School Connectedness and Racial-Ethnic Identity Among Alaska Native Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Study

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The University of Southern Mississippi

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND RACIAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY
AMONG ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS:
AN EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

by

Robert Picou

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015
ABSTRACT

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND RACIAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS: AN EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

by Robert Picou

August 2015

This study was conducted from a theoretical foundation of Feagin’s (2010) racial framing and Brayboy’s (2005) tribal critical race theory. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of school connectedness as those perceptions relate to racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students in a large, predominately White school district. A quantitative phase in which School Climate and Connectedness Survey data were used to evaluate perceptions of school connectedness was followed up by a qualitative phase in which two focus group interviews were conducted to evaluate the degree to which Alaska Native students attributed their perceptions of school connectedness to racial-ethnic identity. The scope of the study involved Alaska Native students \((N = 325)\) and Alaska non-Native students \((N = 4059)\) in the quantitative phase and 13 Alaska Native students in the qualitative phase. The quantitative results indicated there are differences in the seven dimensions purportedly measured by the SCCS that are based upon ethnicity but that those differences are small. The qualitative results indicated that the Alaska Native students in this study did not attribute their perceptions of school connectedness to racial-ethnic identity. The Alaska Native students in this study attributed their perceptions of school connectedness to some teachers who provide encouragement, peers who accept them as Alaska Native students, extra-curricular
activities representative of their Alaska Native cultural heritage, and hard working families who encourage them to do well in school. Programs that target Alaska Native students, encouragement from some teachers, a lack of exposure to and education about racial-ethnic identity and racism, and effective anti-racist counter frames contributed to positive perceptions of school connectedness among the Alaska Native students in this study. It is recommended that school districts provide opportunities for all students of color to learn about racial-ethnic identity in addition to opportunities for all students to discuss and learn from each other about racial and cultural differences. It is further recommended that educators are mindful of processes and structures within the context of the school and classroom that contribute to racial opportunity costs among students of color and provide greater perceptions of school connectedness for all students.
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2015
DEDICATION

It is fair to say that earning this doctoral degree is not the accomplishment of one person alone in the night or the early morning typing away at a computer in the dark. While there were certainly times when I felt like the darkness was overwhelming, my family provided the support I needed to complete this goal. My wife provided the encouragement to continue during those times when I felt like giving up, the care for my two young sons on those long weekends when I was at the office working, and the love necessary to sustain my efforts. Thank you for your encouragement and patience. My wife also provided my two young sons. Those boys are most definitely “Too hot for the police and the fireman. Too hot, make a dragon want to retire man” (Ronson, 2014). They bring laughter, joy, and celebration to my life. I am blessed to have such a fun and supportive family.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“After watching children enter school at ages five or six and leave between 16 and 18, our experience indicates we are doing serious harm to many if not most of Alaska’s Native school children” (Bates & Oleksa, 2007, p. 16). Father Micheal Oleksa, a Russian Orthodox priest, who has spent his entire life studying the interaction between Alaska Native culture and school as an institutional process, suggested that too many Alaska Native school children “leave school damaged, hurt, wounded, depressed, angry and tragically suicidal” (Bates & Oleksa, 2007, p. 16). According to Father Michael Oleksa, there is a disconnect between the culture of Alaska Native students and the expectations of schools in Alaska. Is it possible that the well-intended efforts of the educational community to provide schools for Alaska Native children are actually doing more harm than good? John Goodlad (1985) discussed the findings of a study involving several hundred schools in different areas of the country, schools that served minority students. Results of the study demonstrated that the schools were organized according to White, middle-class cultural expectations and that by fourth grade many students from minority populations were tracked into remedial classes with limited expectations for their success (Goodlad, 1985). Many contemporary researchers and current studies agree that John Goodlad’s description of schools across the United States in 1985 could be an appropriate description of many schools in Alaska that currently serve Alaska Native students (Barnhardt, 2001; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2011).
Statement of the Problem

Although many Alaska Native students do well in school as represented by academic achievement in reading, writing, and math, graduating from high school, and going on to college or other training programs, a persistent problem facing the educational community and the community of Alaska Natives is that a large number of Alaska Native students are unsuccessful in school (Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). According to a 2013 standards-based skill assessment (SBA) administered by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) in the State of Alaska, an average of 44.7% of Alaska Native students in grades three through eight scored below proficient in reading. In writing, an average of 51.2% of Alaska Native students in grades three through eight scored below proficient. In math, an average of 49.4% of Alaska Native students in grades three through eight scored below proficient. According to the High School Graduating Qualifying Exam (HSGQE), 32.4% of Alaska Native students in grade 10 scored below proficient in reading, 43.6% scored below proficient in writing, and 39.4% scored below proficient in math. The 2012-2013 cohort graduation rate for Alaska Native students was 53.9% (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2013).

There are other minority populations of students who share similar results in educational outcomes. For example, African American students in Mississippi also experience low levels of academic achievement in language arts and in math. According to the 2012-2013 Mississippi Curriculum Test in Language Arts, an average of 66% of African American students in grades three through eight scored below proficient. In math, an average of 48% of African American students in grades three through eight
scored below proficient. On the high school subject area tests, 58% of African American students scored below proficient in Biology I and in English II. In U.S. History, 61% of African American students scored below proficient. In Algebra, 35% of African American students scored below proficient (Mississippi Department of Education, 2013). The 2012-2013 graduation rate for African American students was 65% percent (Mississippi Department of Education, 2013).

This present study aligns with current research that suggests school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity play an important role in academic achievement for minority students. A strong sense of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity function as cultural resources that support positive academic outcomes in school (Chavous et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). However, a part of the problem of low academic achievement among minority students has been that research on the influence of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity among minority students has been scarce and one dimensional. Early research on low levels of academic achievement among minority students focused on structural factors such as socioeconomic status and parental education levels (Bereiter & Engleman, 1966; Deutsch, 1963; Hess & Shipman, 1965). Only in the last two decades has research taken into account social-psychological variables such as school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity (Chavous et al., 2003). The research that is available on school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity for minority students has largely focused on the African American population prompting criticism of that research as one dimensional (Brayboy, 2005). At present, there is an absence of research on the influence of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity on academic achievement among Alaska Native students.
In addition to being scarce and one dimensional, the research available on the influence of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity for minority students has been inconsistent and focused on deficit explanations for low levels of academic achievement. For example, some studies have demonstrated the protective role of racial-ethnic identity development (Arroyo & Ziegler, 1994), whereas other studies have demonstrated that high racial identification and the awareness of racism and discrimination lead to mental health risks and poor academic achievement (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Besides being inconsistent, research on the academic achievement of minority students has been primarily focused on deficit model explanations for low levels of academic achievement (Garbarino, 1995; Kozol, 1991; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). However, the trend has moved away from deficit model explanations toward more progressive model explanations when confronting the persistent problem of low academic achievement among minority students. The conversation has changed from “what is wrong with those kids or that community?” (a deficit model explanation) to a conversation and analysis of the ways race is present and active in society, and the ways that institutional structures such as schools influence the unique academic needs of minority students (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006).

Low levels of academic achievement among Alaska Native students is a problem for all members of the educational community and of society in Alaska (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010); however, it is particularly problematic for Alaska Native families and students who are being denied access to economic privilege as a result of low levels of academic achievement (Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). If this
problem is not addressed, many more Alaska Native students will continue to experience failure in school, Native communities will continue to feel unsatisfied with the level of educational services that are being provided by schools, and tax dollars will continue to be wasted well-intended but misdirected educational efforts (Barnhart, 2001; Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). All members of society benefit with a better educated population, a more inclusive population, one that celebrates diversity, but the biggest benefit will come for those Alaska Native students who experience greater levels of academic achievement and consequently higher levels of educational attainment as a result of an increased sense of school connectedness and a positive perspective on racial-ethnic identity (Delpit, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Wright, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this mixed methods study was to examine Alaska Native students’ perspectives on school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity in a large, urban school district in Alaska. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used, and it involved analyzing quantitative data first and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data. In the first, quantitative phase of the study, School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS) data was analyzed from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District to study perceptions of school connectedness as those perceptions relate to the following dimensions: high expectations (HE), school safety (SS), student leadership and student involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), caring adults (CA), and parent and community involvement (PCI). In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured focus group interviews were used in a phenomenological study to explore school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity among 13
Alaska Native adolescents from a traditional high school and an alternative high school in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District. The two strands of data were mixed during interpretation in an effort to provide a more complete understanding of the Alaska Native experience in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District.

Research Questions

Research questions in a mixed methods study should include a quantitative research question, a qualitative research question, and a mixed methods research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The mixed methods research question “should address the mixing or integration of the quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 27). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What dimensions correlate with statistical differences in Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness?

RQ 2: Are there statistically significant differences in the perceptions of school connectedness between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students?

RQ 3: How do Alaska Native students perceive and experience school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity?

RQ 4: In what ways do the interview data from Alaska Native students concerning their perceptions of school connectedness help explain the quantitative results reported on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey?

Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

Mixed methods studies are guided by philosophical assumptions. A philosophical assumption is defined as a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide inquiries (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) described a philosophical
assumption as a worldview and suggested that more than one worldview might be used in a mixed methods study. In the explanatory sequential mixed methods study, the quantitative phase of the study is guided by post positivism as a philosophical assumption (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The characteristics of post positivism in a mixed methods study are: (a) determinism or cause and effect thinking; (b) reductionism by narrowing and focusing on select variables to interrelate; (c) detailed observations and measures of variables; (d) the testing of theories that are continually refined (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the qualitative phase of the explanatory sequential design mixed methods study, constructivism is used as a philosophical assumption (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The characteristics of constructivism in a mixed methods study are: (a) understanding the meaning of phenomena; (b) multiple participant perspectives; (c) social interaction with others through personal histories; and (d) generation of theory to explain phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Philosophical assumptions serve as the foundation for the theoretical lens (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this study, the theoretical lens was Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) because it is currently the only known critical race theory specific to Native American people and therefore more accurately represents the culture of Native American communities. TribalCrit is an emerging theory that was developed by Brayboy (2005) to more completely address the issues of Native Americans in the United States. There are nine tenets of TribalCrit that will be discussed in more depth later in this study, but the primary tenet is the proposition that colonization is endemic to society. Brayboy (2005) defined colonization as both explicit and implicit efforts in societal processes and functions to change or civilize Native Americans to be more like those who
hold the power in the dominate society. Another central tenet of TribalCrit is the importance of story as a source of data to make connections between traditional community values and those of larger societal institutions such as the criminal justice system and the various educational systems that serve Native American communities (Brayboy, 2005). The goal of TribalCrit is to provide a lens through which to gain a better understanding of the needs of Native American communities and to initiate changes in the educational system and society at large that will benefit Native American communities. A further goal is to change the ways that Native students think about schools and the ways that school officials and educational policy makers think about Native American students (Brayboy, 2005).

Definitions

*Academic Achievement:* For the purposes of this study, proficient or higher on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment.

*Academic Self Efficacy:* A student’s sense of competence and confidence in the performance of academic tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

*Adolescence:* For the purposes of this study, individuals between ages 12 years and 17 years.

*Alaska Native Racial-Ethnic Identity:* For the purposes of this study, cognitions and attitudes related to an individual’s ability to understand his or her status as member of a racial-ethnic minority.

*Colonialism:* Implicit and explicit effort within the processes and structures of the dominant society to change or civilize Native Americans (Brayboy, 2005).
Deficit Thinking: An endogenous theory positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies (Valencia, 2010).

Dominate Culture: Represented by the majority of individuals in a setting typically influencing the language, religion, behavior, values, rituals, and social customs of the group (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002).

Ethnic: A socially defined group based on cultural criteria that is commonly used as a euphemism for race (Helms, 1990). For the purposes of this study, ethnicity and race are used interchangeably.

First Generation Urban Alaska Natives: As used in U.S. Census report (2006), those Alaska Native students who were born, or who have lived a significant portion of their lives in rural Alaska but have recently moved to urban Alaska.

Full Alaska Native: As used in U.S. Census report (2006), those students who are the children of two Alaska Native parents.

Minority: For the purposes of this study, a student differing in race or ethnic background from the majority of a student population. Minority students are those students of color, and those students who identify with a particular racial-ethnic that is different from the White cultural norm of the school context.

Mixed Methods Research: Research that uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies within a single study and integrates the results to increase understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Part Alaska Native: As used in U.S. Census report (2006), those students who are the children of mixed race parents.
Private Regard: Refers to the positive or negative feelings an individual has about being a member of a particular racial-ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Public Regard: Refers to how the individual perceives the racial-ethnic group is perceived within a larger social context by individuals who are not members of the racial-ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Qualitative Research: Research conducted to learn the participants’ views on a phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, consisting of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 32). Qualitative research looks for the meaning within the perceptions of the participants.

Quantitative Research: Research conducted to determine how participant data fits an existing theory (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Defined as “the systematic empirical investigation of social phenomenon via statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 53).

Race: A socially defined group based on physical criteria such as skin color or facial features (Tatum, 1997). For the purposes of this study, a social construction that attempts to categorize people into large and distinct populations or groups by anatomical, cultural, ethnic, or genetic affiliations.

Racial Centrality: The extent to which individuals view their racial group as a defining part of their self-concepts (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Racial Frames: Contextual perspectives through which individuals make sense of the world (Feagin, 2010).
School Belonging: For the purposes of this study, school belonging and school connectedness will be used interchangeably. The degree to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment (Finn & Voelkl, 1989).

School Connectedness: Student perceptions about “the people at school, which includes feeling like they are a part of the school, that adults care about them personally, and that their learning is a high priority” (Oschler, Spier, Kendizora, & Cai, 2009, p. 3).

School Connectedness as it Relates to Racial-Ethnic Identity: For the purposes of this study, the degree to which students perceive that they are a significant part of their school and the degree to which they perceive racial-ethnic identity as influencing school connectedness.

Second/Third Generation Urban Alaska Natives: As used in U.S. Census report (2006), those Alaska Native students who have minimal lived experience in rural Alaska, who were born in urban Alaska, and who have lived a significant portion of their lives in urban Alaska.

Sequential Design: A two-phase mixed methods design in which the quantitative data is explored in greater depth by the qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Delimitations

This study is delimited to Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students who attend the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District and who participated in the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey (N = 4,059). The study is further delimited by the use of an explanatory sequential mixed methods design and a time parameter of one school year. In the quantitative phase, the study is delimited by the use of only one
source of data from the School Climate and Connectedness Survey to measure school connectedness. In the qualitative phase, the study is delimited by the use of only one source of data from the interview protocol used with 13 Alaska Native students to measure perceptions of school connectedness as those perceptions relate to racial-ethnic identity. The study is also delimited by the convenience sampling strategy used in the quantitative phase and the purposeful criterion sampling strategy used in the qualitative phase. Only those Alaska Native students who volunteered to take the SCCS and who had permission from their parents were included in the data analysis for the quantitative phase ($N = 325$). Only those Alaska Native students who completed the School Climate and Connectedness Survey were included in the data collection and analysis for the qualitative phase of the study. The study is further delimited by the selection of participants who represent both Title I and non-Title I schools with an equal representation of females and males. The sample population for the qualitative phase of the study is further delimited because participants were chosen from schools in the same state and school district to provide consistency in student experiences with school.

Assumptions

The assumptions of this study are as follows:

- Racism Exists.
- Experiences with racism are risk factors for Alaska Native students.
- Colonialism and racial hegemony as defined by Brayboy (2005) have had considerable historic and current impact on Alaska Natives.
- Participants answered the survey questions in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey with honesty and complete understanding of the questions.
• The School Climate and Connectedness Survey measures aspects of climate and connectedness relevant to the school experiences of Alaska Native students and consistent with the research on school climate and connectedness.

• The racial-ethnic identity of students was accurately reported on the SCCS.

• An increased sense of school connectedness and a positive perspective on racial-ethnic identity leads to greater academic achievement among minority students (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1996).

