jensen shared many benefits of “looping” including: it helps build a stronger family atmosphere; the class doesn’t have to start from scratch the second year and can gain up to six weeks of instructional time; it helps teachers create continuity of curriculum from year to year; and, kids aren’t passed off to another teacher and are less likely to fall through the cracks.

High-performing/high-poverty schools studied by William and Budge (2009) provided several ideas worthy of highlighting. The following suggestions actually came from schools that went from a low performing to a high performing status:

- Eliminate policies and practices that manufacture low achievement (inequitable funding, retention, tracking);
- Implement data systems to guide your work;

- Establish measurable goals and develop aggressive timelines to achieve them;
- Require students who fall below a C in their coursework to get extra help, and allow them to retake tests until they earn a C or better;
- Extend learning time for those students who need it (before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school, Saturday morning learning academies);
- Use release time or block scheduling of “specials” to create common planning time for teachers;
- Have coaches provide “just-in-time” support to teachers;
- Incorporate knowledge about various ethnicities and cultures represented in the student body in content;
- Establish clear learning targets for students and help students acquire assessment literacy through a variety of activities (selecting individual learning benchmarks, compiling portfolios, participating in student-led conferences);
- Support high expectations of students;
- Provide “protective factors” which build a bond between students and the school;
- Engage stakeholders in various ways (hiring a family/community liaison, offering community service learning programs, using the school as a community center, engaging families in volunteer activities);

- Provide intensive interventions (coordinate health, education, and social services);
- Maintain a low student-teacher ratio and caring relationships in school; and
- Target support to students who need it most.

Finally, the highest predictor of academic achievement is the proficiency of teachers in effective instructional practice. When teachers are provided with professional development on effective instruction, they can override the impact of poverty (William & Budge, 2009).

Remarks made by the students during the study echoed much of what the literature suggests regarding student learning. For example, students said they don't "really like learning . . . straight from the book." They like art, drawing, singing, working in the shop, working in groups, doing projects, and labs and experiments.

During the study, students raised several issues regarding difficulties they faced in school, particularly in middle school. For example, Willow said it was "really a harsh blow" and she "just kind of felt alone." Another student said she didn't think her English teacher liked her very much.

While it is understandable that many adolescents face difficulties at the adolescent age, I was surprised by the way students described their middle school experience and the level of distress they expressed feeling. Words students used to describe the middle school experience included "middle school drama," "girls were seriously vicious," "it was a crushing point," and thoughts that "I could be their next target."



### *Teacher Expectations/Mindsets*

The bottom-line is, teachers must believe students can succeed (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). Tileston and Darling (2008) tried to impress upon the readers how important it is to look at the gifts and life experiences students bring with them to the classroom rather than focus on the deficits. Tileston and Darling said:

We have never met a teacher who *intended* to communicate low expectations for any child, but teachers often do have misconceptions about children of poverty and from cultures other than their own. As a result, they develop and adopt low expectations for them. Consistent exposure to these low expectations can lead to low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and poor achievement in students. (p. 37-38)

Tileston and Darling (2008) reiterated the need to view students from poverty as children with *differences* in culture and value systems, not as children with deficits that need to be “fixed.” Tileston and Darling added, “Students who are members of subgroups come to school with different experiences, cultures, values, priorities, and socioeconomic conditions. That must be understood if teachers are going to successfully engage them in the same standard curriculum” (p. xv).

Rawlinson (2011), an educator and author who grew up in poverty, has believed the value of a positive relationship between teachers and students cannot be overstated. She said teachers can help devise a plan to help students if they take the time to get to know their students and understand their strengths and difficulties. It is about building relationships. Rawlinson stressed the importance of paying “as much

attention to the affective domain as to the cognitive. . . . When feelings are ignored, learning suffers” (p. 26).

Jensen (2009) concurred. He said building student-staff relationships with kids raised in poverty is a “make or break factor” (p. 93). He explained, “Adults who build trusting, supportive relationships with low-SES students help foster those students’ independence and self-esteem and protect them from the deleterious effects of poverty” (p. 94). Jensen believed, “For [a] school to foster high achievement, every student . . . need[s] a reliable partner or mentor” (p. 20). Sanchez (2003) said, “Mentorship is relationship sprinkled with counseling” (p. 11).

