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Academic Persistence Among Native American High Schools Students:
A Qualitative Case Study

Tianna Jeanne Buckley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

Aaron P. Jackson, Chair
Carol J. Ward
Paul Caldarella

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Academic Persistence Among Native American High School Students: A Qualitative Case Study

Tianna Jeanne Buckley

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, BYU
Educational Specialist

Qualitative interviews with 12 Native American high school junior and senior students who grew up on reservations identified the following themes related to their persistence in college: (a) faculty support, (b) structured social support, (c) family support or the lack thereof, (d) motivation to be better, and (e) encountering racism. The results indicated a need for clear academic expectations between the school district and the tribal liaisons, multicultural training to foster positive relationships from the primary to secondary level, and structured college preparatory instruction designed for Native American students. Results also indicated a need for further research into the educational experiences of multiethnic students.

Keywords: Native American education; American Indian education; high school students; academic persistence; qualitative research, multicultural education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION TO THE STRUCTURE.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Methods.....	4
Participants and Settings	5
Data Collection	7
Data Analysis	9
Results.....	11
Surface Themes.....	11
Faculty support.....	11
Structured social support.....	12
Family support:	12
Deep Themes	13
Lack of family support.....	13
Motivation to be better.....	14

Encountering racism	14
Discussion	16
Implications.....	20
Conclusion	23
References.....	24
APPENDIX A: Literature Review.....	30
APPENDIX B: Interview Guidelines	50
APPENDIX C: Parental Consent.....	51
APPENDIX D: Youth Assent.....	53

INTRODUCTION TO THE STRUCTURE

This thesis, *Academic Persistence Among Native American High School Students: A Qualitative Study*, is written in a hybrid format. This hybrid format combines traditional thesis and journal publication layouts. The preliminary pages reflect requirements for submission to the university. The thesis report is presented as a journal article and conforms to length and style requirements for submitting research reports to psychology and education journals. The literature review and references for the literature review are included in Appendix A. Appendix B contains the guided questions used in the interviews. Appendices C and D are the forms used for parental consent and student assent.

Introduction

Much research has been dedicated to the role that education plays in the quality of life achieved by different ethnic and racial groups in the United States. The prevailing view concludes that “the importance of education is due to the connection between educational credentials and participation in the labor market” (Ward, 2005, p. 2). That is, levels of educational achievement shape occupational attainment, which determines, to a large extent, a person’s socioeconomic status (i.e., social status, occupational prestige, and wealth; Ward, 2005). It also affects other social outcomes such as attitudes toward and participation in cultural, social, and civic life (Kingston et al., 2003). This suggests that educational attainment is a prerequisite to labor force participation, hence, a factor in stratification.

Dropping out of school has become a prominent educational problem that results in costs not only to individuals but also to larger society. Research has shown that students who drop out of school are more likely to have health problems, participate in criminal activities, be employed in lower income jobs, and become more dependent on welfare and other public assistance programs (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Rumberger, 1987). Research has also shown that students bear greater risk of leaving school if they perform poorly academically, demonstrate more misbehaviors, become less engaged in school activities, come from low-income families or single-parent families, have a less supportive relationship with parents, attend schools with poor academic quality, obtain less support from teachers, or get negative influence from peers (Alexander et al., 1997; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pag, 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Rumberger, 1987, 1995).

While the existing body of research has provided useful insights, very little has included significant numbers of Native American students, despite the fact that these youth are often at particular risk for school failure (Fore & Chaney, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, Faircloth & Tippeconic, 2010). In past years, some research has been focused on understanding why many Native Americans have difficulty completing requirements for high school and postsecondary degrees (Bryan, 2004; Downs, 2005; Gritts, 1997; Hill, 2004; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003; Reddy, 1993; Simms, 1999).

Researchers studying Native American student performance and persistence have generally espoused positivistic approaches, which were primarily developed to study general student populations (Belgarde, 1992; Larimore & McClellan, 2005). That is, much of the research exploring Native American academic persistence has used positivistic, quantitative methods, espousing Euro-American theoretical frameworks regarding retention (Larimore & McClellan, 2005). For example, studies by Jeanotte (1981), Fox (1982), and McNamara (1982) used grade point averages and credits completed to measure persistence and found socio-economic status, type of high school, high school grade point average, parental education level, parental attitudes and support, and financial aid were the most indicative of college performance and completion.

While this body of research has been informative, it does not provide sufficient explanations for variance among ethnic groups. Moreover, the use of privileged Euro-American populations as the primary reference group for studying the education and persistence of Native Americans can be quite disparaging. Knowledge of the worldview of whatever ethnic population a researcher is studying is important, especially when seeking to understand phenomena specific to that population, so that a researcher can better identify and understand what biases and

assumptions may impact data collection and interpretation. Native American studies are no exception to this (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008).

Theoretical frameworks utilizing the perspectives of Native Americans to study academic persistence and retention are beginning to emerge, including the use of resiliency theory (Clark, 2002) and the Family Education Model (Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002; Heavyrunner & Morris, 1997). Research focusing on Native American populations is also beginning to utilize methodological practices, primarily qualitative methods, which more fully consider and include the perspectives of Native Americans (Benjamin et al., 1993; Dodd et al., 1995; Garrod & Larrimore, 1997; Jackson & Smith, 2001). Benjamin et al. (1993) suggested the qualitative interview allows researchers to better account for differences in persistence and educational attainment of Native American students not readily apparent through quantitative, statistical analysis. These research approaches have provided increased understanding of the subjective educational experience of Native American students. This study was an effort to contribute to this body of qualitative research examining the subjective educational experiences of Native American students.

The primary objective of this study was to increase understanding of the subjective experience of Native American high school students and to articulate the factors they believe facilitated or detracted from their efforts to graduate from high school. The philosophical foundation for the method of this study is based in a relational ontology (Jackson, 2005; Schwandt, 2000) and employs a hermeneutic approach in the analysis in order to understand interview dialogues as both individual perspectives and as a cultural experience as a whole. This study increases our understanding of this specific cultural group, and explores the culture of a secluded, multi-ethnic community that is at once both divided and united.