Justification

Over a decade after the well-intended No Child Left Behind Act, school districts continue to struggle with the racial achievement gap. In research conducted by Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006), it was suggested that the racial achievement gap, which includes Alaska Native students, remains one of the most challenging problems facing the educational community and society at large in the United States. Cohen et al. (2006) stressed that although there have been continuous efforts throughout the United States to close the achievement gap between minority and White students, those efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Despite many reform efforts in the last two decades, the academic performance of minority students continues to be persistently lower than White students (Harris, 2011). The current study is justified by the possibility that what is discovered in relation to school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students could be instrumental in assisting other school districts as they contend with the persistent achievement gap among other minority populations.
This study is further justified by the promising research concerning school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity. Racial-ethnic identity (REI) among African American students as a construct has been studied by many researchers (Chavous et al., 2003; Fordham & Ogbru, 1986; Sellers, Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006; Steel & Aronson, 1995). REI is defined as the degree to which an individual is aware of and able to negotiate racism and discrimination positively while demonstrating ethnic pride in oneself and one’s ethnic group (Wright, 2009). Even though the research on REI among African American students is inconsistent, there is a substantial body of research claiming that a positive REI can promote high academic success among African American students (Wright, 2009). Oyserman, Harrison, and Bybee (2001) conducted a study of REI among African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Israeli students to discover whether or not REI contributes to grades, school attendance, and persistence on complex mathematical tasks. Their findings suggested that some forms of a positive REI do promote strong feelings of engagement in school and an increased ability to be successful at academic tasks. Research suggests that there is a possibility of increased academic achievement among minority students when families and schools promote positive racial-ethnic identity development (Oyserman et al., 2001; Wright, 2009).

The construct of school connectedness has also been studied by many researchers and refers to the degree students feel connected to their schools (Booker, 2004; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1995). This includes feeling like they are a part of the school, that adults care about them personally, that their learning matters and is a high priority, and that teachers and other school staff consistently treat them with respect. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) focused on the
relationship between a sense of school connectedness and academic achievement. They concluded that a sense of school connectedness best explains the relationship between motivation and academic achievement among high school students representing four different ethnic groups. Furthermore, Faircloth and Hamm (2005) suggested that the degree of racial integration in a school’s student population and the faculty instilled a strong sense of school connectedness for minority students. Faircloth and Hamm’s study demonstrated that racial-ethnic identification is significant in the degree to which students feel like they belong to their schools which as research has suggested leads to greater academic achievement for minority students (Booker, 2004; Goodenow & Grady, 1995).

This study of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students will contribute to the limited research on Alaska Native students and may provide insights into the dilemma of low academic achievement among other minority populations of students. Large percentages of Alaska Native students, like other minority populations of students, have not been successful in school and are being denied access to opportunities that would come from increased academic achievement (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). There is compelling research on the influence of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity on the academic achievement among minority students (Oyserman et al., 2001). However, there is a need for research on various social, cultural, and individual factors that influence academic achievement among Alaska Native students. This study may provide additional information to Alaska Natives and Alaska Native organizations as they develop and implement a plan of advocacy that challenges injustices and well-intended but misguided efforts to provide educational services to
Alaska Native students. This study may also provide educators and policymakers insight and understanding into school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity as those constructs relate to academic achievement among other minority students.

Summary

Father Michael Oleksa (2007) suggested that in an effort to do good by providing schools to Alaska Native children, the educational community might just be doing harm to Alaska’s Native children. Too many Alaska Native students are not experiencing success in school (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). Communities are frustrated and children are left without access to economic opportunity that comes with greater academic achievement. There is research that suggests a positive sense of racial-ethnic identity leads to greater academic achievement among minority students (Chavous et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). There is also research that suggests an increased sense of school connectedness leads to greater academic achievement among minority students (Booker, 2004; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993). However, there is a need for research that is specific to Alaska Native students and that focuses on the connection between perceptions of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity. The purpose of this study is to advance knowledge about the connection between school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present a review of the literature on the theoretical foundation of this study. In addition, this chapter will present a review of the literature on the suggested obstacles to academic achievement among minority students, the validity of racial-ethnic identity development, and the importance of school connectedness. However, this chapter will begin with a review of literature on the historic, geographic, and demographic context of attempts to provide schools to Alaska Native children.

Historical Context

The Russian Orthodox Church in conjunction with the Russian-American Company was the first to provide formal schooling to Alaska Natives in Kodiak, Southeast Alaska, and in the Aleutians (Dauenhauer, 1982). Attempts to provide western education to Alaska Natives began in 1784 when a Russian fur trader, Gregorii Shelikhov, established a trading post at Three Saints Bay on the southwest coast of Kodiak Island. After killing a large number of Alaska Natives and taking others hostage, Shelikhov opened a school for Native children. He taught them arithmetic, the Russian language, and the precepts of Christianity (Darnell, 1979). Shelikhov’s school for young Native children was the first of many mission schools that would soon be operated by the Russian Orthodox Church in a partnership with the Russian-American Company (Darnell, 1979; Dauenhauer, 1982).

The Russian-American Company was a private enterprise that received a monopoly from the Tsar of Russia in 1799 to exploit natural resources in Alaska. The Russian-American Company provided some technical training for a few Native students
and students of mixed Russian and Native parents in return for indentured service (Darnell, 1979). In the Aleutians, many Aleut people became literate in both the Russian and the Aleut languages (Getches, 1977). Russian schooling of Alaska Native children had three goals: to Christianize, to civilize, and to create more useful servants for the Russian-American Company (Darnell, 1979). The Russian-American Company closed all of its vocational schools in Alaska in 1867 during ceremonies that transferred Alaska from Russia to the United States (Darnell, 1979).

At the signing of the purchase agreement between Russia and the United States government in 1867, various religious mission schools from the United States replaced the Russian Orthodox mission schools, and the American Commercial Company replaced the Russian-American Company (Darnell, 1979). The American Commercial Company received an exclusive lease from the United States government to harvest the fur seals of the Pribilof Islands (Darnell, 1979). In 1873, the Bureau of Indian Affairs divided Alaska into geographical sections and appropriated each section to a specific religious denomination that included Catholic, Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Moravian, Presbyterian, and Swedish-Evangelical (Barnhart, 2001). These schools were referred to as contract schools and received very little if any federal oversight or funding (Barnhart, 2001). The conditions for Alaska Native children in school remained much the same as they had been in the Russian era. The goal of educational services was such that “the White man can use these men for things that are useful for his civilization” (Darnell, 1979, p. 177).
The missionary contract schools were K-6 day schools. Instruction was provided in basic reading, writing, math, industrial skills, patriotic citizenship, and the precepts of Christianity (Barnhart, 2001). There was a strict English only policy, and the primary mission of the schools was to spread the gospel and civilize the Natives (Barnhart, 2001; Bates & Oleksa, 2007). According to Barnhart (2001), this policy of contracting schools to religious denominations continued to influence the federal provision of schools in Alaska long after it was discontinued with Native Americans in the rest of the nation. Alaska Native children were never fully considered in federal education policy until 1865 after the Civil War (Barnhart, 2001). Prior to the Civil War, Native American people in the United States were subjected to annihilation and displacement. After the Civil War, this practice of annihilation and displacement was replaced by a seemingly more humane practice of assimilation (Barnhart, 2001; Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Getches, 1977; Prucha, 1984).

In 1884, the Organic Act was passed, establishing the first civil government in Alaska and providing the legal basis for federal provision of K-8 schools in Alaska to children of all races (Barnhart, 2001; Case, 1984; Darnell, 1979). The goal of federal education policy evolved from a process of civilization and exploitation to a process of assimilation. According to Reyhner, (1994), assimilation is a process of absorbing one group of people into the culture and social norms of another group of people and in the process destroying and eradicating the culture and social norms of the group of people that are to be assimilated. The process of providing schools to Alaska Native children has historically been “a process of imposed imperialism designed to assimilate indigenous people into an alien and dominate culture” (Reyhner, 1994, p. 65).
It took another 63 years after the signing of the Organic Act for federal provision of schools to high school students in Alaska. In 1947, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opened Mt. Edgecumb boarding school in Sitka, Alaska (Barnhart, 2001). When Mt. Edgecumb was full, high school students were sent to boarding schools throughout the Northwest (Barnhart, 2001). Barnhart (2001) contended that this policy of sending Alaska Native high school students to boarding schools was an attempt to educate and assimilate Alaska Native students and resulted in an erosion of the cultural foundation within Native communities by removing the most intellectually advanced students from their villages. Alaska gained statehood in 1959, which is when the responsibility for education transferred from the federal government to the state government. However, it was not until 1972 in a class action lawsuit against the state of Alaska known colloquially as Molly Hootch (Hootch v Alaska State-Operated School System) that local high schools were provided for Alaska Natives in their home villages (Getches, 1977; Reyhner, 1994). The plaintiffs claimed that the state was in violation of Alaska’s constitution that requires the state maintain a public school system open to all children. The plaintiffs argued that a system requiring children to leave their homes for nine months is not truly open and that the dislocation and drop-out rates produced negative consequences for children in boarding school programs (Getches, 1977).

Several authors have suggested (Barnhart, 2001; Bates & Oleska, 2007), that while there were pockets of educational success, in general, Alaska Native children were treated very poorly in both the missionary schools and the boarding schools. Based on their review of available information, they contend that a systemic and intentional destruction of the Native culture occurred in these schools (Barnhart, 2001; Bates &
Oleksa, 2007; Darnell, 1979; Prucha, 1984). Bates and Oleska (2007) suggested that one does not have to be in rural Alaska long before hearing stories from elders of children routinely beaten with canes for speaking their Native language and of adults who have permanent hearing loss in one ear because they were routinely beaten on the side of their heads for not paying attention, resisting the process of civilization (Bates & Oleksa, 2007). As reported by Hopfinger in *Newsweek* (2008, Jan 13), in the village of St Michael, an entire generation of children were sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests. Historically, the efforts of schooling perpetrated on the Alaska Native communities in an attempt to civilize and assimilate have been destructive to the Alaska Native culture and hold ramifications for current educational practice (Barnhart, 2001; Bates & Oleksa, 2007; Reyhner, 1994). In his book, *Conflicting Landscapes: American Schooling/Alaska Natives*, Father Michael Oleksa stated:

I am indignant that after witnessing the destructive impact of public schooling for nearly four decades, and researching its tragic history, our educational system can continue to ignore the damage that has been done and continues to be done to children in the sacred Name of Education. (Bates & Oleksa, 2007, p. 90)

**Geographic and Demographic Context**

Alaska is a large state with a small population. At 663,300 square miles and 6,640 miles of coastline, there are approximately 731,449 people of all races living in Alaska. Approximately half of the population of Alaska lives in Anchorage with the rest spread out over the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (93,925), Juneau (32,832), Fairbanks (32,070), various other municipalities, and what is commonly referred to as
rural Alaska (U.S. Census, 2006). There are approximately 138,000 Alaska Natives living in Alaska with 36,000 of those Alaska Natives living in Anchorage which represents 12% of the total population in Anchorage (U.S. Census, 2006).

There are four distinct Alaska Native populations. The term Alaska Native refers to Alaska’s original inhabitants and commonly refers to those Alaskans who identify as either whole or part Native (U.S. Census, 2006). The tribal affiliations can be divided into four groups: (a) the Inupiat and Yupik Eskimos, who inhabit the northern and western coasts and to some degree inland from the coastline; (b) the Aleuts, who inhabit the Aleutian Islands; (c) the Tlingits and Haidas, who inhabit the southeast portion of the state; and (d) the Athapascan Indians, who inhabit the interior portion of the state (Barnhardt, 2001). Native communities range from the large, heterogeneous populations of urban Alaska with a mix of Native cultural groups to the small homogenous communities of rural Alaska with representatives typically of only one Native cultural group (Barnhardt, 2001). It is important to establish the variation within and between tribal affiliations in order to understand that there is no stereotypical Alaska Native.

According to a study on rural populations in Alaska, there has been a growing migration from rural Alaska to urban Alaska which has been attributed to the high cost of living in rural Alaska and the availability of jobs in urban Alaska (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). There is a multidimensional division within Alaska based on race, culture, and location that is referred to as the urban/rural divide (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). In public testimony, it was stated by Bonnie Jo Savland, statewide director of the Alaska Native Coalition for Employment Training:
The past decade has seen state policy, controlled by the urban non-Native majority, turn against Natives with a vengeance. Under a banner of fiscal austerity, the state is making political war on the poorest and most vulnerable of its citizens defined by race. (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002, p.131)

Many Native people who make the migration from rural to urban Alaska do not have an easy transition. A representative from the Alaska AIDS Assistance Association testified to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that each year approximately 30 people freeze to death on the streets of Anchorage, primarily Alaska Natives who have moved in from rural communities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

The existing data taken from census reports and other reports on Alaska Natives does not provide a complete and accurate description of living conditions for Alaska Natives. Alaska Natives have high mobility rates and often do not participate in surveys due to distrust of outsiders who are collecting information for census surveys and other reports (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). Alaska Natives are often characterized by researchers as statistically insignificant (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010). Being characterized as statistically insignificant has been described as an example of structural and institutional racism that places Alaska Natives at a disadvantage (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2010).

There are numerous examples of conflicting or inaccurate census and other report data. For example, a report completed by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (2009) reported that 40% of Alaska Natives live below the poverty level; however, the U.S. Census data suggest that only 20 percent of Alaska Natives live below the poverty level (U.S. Census, 2006). The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (2009) reported
that the proportion of Alaska Native children under age 18 living below the poverty level exceeded 22%, triple the Alaska White proportion and that the proportion of Alaska Native adults over age 18 living below the poverty level exceeded 18%, also triple the Alaska White proportion (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Poverty level is defined for Alaska as $26,500 for a family of four (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Poverty level data taken from the U.S. Census report does not give a complete and accurate description of life for many Alaska Native people who often live below the poverty level and struggle on a day to day basis to provide the basic necessities for their families. (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

Additional areas where existing data does not provide a complete and accurate description of living conditions for Alaska Natives is participation in the labor force and educational attainment. Although the U.S. Census Report (2006) suggested that 62% of Alaska Natives participate in the labor force, there is compelling evidence to suggest these findings are inaccurate. One reason may be that due to the scarcity of employment opportunities in rural Alaska, many Alaska Natives do not meet the official definition of unemployed because they are not conducting active job searches (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). In rural Alaska, Native populations often rely on both a cash based economy and subsistence, or non-cash based economy (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). In many communities, the unemployment rate actually exceeds 80% as reported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2002). One more area where existing data does not provide a complete and accurate description of living conditions for Alaska
Natives is educational attainment. The U.S. Census (2006) reported that 75% of Alaska Natives have at least a high school diploma. However, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (2009) found that just over one in four (28.2%) Alaska Natives reported not completing high school as compared to U.S. Whites with less than one in twelve (7.5%).

Both the U.S. Census Report and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Report agree that there is an increasing population of Alaska Native children. Approximately 26% of the total Alaska population is under the age of eighteen, whereas approximately 37% of the total Alaska Native population is under the age of eighteen (U.S. Census, 2006). Approximately 4 out of 10 (41%) Alaska Native people are under the age of 20 years, and the number of youth under the age of 20 are projected to increase by almost 13,000 between 2000 and 2030 from 47,909 to 60,703 (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Bates and Oleksa (2007) asserted that the relatively young age of Alaska’s Native population increases the urgency for finding solutions for the problem of low levels of academic achievement for Alaska Natives.

The evidence suggests that Alaska Natives are particularly vulnerable to risk factors such as high levels of drug and alcohol abuse, high levels of incarceration, and high levels of suicide. Substance abuse among adolescents is defined as having used alcohol, marijuana, or cocaine in the past 30 days (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Among Alaska Native high school students, 41% report having at least one drink of alcohol on one or more of the past 30 days (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Almost one third (32%) of Alaska Native high school students report using marijuana during one or more of the past 30 days compared to
17% of Alaska non-Native high school students (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). Such high levels of alcohol and marijuana use among Alaska Native adolescents may help explain their high levels of incarceration. Alaska Native males represent just 8% of the population in Alaska, yet they represent 37% of the prison population (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002).