Several of the students quickly identified those teachers they felt had either positive or negative perceptions toward them as students or as learners. If a student believed a teacher liked them, they spoke about that teacher’s class in an upbeat positive way. For example, when Willow spoke about her English literature class and teacher, she said, “Definitely English literature . . . that’s what I love about English . . . or English has always been one of my favorite classes.” If a student felt a teacher didn’t like them, they made comments that were downbeat and negative, such as when Tatiana spoke about her Algebra I teacher and class. She said, “I don’t really like doing anything in there” or “I hate math.” Jacy shared a similar example of not choosing to do much in a class where she felt the teacher didn’t like her. She said, “Well, if you asked my English teacher, I don’t really think he likes me very much ’cause I don’t really like doing anything in there.” Dyani believed some of the male teachers were intimidating. She said, “Sometimes guy teachers can come off like intimidating. . . . Some teachers, like, push you really hard, and some teachers are like

really nice. . . . I guess . . . the more friendly ones are more fun to, like, be around, to, like, learn with and stuff.” In Chapter III, Cecilia made it known that her . . .

. . . favorite teacher would probably be a favorite teacher because they help you learn more, and they help you be more successful in their class, without just letting you fail, which isn’t supposed to be happening, but they . . . actually interact with you so that way you can learn in their class.

This is clearly an example of the importance of teacher expectations, positive student-teacher relationships and having a mindset that failure is not an option for students.

### Theme Three

Students in this study possessed several characteristics that appeared to have had an effect on their ability to counteract stressors and maintain a sense of resiliency. These characteristics included: being aware of personal accomplishments, goals and aspirations, being mindful of motivating factors, performing at an academically proficient level in both reading and math, and revealing indicators of a desire to help others. The discussion for Theme Three is centered on resiliency.

#### *Student Resiliency*

Sanchez (2003) reported that numerous studies have been completed on resilient children and families. He described resilient children as those individuals who have had successful outcomes in life, despite the fact that they have possessed many risk factors. Sanchez (2003) said it has been shown that “the greater the number of risk factors, the greater the number of protective factors needed to promote a positive [life] outcome” (p. 32).

According to Sanchez (2003), by incorporating resiliency theory into educational design, one would identify the risk factors, as well as the existing strengths of a student and identify specific interventions that should improve outcomes. Sanchez (2003, 2008) shared the risk factors that have been repeatedly identified in studies. They are listed below:

A. In the Child

- Fetal drug/alcohol effects
- Premature birth or complications
- Difficult temperament
- Shy temperament
- Neurological impairment
- Low IQ < 80
- Chronic medical disorder
- Psychiatric disorder
- Repeated aggression
- Substance abuse
- Delinquency
- Academic failure

B. Family Characteristics

- Low socioeconomic status
- Large family with four or more children
- Siblings born within two years of child

- Parent with emotional disorder
- Parent with substance abuse
- Parent with criminality

C. Family/Experiential

- Poor infant attachment to mother
- Long-term absence of caregiver in infancy
- Witness to extreme conflict or violence
- Neglect
- Separation/divorce/single parent
- Negative parent-child relationship
- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Removal from home
- Frequent family moves
- Teen pregnancy

Based on the student interviews, a number of the risk factors identified above were present and a part of the students' descriptions of their life experiences. If one just focuses on the *Family Characteristics* and the *Family/Experiential* factors, the following characteristics or factors were described by the students: low socioeconomic status, large family with four or more children, parent with substance abuse, neglect, separation/divorce/single parent, negative parent-child relationship, removal from home, and frequent family moves.

Sanchez (2008) acknowledged, "risk factors do not invariably lead to problems in the lives of children but rather increase the probability that such problems will arise" (p. 81). Sanchez said, "What is less obvious and has not been studied until recently, is that a certain number of children have successful outcomes in life despite having many of these risk factors" (p. 82).

According to Sanchez (2003):

Resiliency studies have indicated that individuals that overcame the presence of multiple risk factors received the benefits of established nurturing relationships while obtaining certain protective factors that promote health. The impact of relationship and these protective factors have been shown to have a positive impact on brain function, resulting in children who are better able to learn, less likely to misperceive, and ultimately more adaptable. (p. 18)

Sanchez (2008) shared the following specific protective factors that have been identified in various studies:

A. Qualities of the Child

- Positive temperament, adaptable, "easy baby"
- Autonomy and independence as a toddler
- Problem-solving skills at school age
- Gets along with others
- Interpersonally engaging, "likable"
- Sense of humor
- Empathy
- Perceived competencies

- IQ >100
- Good reader
- Internal locus of control as a teenager
- High hopes and expectations for the future

B. Family Characteristics

- Lives at home
- Positive attachment with parents
- Perception of parental warmth
- Inductive, consistent discipline by parent
- Established routines in the home

C. Social Support from Outside the Family

- Adult mentor for child outside immediate family
- Extra adult help for caretaker of family
- Support for child from friends
- Support for child from school
- Support for child from church
- Support for family from workplace

The exciting thing about protective factors is they “provide insight into what specific change can occur in an individual’s life that can improve his/her opportunity for success” (p. 83). Sanchez said, “In many ways, resiliency provides a blueprint for increasing capacity” (p. 83).