Methods

The philosophical foundation for the method of this study was based in a relational ontology (Jackson, 2005; Schwandt, 2000). This philosophy assumes that relationships are primary and necessary to understanding human experiences and are more fundamental than the individuals themselves. Consistent with the relational perspective, the epistemological foundation for this method is hermeneutic and dialectic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An essential tenet of this epistemology is that “understanding is something that is produced in [that] dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195, italics in original). In alignment with this philosophy, Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) approach to interviewing was integrated. This approach includes the following aspects (adapted from Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 28–32):

1. Attention to the everyday “life world” of the participants.
2. Efforts to understand the meaning of the themes in the dialogue.
3. Dialogue aimed at qualitative rather than quantitative knowledge.
4. Encouragement of in-depth descriptions of the participants’ experience,
5. Encouragement of descriptions of specific experiences.
6. A deliberate openness to novel and unexpected perspectives,
7. Focus on the phenomenon of interest without using restrictive questions.
8. Acknowledgement of possible ambiguities and contradictions in the dialogue.
9. Awareness of new insights that may come to interviewer and participant in the interview.
10. Knowledge that each interviewer brings varying degrees of sensitivity to different aspects of the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

Participants and Settings

A total of 12 Native American students (7 females, 4 males) were recruited for this study. Their tribal affiliations were Yavapai, Apache, Navajo, and Hopi (2 Navajo, 1 Apache, 9 multi-tribal). Inclusion criteria included being Native American, having grown up on a reservation, and being a junior or a senior in high school. Being Native American was a necessary selection criterion for this study; the remaining criteria were used to help specifically explore the influence of culture and the academic experience. By excluding those students who were freshmen and sophomores, it was hoped the depth of participants' educational experience would be increased.

All participants were enrolled in the same school district in the Southwest United States with participants from a regular high school and a magnet school. This school district is predominately white (56%), but with a higher percentage of Native American students (11%) than the rest of the state (6%). The district as a whole has a graduation rate of 76%, with the district only graduating 50% of its Native American students. The two schools where data were collected have different cultures. The regular high school has an average enrollment of 400 students, is predominately white, with 8% of the population being Native American. The magnet school has an average enrollment of 99 students, and is also predominately white, though the percentage of Native American students is triple that of the regular high school (24%; Graphiq LLC, 2018). The magnet school also has a reputation of being the school where students go when they face disciplinary issues at the regular high school. Students at the magnet school complete their work online, with only a few teachers who serve in a more supervisory capacity. Both schools rely on a tribal liaison when offering extra-curricular activities and tutoring and academic services for Native American students.

This site was selected because the Native American student enrollment numbers are higher and the primary investigator had established relationships with contact persons at this site. Establishing these positive relationships were essential to facilitating trust between the participants and the primary investigator. Native American populations have intrigued social researchers for hundreds of years; unfortunately, Native Americans have too often been studied with “impudence and insensitivity” (McDonald, 1992, p. 8), creating an attitude of suspicion and bitterness towards researchers (cf. Denzin, et al., 2008). The primary investigator is an *insider* in this community, and, as such, has first-hand knowledge and experiences that helped her relate more with the participants and are relevant to this study. This perspective helped in the data collection and the interpretation of the data. However, the primary investigator also drew on her *outsider* role when examining the data to help her look beyond the framework of her own experiences.

Because the primary investigator grew up in the community and went through this school district herself, this does create a potential for bias, but also allowed for a stronger sense of trust and confidentiality. The reservation in this rural, agricultural community is within the boundaries of a predominately white town. However, the reservation community has its own council, police force, health center, and a tribal Montessori school, creating an atmosphere of *us and them* within the town. Also because of the secluded nature of the town, there is a strong sense of *insiders against outsiders* for the whole community, with strong opinions about and biases against people from even the nearest city. As a result, there is a sense of pride in the *home-grown* professionals who either went outside the community and returned, or never left at all. However, this long-term familiarity contributes to a feeling that everyone knows everyone

else's business, and, within the school system itself, many concerns about nepotism and favoritism.

Because of the primary investigator's familiarity with the staff and culture of both the school and the community, it was assumed that the participants were not as guarded in their comments. As a result, the primary investigator was able to access the most honest and true responses about the experiences of the participants. Had other researchers, who were unfamiliar with the community and the culture, conducted the interviews, the results may not have been as authentic. The experience of returning to the community as a researcher also helped the primary investigator reflect on her own experiences as a multiethnic student in the district, and those experiences ultimately guided her towards researching this specific population.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview format was used to collect data for this study. This format allowed the interviewer to use guiding questions as needed, remain open to changes in the type and sequence of questions asked based on the participants' responses, and spontaneously respond to the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The questions used for this study were modified for the high school setting from a similar study involving college students (Jackson et al., 2003) and after careful review of questions used in similar qualitative research studies with Native Americans. Interview length ranged from five minutes to 40 minutes, with an average interview length of seventeen minutes.

When meeting the participants, the purpose of the study was explained and the potential risks and benefits of participation were outlined. Because the participants were under the age of eighteen, both parent consent and student assent were requested, fully explained, and consent/assent forms completed. After parent consent and student assent were obtained, the

interviewer proceeded with the interview, recording the conversation with a digital recorder.

The types of questions used included (adapted from Kvale, 1996, pp. 133–135):

1. *Introducing questions* which start the conversation and provide spontaneous, rich, descriptions of the phenomena, e.g. “Can you tell me about your experience at the high school?”
2. *Follow-up questions* which allow answers to be extended, communicate the interviewer’s listening attitude, and create the opportunity for further exploration.
3. *Probing questions* which allow the interviewer to probe the content of answer, e.g. “Can you tell me more about how your family has supported your education?”
4. *Specifying questions* which allow the interviewer to obtain clarification and more in-depth descriptions, e.g. “How have you experienced teacher support yourself?”
5. *Direct questions* which allow the interviewer to directly introduce topics, e.g. “How have your friends influenced your education?”
6. *Indirect questions* which allow the interviewer to gain additional insight via projective questions, e.g. “What advice might you give to students who share your same background?”
7. *Structuring questions* which allow the interviewer to “directly and politely break off long answers that are irrelevant to the topic” (p. 134), e.g. “Sounds like an interesting experience. Can you tell me what’s been hardest about getting ready for graduation?”
8. *Interpreting questions* which allow the interviewer to check their interpretation with interviewee and make adjustments as needed, e.g. “So when you had that experience with that teacher, you felt truly supported in your goals?”