According to a study by the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, Alaska has the highest rate of suicide per capita in the United States (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, 2010). In 2007, the rate of suicide in the United States was 11.5 suicides per 100,000 people. In Alaska, during the same year, that rate was 21.8 suicides per 100,000 people of all races. The rate of suicide among the Alaska Native population was 35 per 100,000 people in 2007 (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, 2010). However, the rate of suicide among Alaska Native men between the ages of 15 to 24 was the highest rate of suicide among any demographic in the country, with an average of 141.6 suicides per 100,000 each year between 2000 and 2009 (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, 2010).

In summary, high rates of incarceration and suicide among young Alaska Natives can be linked to other factors such as alcoholism and poverty, but they could also be attributed to low levels of academic achievement and high dropout rates in Alaskan schools (Bates & Oleksa, 2007). Young people who do not achieve sufficient levels of literacy in reading and math, who are not able to navigate the expectations in schools, often find themselves at risk of self-affliction and in trouble with law enforcement (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). Many Alaska Natives live below the poverty line, and there is an increasing population of children. It is important to establish the
demographic context among Alaska Native students in order to understand that current academic results as measured by standardized assessments do not necessarily represent true ability or a willingness to learn on behalf of Alaska Native students (Bates & Oleksa, 2007). Academic results as measured by standardized assessments and levels of educational attainment are influenced by demographic context such as levels of poverty and other societal factors beyond the control of Alaska Native children (Bates & Oleksa, 2007).

Theoretical Foundations

Race has been and continues to be important in discourse concerning the provision of schools to minority students. The racial achievement gap has been explained as a result of intellectual deficits, cultural deficits, cultural differences, institutional racism, and resistance (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006). Several researchers have emphasized the need to examine the ways that race manifests itself in society and the ways that institutional structures such as schools influence the academic achievement of minority students (Fine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1992). Even though there are other perspectives on the issue of race and academic achievement, for the purposes of this study there are three theoretical approaches that have greatly influenced research and that hold potential for future research in the field: (a) cultural ecological theory; (b) racial formation theory; and (c) tribal critical race theory (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006).

John Ogbu’s cultural ecological theory is “arguably the most influential and controversial approach in sociocultural studies of race and schooling in the last 25 years” (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006, p. 362). Ogbu (1991) separated the broad category of minority into two distinct categories: voluntary minorities and involuntary minorities. He
defined voluntary minority groups as those who have chosen to immigrate to the United States and involuntary minority groups as those who have been brought to the United States against their will as a result of enslavement or conquest. Ogbu (1991) suggested that voluntary minority groups are pragmatic and perceive challenges such as discrimination as obstacles to overcome on the road to eventual success; whereas, involuntary minority groups choose opposition and perceive society’s institutions such as schools as a threat to their cultural identity. Ogbu (1991) argued that members of involuntary minority groups often develop self-affirming norms and values that undermine academic success in an effort to maintain boundaries between their cultural identities and the majority group-norms. According to Ogbu, there are two factors that influence minority school performance: (a) how the system and society at large treat minorities; and (b) how different minority groups respond to the system and society’s treatment. Differences in academic outcomes among minority populations are partly due to differences in cultural adaptations (Ogbu, 1991).

Researchers and scholars have pointed out the problems in Ogbu’s theory of dysfunctional cultural adaptation (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006). Researchers claimed that Ogbu’s theory was a deficit model explanation for poor academic achievement that blamed minorities for discrimination (Harris, 2011). Researchers also claimed that his work did not recognize contemporary theories of race and ethnicity that frame racialization as a cultural process as opposed to an inherited and predetermined, fixed classification (Harris, 2011). In addition, researchers claimed that Ogbu’s work was too deterministic (Harris, 2011) and ahistorical in its treatment of American Indians (Brayboy, 2005). Nevertheless, Ogbu made an important contribution to the study of
race and ethnicity with his emphasis on the significance of historical context and the interaction between system forces and community responses (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006). Ogbu’s theory of oppositional cultural adaptation is relevant to the current study because Alaska Native students are obviously the descendants of a conquered people, which makes them members of an involuntary minority group. In addition, Ogbu’s theory is relevant to the current study because many Alaska Native students in the Mat Su Borough School District must struggle with cultural adaptation in their efforts to fit into a predominately White, non-Native society.

A second theory that has influenced the study of race and ethnicity is racial formation theory. In racial formation theory, race is not perceived as fixed or inherent. Race is not a biological essence or an ideological construct. Race is instead perceived as a process that is the result of “historical contingencies, racially defined experiences, and political relationships” (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006, p. 364). Racial formation is defined as a simultaneous process that involves cultural and social initiative to define the meaning of race in addition to a political and economic initiative that distributes power according to racial classification (Brayboy, 2005). Racial formation theory has been used to analyze the ways that race and racialization manifest within the context of the school experience (Brayboy, 2005). Racial formation theory requires that researchers analyze the intersection of race with other social factors such as class and gender and with social institutions such as schools while emphasizing the significance of race within the context of institutional practice (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006). Racial formation theory is relevant to the current study because Alaska Native students in a
mostly White, non-Native community do not share similar racial experiences; therefore, race is not fixed or inherent for Alaska Native students. Race is instead a complex and dynamic process of racial and cultural adaptation.

A third theory that has influenced the study of race and ethnicity is critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theory suggests that racism is endemic in society and that racism has become so deeply engrained that it has become invisible (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Established in the mid-1970s, CRT was developed as an attempt to critique and change societal structures and institutions by exposing the relationship between race, racism, and power (Haynes Writer, 2008). The basic assumption of CRT is that racism is more than individual acts of discrimination. Racism is the historical, systemic, and ideological manifestation of power intended to maintain and protect a racial hegemony in favor of the White race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). It was not until the mid-1990’s that CRT was applied to research in education as a framework within which to analyze educational practice and the challenges facing people of color within educational institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Haynes-Writer (2008) suggested that the goal of CRT is to construct an alternative reality through the identification of one’s personal, racial circumstance by the process of storytelling. The process of storytelling provides writers and researchers the ability to analyze “myths, presuppositions, and received wisdows that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render… minorities one-down” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xiv).

Theoretical approaches specific to the experiences of particular racial or ethnic groups have evolved out of the original premise of critical race theory. Such theoretical approaches include Latino critical race theory (LatCrit), Asian critical race theory
(AsianCrit), and tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit). Brayboy (2005) introduced tribal
critical race theory to specifically address the experiences of Native American people.
Brayboy (2005) recognized CRT as a legitimate framework from which to examine
issues of race but felt CRT was limited in its ability to address the needs of Indigenous
populations because it did not address the liminality inherent within the Native American
experience or the presence of colonization. The original intent of CRT was to address the
Civil Rights issues of African American populations; therefore, it was oriented toward a
black-white binary examination of race and racial discrimination (Brayboy, 2005).

Brayboy’s intent in developing TribalCrit was to provide an analytical lens that is a more
“culturally nuanced way of examining the lives and experiences of tribal peoples since
contact with Europeans over 500 years ago” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430).

A major distinction between CRT and TribCrit is the existence of colonization.
The basic premise of CRT is that racism is endemic in society. In contrast, the basic
premise and first tenet of TribalCrit is that colonization is endemic in society (Brayboy, 2005). Colonization was defined as a historical and systemic effort to colonize or civilize
Native Americans to be “more like those who hold power in the dominant society”
(Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). In her book, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and
Indigenous Peoples, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) challenged traditional Western ways of
conducting research and called for the decolonization of methodologies that attempt to
understand the Native American experience. Many other researchers have highlighted
the negative influence of colonization to the Native American experience. Hodge, Limb,
& Cross (2009) linked colonization to mental health within the Native American
community and suggested abandoning Western mental health remedies in exchange for

The second tenet of TribalCrit is that “the policies of the United States are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 431). Other researcher have suggested that the United States is built on 350 years of aggressive extermination and displacement of Native Americans and that understanding our past is critical to understanding “our present racial situation, with its dominant racial hierarchy and rationalizing racial frame” (Feagin, 2010, p. 22). Deloria and Wildcat (2001) extended the idea of imperialistic rationalization with a discussion of what they referred to as the European Truth which is the mistaken belief that Europeans possessed the only legitimate claim to history, rationalizing the large scale subjugation of non-European, Indigenous people wherever they were met on all continents. Brayboy (2005) used as an example of present day White supremacy in the educational setting the emphasis placed on White authors such as Shakespeare and Dickinson as opposed to authors such as Louis Owens and Zitkala-Sa, both Native American authors, by curriculum departments in school districts across the United States.
The third tenet of TribalCrit is that Native Americans “occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). Brayboy used the concept of liminal to describe a place in-between. Brayboy argued that Native Americans are both legal/political and racialized entities but that society rarely considers the legal/political aspect of Native American presence choosing instead to concentrate on the racialization of Native Americans. He further argued that Native Americans “must struggle for the right to be defined as both a legal/political group and a racial group” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 433). Deloria and Lytle (1984) referred to the legal/political aspect of Native American presence as the extra constitutionality of non-recognized people and also suggested that Native Americans be treated as a legal and political presence in addition to a racial presence. For example, Wilkens (1997) argued that Native Americans were organized as tribal nations long before there was a U.S. Constitution and therefore should be treated as sovereign nations.

The fourth tenet of TribalCrit “is rooted in a belief and desire to obtain and forge tribal autonomy, self-determination, self-identification, and ultimately tribal sovereignty” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 433). Brayboy defined tribal autonomy as the ability to control natural resources, which includes education systems on tribal land, and the ability to control and legally protect tribal boundaries. Brayboy (2005) referred to self-determination as the ability to break free of the guardian/ward relationship that has existed between the U.S. government and tribal nations and to discontinue the practice of tribes having to ask for permission from the U.S. government on all matters relative to Native American life. Self-identification was defined by Brayboy (2005) as the ability for tribal groups to decide what it means to be a Native American without prejudicial
influence from the dominate society. Others have defined sovereignty as “the inherent right of a people to self-government, self-determination, and self-education” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 9). However, Wilkins and Lomawaima (2001) emphasized that sovereignty does not necessarily imply complete political independence. Wilkins and Lomawaima (2001) used the balance between federal sovereignty and the sovereignty of the states as an example of an ideal relationship that should exist between the U.S. federal government and tribal nations. This concept of sovereignty is relative to all aspects of Native American life but is particularly important to Native American researchers, scholars, and by extension Native American communities, to the process of providing educational services to Native American children (Barnhart & Kawagley, 2010; Brayboy, 2005; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

The fifth tenet of TribalCrit deals exclusively with education. In relation to educating Native American children “concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). In TribalCrit knowledge is defined as “the ability to recognize change, adapt, and move forward with change” (Brayboy, 2005, p.434). Brayboy defined three different types of knowledge that are essential to a productive and worthwhile education vital to the survival of Native American communities: (a) cultural knowledge which is the ability to know what it means to be a member of a particular tribal nation; (b) knowledge of survival which includes the ability and willingness to adapt when change is required; and (c) and academic knowledge which does not necessarily have to be diametrically opposed to Indigenous ways of knowing. Many scholars have advocated for a migration away from traditional Western concepts of knowledge and a shift toward more Indigenous
ways of knowing (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Demmert, 2001; Haynes Writer, 2008). Demmert (2001) asserted that too many Native students have not been successful in the current structure provided by a traditional Western education and advocated for moving toward more Indigenous ways of knowing that grounds Native children in their roots as Indigenous people. The difference between Demmert and other scholars on the subject of Native education is that Demmert (2001) argued that non-Native students would also benefit from an education that is based upon Indigenous ways of knowing.

Through a TribalCrit lens, power is defined as not being a “property or trait that an individual, community, or nation uses to exercise control over other individuals, communities, or nations, but is instead the ability to survive rooted in the capacity to adapt and adjust to changing landscapes, time, ideas, circumstances, and situations” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 435). Power is not an individual essence dependent upon one individual’s ability to persevere and overcome, nor is power simply a matter of maintaining group identity. Power is a community achievement, a combination of survival and resistance (Brayboy, 2005). Deloria and Lytle (1984) identified power with a Native American community’s ability to not only survive but to prosper and develop into a greater community by a process of self-determination and self-knowledge. There is a dialogical relationship between culture, knowledge, and power: “culture is the base for knowledge that ultimately leads to power” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 436).

The sixth tenet of TribalCrit is the rejection of assimilation policies in educational institutions (Brayboy, 2005). According to Klug and Whitfield (2003), assimilation language influenced educational policy for Native Americans from earliest attempts to provide educational services to Native American students through usage of the word
appropriate. Officials with the Bureau of Indians Affairs were charged with the responsibility of defining what was and was not appropriate and most often what was determined to be appropriate resulted in the destruction of Native American culture and assimilation of Native American students into the dominate society according to White values and methods of communication (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Fordam (1985) argued that experiences in school do not necessarily have to destroy cultural integrity. However, research suggests that academic success can become defined by scripted and racialized performance (Fordam, 1985). In a study of high achieving African American and Latina/o students at two elite private colleges, racial opportunity cost was defined as the “options that are foregone and the losses that result from those foregone options when students of color pursue academic success” (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014, p. 191). According to Brayboy (2005), TribalCrit rejects integration and assimilation of Native American students in educational institutions because integration and assimilation inevitably destroy cultural integrity by forcing Native American students to accept academic knowledge at the expense of cultural knowledge.

The seventh tenet of TribalCrit emphasizes “the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future; it honors the adaptability of the groups and recognizes the differences within individuals and between people and groups” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 437). Typical western schooling practices emphasize the importance of competition between students, whereas Indigenous ways of knowing that are grounded in a strong cultural foundation emphasize the importance of cooperation (Brayboy, 2005). Other researchers have demonstrated that cooperation is the preferred method of learning among Native American students (Demmert, 2001; Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Indigenous
ways of knowing should be validated within the school setting and curriculum choices should include a strong Indigenous cultural foundation (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). Haynes Writer (2008) suggested that efforts have been made to provide a cultural foundation to curriculum that is used with Native American students, but those efforts have been ineffective because they are grounded only in a historical context. According to Haynes Writer (2008), curriculum should be developed that addresses both the historical and the contemporary context of the Native American experience, and Educators should learn to think critically about their own identities and examine the frame of their prejudicial thoughts regarding Native American identity (Haynes Writer, 2008). The goal of education from a TribalCrit perspective should be to eradicate “centuries of colonial ethos imprinted on the minds and souls of Indian youth and to replace that model with one of pride, respect, and knowledge of Indian nationhood” (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 182).

The eighth tenet of TribalCrit establishes story and oral knowledge as a legitimate form of data in the research process on all issues concerning Native American people. “Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 439). Klug and Whitfield (2003) also emphasized the importance of story to the Native American experience and went on to suggest that non-Native American people must learn to develop a patient attitude and really hear in order to understand and learn from the Native American experience. Brayboy (2005) and other researchers (Barnhart, 2001; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006) have also emphasized the difference between hearing and listening to stories as useful data in the Native American experience. Listening is an act of going through the motions of participating in a conversation, whereas hearing is a
process of attributing value and understanding the range of possibilities and nuances within a story (Brayboy, 2005). Using TribalCrit as a lens, stories that describe the Native American experience should be an important source of data in the process of redesigning educational experiences for Native American students.