Based on the interview data, it was evident that each of the students possessed a number of protective factors, which likely helped them counteract the stressors or

risk-factors present in their lives. Some of the qualities the students had were: problem-solving skills, the ability to get along with others, interpersonally engaging, “likable,” sense of humor, empathy, perceived competencies, being good readers, having high hopes and expectations for the future, living at home, having a positive attachment with parents/guardians, support from friends, and support from school.

### Conclusion

According to Thornton and Sanchez (2010), resilient youth successfully adapt to the school environment independent or in spite of poverty, family factors, and/or social issues. The challenge facing schools is how to facilitate resiliency in youth. Noguera and Akom (2000) reminded educators,

We must also recognize that to the extent that change is possible, it is more likely to occur in education than in any other sector. This is because despite its faults, public education remains the most democratic and accessible institution in the country. (p. 31)

Chapter IV has included the findings of the study with reference to the literature. The topics and subtopics included: culture, poverty, mobility, relationships, effective learning environments, teacher expectations/mindsets, and resiliency.

Chapter V provides the summary of the findings of the study, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to gain an understanding of how students perceive their own academic successes, learning experiences, and factors that contribute to their success, and (b) to document the oral stories students shared about their experiences through transcribed interviews. The information gathered was intended to support educators in understanding factors contributing to school success for Native American students.

Students interviewed were eight female, Native American students, living in poverty (as defined by receiving free or reduced lunches at school), in Grades 8-10, and scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment exams in both reading and math. This study was conducted to gain insight from students that could be shared with educators as a way of possibly improving outcomes for current and future Native American students.

Chapter I provided the reader with an introduction and a brief overview of issues which pertained to this study concerning Native American education. Terms were defined as well as acronyms used within the study. In addition, the purpose of the study; research questions; parameters for literature review; and the researcher's bias, background, and experiences were highlighted.

Chapter II described the methods utilized in this study, and included a discussion of the IRB application and approval process, as well as a brief overview of the EFR 520 study, which served as a foundation for this dissertation research study. Chapter II also included the rationale for choosing qualitative research methods for this study, a description of the process used for selecting students, methods, and a review of the profiles of students. Methods of data collection were shared, including the development of the interview questions, and the specific approach used to code, analyze, and synthesize data. The chapter concluded with a discussion of validity issues.

In Chapter III, the reader was introduced to students' experiences and perceptions. The three themes that emerged from student interviews were presented along with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the interviews.

Chapter IV included the themes of the study with reference to the literature review.

In Chapter V, a summary, conclusions, and recommendations are offered.

### Conclusions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty, perceive their own academic success?
2. How do female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty, perceive their own learning experience?
3. What factors contribute to the success of female, Native American students, in Grades 8-10, living in poverty?

Three themes emerged after coding, categorizing, analyzing, and synthesizing the transcribed narratives from the interviews. Collectively, the themes address answers to the research questions.

### *Theme One*

The level of support provided by family and community members (substitute support in place of families) both positively and negatively affected students' learning and success in school. In this study, there was evidence that students received various levels of support from family members, relatives, an adoptive parent, community members, friends, and school staff members.

In some cases, students expressed that the level of support received from their mother or father was not considered desirable or adequate. In these situations, support came from siblings, relatives, friends, school staff members, community members, and in one case, an adoptive parent. In every case, the students had one or two strong relationships with other individuals. In Willow's words, these people served as "the second reassuring voice." Solid relationships seemed to be essential to the success of the students. The students looked to others for guidance, support, and encouragement.

Nearly all of the students had attended numerous schools. Mobility was or has been a major factor in the students' lives. Most all of the students indicated the lack of home and/or school stability posed additional challenges when navigating their efforts toward school success.

### *Theme Two*

The school's culture, climate, and staff both positively or negatively influenced the students' learning experiences. The students in the study shared many stories and

characteristics of both effective teachers and learning environments and less effective teachers and learning environments.

Students revealed incidents where school staff members were not as supportive as they could have been or perhaps they were not aware of the circumstances the students were facing. Therefore, some school staff members were viewed as being less supportive than others.