Kvale also notes the importance of silence in the interviews, saying it allows the interviewee “ample time to associate and reflect and then break the silence themselves with significant information” (p. 135) instead of being bombarded with question after question by the interviewer. Silence was used appropriately to ensure that the interviewees could easily and sufficiently communicate what they wanted to say.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed during subsequent reviews of the recordings. The interpretation of the transcribed interviews used the same philosophical and theoretical assumptions as were used in conducting the interviews. The transcriptions were analyzed within the principles of the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation as outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 238–239). The following summarizes these principles:

The first canon involves the continuous back-and forth process between parts and the whole...starting with an often vague and intuitive understanding of the text as a whole...A second canon is that an interpretation of meaning ends when one has reached a “good Gestalt,” an inner unity of the text, which is free of logical contradictions. A third canon is the testing of part interpretations against the global meaning of the text...A fourth canon is the autonomy of the text, understood on the basis of its own frame of reference...a fifth canon concerns knowledge about the theme of the text. A sixth principle is that an interpretation of a text is not presuppositionless...A seventh canon states that every interpretation involves innovation and creativity.

Validity is an issue often raised when discussing qualitative interview research. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize that there are no set rules for establishing the validity of qualitative research. As such, Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) assert that qualitative research uses a

continual process of validation throughout the designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysis, and reporting of a given theme by checking, questioning, and theorizing about the interview with each successive reading.

In following these principles, an unfocused overview of the text was completed to approximate the meanings articulated in the dialogue. Next, tentative interpretations were made through successive readings of the material. These tentative interpretations were revisited and either confirmed, revised, or rejected in subsequent readings as they were considered vis-à-vis the parts and the entirety of the interview date. Finally, once valid interpretations were made, the primary investigator worked to effectively communicate the findings in order to produce a precise description of meaningful themes (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). The primary investigator completed all levels of analysis, identifying themes that had broad support in successive readings of the transcripts. Successive readings also aided in identifying potential counterevidence to the initial themes and final themes.

There were a few assumptions made by the principal investigator of this study. First, it was assumed that qualitative interviewing is an effective way to create understanding and meaning in the lives of the participants, and that said meaning will be beneficial in assisting educators, counselors, and the Native American community at large. Second, the principal investigator recognizes that the research questions guiding this study are influenced by her bias and experience as a multiethnic, Native American graduate student who, while raised in the study community, is not part of the dominant tribe of the area. Finally, it was assumed that through the hermeneutic process these biases and assumptions would not harm the trustworthiness of the results.

Results

Our analysis provided results at two levels of depth. The first included *surface* themes, rather obvious themes that developed across each interview. These themes were typically straightforward and consistent with previous findings. The second level included findings that were more nuanced, paradoxical and complex. These themes added perspective to the already multifaceted micro-culture of the selected population and their perspectives on educational achievement.

Surface Themes

Faculty support. Students talked about how they were influenced by the strong support they received from an individual faculty member. For each student, this individual was mentioned multiple times, by name, and was identified as a critical aspect of the student's success in both their academic and personal lives. One student described her experience of dropping out of school to have a child, and then coming back:

When I started [back at school] I met [the principal] for the first time. I didn't know who he was, I didn't know his name, and the first thing he did was he hugged me and said "hello." When I dropped out, he motivated me to come back. A couple times I had to quit because my son had medical problems, but he said no matter what, there's a spot open for me. Because of him, I'm wanting to graduate and I'm wanting to do the best I can do for my son and give him an example instead of just being a dropout.

Another participant described how his special education teacher offered positive support in his personal life:

I count on [my teacher] to give me good advice when I'm down. This is what happened my sophomore year, because I had a lot of problems with my mom, and [my teacher] was

always telling me that things were going to be okay and that this hurts, but that I can use this to help me move on to what I want to be. Because when I was living with my mom, she didn't give me a chance, she didn't let me explain what I wanted to do. She just ignored me. [My teacher] never ignored me. She helped me learn how to handle it and move on.

Structured social support. Participants talked about the positive effects of Native American clubs and other extracurricular groups that provided an extended level of support. One student described his experience with the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) program:

It's been really inspiring for me, just how there's so many Native youth that want to do something, especially for Indian country. That's really what kind of drives me, I want to go to college and study law and learn about things like that so I can help Native Americans stop getting gypped [*sic*]. I just want to kind of use my powers for good.

Another student described how participation in the basketball team has been an extension of his own family:

My coach and basketball team have pushed me a lot through the years. I struggle through school a lot, and they help me with what they know. Coach always gives 100%. He's like another father to the team. He's been a really good role model in my life and he's helped us all be better people.

Family support. Participants talked about the support they received from a parent or extended family member, such as a grandparent, aunt, or uncle, to finish their education. One student described his uncle's help in going through school:

Half of my family, they didn't really graduate high school, and my uncle was one of the few who did graduate, with honors actually. And he gave a speech at graduation. He's the one who really taught me techniques for school and what I can pass with. He gives me a lot of support in what I want to do after high school.

Another student described how her mother's support has been focused more on overcoming challenges:

My mom sometimes says she could have left us on the street, but we're precious in every single way and that we are her strength. She's always telling us she won't give up on us. Like, sometimes she'll take the weight off our shoulders, but she always puts it back so we can learn how to be strong. She says envision a mountain and don't you want to know what's up there. Bad things are going to happen, but push through it and keep going. There's always someone willing to help you along.