The ninth and final tenet of TribalCrit is a commitment to action and social justice. Brayboy (2005) suggested that the intent of TribalCrit is to move researchers, scholars, and educational practitioners beyond pontification and theory. Researchers and scholars who use TribalCrit as a theoretical lens should be committed to action that produces positive change in the lives of Native American people (Brayboy, 2005). Deloria (1991) also called for a commitment to action as opposed to theoretical dialog. In a critique of formal and official institutions of Native American education, it has been suggested that educational policy makers and tribal leaders need to cultivate a mind shift that is focused on relevant and tangible evidence of change that goes beyond “the perpetual education report” (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. 160). In addition to a call for action, the ninth tenet of TribalCrit includes a responsibility for social justice. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) offered a definition of social justice as both a process and a goal. “Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 3). Scheurich and Skrla (2004) applied this definition of social justice to the school environment and suggested that a commitment to social justice requires that all children, regardless of race, perform academically at uniformly high levels in schools where they feel safe and secure.
TribalCrit is relevant to the current study because it is the only critical race theory that is specific to the Native American experience. Alaska Natives share many experiences with Native Americans. Both Native Americans and Alaska Natives were victims of colonization and assimilation education policies. In its emphasis on the relevance of story as a legitimate source of data, TribalCrit offers the potential to give voice to Alaska Natives who because of small numbers are often considered statistically insignificant. Story is another source of relevant data available to explain and describe the Alaska Native experience. Finally, TribalCrit is relevant to the current study of Alaska Natives because often Alaska Native children must learn to live in two conflicting worlds. They must learn to live in the White world where success is based on the premise of competition and material gain, and they must learn to maintain cultural values and live in the traditional Native world where success is based on community and sharing. Brayboy’s (2005) definition of a viable education describes perfectly what is necessary for survival in both the White and Native worlds for Alaska Native children: cultural knowledge, knowledge of survival, and academic knowledge.

In summary, indigenous people in the United States are often members of an involuntary minority (Ogbu, 1991). Ogbu’s theory of dysfunctional cultural adaptation known as oppositional culture has been refuted by many researchers as an example of deficit thinking, but his definition of involuntary minority is applicable to the Indigenous experience in the United States. Further, Ogbu’s emphasis on the importance of historical context when examining the contemporary experiences and academic results of minority students has been a major contribution to sociocultural studies of race and school (Brayboy, 2005). Racial formation theory is defined as a simultaneous process of
social and cultural initiative to define the meaning of race and political and economic initiative to distribute power according to racial classification (Omni & Winant, 1986). Tribal critical race theory emerged out of critical race theory which was an attempt in the 1970’s to provide a critical and analytical lens to change societal structures and institutions by exposing the relationship between race, racism, and power in the African American experience (Haynes Writer, 2008). Brayboy (2005) developed tribal critical race theory as a theoretical lens in an effort to better represent the Indigenous experience in schools, to change the ways that Native American students think about schools, but to more importantly change the ways that schools think about Native American students.

Suggested Obstacles to Academic Achievement

There are many suggested obstacles to academic achievement experienced by minority students. This section will review the literature on the following suggestions that attempt to explain school failure among minority students: (a) oppositional culture; (b) culture of poverty; (c) deficit thinking; (d) learning style difference; (e) sociolinguistic difference; (f) social reproduction and structural inequality; and (g) sociocultural and sociopolitical.

Oppositional Culture

As has been previously mentioned, Ogbu (1991) attempted to explain low academic achievement among minority students as a result of a dysfunctional cultural adaptation that he referred to as oppositional culture. According to Ogbu (1991), low academic achievement among minority students is a result of incongruence between subordinate and dominate cultures (Ogbu, 1991). Historical and broader societal forces can either encourage or discourage subordinate groups from engaging in pro social school
experiences. Ogbug (1991) argued that some subordinate groups develop an oppositional culture as a result of the discriminatory treatment they have received and may still be receiving from the dominant culture. This oppositional orientation is a result of how the subordinate group understands how society works and of the subordinate group’s place within that society (Ogbug, 1991). This understanding is referred to by Ogbug as a subordinate group’s cultural model. The subordinate group’s refusal to participate in successful school experiences is referred to as the subordinate group’s oppositional inclination (Ogbug, 1991).

Central to Ogbug’s oppositional culture theory is the distinction between voluntary immigrants and involuntary immigrants. According to Ogbug, many voluntary immigrants have moved to live within the dominate culture in search of opportunity. These voluntary immigrants respond to economic and social barriers as problems they can overcome through hard work (Ogbug, 1991). However, many involuntary immigrants are those immigrants who have been forced against their will to live in a dominate culture. These involuntary immigrants compare themselves with the dominate culture and see themselves as not able to overcome economic and social barriers because they belong to the subordinate culture (Ogbug, 1991). Members of the involuntary immigrant group who adopt an oppositional inclination do not see school success as a means to a way out of their condition because the school is representative of the dominate culture (Ogbug, 1991). These members of the involuntary immigrant group perceive standard language and standard behavior practices most rewarded in schools as detrimental to the involuntary immigrant group’s culture and identity (Ogbug, 1991).
Much has been written disclaiming oppositional culture theory (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998; Akom, 2003; Carter, 2005; Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Tyson, 2002; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Harris (2011) critiqued oppositional culture theory by examining the key assumptions and claiming that they simply cannot be substantiated by empirical evidence. Even though some researchers might believe the basic tenets of oppositional culture theory have been discredited, there is other research that suggests teachers perceive that students of color choose to do poorly in school because they have adopted an oppositional and defiant attitude toward school (Bol & Berry, 2005; Harris, 2011). While there may be some element of truth in the oppositional culture theory for some members of the involuntary immigrant population, there is little evidence that oppositional culture theory can explain differences in academic achievement for all members of the involuntary immigrant population (Harris, 2011).

While intriguing, Ogbu’s theory of oppositional cultural adaptation among involuntary immigrants is not applicable to the Native American experience because Native Americans are not an immigrant group. Native Americans are an indigenous group. There can be little doubt they have experienced a high cultural and social cost as a result of exposure to the dominate culture; however, there is no available evidence that Native American students are making a conscious choice to not participate in successful school experiences. In addition, Ogbu’s theory is an example of deficit thinking, placing blame for low academic achievement on a conscious choice made by minority students.
This study agrees with Harris (2011) that instead of focusing on the questionable supposition that poor academic achievement among minority students is due to some oppositional inclination, focus should be placed on alternative explanations such as ineffective teaching practices in schools and consequently underdeveloped academic skills among minority students.

Culture of Poverty

Another popular suggestion that attempted to explain low academic achievement among minority students is the culture of poverty framework. The culture of poverty explanation was made popular by Ruby Payne (2005) in her self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. According to Payne (2005), many minority students are born into poverty and the condition of poverty is what leads to their inability to achieve academic success in school. Poverty was defined as the “extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, 2005, p. 8). Payne suggested there are eight types of resources: (a) financial resources; (b) emotional resources; (c) mental resources; (d) spiritual resources; (e) physical resources; (f) support system resources; (g) relationships and role model resources; and (h) knowledge of hidden rules resources (Payne, 2005). According to Payne (2005), these resources are class bound and originate in the cause and effect experience of economic realities for many minority students. Delpit (1995) also suggested there are hidden rules within the culture of power that are prevalent in most classrooms and that minority students must learn to navigate these rules in order to be successful. However, many researchers have discredited Payne’s culture of poverty explanation for low academic achievement among minority students.
The culture of poverty explanation for low academic achievement implies that some subordinate groups are destined to fail because they exist within a context of generational poverty. Valencia (2010) asserted that Payne’s culture of poverty theory is scientifically indefensible and that Payne is guilty of participating in a futile exercise of grand theorizing. Earlier scholars have refuted the use of poverty as an explanation for low academic achievement, claiming that there is no such thing as a communal mindset among people who live in poverty (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Gans, 1995; Leeds, 1971). Valencia (2010) suggested that Payne’s framework for understanding poverty has a non-scientific research base and that it engages in considerable stereotyping of minority students. Payne’s framework for understanding poverty offers no consideration of alternative explanations for poor academic achievement among minority students (Valencia, 2010). According to Valencia (2010), the culture of poverty theory is fundamentally a flawed theory that is grounded in the tragedy of deficit thinking.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking places the blame for school failure on the victim instead of on the structure of schools and the ways in which schools fail minority students (Valencia, 2010). In his book, Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice, Richard Valencia (2010) argued that deficit thinking is the predominate explanation used by most educators in the United States when attempting to explain poor academic performance among minority students:

The deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or
motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster—such as familial deficits and dysfunctions. (Valencia, 2010, p. xi)

Valencia argued that the deficit thinking paradigm is ubiquitous and permeates education systems where poor and minority students of color attend school and that even superintendents of such school systems are often guilty of deficit thinking. Well intended efforts at school reform, such as the popular at-risk construct, could potentially be permeated with deficit thinking by viewing “poor and working class children and their families (typically of color) as predominately responsible for school failure” (Valencia, 2010, p. xi). In their study of Mexican American students and families, Valencia and Black (2002) argued that the most common form of deficit thinking is the mistaken assumption among many in the educational community that families of low socioeconomic conditions do not value an education.

Valencia and Black (2002) traced the myth of deficit thinking back to the racist ideology of the American Colonial period and argued that behavior such as success in school cannot be equated with community values. Using qualitative data from a study of Mexican American families, evidence of the Mexican American people’s long standing struggle for equal educational opportunities, and the scholarly literature on parental involvement, Valencia and Black (2002) argued that there is no scientific basis for the assumption that Mexican American families of low socio economic conditions do not value an education. Weiner (2006) argued that an impersonal, bureaucratic school culture reinforces deficit thinking among teachers who as a result focus on what is wrong with students and communities instead of focusing on the strengths students bring to the school experience from their communities. Weiner (2006) outlined a reframing process
that teachers and other educational policy makers should use to debunk the myth of
deficit thinking. Weiner (2006) suggested that impersonal school practices and hidden
assumptions in the deficit paradigm often reinforce the negative behavior among students
schools hope to change. Many studies have suggested that minority students are victims
of deficit thinking and are consequently treated differently than White or Asian American
students by their teachers (Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2000; Lewis, 2003). Deficit thinking
ignores systemic factors in creating school failure such as ineffective school practices and
inequitable funding for the education of minority students (Valencia, 2010).

*Learning Style Difference*

Learning style difference research also attempts to explain poor academic
achievement among minority students (Guild, 1998; More, 1987; Swisher, 1994).
Learning style refers to the student’s preferred method of learning (More, 1987).
Swisher (1994) defined learning style as a consistent pattern of behavior and
performance exhibited in the learning place, which has been formed in the home, culture,
and society. Researchers have emphasized that learning styles however are not mutually
exclusive (Guild, 1998; More, 1987; Swisher, 1994). Rather, learning styles exist on a
continuum. Individuals may be categorized according to the learning style most favored,
but individuals can also learn to strengthen other learning styles (Guild, 1998; More,
1987; Swisher, 1994). According to Swisher (1994), there are four different learning
styles:

- Sensory modality learning style in which learners are categorized as either visual,
auditory, or tactile/kinesthetic.
• Global/analytical learning style in which learners are categorized as either requiring a big picture when learning a new task or requiring a series of facts and step by step instructions.

• Impulsive/reflective learning style in which learners are categorized by the speed and rate of accuracy they demonstrate when learning a new task. Impulsive learners respond quickly and usually make more mistakes, while reflective learners respond more slowly but make fewer mistakes.

• Cooperation/individualism learning style in which learners either learn best in groups on collaborative projects or as individuals in teacher centered more competitive learning activities (Swisher, 1994, pp. 3-6).

Swisher (1994) argued that schools should make an effort to match the teaching styles available to students with the preferred learning styles of individual students and that preferred learning styles are a result of an individual’s innate predisposition and his or her interaction with social and cultural influences (Guild, 1998; Swisher, 1994).

Many researchers have suggested that some minority students struggle with a disconnect between the learning styles they bring to school and the learning styles most represented and embraced by schools (Kaulback, 1984; Reyhner, 1994; Rhodes, 1988; Swisher, 1994). As an example, More (1987) suggested that some Native American students are at a disadvantage because they typically utilize imagery and global perspectives when making connections. According to More (1989), some Native American students do not typically respond well to a series of directions given in verbal or written form. Moore (1987) also suggested that some Native American students value cooperative learning and reflective learning activities rather than competitive rapid
response learning activities. In contrast, most traditional classrooms reward refined verbal skills, competition among individuals, independent learners, and rapid fire learning styles that rely heavily on verbal or written directions (More, 1987). Researchers have suggested that even though students can and do learn to operate in a variety of learning styles, there is often miscommunication when there are inconsistencies between a student’s learning style and a teacher’s teaching style (More, 1987; Swisher, 1994). However, researchers are careful in pointing out that there is much research that needs to be done on learning styles and that learning style differences should not be overemphasized because it may lead to a new form of inaccurate labeling and stereotyping of minority students (Guild, 1998; Kaulback, 1984; More, 1987; Swisher, 1994).

**Sociolinguistic Difference**

Before proceeding to a discussion of the sociolinguistic difference explanation for low academic achievement among minority students, it is important to challenge the assumption of language validity, the belief that one form of language usage is somehow superior to other forms of language usage. Many blame low academic achievement of minority students on an inability to master proper usage of the English language. Language validity is the assumption that there is a single right way to use language and is based on politics, not cognitive development or scientific evidence (Wynne, 2005). Wynne (2005) referred to language validity assumptions as linguistic oppression. According to Wynne (2005), the abuses of linguistic oppression toward minority students are horrendous and the damage to self-esteem unconscionable; however, he suggested that language validity assumptions are equally harmful to students who supposedly use
proper or Standard English. When students who use Standard English assume that their language is the language of supremacy, those students may become incapable of communicating with other cultures, of learning from other cultures, and of potentially solving world problems through communication with those who are deemed non-standard by virtue of language usage (Wynne, 2005).

Other researchers have argued that language validity assumptions are an egregious act of deficit thinking and tantamount to linguistic oppression (Lippi-Green, 1997; Zuidema, 2005). According to Zuidema (2005), there are four myths about language usage:

- English must obey the rules of grammar. When we define grammar as the pattern of a language, it is correct to say that English must obey rules. However, many non-linguists define grammar as the rules of taste or usage. Students should understand that English must follow some grammar rules, but they should also understand that they have the freedom to disregard some rules when using taste or usage based grammar.

- Some dialects and languages do not have grammatical rules. There is much research on the grammar and vocabulary of stigmatized language systems (Rickford & Rickford, 2002; Smitherman, 2002; Wolfram, Adger, & Conna, 1999).

- Standard English is better than other varieties. Wolfram et al., (1999) suggested that there is no one, single dialect that is considered the standard of all English dialects. That is, Standard English is a moving target (Wolfram et al., 1999).
English is not as good as it used to be. “Contrary to popular opinion that English usage is getting worse, English is simply adapting and evolving to meet the needs of an ever changing society” (Zuidema, 2005, pp. 668-672).

It is only through the elimination of such myths that minority students will never be able to experience the freedom to use their community languages, or what Delpit (2002) referred to as their public languages, while learning academic language without feelings of inferiority. The prejudicial presumption that language usage is divided neatly between standard and non-standard is the result of various false assumptions about language and a deficit-thinking paradigm (Delpit, 2002; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010).

Even though many researchers have argued against the assumption that there is one Standard English that is superior to all other varieties of English, there is little evidence that these same researchers have suggested minority students should not learn Standard English. According to Delpit (1995), teachers frequently use their own language as a normative reference for what they consider to be Standard English when communicating with minority students. Most teachers who use Standard English as a normative reference consider those who use non-Standard English as language deficient (Delpit, 1995). The most common result of this deficit perspective is lowered academic expectations for minority students (Delpit, 2005; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Many researchers have recommended that teachers should avoid requiring minority students to renounce their natural speech patterns while learning the rules of discourse required of Standard English (Delpit, 1995; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010).
In her book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Delpit (1995) stated that Standard English is the language of economic success and the language of power. Delpit (1995) went on to suggest that all children have a right to be explicitly taught the variety of language that will most likely give them access to economic success and power. Delpit (1995) also suggested there is a culture of power that influences academic achievement among minority students within every classroom. Delpit (1995) proposed five basic assumptions within the culture of power:

- All classroom activities and behaviors are a complex interplay between power and powerlessness.
- There are codes or rules of power within the culture of power.
- The rules within the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of those who have the power.
- If you are not a member of the culture of power, being explicitly told the rules makes participating easier.
- Those with power are frequently least aware of the influence of power, “while those without power are most aware of its existence and of its influence on their personal wellbeing” (Delpit, 1995, p. 24).