The students openly discussed what they believed their teacher's view or perception had been of them as students. It was interesting to note that the students' favorite teachers and favorite classes seemed to go hand-in-hand. If a student did not care for a particular teacher, they generally did not care for that teacher's class, either. Many of the students disclosed stories or personal experiences that occurred at the middle school level which proved to be very difficult. Each of the students shared advice or strategies to potentially help new students be more successful in school. The students seemed to understand the importance of working hard, taking good notes, doing homework, listening in class, and being respectful to teachers. Willow also advised potential students to get involved by joining clubs that are of interest to them and participating in extra-curricular activities.

### *Theme Three*

Students in this study possessed several characteristics that appeared to have had an effect on their ability to counteract stressors and maintain a sense of resiliency.

These characteristics included:

1. being aware of personal accomplishments, goals, and aspirations;
2. being mindful of motivating factors;

3. performing at an academically proficient level in both reading and math based on 2009-2010 state assessment results; and
4. revealing indicators of wanting to help others.

All of the students interviewed had goals or future-oriented thinking. For all students, plans after high school involved attending college or some level of advanced educational training beyond high school. Caregivers were often cited as encouraging the students to do well in school.

All eight of the students scored at the proficient or advanced levels on their 2009-2010 state assessment exams. Yet, several of the students verbally expressed a dislike for math and English.

Several of the students shared their hopes, dreams, and future desires. Many of their comments had to do with an aspiration to help others. The students spoke of being nurses, doctors, immigration lawyers, pediatricians, cops, and social workers. Willow seemed to capture the essence of helping others best when she said, “It’s the feeling you get when you help someone . . . when you do something and you know that you helped someone else or you brought relief to someone else.”

### *Reflections*

I thoroughly enjoyed the interview process. I appreciated every minute of visiting with the students in their school environments. I was surprised at how much information students shared and how comfortable they seemed to be with me. The stories the students shared seemed real, deep, meaningful, and sometimes, unfathomable. The students shared very personal life experiences. The students gave

the impression they understood I was trying to improve the learning environments in our district based on what I could glean from their interviews.

I did encounter a couple of situations in which I asked a question and the interviewees recalled painful memories and began to tear up and cry. I had to decide how to resolve the issues as they surfaced. While I anticipated some of the questions would be difficult to answer, I was surprised by the depth of life experiences the students shared. I tried to be empathetic and respectful in my responses, while trying to tactfully redirect the conversations to less difficult topics. Yepa and Willow each shared a story or account that stirred up emotions.

Yepa revealed that one of the most challenging situations she had to deal with was when her parents split up. She said:

When I was little, I was probably about six, and that's when my mom and dad, they split up, and I thought I was just gonna die, because my dad's like the best person in the world and well . . . when we moved up here, I'm like, oh God, I can't get through this . . . I didn't see him. I didn't get to talk to him or anything, but . . . I started seeing him more. . . . He just gets me through it.

Yepa cried as she spoke about the circumstances. I acknowledged the situation must have been hard. I apologized for hitting "a tough spot." She said she does get to see her dad, but not as often as she would like. She laughed and shared that she had her permit. We spoke about when she actually gets her driver's license, and a little driving experience, that she may be able to see him more often. I apologized again. I felt bad that the memory was still so painful for Yepa. She said, "It's okay." We moved on to another topic, and it wasn't long before we were both laughing.

Willow shared a vivid memory she had as a sixth grader. Willow was asked to write a paper about a past experience. Willow talked about the experience she chose to write about; and as Willow shared her story with me, she began to cry.

I found these situations difficult. I tried to recognize and acknowledge the feelings the girls were expressing, and then in a very sensitive manner, move on to a topic that was less likely to stir up additional sad emotions or memories.

I really appreciated the human aspect of qualitative research and the focus being on students' perspectives and their meaning. I enjoyed carefully inspecting data for patterns, codes, categories, and themes. I found reflective thinking to be an important part of the process.

While the qualitative research method requires extensive time – both during the interview and transcribing phase and while analyzing raw data, I appreciated the fact that the data was not grouped according to predetermined categories. The “findings” were determined during the study and emerged from data itself. I believe the extensive writing required is important in order to substantiate claims and to provide a more holistic and accurate interpretation of data.

### Recommendations

These recommendations are based on giving voice to the students' stories presented in this study. The recommendations are also based on the literature review. Finally, the recommendations are based on my experience as a teacher and a school administrator engaged with student academic success.

*Recommendations for Central Office School Administrators*

1. School administration along with stakeholders must engage in conversations that lead to action in regard to offering quality pre-school programs for minority students and students living in poverty. (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2003; Howard, Dresser, & Dunklee, 2009).
2. School Administration must budget for resources, supplies, materials, and technology necessary to meet the learning needs of all students. Remember Willow's story, some families have no car, television, computer, printer, or money.