Deep Themes

The dialogue that undergirded the deep themes emerged typically after the primary investigator had established a level of trust with the participants. Likewise, these findings only became clear after repeated analysis of the dialogue.

Lack of family support. While some of the students identified a family member who offered great encouragement, a few struggled to identify any sources of familial support, and often identified only family members who had been negative influences. One student described how a lack of familial encouragement has affected her motivation:

My grandma, I live with her, she's one of the most negative things in my life right now. She's always bragging about me when we're with other people, but when we're at home

she's always saying I'm stupid and that I'm never going to graduate. Right now, I'm not really motivated to do school. I'm here because I have to be, not because I want to be.

Another student described how he feels disconnected from his peers because many of them seemed to struggle due to a lack of parental support:

I think the goals I have are hugely different than the other Native kids because of home life. A lot of kids don't have a mom and a dad, and so there's a lack of guidance. I'm lucky because my parents aren't into drugs and alcohol. I guess that's kind of why I don't hang out with a lot of the Native kids. We just want different things.

Motivation to be better. When asked about their plans and motivations after graduation, many students described a need to do better than someone close to them. One student described how lack of parental support motivates her to be better:

My mom was around, but every time we thought she was better, she'd get back into drugs and alcohol. So, I kind of gave up hope on her, knowing she was just going to go back to everything she did...I'd rather have my son than turn out like my parents. I want him to know I'm investing everything in him.

Another student described what success meant to him:

I've promised myself that I'm not going to be like these other people who live their life in shame, like my mom. I'm going to live my life in happiness and kindness. That's what I'm going to do.

Encountering racism. While racism is a common topic in both scholarly articles and everyday dialogues, the types of racism described in these interviews demonstrates the micro-cultural features of both the dominant tribe of the selected area and the community as a whole; features, of which, community members may be unaware. This theme was also included because

it required the primary investigator to re-examine her own experiences as a multiethnic student in the community.

The students described experiencing racism at all stages of their education. One student recalled:

When I look back at middle school, that place is a wreck. I don't know if it's racially profiling, but I just feel like the Native kids in general are really neglected, especially once they have a failing grade. And then the moment those kids don't do stuff, they're kicked to the alternative school. I honestly feel it's not a fair education, and I barely got by.

Another student felt the same neglect while suffering from severe depression. She recounted how she was contemplating suicide and how the school responded:

I was telling the nurse I wanted to kill myself and all she did was call the police. If it were anyone else, they would have jumped on it, you know? All these teachers would have looked into it. But to them, I was just another kid. That's what you get, not just with them, but with the whole Native American society.

While these instances of racism are more common, a few of the participants highlighted experiences of racism that are seen only within the Native American community. Inter-tribal racism is an event that is common within the Native community, but rarely discussed outside of the Native American culture. Every tribe has its own traditions, stories, and beliefs, and members of those tribes are proud of and celebrate their individual cultural heritage. While the majority of the participants in this school district were Yavapai or Apache, those few who were Navajo or Hopi felt discrimination from their white teachers and from their fellow Native students alike. One student recalled how he doesn't like telling people where he's from:

Not being a [dominant] tribal member here has really made school more difficult, and so I don't really tell people I'm not from here. Like, one of my teachers thought I was born and raised here. I think she was picturing a future tribal chairman, but when she found out I wasn't, I guess her expectations of me kind of went down. Just because I'm not from here.

This same student also reported that he felt like he got roped into events put on by the Native American club "just because [he's] Native" without any consideration for his unique cultural background. Another student reported that she felt the same insensitivity when it came to participating in the Native American club:

It's a Native American club, and we're not all Apache. So when we have parades and stuff like that, I wear my traditional clothes and speak Navajo. There's only one other Navajo in the club and it has been hard trying to get everyone to understand that not everyone's Apache. It makes me happy that I know my own language and can speak out like that.

Discussion

While Native American educational attainment is increasing, they are still only half as likely as Whites to have a college degree, and, with other racial and ethnic minorities, comprise an increasing share of the rural population without a high school diploma (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). The students and the community in this study are no exception to these trends but have found ways to cope with the difficult cultural and societal pressures of this unique community. These students demonstrated resilience in pursuing their high school diploma, even after struggling with varying levels of family support, lack of positive influences, and feeling discouraged by racism.

The experiences related by the participants were, as a whole, not that different from the experience of the primary investigator who graduated from the same school five years prior. While the details were different, the primary investigator recalled the same feelings of disconnect and the motivation to be better:

I think only about 20 of the 92 kids who graduated in my class received their bachelor's degree. I think there were maybe five Native kids in my class, and two of us went to college. I loved growing up there, but I always felt disconnected in some way. I was an ethnic minority being both Asian and Native American, a religious minority, and I felt like I valued education a little more than the rest of my peers. Everything I did to get to college I did with my parents, without any support from the counseling office. It was a fight to take calculus, and there were only two students in the class, me and the foreign exchange student. I think a lot of people would say that a good academic education took a back-seat to athletics and vocational education.

Conversely, the experiences of the participants in regards to family support were nothing like those of the primary investigator, but illustrate the importance of strong, positive family support in education. The average family household among the tribal members highlighted in this study are three times more likely to be headed by a female householder with no husband present (36%) than the county (9%) or state (12%). Children under age 18 are also four times more likely to live with grandparents (9.6%) than they are at the county (1.7%) and state (2.3%) level. Poverty rates for this population are approximately three times higher (42%) than the county (14%) and state (15%) levels, and more than half of all children under 18 are considered to be living in poverty (Arizona Rural Policy Institute, n.d.). In accordance with Maslow's

(1943) Hierarchy of Needs, when a student's physiological needs aren't being met, experiences and opportunities for self-actualization and education are few and far between.