Other researchers besides Delpit have suggested that the primary reason for the low level of academic success among minority students is the discontinuity between the language and culture of the home environment and the language and culture of mainstream American society as represented by schools (Erickson, 1993; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010; Purcell-Gates, 2002).
According to sociolinguistic difference theory, many minority students come from backgrounds that support linguistic and sociolinguistic styles that are not supported by typical public schools. Typical public schools support linguistic and interaction styles common to White, middle class students (Delpit, 1995; Erickson, 1993; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010; Phillips, 1983). One example given by Klug and Whitfield (2003) of a sociolinguistic difference in rules of discourse between Native American students and teachers is the manner in which Native American students convey attention to a teacher. Teachers frequently use gestures and direct eye contact that are inappropriate in Native American culture (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Native American students use less direct cues to show that they are paying attention. Sociolinguistic difference theory suggests that different assumptions about appropriate language use contribute to routine miscommunication in the classroom and uncertainty among minority students and their teachers (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Erickson, 1997; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Leap, 1993; Phillips, 1983).

Language usage is inextricably bound to race, culture and community (Nieto, 2010). Many researchers have recommended that teachers should avoid requiring minority students to renounce their natural, community speech patterns while attempting to learn Standard English (Delpit, 1995; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010). Valenzuela (1999) defined subtractive schooling as the process of divesting minority students of important social and cultural resources and leaving the students vulnerable to academic failure. Education is at its best when teachers find ways to capitalize on what a student brings to the classroom while adding new knowledge and skills to the student’s reservoir of
knowledge (Valenzuela, 1999). Researchers have consistently suggested that teachers broaden their perspective on language when working with minority students by combining the skills students already have with targeted Standard English language knowledge (Delpit, 2005; Hilliard, 2002; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Leap, 1993; Nieto, 2010; Stubbs, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

**Social Reproduction and Structural Inequality**

Many scholars and researchers have attempted to explain the poor academic achievement among minority students with a social reproduction explanation. This explanation is also referred to as the structural inequality or systemic inequality explanation (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; De Jesus, 2000; Oakes, 1985, Valencia, 2010). Systemic inequality has been defined as the “established processes whereby values, traditions, hierarchies, styles, and attitudes are deeply embedded into the political, economic, and cultural structures of any society” (Pearl, 2002, p. 336). According to Pearl (2002), the systems that have emerged are the consequences of historical influence and contemporary political pressure. School failure for minority students cannot be fully understood without understanding the history of a conquered people still paying a price for being conquered that manifests itself in the exclusion from positions of authority and influence (Pearl, 2002). De Jesus (2000) suggested that the function of many schools in society is to sort individuals and groups into a hierarchical division of labor. According to De Jesus (2000), schools are responsible for maintaining the asymmetrical power relations between dominate and subordinate groups.
Following in the vein of the structural or systemic inequality explanation, Valencia (2010) suggested that there are nine structural conditions within schools that play a significant role in shaping and reproducing school failure among minority students. The nine structural conditions that contribute to school failure for minority students are: (a) school segregation; (b) language and cultural exclusion; (c) inequitable school financing; (d) poor teacher-student interactions; (e) low levels of teacher certification; (f) lack of curriculum differentiation; (g) an overemphasis on special education; (h) the absence of gifted and talented programs; and (i) few well trained teachers that represent the culture of minority students (Valencia, 2010). The structural and systemic inequality explanation contends that there is a strong and predictable connection between school conditions and school outcomes. “Racialized opportunity structures lead to racialized academic achievement patterns” (Valencia, 2010, p. 8).

**Sociocultural and Sociopolitical**

There are many explanations offered for low academic achievement among minority students. Nieto (2010) proclaimed that no theory can provide all the answers to the persistent dilemma of educating minority students because the problems are not just about what happens inside of a school but are about the ideology inherent within a society’s culture. Nieto (2010) argued for a critical dialog on race and culture, suggesting that both heavily influence language and literacy development among minority students. However, much has been written about unwillingness on behalf of teachers to participate in a critical dialog on the educational process and the differences between themselves and their students (Fine, 1991; Jervis, 1996; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1994; Solomon, 1995; Tatum, 1997). The sociocultural or sociopolitical explanation is based on the assumption
that social relationships and political realities are the foundation of teaching and learning. In a sociocultural and sociopolitical explanation, “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers” (Nieto, 2010, p. 27). From a sociocultural and sociopolitical perspective, low levels of academic achievement among minority students are a result of an absence of critical conversation regarding the educational systems provided to minority students and a disregard for social justice (Neito, 2010).

According to Nieto (2010), there are five tenets offered by a sociocultural and sociopolitical perspective for educators who work with minority students:

- Teacher-centered transmission models of instructional delivery are generally the practice in most classrooms, especially in classrooms of most minority students. A more dynamic approach to instruction is suggested in which the student acts as the center or the agent of knowledge construction.

- Instead of a mechanical transmission of content that is separate and alien from the student’s experience, the knowledge and experiences that students bring to school should be incorporated in the learning process.

- There is no such thing as pure cultural identity. Instead, cultural identity is “understood as dynamic; multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by social, economic and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical” (Nieto, 2010, p. 62).

- Culture is highly dependent upon context, but it is more than the rituals, foods, and holidays of specific groups of people. Culture is a much more dynamic
process. Rituals, foods, and holidays are points of demarcation that distinguish one group of people from another group of people.

- Community is the foundation of a sociocultural and sociopolitical framework. Educators should take advantage of the assets offered by the community in the educational process and work toward developing a sense of community in the classroom.

There are many researchers who have suggested that learning cannot be separated from the context in which it takes place (Nieto, 2010; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Within the context of community, the sociocultural and sociopolitical framework includes a commitment to social justice and educational equity (Nieto, 2010).

In her book, *Language, Culture and Teaching: Critical Perspectives*, Nieto (2010) asked a critical question: What is the purpose of schools in a democratic society? Nieto then went on to suggest that the purpose of schools must be based on social justice if we expect to fulfill our great promise of equal access to a high quality education for all children (Nieto, 2010). Neito (2010) suggested five implications for teaching from the perspective of social justice:

- Educators must believe that all students are capable and worthy of learning to high levels of academic achievement. Before we attempt to fix the curriculum content or the instructional strategies in our schools, we must first fix our society’s expectations of students, particularly those who differ from the majority in terms of race, language and culture, and those who live in poverty.

- Educators must capitalize on the knowledge, experiences, and
languages that students bring to school as the basis of instruction. The assumption that students bring to the classroom many talents and assets, especially minority students, contradicts the prevailing and unfortunate assumption of many teachers that minority students are somehow deficient.

- Students need to be prepared with the skills and attitudes necessary to live and work with others in an increasingly diverse, complex, and interrelated world. In order to prepare students for an increasingly diverse and complex world, the curriculum should be based on reading, writing, mathematics, technological literacy, and multicultural literacy.

- The curriculum for all students should include an apprenticeship in democracy so students can become critical and productive citizens. Students should be provided with day-to-day opportunities to practice democracy with all the conflict and ambiguity inherent in democracy.

- Conscious effort should be made to improve the relationships between teachers and students. Many studies have confirmed that the quality of the learning is directly dependent upon the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student (Nieto, 2010, p. 57).

According to Nieto (2010), the purpose of school in a democratic society is to affirm and honor all children, to believe that all children are capable of success, and to teach students to become critical and creative people who care for others and the environment and who champion social justice.
In summary, there are many suggestions that have attempted to explain low levels of academic achievement among minority students. Some of those explanations like Ogbu’s (1991) oppositional culture explanation and Payne’s (2005) culture of poverty explanation are based on a deficit-thinking paradigm that places the blame for school failure on the student and the community. It has been suggested that a deficit paradigm that places the blame for school failure on the victim instead of on the structure of schools can be a cause of failure among minority students (Valencia, 2010). There have been studies that suggest some students have different learning styles (Guild, 1998; More, 1987; Swisher, 1994). One explanation for persistent school failure among minority students has been an incongruent match between teaching styles and the preferred learning styles of students (More, 1987). However, the education community should be careful not to use learning style theory as a way to label and stereotype minority students (Swisher, 1994). The suggestion that there is a superior, right Standard English is a fallacy (Zuidema, 2005). Language is more flexible and responsive to the needs an ever changing society (Zuidema, 2005). However, minority students need to learn academic English while maintaining the integrity of their community languages because academic English is the language of economic success and power (Delpit, 1995). The social reproduction and structural inequality explanation places the responsibility for school failure among minority students squarely on the organization of the school system and society. Racialized structural patterns produce racialized results (Valencia, 2010). Finally, Nieto (2010) argued that the reason there is such a persistent discrepancy in academic achievement between minority students and those students who have enjoyed
the advantages of membership in the dominate culture is an unwillingness to have an honest, critical conversation about educational practice, social justice, and race.

Racial-Ethnic Identity Development

This section will establish the historical and present context of racism in the United States before reviewing the literature on race as a construct, the need for a more heterogeneous racial model, and the presence of racial discrimination within the school context. In addition, this section will review the literature on stereotype threat and racial opportunity cost. This section will conclude with a review of seminal studies using the Multidimensional Measure of Racial Identity (MMRI) to establish the influence of racial-ethnic identity on academic achievement among African American students.

Race has been a significant factor throughout the history of the United States. Howard Zinn (1999) stated that there is not a country in world history that has been so impacted by race and racism and for so long a time as the United States. Many have asserted that racial oppression has been foundational to the deep structure of American society since the founding of the United States and the creation of the Constitution (Feagin, 2010; Miller & Garran, 2008; Zinn, 1999). For most of our history as a nation, the American story has been one of human bondage and legal segregation (Feagin, 2010; Zinn, 1999). It has only been within the past forty years that we can possibly declare ourselves a free country for all citizens, and “forty years is not enough time to eradicate the impact of the previous three and a half centuries of extreme racial oppression” (Zinn, 1999, p. 112). Racism in the United States has been referred to as systemic, embedded in our history and our culture, present in our everyday lives, and practiced on a routine and
daily basis throughout society (Feagin, 2010). It has been suggested that racial oppression has been and currently is ubiquitous, combining “institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society” (Bell & Griffen, p. 4).

Race is a significant factor in the current social fabric of the United States. In his book, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, Joe Feagin (2010) suggested that racism is systemic in the United States. Feagin used the term white racial frame to describe a generic meaning system that is held by most White Americans and some Americans of color. The white racial frame “is an overarching worldview, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” (Feagin, 2010, p. 3). The white racial frame contains several layers of understanding and making sense of the world. At the most basic level, the white racial frame views Whites as generally superior to persons of color (Feagin, 2010). At the next level, the white racial frame rationalizes White control of social institutions and economic opportunity. At the lowest level, the white racial frame reinforces negative racial stereotypes about people of color. The white racial frame is so endemic to society that it is seldom if ever questioned by White people as unacceptable (Feagin, 2010). In a study of White students in institutions of higher education, Feagin (2010) exposed post racial assumptions that the United States has become a more racially tolerant nation by
studying journal data collected from White students around the country over a period of many years. The study found that racist perspectives from a white racial frame are a normal part of many White students’ social context in institutions of higher education (Feagin 2010).

Even though race has been such an integral part of the history of the United States and is such a foundational condition of the contemporary social context, there has been disagreement about whether or not race should be used as a construct when studying the experiences of minority populations. Some researchers have suggested that race not be used because race is not an absolute construct (Helms, 1990; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Researchers have suggested alternative constructs such as culture and ethnicity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Arguments against the use of race as a construct when studying the experiences of minority populations have focused on whether race is measureable and offers scientific validity to a social construct that is primarily a biological classification (Helms, 1990). However, there has also been research suggesting that race should be used when studying the experiences of minority populations (Sellers, Chavous, & Cook, 1998). Research arguing for the use of race as a construct has cited the historical significance of race in the experiences of minority populations, the present social inequality minority populations experience as a result of race, and the personal meaning individuals within minority populations attribute to race as reasons race should be used as a construct in the study of minority populations (Chavous et al., 2003; Sellers et al., 2006).
There are many different categories of racial-ethnic identity (REI), but most of the research connecting racial-ethnic identity (REI) to educational outcomes has been focused on African American students. There is a need for additional research connecting REI to educational outcomes among African American students but also among minority students who are not African American (Oyserman et al., 2001). Celious and Oyserman (2001) argued for a more heterogeneous racial model that goes beyond a simple Black-White dichotomy taking into account not only other racial-ethnic groups but also variations within groups. Theories of racial identity fail to recognize the diversity within racial-ethnic identity groups (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). There is no existing research that links educational outcomes to REI among Alaska Native students. Brayboy (2005) was particularly critical of the Black-White binary of most race theories and attempted to provide a race theory in TribalCrit that is specific to the Native American experience.

Racism is a prevailing and consistent experience for many minority students in public schools (Valencia, 2010). There is strong evidence suggesting that minority students experience negative and inequitable treatment in schools across the nation (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Scheurich & Skrla, 2004; Valencia, 2010). Minority students are more likely to be assigned to special education classes and more likely tracked into remedial classes. They are also more likely the recipient of harsh disciplinary action and more likely labeled as drop-outs (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson & Koschoreck, 2001). By nearly every measure, minority students are the victims of racist educational practice and policy. The condition of minority students has been summarized as follows: “Millions of minority students attend schools that are segregated, inequitably financed, vapid in
curricula delivery, teacher centered, and generally hostile in any sense of a learning environment” (Valencia, 2010, p. 11). Scheurich & Skrla (2004) suggested that it is not enough to wait for educational policy to change the situation for minority students. “Instead, what is critically needed is real life, context specific, tactical, anti-racist work in our schools” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2004, p. 52).

The urgent call for a real conversation about race is important because minority adolescents are at risk in school as they explore the significance of their racial group membership and encounter negative racial stereotypes in defining who they are within a larger social context (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming as a self-characteristic a negative stereotype about one’s racial-ethnic group (Steel & Aronson, 1995). There is a considerable body of research on the influence of stereotype threat in relation to the educational outcomes of African American students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steel & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson (1995) performed the first experiments demonstrating that stereotype threat can have a negative influence on the academic achievement of African American students. Steele and Aronson (1995) suggested that some African American students may perform poorly on academic tasks due to anxiety produced by the negative images of their racial group that are prevalent in a White dominate society. Steele (1992) suggested that racial images prevalent in society cause minority students to not identify with school. The work of Steele and Aronson (1995) corroborated earlier work by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who suggested that students who de-emphasize racial identification avoid negative
racial stereotype threat and experience higher levels of academic achievement. However, researchers such as Sackett, Hardison, & Cullen (2004) have criticized stereotype threat theory stating there is no evidence the elimination of stereotype threat will necessarily produce higher levels of academic achievement among minority students.

Although there is disagreement over the influence of stereotype threat, a considerable body of research suggests there is an identity cost for minority students who attempt to engage in successful academic experiences in school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that African American students who distance themselves from racial identification achieve greater academic success. From this theoretical foundation emerged the popular acting White hypothesis, the supposition that African American students do poorly in school because they do not want to betray their culture by assuming the cultural expectations of a predominately White society (Ogbu, 1991). While not denying that African American students experience an identity cost in their school experiences, many researchers have refuted the acting White hypothesis (Akom, 2003; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2011). In their study of high achieving students of color, Venzant Chambers and Huggins (2014) identified the influence of five school factors on what she referred to as racial opportunity cost. A loss of racial identity has been defined as “the options that are foregone and the losses that result from those foregone options when students of color pursue academic success” (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014, p. 191). Venzant Chambers and Huggins’s research supports earlier research by Valenzuela (1999) who suggested that African American and Latina/o students have important social and cultural values stripped from them in their efforts to fit into White middle class norms in a process Valenzuela referred to as subtractive schooling.
Venzant Chambers and Huggins (2014) identified five school level factors that either mitigate or exacerbate racial opportunity cost:

- **Centrality of School Norms and Values**: Schools that are permeated by a narrow and restrictive culture that only recognize the legitimacy of White middle class norms and values exacerbate racial opportunity cost. Schools that support a range of cultural norms and values alleviate racial opportunity cost.