*Recommendations for School Building Principals*

1. Build community. Building principals along with stakeholders must identify ways to create less stressful environments for incoming seventh graders and for students new to schools because of moving. Several students in the study spoke about difficulties they experienced in middle school. Words used to describe their experiences included: "middle school drama," "girls were seriously vicious," "it was a crushing point," and thoughts that "I could be their next target." Community building activities take time. A multi-age home-base would be a place to start.
2. Administrators must construct learning environments aimed at developing assets or protective factors within students, especially for those students who possess many risk factors. There is a solid research base around the benefits of this work (Brooks & Goldstein, 2003; Sanchez, 2003; Sanchez, 2008; Search Institute, 2012). The more assets



or protective factors a student maintains, the more likely they will have the coping strategies, resiliency, and/or qualities and characteristics necessary to overcome the stressors in their lives.

3. Administrators should consider timing when dealing with situations that occur at school. If it is possible to wait until the end of the day to address trivial issues, less learning time will be lost. If it is not possible, consider pulling students from classes they are doing well in; otherwise, students miss instruction critical to helping them succeed. Students interviewed shared that when a student is pulled out of class to address an issue, it is likely little learning will transpire for the rest of the day. Jensen (1998) and Kovalik and Olsen (1997) both reported that emotion drives attention and attention drives memory.
4. Administration must pursue attendance issues. Based on student interviews, there is typically a reason students are absent that is not always readily or truthfully revealed by some caregivers. Willow shared a story about her principal that didn't pursue her absences. She said, "It might be normal for . . . Native American kids to be gone from school a lot, but I feel like sometimes more can be done."

#### *Recommendations for Classroom Teachers*

1. Build relationships with students. Students in the study discussed perceptions they believed teachers' had of them. Students know if you look at them and see strengths or lack of potential. They know if you care about them or if you don't. They know if you think they are "loud,"

“annoying,” or “disruptive.” Greet them every day by name. Smile at them. Recognize them. Every student in the study spoke about the significance and power of relationships . . . intentionally build connections with all students.

2. Create engaging classrooms. The use of brain compatible strategies and techniques should not be optional. There is much research on how learning occurs. As a reminder for the reader, Starnes (2006) shared three powerful strands of findings that have emerged regarding what works most often for Native American children. The first one was that most Native children learn best when hands-on, experiential teaching and learning approaches are used. The use of real-life experiences to provide prior knowledge should be considered in lesson planning as essential elements of quality lesson design (Jensen, 2009; Kovalik & Olsen, 1997). Students repeatedly talked about the desire to learn through activities. They do not feel engaged when learning “straight from the book.”
3. Maintain high expectations of students. Expect them to complete their homework. Remember Tatiana’s story about the teacher who made a comment assuming she had not completed her homework. Contrary to the teacher’s belief, Tatiana said her homework was completed in her backpack.
4. Be clear on each lesson’s goals. Students in the study indicated it was difficult to take lecture notes and to listen at the same time. Be clear about whether you want students to take comprehensive notes or if you

want them to listen attentively so they can acquire a certain level of knowledge.

5. Respond to questions posed by students with sensitivity and clarity. Students interviewed talked about being uncomfortable asking questions. Be kind in your responses. Assist students in ways that makes sense to them. Repeating steps needed to solve a problem in the same way is not helpful if students didn't get it the first time.
6. Serve as a positive role model. Students learn morals and values from what you do or don't do, and from what you say or don't say. Be enthused about the work you do. Students interviewed indicated they did not know whether or not teachers wanted "to be there." Don't act like you "hate [your] job" or be "crabby," "mean," or "snotty." Make sure students know you chose to be a teacher for the right reason . . . to help them learn.
7. Be cognizant of the amount of homework students are assigned after hours. Several of the students interviewed reported having to care for younger siblings, which often includes: supervising younger siblings, making supper, feeding younger siblings their supper, assisting with homework, and bathing routines. This leaves little time for older children to complete what they are expected to do for school. Listen for hidden messages about why homework/assignments may not be complete. Listen for signs of embarrassment and offer alternatives.