While the primary investigator never faced these familial challenges personally, she was not immune to their social effects:

Often times, I had friends coming to me and seeking advice because of my strong family background. I could always be consistent in my plans I made with my friends, because I was never worried about how I would get to places or pay for things. For the majority of my high school experience, I split my lunch with friends who didn't have one, or I knew of friends whose only opportunity to eat was during our culinary arts class. I was fortunate to be able to focus on my academics without having to worry about family dynamics. I wasn't worried about getting to school on time, or having time to do my homework, or even what I was going to have for dinner because I knew both of my parents would be home and would provide. I knew early on where I wanted to go to college and what I wanted to study. Some of my friends weren't so fortunate and didn't have such detailed future plans, Native and non-Native alike.

According to the National Education Association, "rural communities depend on their schools to serve many functions beyond their primary mission of educating children...and serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of their communities" (2017). However, in a town where an estimated 16% of adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher and an estimated poverty rate of 25% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), the culture created is one of supporting the existing community rather than improving the community through higher education opportunities. This is typical of rural communities around the world, and especially on Native American reservations where the share of adults with at least a bachelor's degree is 14%

lower than in urban areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Different places provide different conditions and barriers that directly and indirectly provide certain opportunities for individuals, and close others off, which may affect student motivation and choices (Bæck, 2016).

The town in this study is characterized as lower middle class, primarily composed of retirees and the less educated. The county as a whole has a lower percentage of adults with an Associate's degree or higher than the national average, and is considered a poorly educated county (Graphiq, 2018). The town was founded by ranchers and farmers, labor markets that require a different, non-traditional formal education. These labor markets continue to be the dominant labor markets for the community and may contribute to a perception of citizens having fewer career options because they are less likely to have continued formal education. As with other rural areas in the United States and on reservations (Deyhle and Margonis, 1995; Jackson & Smith, 2001), it is difficult for individuals in this community to be exposed to people in different career settings and thus never consider different, potentially higher-education demanding careers as viable options.

The maintaining of the status quo may also be due to the higher pay offered in urban areas to workers with college degrees. In regards to public education specifically, the town, county, and state offer teacher salaries that are at least \$14,000 less than the national average, and the school district spends approximately \$3,700 less revenue per student than the national average. In contrast, the county allocates more funding per student when they are enrolled in vocational and technology courses (Graphiq, 2018).

Bearchief-Adolpho et. al (2017) referred to this phenomenon as a *brain drain*, or “the permanent or long-term migration of skilled human capital produc[ing] a negative effect on the native countries when educated, human capital fails to return” (p. 2) in their work with the

Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation is spending millions of dollars facilitating the education of tribal members in an effort to raise the level of human capital on its reservation. However, the scholarship recipients who graduate from college fail to return to the reservation in significant numbers for a number of reasons, including little to no job opportunities, no housing, and few conveniences. Those who did return were motivated by family, community, cultural identity, a want for a simpler life, and a commitment to the Reservation. In short, those who returned did so for the constant and meaningful relationships rather than career-growth opportunities.

This commitment to relationships is ultimately what led the primary investigator to pursue this research and a career in education:

I've known since I was a junior in high school that I wanted to do something in education, because I wanted to come back home and give back to my community. There are so many wonderful people in my community who have influenced me in some way, and who continue to influence the people and youth in the community. Sure we have our quirks and our problems, but we also have talents and ambitions, and I think for the most part we are trying to become a more positive and supportive community. I want to join their ranks in promoting that community. I know that the career opportunities aren't abundant, and I know some people may view going back as a waste of education or talent, but I think that there could be nothing more beneficial than being an example of what different opportunities are out there in the world, and what someone from the community can achieve.

Implications

Based on the results of this study and the related existing literature, we have several observations and recommendations for helping the students of this community have positive

experiences in their education. At the broadest level, both the school and tribal communities need to attend to the contradictory message of producing *home-grown* professionals while struggling to provide a rigorous and comprehensive education. That is, there is a more explicit assumption that those individuals who can find success professionally without leaving the community are more valued, while there is a more implicit assumption that a rigorous, college preparatory education that can expand the professional opportunities of the students is not an important focus in the school district. This is supported by the evidence provided above, which indicates that more funding is allocated for vocational and technology courses than for academic and college preparatory courses. Reconciling these assumptions may involve a prolonged discussion between the school board, superintendent, and tribal liaisons about what they want the future of their students to be.

At an institutional level, our study suggests that the school district needs to attend to generating positive relationships between faculty and students at all levels to facilitate a supportive environment throughout the elementary to high school level. Similarly, our experience with the participants suggests that proactive efforts to establish mentoring relationships early in the high school experience would increase academic persistence.

In conversations with the participants after the formal interview was completed in which the participants displayed little to no knowledge about scholarship opportunities specifically for Native American students. These conversations were congruent with the researchers own family experience in preparing for college. This persuaded the investigator that a structured college preparation program that emphasized the scholarship opportunities for the Native American students would be beneficial for those students who want to attend college but lack the financial

stability to do so. This could be done in conjunction with the Native American club and the Tribal Youth Council.

The experiences of racism among our participants were discouraging, and particularly resonated with the primary investigator:

I don't recall ever feeling discriminated against, other than never being interested in joining the Native American club because I didn't feel like I was the *right* kind of Native or *enough* of a Native. But, my mom told me about how she was once discussing the low performance of the Native students and asked a teacher why her kids were never viewed as less intelligent like the other Native kids. The teacher told her that everyone in the schools saw us as Asian, not Native American, so they expected us to do better.

Not only is this an age-old stereotype (as discussed by Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), this subtle act of profiling, along with the experiences of the participants, indicates that racially oppressive experiences among Native Americans are still prevalent, and that these students are still "subject to prejudices that more populous minorities have begun to overcome" (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003, p. 562). This expression of not being *enough* or *right* has also persuaded us that additional research is needed to understand the experiences of multi-ethnic students and the unique racial oppressions they may face. How do students navigate their multi-ethnicity in college? What are the experiences of multiethnic students living on the reservation? What are the experiences of multiethnic students raised off the reservation when interacting with members of their own tribe or culture? How does an individual's multi-ethnic qualities help or hinder academic success? These questions can help guide researchers in understanding the experiences of multi-ethnic students.

Conclusion

Learning is never detached from who one is, where one is, or whom one is with; it never takes place in a social vacuum but must always be understood as a product of social processes where actors play consequential interpretive roles to constructing reality.