- **The Influence of School Community and Belonging**: Schools that create a sense of community and belonging for all students alleviate racial opportunity cost. Schools that do not create a sense of community and belonging for all students exacerbate racial opportunity cost.

- **Importance of Conversations About Race and Racism in School**: Schools that create opportunities for open and safe discussions about race and racism alleviate racial opportunity cost. Schools that do not discuss race and racism or do so in a hostile forum exacerbate racial opportunity cost.

- **The Role of Tracking and Within School Segregation**: De facto segregation that often occurs as a result of academic tracking exacerbates racial opportunity cost among advanced minority students. There are few minority students in advanced school programs and that absence of racially similar students produces feelings of isolation and loneliness among academically advanced minority students.

- **The Influences of Teachers and School Personnel**: Teachers and school staff with high relationship building capacity and high expectations for minority students
alleviate racial opportunity cost. Teachers and school staff who practice open deficit thinking patterns and who do not strive to build strong relationships with minority students exacerbate racial opportunity cost.

Flexible school norms and values that encourage minority students to express themselves, inclusive school communities that help minority students feel welcome, teachers who routinely engage in conversations about race and racism, open enrollment patterns that do not track minority students into lower level classes, and teachers and other personnel who are committed to supporting all students with encouragement alleviate racial opportunity cost and promote healthy racial-ethnic identity development among minority students (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014).

There is a limited body of research connecting racial-ethnic identity and academic achievement (Sellers et al., 1998). In the research that does exist, the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) has been one instrument used to measure various dimensions of racial-ethnic identity among minority students (Chavous et al., 2003; Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011; Rowley, Burchinal, & Roberts, 2008; Sellers et al., 1998). The MMRI distinguishes between the significance of racial-ethnic identity to the individual and how the individual feels about his or her racial-ethnic group within a social context (Sellers et al., 1998). The MMRI delineates four dimensions of racial-ethnic identity: (a) salience; (b) centrality; (c) racial regard; and (d) ideology. Racial salience refers to the degree to which race and issues surrounding race are present in an individual’s experience. Racial centrality refers to the relevance of race to an individual’s self-concept. Racial regard refers to the meaning an individual places on race within a larger social context and is divided into two sub dimensions: (a) private
regard which refers to the positive or negative feelings an individual has about being a member of a particular racial-ethnic group; and (b) public regard which refers to how the individual perceives the racial-ethnic group is perceived within a larger social context by individuals who are not members of the racial-ethnic group (Sellers et al., 1998). Racial ideology refers to the meaning that an individual attributes to being a member of a specific racial-ethnic group. Racial ideology represents the individual’s beliefs about the ways in which members of a specific racial-ethnic group should live and interact within a larger social context (Sellers et al. 1998).

In their study of racial centrality, racial ideology, and academic performance among African American students attending a predominately Black college and a predominately White college using the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), a derivative of the MMRI, Sellers and colleagues (1998) found that racelessness, a process of denying racial identity, was not an effective strategy for African American college students. Both racial centrality and racial ideology were significantly related to cumulative GPA. However, ideologies that de-emphasized the importance of race and emphasized a connection with the mainstream were not associated with academic success (Sellers et al., 1998). The only positive relationship between racial ideology and academic success was for those students who had a high racial centrality and a high awareness of the similarities between African Americans and other oppressed groups. Such findings suggest that a high racial centrality and identification with other racial groups as victims of racial discrimination serve as a buffer against the possible negative effects of racial discrimination (Sellers et al., 1998). However, Sellers and colleagues
were careful to point out there should not be an overemphasis on REI in attempting to explain academic performance among minority students. There are too many other factors that logically influence academic performance such as “motivation, course selection, and school-and class-specific factors” (Sellers et al., 1998, p. 24).

Chavous and colleagues (2003) used the MMRI to examine racial centrality, private regard, and public regard among a sample of African American 12th grade students. The findings suggested that students with low racial centrality, low private regard, and low public regard experienced lower educational outcomes as measured by academic achievement in school and later college attainment. In contrast, students with high racial centrality, high private regard, and high public regard experienced greater educational outcomes (Chavous et al., 2003). In addition, students with high racial centrality, high private regard, but low public regard also experienced higher educational outcomes. This finding supports an earlier finding of Sellers et al., (1998) suggesting that high racial centrality serves as a buffer for students who do not minimize the presence of racial discrimination (Chavous et al., 2003).

In a later study, Chavous and colleagues (2008) found gender differences in relation to racial centrality and academic outcome. Racial centrality moderated the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and academic outcome differently between boys and girls (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffen, & Cogburn, 2008). There was a significant difference between high racial centrality boys and low racial centrality boys in relation to school importance attitudes (Chavous, et al., 2008). However, there was not a significant difference between high racial centrality girls and low racial centrality girls. Such findings suggest that racial discrimination influences
boys differently dependent upon the degree to which they have a healthy and positive REI. A healthy and positive REI is also important for girls, but it appears from this study that the perception of racial discrimination did not have as large an influence on low racial centrality girls as it did on low racial centrality boys. Chavous et al., (2008) also suggested a need for further research connecting REI to academic outcomes among minority students with an emphasis on individual and contextual level factors in efforts to better understand academic achievement and social development of minority students.

In summary, research has suggested that one cause for low levels of academic achievement among African American students may be incongruence between the racial-ethnic identities of students and the White, middle class culture of schools (Chavous et al., 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1985; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sellers et al., 1998). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that African American students who deemphasize REI and become raceless achieve higher academic success because they do not develop negative attitudes toward school as a result of negative in group and out of group stereotypes. Fordham and Ogbu’s findings were corroborated by research (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor & Antony, 2000; Willie, 2003) that suggested academic achievement among African American students can be negatively influenced when race is made salient within the context of negative stereotypes about an individual’s racial-ethnic identification. This body of research has suggested that African American students should deemphasize racial-ethnic identity in an effort to cope with negative racial stereotypes and thereby achieve greater academic success.
There is another body of research (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Welch & Hodges, 1997; Wright, 2009) that suggested African American students should not de-emphasize racial-ethnic identity. This research was corroborated by additional research (Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001) that suggested racial group pride and awareness of racial discrimination can become a protective influence for a healthy REI that in turn could lead to greater academic achievement among African American students. In his qualitative study of African American students who represent high levels of academic success, Wright (2009) argued that African American students cannot ignore or minimize their racial-ethnic identities in their often racially influenced educational experiences. In a world where White, middle class, Western values are imposed upon African American students from every angle, it is imperative that African American students develop narratives of academic success in response to the overwhelming presence of negative racial stereotypes and racial discrimination (Wright, 2009).

The MMRI (Multiple Measures of Racial Identity) has been used in various studies to examine dimensions of racial-ethnic identity (Chavous et al., 2003; Sellers et al., 1998; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). Research using the MMRI suggests high racial centrality serves as a moderator for racial private regard, public regard, and racial ideology. Most available research connecting REI to academic achievement among African American students suggests that an emphasis on REI does serve as a buffer in the context of racial discrimination. Sellers and colleagues (1998) have suggested there is a positive relationship between racial ideology, how one feels about a specific racial group, and racial centrality, the degree to which one identifies with a
specific racial group, which influences academic achievement among African American students (Sellers et al., 1998). However, Sellers emphasized other factors to consider that could possibly influence academic achievement among minority students in addition to REI. Nevertheless, racial-ethnic identity (REI) has been connected to various youth adjustment outcomes (Rowley et al., 1996; Sellers et al., 2006) and becomes increasingly important for minority adolescents as they explore the significance of their racial-ethnic group membership in defining who they are within a larger context of society (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

African American students and other minority students encounter a number of race-based identity risks in their efforts to adapt to larger social contexts that have been referred to by Venzant Chambers and Huggins (2014) as racial opportunity cost. Other researchers have suggested minority students sacrifice important cultural and racial assets in their efforts to fit into a school culture that is dominated by White, middle class norms and values (Valenzuela, 1999). This study agrees with the research that a healthy REI serves as a buffer and increases a sense of belonging not only to a particular racial-ethnic group but also to a school community which by extension creates a positive orientation toward academic success. The REI research on African American students is relevant to the connection between REI and academic outcome among Alaska Native students because there may be similarities that provide insight for educators, policy makers, and tribal community leaders as they develop school programs that nurture racial-ethnic identity and create school communities where Alaska Native students feel like they connected to school.
School Connectedness

The following section will provide a definition of connectedness, the personal/social development benefits associated with an increased sense of connectedness, and a review of the literature on connectedness within the context of the school setting. There have been a number of areas associated with wellbeing attributed to an increased sense of connectedness. The areas associated with wellbeing that have been associated with an increased sense of connectedness include psychological and physical health in addition to cognitive development and academic achievement. This section of the literature review will provide an overview of the research on connectedness as the construct relates to the school setting.

Before proceeding, it is important to establish a clear definition of school connectedness and school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity. According to Osterman (2000), who used the term belonging instead of connectedness, the research on belonging in educational settings has been unsystematic and ambiguous in definition and terminology. Osterman (2000) reviewed the literature on school belonging and found that definitions of school belonging cover a spectrum that includes a sense of belonging, feelings of relatedness, connectedness, and school or classroom membership. School belonging has been define by researchers as a condition in which students feel like they are a part of school, like teachers support and care about them on a personal level, like they have a reasonably good opportunity for present and future academic success, and like discipline is effective and fair (Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). For the
purposes of this study, school connectedness and school belonging will be used interchangeably, and we will use the term school connectedness because it is the term used in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. School connectedness has been defined as:

Students’ perceptions and feelings about the people at school, which includes feeling like they are a part of school, that their learning matters and is a high priority, that they are close to people at school and have supportive relationships with adults, and that teachers and other school staff consistently treat them with respect. (Oscher et al., 2009, p. 4)

School connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity will be generally defined as the degree to which students perceive that they are a significant part of their school and the degree to which they identify racial-ethnic identity as influencing school connectedness.

There are many personal and social benefits associated with an increased sense of connectedness. Self-esteem and life satisfaction are just a few of the benefits associated with a sense of connectedness (Haslam et al., 2009). A sense of connectedness has been shown to protect against stress and depression (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Pathological behaviors such as suicide and other mental illnesses have been shown to be associated with an absence of connectedness (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayash, & Cummins, 2008; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). There is also an abundance of research on the health benefits of connectedness, putting schools in a unique position to influence the overall wellbeing of children by developing and organizing programs that contribute to an increase sense of connectedness (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Jetten, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). In a study of 19 to 20 year olds, O’Conner, Sanson,
Frydenberg (2012) demonstrated that the degree to which students felt like they were connected to their school when they were in high school, specifically in regard to relationships with teachers and perceptions of respect and validation, significantly contributed to their physical and psychological wellbeing as young adults.

A sense of school connectedness significantly predicts academic attitude including intrinsic motivation and academic engagement. Academic attitude was defined as a “positive orientation toward school, class-work, and teachers” (Osterman, 2000, p. 331). In a longitudinal study from 1991 to 1995 of 4515 students in grades 3-6, Watson, Battistich, and Solomon (1997) found a correlation between a sense of connectedness and intrinsic motivation to learn. This finding was supported by additional research establishing the relationship between connectedness and intrinsic motivation to learn (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goodenow, 1993). Research conducted by Goodenow (1993) established a relationship between school connectedness and academic persistence. In a study of 301 students in two multi-ethnic junior high schools, Goodenow (1993) found that a student’s subjective sense of connectedness appears to have a significant impact on engaged and persistent academic effort. Goodenow (1993) also found that gender and ethnic differences may exist in the effects of school connectedness on intrinsic motivation to learn and academic persistence. These findings may suggest that a sense of connectedness serves as a buffer for students who internalize negative stereotypes and experience acts of racial discrimination (Goodenow, 1993).
Social context is important to perceptions of school connectedness. There are many studies of connectedness that have concentrated on the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students or peer relationships (Goodenow, 1993; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). Other research suggests that social context is also important to a sense of connectedness (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological theory of human development emphasized the multiple levels of social context and their intersections that influence human behavior. More recently, Wortham (2006) suggested that researchers focus on social contexts at each of the different levels of proximity when studying academic effort and motivation. In relation to the social context of the school environment, School connectedness has been defined as a student’s perception that “they are discernibly part of the school environment and that school constitutes an important part of their own experience” (Finn, 1989, p. 123). There are three generally accepted models that highlight school experiences relative to school connectedness: (a) Finn’s participation-identification model; (b) Faircloth’s identity-instruction integration model; and (c) Crosnoe’s not-fitting-in model of social marginalization (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model is dependent upon student identification with school and student participation in school. Participation represents specific student engagement and identification represents the students’ perception of connectedness. Finn identified four forms of participation: (a) classroom based responses to teacher directions and course requirements; (b) course-related enthusiasm and extension of academic work; (c) participation in extracurricular activities; and (d) participation in school governance (Finn, 1989). Classroom based responses to teacher
directions and course requirements were considered the most fundamental form of participation. Finn (1989) suggested the quality of instruction is the greatest moderator of student engagement and a student’s sense of connectedness; however, Finn (1989) emphasized that all instruction is not of equal value as a moderator of student engagement and connectedness. Instruction that is driven by strong relationships between the teacher and the student is the most significant moderator of student engagement and connectedness (Finn, 1989). Although Finn’s model provides a foundation for the various forms and significance of participation, it does not take into account the barriers to participation that are critical in understanding the concept of school connectedness within a social context (Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012).

Faircloth and Hamm’s (2005) identity-instruction integration model and Crosnoe’s (2011) not-fitting-in model of social marginalization give additional insight into the concept of social context as it relates to student connectedness. Faircloth’s identity-instruction integration model provides a framework for studying student-teacher relationships and instructional decisions as those relationships and decisions relate to school connectedness and student identity. In this model, a student’s sense of connectedness is related to the student’s perception of congruence between the student’s identity and the learning environment (Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012). The identity-instruction integration model offers an opportunity to identify high leverage teaching practices that may influence a sense of connectedness among students, but the model does not address the significance of peer relations in the process of developing an increased sense of school connectedness (Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012). Crosnoe’s (2011) not-fitting-in model of social marginalization addresses the connection between
the academic and social experience in school with an emphasis on peer relations.

According to Crosnoe (2011), the information students receive from various peer networks serves as a significant influence on students’ sense of school connectedness and ultimately academic achievement.

There are many studies of connectedness among adolescents that stress the importance of the student-teacher relationship. In a study of connectedness among adolescent students in high school, Wallace, Ye, and Chhuon (2012) found that adolescents’ sense of connectedness involves four distinct factors: (a) generalized connection to teachers, (b) a special connection to a specific teacher, (c) identification and participation in official school activities; and (d) the perception of fitting in with peers. An earlier study by Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found that perceptions of teacher caring are significantly linked to school interest and academic effort. Other studies have shown that perceptions of teacher support may have the most direct effect on student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). In a study of a predominately minority sample, Finn and Voelkl (1989) found a significant association between student-teacher relationships and academic engagement. However, some researchers have reported contradictory findings in regard to the importance of student-teacher relationships among ethnically diverse student populations (Gillock & Reyes, 1999). These findings suggest a need for further research on the importance of student-teacher relationships as a dimension of connectedness and a need to focus on specific ethnic groups as opposed to assuming all ethnic groups share the same experience (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).
There are also many studies of connectedness among adolescents that stress the importance of peer relationships (Nichols & White, 2001; Ryan, 2001). Wentzell and Caldwell (1997) suggested a positive association between peer relationships and academic achievement; however, these studies were primarily focused on the peer relationship experiences of European American students (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). There are some researchers that have suggested ethnic minority students are more likely to identify with significant peer relationships outside of school (Clark & Ayers, 1991; Dubois & Hirsch, 1990). These contradictory findings suggest once again a need for further research that focuses on the importance of peer relationships among ethnically diverse student populations specific to individual ethnic groups (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Despite the possible connection between student-teacher relationships and peer relationships to students’ sense of connectedness and the connection between that sense of connectedness and academic achievement, many critics have suggested that schools place very little priority on the socio-emotional needs of students (Goodlad, 1985; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). Most schools are organized according to “organizational policies and practices that systematically prevent and preclude the development of community among students and directly contribute to students’ isolation, alienation, and polarization” (Osterman, 2000, p. 324).