### *Recommendations for Parents/Guardians*

1. Recognize the impact of drinking, substance abuse, and relationship issues on children. The students interviewed shared heart-wrenching stories of the impact of alcohol and drug use in their lives. Work hard to minimize the negative effects. Be courageous and take care of mental health issues. Serve as a model for your children; choose to be healthy. Nurture resiliency in yourself as a parent and in your children. Strive to build assets in yourself and in your children (Sanchez, 2003; Search Institute, 2012).
2. Avoid moving too many times. Do everything you can to have as few moves as possible. Stability is important. It was Cecilia's wish. She said, "First, I would make a law that you couldn't change schools more than once a year."
3. Use caution when delegating parental responsibilities to older siblings. Too much dependence on older children to assume parenting duties may prevent the oldest children from getting their own needs met as adolescents. If they are so consumed in taking care of younger siblings, it may prevent them from being able to succeed in school. The oldest children need support, too. Remember Willow's story about her oldest brother who dropped out of school because he was too busy caring for siblings to get his homework done.
4. Stay involved or in contact with your children, even if you are divorced or separated. Mothers and fathers both have a role in raising a child. The

students interviewed shared many devastating stories of feeling abandoned, by one or both of their biological parents, and the loneliness and unending questioning of “why” that continues.

5. Celebrate with your child and tell them when you are pleased with choices they have made or when they have achieved accomplishments or obtained milestones. Students interviewed for this study spoke of the importance of receiving encouragement from parents. Accept each child for who they are. Do not pick “favorites” or choose one child over the other. Willow’s story should serve as a reminder that if you have children, you should care for all of them. Remember Willow’s story about her biological dad picking favorites among his children and “not claiming” others.
6. Show an interest in learning. Ask your children what they do in school each day. Talk to them about interests they have shown and strengths they are developing, both inside or outside of school. Several students discussed the importance of being able to talk to family members about the things they learned at school on any given day.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

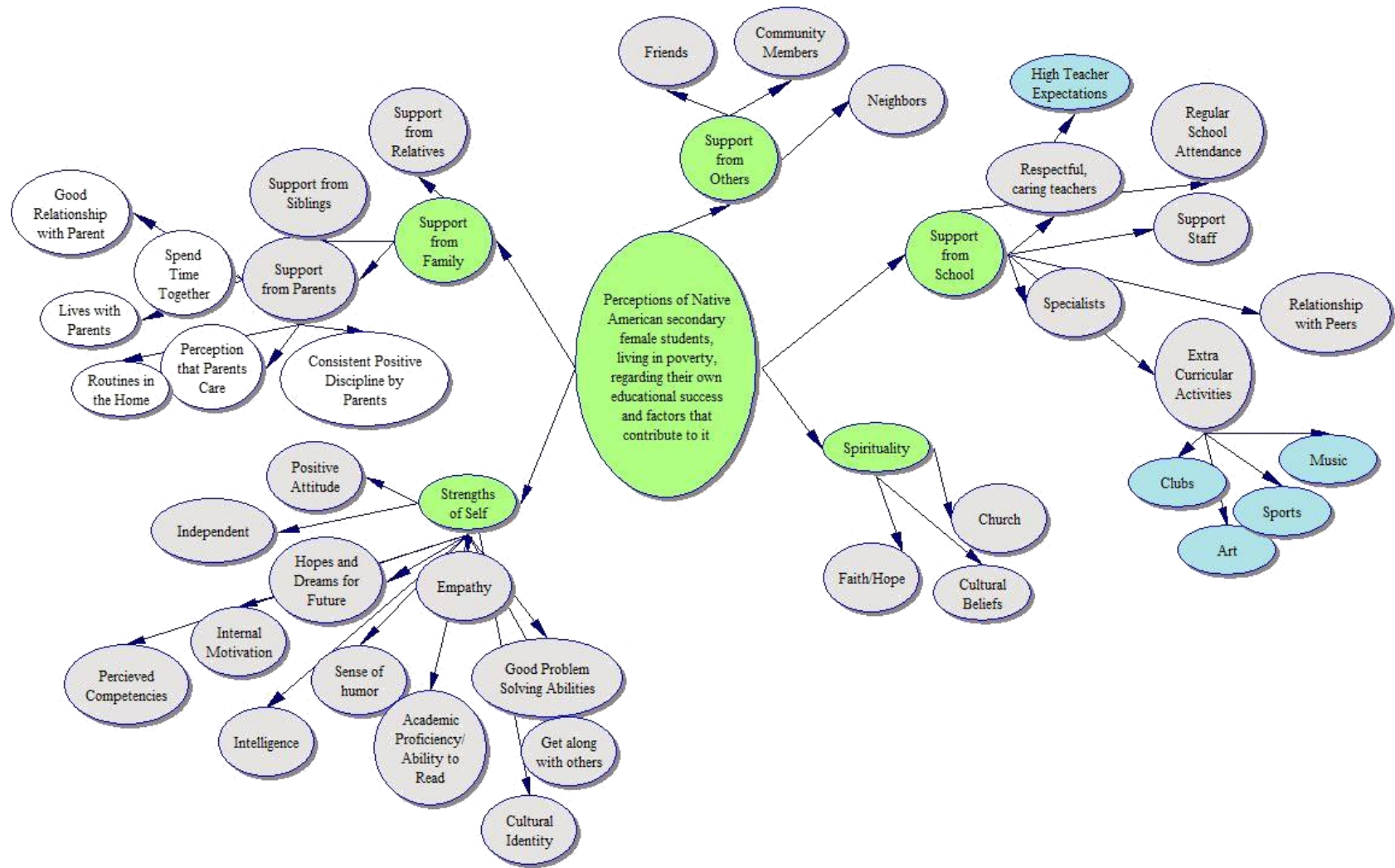
1. The study should be replicated and expanded to include a larger number of Native American female secondary students. It would be interesting to compare difficulties and factors associated with academic success with students in other school districts.