(Bæck, 2016, p. 441)

There is no one factor that determines a student's academic success, and no combination of factors is consistent across all students. The history and treatment of Native Americans in education in the United States has created a unique cultural background for these peoples, one that has trickled down through generations of both students and educators. As such, research into the experiences of Native American students at all levels may be beneficial to the future development and training of multiculturally competent educators.

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APPENDIX A

Literature Review

Disparities in academic achievement across ethnic groups in the United States have long been of concern to both educational and developmental scholars, and a considerable body of research has attempted to uncover the causes of these disparities (Ashmore et al., 2004; Fuligni et al., 2005; Guzman et al., 2005; Newcomb et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2001; Wong et al., 2003). Stone and Gridley (1991) examined the relationship between academic achievement and race and found that, on average, Native Americans perform at a lower than expected level through elementary and secondary levels of education. Studies have also indicated that Native American students typically experience less academic success than students of other ethnicities (Humphries, 1988; Matthews & Smith, 1994; Stone & Gridley, 1991). Drop outs in particular are a serious concern for this ethnic group.

High school dropout rates have become one of the most prominent educational problems which results in costs not only to individuals but also to larger society. Research has shown that students who dropped out of school are more likely to have health problems, get involved in criminal activities, be employed with lower income jobs, and become more dependent on welfare and other public assistant programs, (e.g., Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1987).

Research has also shown that students bear greater risk of leaving school if they perform poorly academically, demonstrate more misbehaviors, become less engaged in school activities, come from low-income families or single-parent families, have a less-supportive relationship with parents, join schools with poor academic quality, obtain less support from teachers, or get negative influence from peer friends (e.g., Alexander et al., 1997; Archambault et al., 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Englund et al., 2008; Janosz et al., 2008; Kaplan et al., 1997; Lan &

Lanthier, 2003; Rumberger, 1987, 1995). While the existing body of research has been very beneficial, very little has included significant numbers of Native American students, despite the fact that these youth are often at particular risk for school failure (Fore & Chaney, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Native Americans in Education

In the 2008-09 school year, 40% of Native American students attended a school that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress. In that same year, 46% of Native American students received special education services, compared to the national average of 20%. In 2011, 52% of Native American children lived in single-parent households. In 2012, 29.1% of Native Americans lived in poverty – the highest rate of any race group – compared to the 15.9% for the entire nation. Between 2005 and 2011, Native American students have performed 13 points below non-Native American students in reading, and the gap in mathematics has increased from 15 to 19 points below on standardized, end-of-year tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). With these factors in place, it is not surprising that the dropout rate for Native American students is nearly double (15%) that of the rest of the nation (8%) (National Indian Education Association, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

In past years, research has been conducted on understanding why many Native Americans have difficulty completing requirements for high school and postsecondary degrees (Bryan, 2004; Downs, 2005; Gritts, 1997; Hill, 2004; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Jackson et al., 2003; Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003; Reddy, 1993; Simms, 1999). Several authors have attempted to explain the puzzle of non-persistence among Native American students. Their conclusions can be divided into three categories: (a) sociocultural factors, (b) academic factors, and (c) personal factors (Jackson et al., 2003).

Sociocultural Factors

Benjamin, Chambers, and Reiterman (1993) concluded that lack of academic persistence was due to colleges' failure to accommodate Native American culture. Other studies with college students (Lamborn et al., 1997; Lin, 1990; Ward, 1998) have suggested that a clearer sense of ethnic identity may lead to better academic performance in college. Willetto (1999) also found that family influences such as parental education, and family adherence to traditional cultural practices contributed to commitment to academic commitment and achievement.

Ward (2005) also delved extensively into other familial factors. In her work with the Northern Cheyenne, it was found that some older generation members had negative experiences with boarding schools, but others attended the public high school and had somewhat better experiences. In reference to generational differences, one source (who was in school in the 1950s and 1960s) reflected on support for schooling at that time on the reservation: "When I think back to grade school, there was a lot of parents who didn't see the importance of having a productive home for their kids. A lot of the kids had to babysit instead of coming to school...so a lot of the girls in the eighth grade quit; they didn't go on to high school. A lot of the boys quit just because of no encouragement" (p. 123).

Experiences like this are not uncommon and have affected adults' views of education. It is only within the last two generations that more than 50% of adults have finished high school (Ward, 2005). As a result, the parents of current students had few childhood role models who taught them about how adults support their children in their education. Thus, while some adults now support education either as role models or by helping their children, others may take actions only when graduation becomes problematic, and still others ignore the problems completely. Closely monitoring and assisting with homework are not typical behaviors for parents who

utilize a more traditional, noninterfering parenting style. Other parents do not intervene because of competing personal problems or family needs. These approaches represent the diversity of cultural norms of not only Native communities, but of society as a whole.

Substance abuse among adults and children is another major social factor for Native American students. In 2011, greater percentages of Native American secondary students reported that drugs were offered, sold, or given to them on school property (40% compared to 23% each for White, Black, and Asian students), 47% reported using marijuana anywhere, and 45% reported consuming alcohol anywhere in the 30 days prior to the survey (National Indian Education Association, 2012). When alcohol or drug abuse is present, children often lack sufficient supervision to even prepare for school. In such situations, parents' education levels and educational values may have little positive effect, since they rarely translate into behaviors that guide students' school efforts. Substance abuse may also result in violence and emotional trauma that have negative effects on students' attention to their schooling. Thus, to the extent that persons in the home are involved with substance abuse and belong to groups that support these behaviors, it is much more likely that children will not receive the support they need for schooling and that their performance will suffer.