In summary, a preponderance of research suggests that a sense of connectedness is critical to the academic success of all students. There are three generally accepted models of student connectedness. Finn’s participation-identification model, Faircloth’s identity-instruction integration model, and Cresnoe’s not-fitting-in model of social marginalization all address specific dimensions of connectedness. The student-teacher
relationship and peer relationships appear to be strong moderators for students’ sense of connectedness, but there is research suggesting that may not be the case for many minority students. This contradiction suggests there is a need for further research on school connectedness that is specific to different ethnic groups. Despite the amount of research suggesting the significance of school connectedness to academic achievement, many schools are organized in ways that perpetuate student isolation and alienation.

Summary

There is very little historical precedent of success in the education of Alaska Native children. In addition, current results are less than encouraging. By nearly every indicator: reading and math achievement, drop-out rate, suicide and alcohol abuse rate, Alaska Native students are among the most at risk populations of students in the United States. Many obstacles have been suggested for the low levels of achievement among minority students, but there is very little research specific to the Alaska Native experience in relation to school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity. The theoretical foundation of this study, TribalCrit, was developed specifically to serve as a lens for the study of indigenous populations. There is promising research on the influence of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity among African American students that may inform educational policy and practice for Alaska Native students. Research using the MMRI has shown that African American students with a positive perspective on racial-ethnic identity who identify with other racial groups that have experienced racial discrimination achieve higher levels of academic success as measured by grade point averages, participation in extracurricular activities, and attendance in post-secondary education. Research has also shown that a sense of school connectedness may influence
academic achievement and serve as a buffer for perceptions of racial discrimination among minority students. However, the research on both REI and school connectedness is inconclusive which suggests there is a need for additional research that is specific to various racial-ethnic groups including Alaska Native students.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLGY

Introduction

This study was conducted in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District is located approximately 35 miles north of Anchorage, Alaska in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, an area commonly referred to as The Valley. There are approximately 17,867 students in 48 schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District. The ethnicity in the Mat-Su Borough School District is as follows: 69% White; 2% Black; 3% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 5% American Indian; and 18% Alaska Native. The Mat-Su Borough School District is a large district in land size, encompassing 37,000 square miles. It is primarily a bedroom community for Anchorage and the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay on the North Slope of Alaska.

This chapter will first present the research design that was used in the study. After a presentation of the research design, the chapter will be divided into two parts. The first part will present a description of the participants, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis that was used in the quantitative phase of the study. The second part will present a description of the participants, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis that was used in the qualitative phase of the study. Finally, this chapter will present a description of the procedures that were used in the mixed phase of the study.

Research Design

In order to better understand the concept of school climate and connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students, the researcher used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The explanatory sequential mixed
methods design consists of a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The reason for studying both quantitative data and qualitative data in a mixed methods study is to compare the results from two different perspectives and bring greater insight to the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the researcher first analyzes the quantitative data to establish overall patterns and trends. The qualitative data is collected and analyzed second in the sequence to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase of the study. The qualitative phase builds on, challenges, or extends the quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The two phases are connected in the interpretation stage or the mixed phase of the study. The rationale of this approach is that quantitative data provide a general understanding of the research problem. The qualitative data refine and explain the quantitative data by exploring participants’ perceptions in greater depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

In the first, quantitative phase of this study, the researcher used secondary quantitative data to examine the following dimensions of school connectedness among Alaska Native students as measured on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS): high expectations (HE), school safety (SS), school leadership and student involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), caring adults (CA), and parent and community involvement (PCI). The data that was used in the quantitative phase of this study was collected by the American Institutes for Research and the Mat-Su Borough School District using a cross-sectional design. In a cross-sectional design, data is collected from research participants during a single, relatively brief point in time (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The researcher used the quantitative data to investigate
the differences between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students in perceptions of school connectedness as measured by these seven dimensions purportedly captured by the survey (HE, SS, SLI, RC, PC, CA, PCI). A description of all seven dimensions from the SCCS is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Scale Definitions of School Climate and Connectedness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about their own expectations as well as those of adults in their school and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about bullies and gangs at school as well as general crime and violence that affect the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership &amp; Student Involvement</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about the decision making of school leaders as well as student participation in the school governance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful Climate</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about fairness of rules and respect for students’ contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Climate</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about how respectful students are to one another and how helpful students are to other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adults</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about how close they feel to adults in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent &amp; Community Involvement</td>
<td>Students’ feelings about how much their parents and community are involved in their school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the second qualitative phase of this study, the researcher used text data obtained from focus group interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol with Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District who completed the SCCS. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the students’ perceptions of school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity. The qualitative phase of this study used a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of the qualitative phase of this study was to understand school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity for Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. It is important to understand differences in perceptions of school connectedness so educational programs can be designed in which all students experience high levels of school connectedness and as a result higher levels of academic achievement (Osterman, 2000).

Finally, in the mixed methods phase of this study, an analysis was conducted using both the quantitative and the qualitative data to explore the ways the interview data reporting the perceptions of Alaska Native students about school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity help explain the quantitative results on school connectedness taken from the SCCS. This phase of the study was focused on using the qualitative data on perceptions of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity to explain, challenge, or extend the quantitative data obtained from the SCCS. The qualitative results from this study were compared to quantitative results on school connectedness in an effort to provide a deeper understanding of the Alaska Native school experience. The following research questions guided this study:
Research Questions

What dimensions correlate with statistical differences in Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness?

Are there statistically significant differences in the perceptions of school connectedness between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students?

How do Alaska Native students perceive and experience school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity?

In what ways do the interview data from Alaska Native students concerning their perceptions of school connectedness help explain the quantitative results reported on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey?

Quantitative Phase

It is appropriate to begin the quantitative phase of this study with a definition of quantitative research. Johnson and Christensen (2000) offered this definition: Quantitative research is explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics). The quantitative phase of this study used a descriptive discriminate analysis to investigate adolescent students’ perceptions of school connectedness in the Mat-Su Borough School District. A descriptive discriminate analysis uses continuous or interval scale response variables to predict group membership (Sherry, 2006). A researcher may use a DDA to discover what variables contribute to group separation or on which variables specific groups differ most (Sherry, 2006). The DDA is used to help a researcher describe meaningful differences between groups (Sherry, 2006).
Participants

A convenience sampling strategy was used by AIR in administration of the SCCS. A convenience sampling strategy uses all participants who are available or volunteer or can be easily recruited and are willing to participate in the research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Unless their parents denied permission, all students in grades 5 to 12 in the Mat-Su Borough School District were required to complete the SCCS. Four thousand three hundred and eighty four (N = 4,384) volunteers from the Mat-Su Borough School District in Alaska participated in the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey. Of these, 325 were identified as Alaska Native and 4,059 were identified as Alaska non-Native. All of the participants were in grades 5-12. There were 2,136 males and 2,248 females in grades 5 to 12. The quantitative phase of this study compared SCCS data between all Alaska Native students (N = 325) and all Alaska non-Native students (N = 4059).

Instrumentation

In 2005, the Alaska Association of School Boards contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to create an online survey that could be used to evaluate student and staff perceptions of school climate and student perceptions of school connectedness. The School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS) was developed by AIR to evaluate staff perceptions of school climate and student perceptions of school connectedness in Alaskan schools (American Institute of Research, 2013). This survey was piloted with staff and students in a small number of Alaska school districts and then administered to larger numbers of school districts. By 2014, the SCCS had been completed by 29,225 students and 6,669 school staff in 266 schools in 24 school districts.
across Alaska, including the Mat-Su Borough School District. Important educational policy decisions are made at all levels in the state of Alaska using SCCS data. Policy makers often use the SCCS as justification for the continuation of programs that impact the lives of all students, including Alaska Native students.

The School Climate and Connectedness Survey is an online survey that consists of twelve items on background information and uses a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to measure students’ perceptions of school climate and connectedness. School climate is captured using three scales: high expectations, school safety, school leadership & student involvement. School connectedness is measured in the SCCS using four scales: respectful climate, peer climate, caring adults, and parent & community involvement. The SCSS also contains scales related to student at risk behavior and scales related to staff perceptions of school climate but these scales were not included as part of this study. The internal consistency reliability estimates for the scales used in this study ranged from .70 to .79 and are listed in Table 2 (Spier, Garibaldi, & Osher, 2012).

Table 2

*Cronbach's Alpha 2012 School Climate and Connectedness Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Reliability Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership &amp; Student Involvement</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Reliability Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respectful Climate</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Climate</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adults</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent &amp; Community Involvement</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 contains the correlation between these scales and the percentage of students who scored proficient or higher on the 2014 Alaska Standards Based Assessments (SBAs) in the areas of reading, writing, and math (Spier et al., 2012).

Table 3

*Correlations, 2012 School-Level SCCS Scores and Student Academic Achievement (N = 275)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Climate</td>
<td>$r = .25$</td>
<td>$r = .24$</td>
<td>$r = .25$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Connectedness</td>
<td>$r = .37$</td>
<td>$r = .38$</td>
<td>$r = .37$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>$r = .19$</td>
<td>$r = .18$</td>
<td>$r = .21$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>$r = .37$</td>
<td>$r = .35$</td>
<td>$r = .34$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership &amp; Student Involvement</td>
<td>$r = .11$</td>
<td>$r = .12$</td>
<td>$r = .12$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful Climate</td>
<td>$r = .32$</td>
<td>$r = .33$</td>
<td>$r = .31$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Climate</td>
<td>$r = .30$</td>
<td>$r = .31$</td>
<td>$r = .30$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adults</td>
<td>$r = .24$</td>
<td>$r = .24$</td>
<td>$r = .23$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent &amp; Community Involvement</td>
<td>$r = .38$</td>
<td>$r = .39$</td>
<td>$r = .42$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All correlations were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

*Procedures*

The researcher requested and obtained the necessary permissions from the Mat-Su Borough School District to conduct the study and the American Institutes of Research to access the student level data from the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey. Once the necessary permissions were obtained, the researcher ran a descriptive discriminate analysis (DDA) on the student level data. The researcher used a DDA to examine the differences between Alaska Native students in grades 5 to 12 and Alaska non-Native students in grades 5 to 12 in the following seven dimensions of school climate and connectedness: high expectations (HE), school safety (SS), school leadership and student involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), caring adults (CA), parent and community involvement (PCI).
Data Analysis

Secondary SCCS data collected by AIR was examined on seven dimensions of school climate and connectedness (HE, SS, SLI, RC, PC, CA, and PCI). The data was analyzed using SPSS version 22. Missing data were replaced using multiple imputations (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2014). According to Allison (2002) and Graham (2009), as cited in Cox et al. (2014), multiple imputation offers the greatest analytic flexibility while preserving the underlying characteristics of the complete data set. The data was then examined using descriptive discriminant analysis (DDA) to test for differences between Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students. The purpose of a DDA is to discover differences between variables and to gain an understanding of group separation (Sherry, 2006).

There are seven assumptions of a DDA. All assumptions were met in this study. There are two mutually exclusive groups: Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students. There are more than two subjects per group. The sample size of the smallest group \( (N = 325) \) exceeds the number of continuous variables \( (N = 7) \). All seven continuous variables are measured at the interval level and each continuous variable is independent of all other continuous variables. The Mahalanobis distances and paired chi-square values were plotted in a scattergram. The plots formed a straight, diagonal line indicating that the data meets the assumption of multivariate normality. The homogeneity of variance assumption is met for this analysis as noted by Box’s M: \( F(28, 1095287.61) = 1.196, \ p = .235 \). The variances are considered to be relatively equal across groups.
Pooled data from five imputations were used in the final analysis. Once the researcher addressed the missing data and evaluated the assumptions for DDA, the researcher ran the DDA and evaluated the output.

Both $p$ values and model effect sizes were used in the interpretation of statistical results (Wilkinson, 1999). In DDA, effect size can be measured by calculating $1 - \text{Wilks's Lambda}$ (Sherry, 2006) and can be used to determine the proportion of individual differences on the canonical discriminant function that can be explained by group membership. The contribution of specific dependent variables was examined using discriminant function weights, structure coefficients, and centroids. Structure coefficients, when squared, can be interpreted as the proportion of the overall effect size (i.e., $1 - \text{Wilks Lamda}$) that can be explained by each predictor variable by itself (Courville & Thompson, 2001).

This concludes part one of Chapter III on methodology. Part two will focus on the participants, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis that will be used in the qualitative phase of the study.

Qualitative Phase

It is appropriate to begin the qualitative phase of this study with a definition of qualitative research.

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative
researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 2013, p. 3).

The qualitative phase of this study is a phenomenological study of adolescent student perceptions of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity in the Mat-Su Borough School District. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). These lived experiences may be a phenomenon such as school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity. In a phenomenological study, the inquirer collects textual data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and then develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2013).

*Philosophical Presuppositions of Phenomenology*

Phenomenology has a strong philosophical foundation that draws upon the work of the German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). There are four underlying philosophical premises of a phenomenological study. First, phenomenology represents a return to the early tradition of philosophy before the 19th century shift to a focus on empirical science. Phenomenology represents a return to the original Greek conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom (Creswell, 2013). Second, phenomenology represents a suspension of all judgments about what is real until those judgments are grounded in relative certainty. In the epoche stage of a phenomenological study, the researcher brackets previous experiences and approaches the subject with fresh eyes (Creswell, 2013). A third philosophical premise of phenomenology is the intentionality of consciousness. This philosophical premise assumes that the reality of an object is
inextricably related to the researcher’s consciousness of the object. Reality is not divided into subjects and objects but is instead inextricably bound into both subject and object as they appear in consciousness (Creswell, 2013). The fourth theme of phenomenology follows the third theme in that the reality of an object or phenomenon is only perceived within the meaning of the experience or the essence of the experience for the individual (Creswell, 2013).

**Participants**

Criterion sampling and a purposeful sample were used in this study. Purposeful sampling implies that the researcher selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Criterion sampling implies that all participants meet some identified criterion (Creswell, 2013). In a phenomenological study, criterion sampling works best when all participants have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This study consisted of two different groups of Alaska Native students from two different high schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Group one consisted of seven participants. Group two consisted of six participants. Participants had to meet the following criteria for inclusion in this study: (a) identify as Alaska Native, (b) have participated in the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey, (c) be an adolescent high school student in the Mat-Su Borough School District at the time of research, and (d) have provided an informed consent form from either a parent or a guardian.

Participants were selected from Indian Education programs (IEA) in two different high schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District: Every Day High School and Second Chance High School. Pseudonyms have been used to represent participants and high
schools. IEA is a Title VII federal program dedicated to removing the achievement gap for Alaskan Native/American Indian students by supporting research based instructional strategies and capitalizing on the inherent strengths of indigenous children and their families. Every Day High School is a large suburban high school of 1,147 students. Alaska Native students represent 9% of the population. White students represent 86% of the population. Every Day High School is not a Title I school. It serves a comparatively high socio economic population. Second Chance High School is an alternative high school of 372 students. Second Chance is by far the most diverse high school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Alaska Native students represent 21% of the student population. White students represent 61% of the population. Second Chance High School is a Title I school and by any measure considered a low socio economic population. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards.