2. The study should be replicated and expanded to include Native American male secondary students to determine similarities and differences in regards to difficulties and factors associated with academic success by gender.

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK MAP





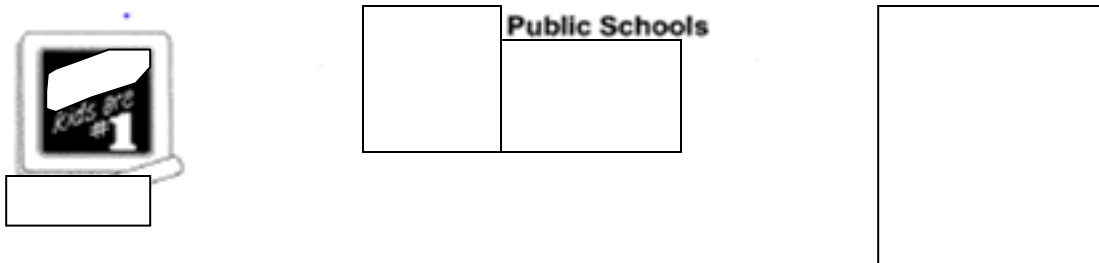
**Perceptions of Native American secondary female students, living in poverty,  
regarding their own educational success and factors that contribute to it**

- I. Strengths of Self
  - A. Positive Attitude
  - B. Independent
  - C. Hopes and Dreams for Future
  - D. Empathy
  - E. Internal Motivation
  - F. Sense of Humor
  - G. Good Problem Solving Abilities
  - H. Get Along with Others
  - I. Academic Proficiency/Ability to Read
  - J. Intelligence
  - K. Perceived Competencies
  - L. Cultural Identity
- II. Support from Family
  - A. Support from Relatives
  - B. Support from Siblings
  - C. Support from Parents
    - 1. Spend Time Together
    - 2. Lives with Parents
    - 3. Routines in the Home
    - 4. Perception that Parents Care
    - 5. Consistent Positive Discipline by Parents
    - 6. Good Relationship with Parent
- III. Support from School
  - A. Respectful, Caring Teachers
    - 1. High Teacher Expectations
  - B. Support Staff
  - C. Specialists

- D. Extra Curricular Activities
  - 1. Music
  - 2. Sports
  - 3. Clubs
  - 4. Art
- E. Regular School Attendance
- F. Relationship with Peers
- IV. Support from Others
  - A. Friends
  - B. Community Members
  - C. Neighbors
- V. Spirituality
  - A. Church
  - B. Faith/Hope
  - C. Cultural Beliefs

APPENDIX B

DISTRICT APPROVAL TO USE DATA



March 10, 2010

To whom it may concern:

Mrs. Fran Rodenburg has asked for approval to conduct a study entitled, "Native American Secondary Students' Perspectives on School Success," as part of the required coursework for her Doctoral Degree through the University of North Dakota.

I understand the study will involve an interview process between Mrs. Rodenburg and four [redacted] Public School students. After obtaining a list of 100 students through the District's PowerSchool database, Mrs. Rodenburg will randomly select four female students who are all in the same grade level, who have scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the [redacted] SA, and who are living in poverty (as defined by free or reduced meals). She will make an appointment by phone or personally visit with the parent/guardian of the students selected to explain her interest in interviewing their daughter. If they are in agreement, Mrs. Rodenburg will visit with their child to determine their interest/willingness to participate in two or three future interviews (each interview would be 30-60 minutes in length). Signed consent forms will be sought from the parents of students who will be interviewed.