It is also important to consider the ambivalence that comes with learning "white man's knowledge and ways". There are some in a Native community that consider this knowledge to be a way of becoming superior to others in the community. For example, high levels of education are better tolerated if community members do not feel that the person has changed or become snobbish. This attitude can overshadow the value that family and tribal leaders place on obtaining an education (Ward, 2005). Still, research shows that traditional cultural resources, especially at the community level, can have positive effects on schooling. Unlike the "cultural

deprivation” or “cultural difference” approaches used to assess the role of culture in schooling, Ward’s research showed that differences in individual experiences and school outcomes can be better understood by examining (a) the specific meaning of schooling and its relation to the cultural knowledge and the social relations within family, community, and reservation groups and (b) how these different social and cultural groups relate to schooling.

Academic Factors

School experiences have been identified as one of the best predictors of an individual’s decision to leave school or not, whether those experiences are positive or negative (McDill et al., 1986). Hoover and Jacobs (1992) argued that Native Americans do not receive adequate preparation from their high school counselors regarding planning for postsecondary education and careers. They proposed that this leaves these students ill prepared to successfully navigate postsecondary education. This is supported by the National Indian Education Association’s 2012 survey in which it was reported that 63% of Native American 8th grade students had never talked to a school counselor during 8th grade about classes they should take in high school or about what they want to do after high school. Other studies have suggested that better preparation with study skills and career development will lead to greater persistence (Sakiestewa, 1996; West, 1988).

Teachers and administration have always been a critical factor in Native American education. Positive and supportive relationships with teachers promote a sense of school belonging, which stimulates the will to participate cooperatively in classroom and school activities. Teacher-student relationships can also predict changes in motivation outcomes, achievement expectancies, general interest in school, and value. In general, when students feel they are in a caring environment with a homelike atmosphere, where they are treated with respect

and care, student interactions with teachers and faculty are similar to relationships with their own extended family (Tosolt, 2010). This helps to diffuse disturbing behavior and reduces classroom conflicts (Giani & O'Guinn, 2010; Ma, 2003). When there is agreement on the educational goals and methods among faculty, students, and parents, there is an increase in opportunities for close interactions between teachers and students. It also shows that providing responsive learning services for at-risk students and high levels of support for low achievers are important to student outcomes (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Similarly, peer relationships have particular importance in one's sense of school belonging. Peer relationships satisfy an adolescent's need to belong, because they offer opportunities to connect with others. When a student's peer group is always changing or if they never find a peer group to connect with, it can lead to a lowered sense of belonging, less positive feelings toward school, and academic engagement (Ryan, 2001). However, when a student has a strong peer group, it acts as a buffer to experiences of exclusion and can even affect a student's academic and social competence (Osterman, 2000).

Native American education studies also show that engagement with school and extracurricular activities improves performance and increases their chances of graduation (Deyhle, 1992, Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). Conversely, negative experiences with schools, as evidenced by suspensions, poor attendance, transfers to other schools, and conflicts with school authorities increase the chances of dropping out. These factors are relatively consistent among Native and non-Native students alike (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Brandt, 1992; Jordan et al., 1996; Ward, 2005).

Another academic factor influencing persistence is the structure of formal education itself. Formal learning is primarily based in the western science of child development.

Traditionally, the Anglo-American concept of development maintains that children do not become adults until they are 18, they are too immature to make their own decisions, do not know what is best for them, and should do as they are told (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994). Thus, formal education in the United States is a system of assimilation and control. Since its inception, Native American education was based on assimilation in order to control the “Indian problem”, and for over 100 years, formal education was out of their control (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). While local and tribal control is now a reality in public schools on reservations across the United States, Native American students still have to teach themselves how to succeed in a system that was never designed to accommodate their unique cultural learning styles.

Personal Factors

This third category includes a large number of factors that can be directly attributed to individual differences that are mainly within the power of the person to influence or direct in some way. Personal variables may include attitudes (e.g., motivation, work ethics), self-perceptions (e.g., confidence, self-efficacy), behaviors (e.g., work organization, study habits), problem-solving (e.g., critical thinking, decision making), and values (e.g., personal preferences, beliefs).

Lyubomirsky (2008) suggested that while 60% of an individual’s success outcomes are determined by genetics and life circumstances, the key to success is the remaining 40%, which includes the variables a person may directly influence. Satisfaction, happiness, and success are manifested by putting effort into the variables in which one has control, including attitudes, emotions, and personal behaviors, and many studies provide evidence there is a relationship between these personal variables and college performance (Chemers et al., 2001; Davidson &

Beck, 2006; Friedlander et al., 2007; Lahmers & Zulauf, 2000; Macan et al., 1990; Robbins et al., 2006).

However, it is difficult to contextualize these factors without considering cultural factors. How one defines success is influenced by their experiences (e.g. I am successful if I graduate from high school because no one else in my family has). Individual attitudes, positive or negative, are influenced by the attitudes of family, friends, and the community a person is raised in. Middleton et al. (2013) proposed that researchers needed to consider motivation influenced by both individual qualities and context, especially when examining motivation of indigenous and minority learners. Without such consideration, they felt that the lack of contextualization would lead to imposing the majority cultural context onto these minority groups.

In reference specifically to Native American students, Kerbo's (1981) data suggest that Native American students' confidence in their ability to succeed is of greatest importance. He noted that when Native American students identify themselves as more white, and more often interact with whites, they may come to feel that they fit in more in the college environment and may feel they can compete at an equal level with their white peers. This, of course, introduces the variable of self-perception, which is influenced by one's confidence in himself based on his knowledge of his abilities and the perceptions of others.

The concept of self-perception is especially fascinating in the Native American context, because of the pervasive stereotype of Native Americans being a *problem* and that they are lazy, deviant, have poor attitudes, and have lower intelligence. Whatever the *problem* characteristic, Native American students in research are often identified as deficient, rather than identifying factors in the school environment and school interactions that may be significant reasons Native students leave school. Such research only perpetuates the stereotype, and it is not surprising that

low self-esteem, depression, feelings of rejection and powerlessness, and a damaged self-concept are major factors in the academic failure of Native American students (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

Another factor of academic persistence among Native American students not as specifically categorized is geographic location. Johnson and Strange (2005) reported that half of the states where rural education is most important to overall educational performance of the state are either in the Great Plains, the Midwest, and the Southwest. These states also have high levels of poverty, higher levels of English Language Learners, and higher levels of minority students disadvantaged by generations of ethnic discrimination. Rural schools in these states are meagerly funded, have lower graduation rates, and are states with the highest populations of Native Americans.