Mrs. Rodenburg's reason for doing this research is to record the perspectives of students and share the common contributing factors of student success with district educators in a way that can promote academic success. Her research question is: How do Native American Secondary Students, who are living in poverty, perceive their own success and define the factors that contribute to it?

Please consider this letter official approval from the [redacted] Public Schools for Mrs. Rodenburg to conduct this study.

Sincerely, [Signature]  
[Redacted Name]  
Superintendent

APPENDIX C  
CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in an educational research study that involves interviews relating to their experience in school.

**Who is conducting the research?**

My name is Fran Rodenburg. I am a doctoral student at the University of North Dakota. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for completing a Doctoral Dissertation study. I will complete the research, under the supervision of Dr. Sherry Houdek, my doctoral advisor.

**What is the research?**

The research is titled, “Native American Secondary Students' Perspectives on School Success.” The purpose of this study is to gather information to help educators understand factors that contribute to school success for Native American students. The students interviewed will all be students who are Native American, living in poverty (as defined by free or reduced lunch), and have received scores of proficient or advanced on the  State Assessment in the areas of reading and math.

**What will the participants be asked to do?**

If you agree that your daughter can participate, I will interview her two or three times for 30-60 minutes each time. I will record the interviews using an audio recorder and

will supplement the interview process with note taking. Following the interviews, the recordings and notes will be transcribed.

**How much time commitment will there be?**

Each interview should not take more than 30-60 minutes. There will be a total of two or three interviews.

**How will confidentiality be maintained?**

All names of the participants will be changed in the transcripts. The reports of this study will maintain the use of pseudonyms. The audio files, consent forms, and pseudonym list, and any other documentation will be stored in separate locked file cabinets in my home. Other persons who audit IRB (Institutional Review Board) procedures and the researcher will be the only persons with access to consent forms, audio files, and transcripts. All files and documents will be stored as described for three years after the research is completed after which they will be shredded. Any material on the researcher's computer will be stored in a password-protected file. As an educator, I am considered a mandatory reporter. If, in the unlikely event, your child expresses anything concerning harming themselves or others, I am required to report this.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

The participants may benefit from verbalizing the benefits and limitations of their school experiences. Others who may benefit from this study would be administrators and teaching staff.

**Whom to contact?**

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Fran Rodenburg at (w) 701-527-4327 or (h) 701-387-4736, 1650 Highway 83 SE, [ ] North Dakota 58572. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk to someone else.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to discontinue your child’s participation at any time and have any of your files destroyed with no adverse consequences to you. Your signature below indicates you have read the consent form and understand its contents. You will be provided a copy of this form.

I hereby give permission for my daughter to be interviewed.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of child

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of parent or guardian

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What are your favorite classes? Why?
3. Who were your favorite teachers? Why?
4. Tell me about your school experience.
5. What is your most important accomplishment to date?
6. What goals do you have?
7. How do you plan to achieve these goals?
8. How do you personally define success?
9. Describe a situation in which you were successful.
10. What do you think it takes to be successful in school?
11. What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction in your life?
12. If you were talking to another student that was about to start school, what would you tell him?
13. If you could change one thing about your school experience, what one thing would you change?
14. What qualities do you feel a successful teacher should have?
15. Tell me about some of your recent goals and what you did to achieve them.

16. What major problem have you had to deal with recently?
17. What is your greatest strength?
18. What is your greatest weakness?
19. What motivates you?
20. If I were to ask one of your teachers to describe you, what would he or she say?
21. What changes would you make at your school?
22. What do you like most about school?
23. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your school experience that wasn't covered in these questions?
24. What do you feel you've learned from being in school?
25. What things can you observe about yourself that are different now from when you first started school that you believe are directly related to what you learned in school?
26. How could school be improved?
27. Do you believe that you are a successful student? If so, why?
28. What accounts for your academic success?
29. What can maintain your success in the future?
30. How does middle school compare to elementary school?
31. What do you do in class when you don't understand the content?
32. What word would describe the best teacher you have ever had?
33. What would I need to know to be successful in school?



34. How do you describe people who are successful in school despite the many problems they face?
35. What kinds of things are most challenging for you in school?
36. What do you do when you face difficulties at school?
37. When you are having a bad day, what can help?
38. What do you do to keep healthy, mentally, physically, and emotionally?
39. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you have faced in school?
40. What do you like most about school?
41. What do you dislike most about school?
42. What motivates you to do well in school?
43. How do you define success in school?
44. Describe your ideal school.
45. How do you handle conflict?
46. What has been the most difficult situation you have faced?

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