Educational attainment is highly correlated with measures of regional economic prosperity. Rural counties with the lowest levels of educational attainment face higher poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and population loss than other rural counties. Even with the rising levels of rural educational attainment, the median earnings in rural areas were a fraction of those in urban areas at every level of education, with the higher pay in urban areas resulting in rural students staying in urban areas for work rather than returning home (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Although participation in the labor market is a goal of most rural communities, the structural factors of the community limit opportunities and a cycle is formed that perpetuates additional intergenerational poverty (Fitchen, 1995).

If, as Bæck (2016) proposes, different places create different opportunity structures, then the plight of the typical rural community in the United States begins to mirror that of a Native American reservation. Bæck states that different places provide certain opportunities and close others off based on the conditions and barriers of that location. If educational institutions and

programs of study are geographically far away from a local community, the educational choices of students in that region have been somewhat limited. Student motivation and choices in these areas may be affected simply by location. If this is combined with a lower perceived need for higher education, the cycle of lower educational attainment and limited exposure to different choices is perpetuated.

In 2015, statistics reported that 37% of Native Americans in rural areas had a high school diploma or its equivalent, while 36% of Whites in rural areas achieved the same level of attainment. The same report showed that 24% of Native Americans in rural areas had some college, while 22% of Whites in rural areas had the same level of educational attainment, though only 10% of Native Americans had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 20% of Whites in rural communities and 33% of all races and ethnicities in urban areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). While this study was dedicated to identifying factors that help Native American students persist through high school, more research needs to be done on the academic persistence of rural students in general.

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APPENDIX B

Interview Guidelines

The interviews were conducted using an unstructured format. The following questions are typical of those that were asked in the course of the interview. Reflective listening and minimal encouragements were used to maximize participant responses and increase the depth of the interview content. In each area, efforts were made to help participants address areas of likely relevance to success in high school (e.g., family, relationships, friends, academic programs, student programs, etc.). The actual wording of the questions was adapted to be appropriate to the context and flow of the interview.

1. Please describe your experience at (high school name).
2. What kinds of things have been most helpful for you while in school here?
3. What kinds of things have made school more difficult?
4. How have family members been involved in your education?
5. How have your friends been involved in your education?
6. What advice would you give to other students who come from similar circumstances as you as they prepare for graduation?
7. What are your plans after graduation?

APPENDIX C

Parental Consent

Parental Permission for a Minor

Introduction

My name is Tianna Freeman. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. Under the supervision of my mentor, Professor Aaron Jackson, I am conducting a research study about Native American students who are preparing for high school graduation, their experiences in school, and their plans after graduation. I am inviting your child to take part in the research because (he/she) is a Native American Junior/Senior who is preparing for life after graduation.

Procedures

If you agree to let your child participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You child will be asked questions in an individual interview about their experiences in school, how family and friends have been involved in their education, and their plans after graduation.
- These interviews will be audio recorded.
- Interviews will take about 30 minutes.
- In adherence with school policy, interviews will take place in a private conference room in the school office during school hours, in the presence of a school official.
- Interviews will take place during course instruction time of your child's elective course. Elective course instructors have been notified of your child's potential participation and have prepared additional opportunities for course instruction so that your child will not be at a disadvantage.
- Your child will be asked to describe their experience in school, including questions about family, friend, and school involvement that may have influenced their experiences in school.

Risks

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report. All collected data will be assigned a number only for reference purposes, and these numbers will not appear in the written report. The researcher will also keep all data on a password protected computer. Only the researcher will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be kept for three years and then destroyed. There may be some discomfort caused by being asked some of the questions. You child may answer only those questions that your child wants to, or you child may stop the entire process at any time without affecting his/her standing in school or grades in class.

Confidentiality

The research data will be kept on a password protected computer and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in a secured office.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits for your child's participation in this project.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for participation in this project.

Questions about the Research

Please direct any further questions about the study to **Tianna Freeman** at **801-800-3381** or **tiannajf.10@gmail.com**. You may also contact **Aaron Jackson** at **(801) 636-3745** or **aaron_jackson@byu.edu**.

Questions about your child's rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to **irb@byu.edu**.

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw you child's participation at any point without affecting your child's grade/standing in school.

Child's Name: _____

Parent Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

Youth Assent

(15–17 years old)

What is this study about?

My name is Tianna Freeman. I am from Brigham Young University. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Your parent(s) know we are talking with you about the study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.

In this study, we want to learn about your experiences you have had in school, and how your family and friends have been involved in your education.

What am I being asked to do?

If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you to answer a few questions in an individual interview about your experience in school, how your family has been involved in your education, how your friends have been involved in your education, and your plans after you graduate. Interviews will take about 30 minutes and will take place during your elective course time. Your teacher will be informed of your participation and will prepare additional opportunities for you to receive any missed instruction.

The interviews will be audio recorded, with your permission.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?

Taking part in this research study may not help you in any way, but it might help us learn how to better serve other Native American students prepare for life after graduation.

Can anything bad happen if I am in this study?

We think there are a few risks to you by being in the study, but some kids might become worried or sad because of some of the questions we ask. You don't have to answer any of the questions you don't want to answer. If you become upset, let us know and we will have the school counselor help you with those feelings.

Who will know that I am in the study?

We won't tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us will be private. Your parent may know that you took part in the study, but we won't tell them anything you said, either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

Do I have to be in the study?

No, you don't. The choice is up to you. No one will get angry or upset if you don't want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study anymore.

What if I have questions?

If you have questions at any time, you can ask us and you can talk to your parents about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask us questions about the study, contact **Tianna Freeman** at **801-800-3381** or **tiannajf.10@gmail.com**.

Before you say yes to be in this study what questions do you have about the study?

If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name.

Name (Printed): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

_____ Yes, I give permission to have my voice recorded

_____ No, I do not give permission to have my voice recorded