Maximum variation sampling consists of determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the participants and then selecting participants that are different on the criteria (Creswell, 2013). This approach is often used because it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect different perspectives of the phenomenon to be studied (Creswell, 2013). The criteria for this study were Alaska Native students who are in high school in the Mat-Su Borough School District and who have participated in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. Selecting participants who represent an alternative high school experience and participants who represent a traditional high school
experience provided maximum variation. Selecting participants who have never lived in rural Alaska and participants who have recently migrated either from Anchorage or from rural Alaska provided further variation.

**Instrumentation in Qualitative Phase**

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to gather data on Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity. The interview protocol was designed as follows. There were seven open-ended questions that explored the role of the seven dimensions of school connectedness: HE, SS, SLI, RC, PC, CA, PCI and how those seven dimensions relate to racial-ethnic identity. There were an additional three open-ended questions that explored the significance of racial-ethnic identity to the participants. The interview protocol went through an initial review by an Alaska Native Parent Advisory Committee in the Mat-Su Borough School District. A member of the dissertation committee who is an expert on qualitative research also reviewed the interview protocol. The protocol was pilot tested on one participant purposefully selected from those who participated in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. As a result of the pilot and expert review, the order and content of the protocol questions were slightly revised and additional probing questions were developed. The interview protocol is available as Appendix D.

**Procedures Used in Qualitative Phase**

The first step involved the identification of potential participants who have experienced the phenomenon of being an Alaska Native student in the Mat-Su Borough School District and who have participated in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. An email explaining the study was sent out to two high school principals and
teachers who work in the IEA program with Alaska Native students. A request was made to identify six participants to participate in a focus group interview. Creswell (2013) recommended that qualitative researchers interview from 5 to 25 individuals in a phenomenological study. Seven students were identified from Colony High School and six students were identified from Burchell High School.

In addition to the procedures for gaining permission already mentioned in the quantitative phase, additional permission was required for the qualitative phase of the study. Permission was requested of the parents, the participants, and the principals at designated locations where the participants would be interviewed. To initiate the qualitative phase, a parent meeting was held in January of 2015 to inform parents of those students selected to participate in the study and to gain permission. This meeting lasted approximately one hour. Creswell (2013) defined this stage of the inquiry process as building rapport and gaining access. At the meeting, the study was explained within the context of a larger conversation about the importance of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity as a cultural asset. Once a sample of participants was identified and parental permission gained, lunch meetings were held at the school locations where the participants attended school to discuss the study and obtain consent from the participants. The schools where the participants attend school were considered the best place to conduct the interviews because it was easy to gain access to students while they were at school. All approval, permission, and consent forms connected to this study are provided in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C.
The interview process used in this study was a series of semi-structured, focus group interviews. In preparation for the interviews, the researcher established the interview schedule and obtained the necessary equipment to record the interviews. The researcher then informed all teachers, parents, and participants of the interview schedule and location of the interviews. Each initial interview lasted approximately one hour and a half and all initial interviews occurred over a four-week span of time. There were follow up interviews that lasted approximately one hour. The follow up interviews occurred over the same four week span of time with an additional week added to conclude final follow up interviews. During the follow up interviews, the researcher verified responses with the participants. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. The recordings were sent to a transcriber and stored on the researcher’s personal computer in a password-protected file.

Creswell (2013) suggested that trustworthiness is the foundation of reliability and validity in qualitative research. They defined trustworthiness as measured by the following standards: (a) transferability, (b) dependability, (c) confirmability, and (d) credibility. Transferability refers to the ability to generalize the findings in other contexts. Dependability refers to the ability to replicate similar findings if the study is repeated. Confirmability refers to objectivity and control of researcher bias. Finally, credibility refers to the believability of the findings (Creswell, 2013). To establish trustworthiness in this study, the researcher collected data from multiple sources, followed up with focus group participants to evaluate conclusions, and created a detailed record of data collection and rationale for important decisions. In addition, the researcher created a position statement to establish his biases within the context of the study.
Before conducting any interviews, the researcher attempted to bracket his own personal biases by writing a position statement of his personal experiences with the phenomenon. In addition to bracketing experiences with the phenomenon, the researcher kept a journal throughout the data collection and the data analysis phase of the study. The journal served as an informal method to document thought and decision-making processes throughout the study. The researcher also wrote responses to the interview questions in the way that he would have answered them as an adolescent. The interview question responses, the journal entries, and the bracketing helped increase self-awareness in the process of analysis. They helped the researcher become more aware of his personal biases and reflect on his previous experiences with Alaska Native students. They also helped the researcher avoid infusing his values, perceptions, and cultural frame of reference into the data analysis.

Data Analysis in Qualitative Phase

In a qualitative study, data analysis and data collection may occur simultaneously in the process of interpretation (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the researcher analyzed the data as it was collected from the participants. Creswell (2013) referred to this process as an emergent methodology. In an emergent methodology, the research relies on the process of induction in a continuous interplay between the data and interpretation (Creswell, 2013). After each focus group interview was completed, the recorded qualitative data file was sent to a transcriber who transcribed the data into a Word document. The researcher then took that Word document and began the process of analysis. As each focus group interview was completed and transcribed, the researcher incorporated the additional data into an expanded interpretation.
Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes, and representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2013). The data analysis for this study occurred in the following steps:

1. The researcher described his personal experience with the phenomenon in an attempt to focus the study on the experiences of the participants and to minimize any personal biases that he may have brought to the study.

2. The researcher developed a list of significant statements from the data while it was being collected in an attempt to discover how individuals experience school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity. This step in the data analysis process is referred to as horizontalization of the data (Creswell, 2013). In the process of horizontalization, the researcher placed equal value on every statement and worked to develop a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements (Creswell, 2013).

3. The researcher then took the list of significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information that are referred to in the literature as meaning units or themes (Creswell, 2013). During the coding process, the researcher made notes in his journal about developing interpretations. The researcher then analyzed his exploratory comments for emergent themes while looking for connections across themes. This process was completed for each focus group transcript. The researcher then began the process of looking for patterns across focus groups.
4. Using the coded themes, the researcher then wrote a textural description of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon that included verbatim examples.

5. The researcher then wrote a structural description of how the experience happened to the participants reflecting on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced.

6. Finally, the researcher wrote a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textual and structural descriptions. This passage is referred to as the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

This concludes part two of Chapter III on methodology. The next section will focus on the mixed methods, interpretive phase of the study.

Mixed Methods Phase

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) defined mixed methods research as the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the methodology of a study.

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009, p. 123)

The mixed methods phase of this study is an explanatory sequential design. In an explanatory sequential design, the qualitative data is collected and analyzed after the quantitative phase to explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The overall philosophical assumptions in a mixed methods research study shift from
post positivism of the quantitative phase to constructivist in the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Researchers use multiple philosophical positions in mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Participants

There are two variants for participant selection in an explanatory sequential design. The follow up explanations variant is used when the researcher uses the quantitative phase to identify participants to be used in the qualitative phase that help explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The participant selection variant is used when the researcher places priority on the qualitative phase but uses the quantitative results to identify and purposefully select participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this study, the follow up explanations variant was used to identify the participants for the qualitative phase. The criteria used in selecting the participants were Alaska Native, adolescent students in the Mat-Su Borough School District who had completed the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey.

Procedures

Quantitative and qualitative procedures are incorporated in a mixed methods study and have been described in greater detail in previous sections. The first step involved obtaining the quantitative data from American Institute of Research (AIR) and gaining necessary permissions from the Mat-Su Borough School District. The researcher then conducted a descriptive discriminate analysis on the data and used the results to design a follow-up qualitative phase. Additional permissions were required in the qualitative phase. Once participants were identified, the researcher conducted a series of focus group interviews and analyzed the data obtained from those interviews. After
analyzing the data from the quantitative and qualitative phases separately, the researcher reviewed the combined quantitative and qualitative results to identify meta-inferences that occurred across both phases. A display was created that contained findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study.

Data Analysis

In an explanatory sequential design, data analysis occurs in three steps. The first step occurs during the quantitative phase. The second step occurs during the qualitative phase. The third step occurs as the researcher interprets the ways the qualitative data help explain the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, the researcher engages in a connected mixed methods data analysis in which the data from the qualitative phase is connected to the data from the quantitative phase (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this study, the researcher used qualitative codes that were aligned with the dimensions from the SCCS and additional codes that were identified in the qualitative phase of the study. The researcher interpreted the results by drawing inferences and meta-inferences from the connected data. The qualitative category codes were connected to the quantitative results to provide a deeper understanding of school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students in the Mat Su Borough School District.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will begin by presenting the results from a descriptive discriminate analysis (DDA) of the secondary data taken from the School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS). After the results are presented from the DDA, the results will be presented from the qualitative and mixed phases of the study.

Quantitative Results

The demographic information of the 4,384 SCCS participants was examined in this study and is reported in Table 2. The sample contained 325 Alaska Native and 4059 Alaska non-Native students. Males represented 48.9% of the sample. Females represented 51.1% of the sample. The percentage of Alaska Native students (7.4%) in the SCCS sample was lower than the percentage of Alaska Native students in the total population (17%) reported in 2014 by the Mat-Su Borough School District (http://www.matsuk12.us/domain/3379). Students listed mixed as racial-ethnic identity on the SCCS constituted 17.2% of the total sample. White students constituted 66.4% of the sample (N = 2892). American Indian, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, and Pacific Islander combined constituted the remaining 9.1% of the sample population.

The racial-ethnic demographics of this sample were then compared by grade level. There were a larger percentage of Alaska Native students in grades 5-8 compared to those reported to be in grades 9-12. Alaska Native students in grades 5-8 represented 68.4% of the Alaska Native sample compared to 32.6% reported to be in grades 9-12. Unlike Alaska Native students, the Alaska non-Native students were more equally
represented across grade levels with 53.2% contained in grades 5-8 and 46.8% in grades 9-12. There was also a notable difference between the percentage of Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students in grades 9-12. Alaska Native students represented 32.6% of the sample in grades 9-12 compared to 46.7% of the Alaska non-Native students. However, this finding is consistent with graduation rates in the Mat-Su Borough School District. The 2013-2014 graduation rate for Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District was 63.80% compared to 78.36% of Alaska non-Native students (Alaska Department of Education, 2013).

Table 4

Demographic Statistics for Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Alaska Native Students</th>
<th>Alaska non-Native Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>African American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleventh</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A reliability and descriptive analysis was conducted on the sample SCCS data. Table 5 represents the internal consistency reliability estimates ($\alpha$), the means, and the standard deviations for all measures of the SCCS by groups. Reliability estimates were higher than those reported by AIR in the district report (Spier et al., 2012). The reliability estimates reported by AIR ranged from .70 to .79. The reliability estimates in this study ranged from .82 to .87 for Alaska Native students and from .84 to .86 for Alaska non-Native students. The highest reliability estimate in this study was in school safety (.87) for Alaska Native students and school safety (.86) for Alaska non-Native students. The lowest reliability estimate was in respectful climate (.82) for Alaska Native students and in school leadership and involvement, respectful climate, and parent and community involvement (.84) for Alaska non-Native students. Collectively, this seems to suggest that the scale scores demonstrate evidence of good internal consistency reliability.
The mean scores for the seven dimensions of the SCCS were then compared across groups. There was little difference in the mean scores between the two groups. Mean scores for Alaska Native students were slightly higher on school leadership and involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), and parent and community involvement (PCI) than Alaska non-Native students. Mean scores for Alaska non-Native students were slightly higher on high expectations (HE), school safety (SS), and caring adults (CA). The greatest difference was identified on the SLI indicator where Alaska Native students had a mean of 3.52 ($SD = .720$) compared to Alaska non-Native students with a mean of 3.33 ($SD = .768$). Alaska Native students scored an average of .19 points higher on the SLI scale than Alaska non-Native students ($d = .27$). Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students both had their highest mean scores on high expectations ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .577$; $M = 4.12$, $SD = .579$) and both had their lowest mean scores on peer climate ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .683$; $M = 3.13$, $SD = .752$).
Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations on the Seven Factors of School Climate and Connectedness by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Alaska Native Students</th>
<th>Alaska non-Native Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations (HE)</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety (SS)</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership &amp; Student Involvement (SLI)</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful Climate (RC)</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Climate (PC)</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adults (CA)</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent &amp; Community Involvement (PCI)</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.628</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To better inform descriptive findings, the school climate and connectedness scores obtained from this study for Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District were compared to state data reported by AIR for Alaska Native students statewide (Spier et al., 2012). These groups were compared because they both identify as Alaska Native and they both are likely to attend schools that do not represent their Alaska
Native cultural values. There was very little difference in the mean scores between the two groups. The greatest difference between the two groups was on the caring adults and parent and community involvement scales. Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District had a mean score on CA and PCI of 3.51 ($SD = .767$; $SD = .628$), whereas Alaska Native students statewide had a mean score on CA and PCI of 3.59 ($SD = .743$; $SD = .637$). Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District and Alaska Native students statewide both had their highest mean scores on high expectations ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .577$; $M = 4.12$, $SD = .513$) and both had their lowest mean scores on peer climate ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .683$; $M = 3.20$, $SD = .717$). Even though the differences were small, Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District scored lower than Alaska Native students statewide on all 6 indicators of the SCCS (HE, SS, RC, PC, CA, and PCI). Only on the SLI indicator were Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District more comparable to Alaska Native students statewide.

The data were then entered into a descriptive discriminate analysis to determine if Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students differed statistically in their levels of school connectedness. Descriptive discriminate analysis can result in multiple functions that must be interpreted. The number of resulting functions is equal to the smaller of the predictor or criterion variable set. In this study, there was only one categorical predictor variable (i.e., racial/ethnic identity) and thus, only one resulting function to interpret. This function was statistically significant ($p < .001$) with a canonical correlation of $R_c = .106$. When squared, the canonical correlation can be interpreted as the shared relationship between all predictor and criterion variables. In this study, the squared canonical correlation indicated racial-ethnic identity explained about 1.2% of the
variability in school connectedness scale scores obtained in this study. Although statistically significant, these group differences were considered to be small. Table 6 represents these findings.

Table 6

*Wilks’s Lambda and Canonical Correlation for Two Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Wilks’s Lamda</th>
<th>$x^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$R_c$</th>
<th>$R_c^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.988</td>
<td>47.83</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because the literature on Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness is scarce and group differences were statistically significant, the standardized discriminant function coefficients were examined to better inform on what variables groups differed most. A comparison of the standardized discriminant function coefficients suggests that Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students differed most on the SS and SLI indicators. Of these two variables, SLI was found to have the largest standardized weight (−.235). Alaska Native students scored higher than Alaska non-Native students in the SLI dimension of school connectedness. However, standardized weights can be prone to misinterpretation when variables are correlated in the analysis. It has been suggested by some that researchers also interpret variable structure coefficients ($r_s$) given they represent the proportion of the effect size that can be explained by each individual variable alone (Courville & Thompson, 2001; Sherry & Thompson, 2006). These coefficients suggested that it was SS that had the largest shared relationship with racial-ethnic identity (.382). Given these findings, racial-ethnic identity was assumed to be most informative of SS and SLI. These results were compared to the mean scores in
table 5. A comparison of the mean scores demonstrated that the greatest difference between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students existed in the SLI (\( M = 3.53, SD = .723; M = 3.33, SD = .769 \)) and SS (\( M = 3.82, SD = .751; M = 3.93, SD = .746 \)) variables.

Table 7

*Standardized Discriminant Function and Structure Coefficients for Two Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>( r_s )</th>
<th>( r_s^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>.382</td>
<td>.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLI</td>
<td>-.235</td>
<td>-.125</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>-.026</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: HE = High Expectations; SS = School Safety; SLI = Student, Leadership and Student Involvement; RC = Respectful Climate; PC = Peer Climate; CA = Caring Adult; PCI = Parent and Community Involvement

Qualitative Results

The purpose of the qualitative phase of this study was to better understand how Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District perceive school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity. The results section of the qualitative phase begins with a position statement placing the researcher within the context of the study. Following the position statement are participant profiles that provide biographical information and describe observations that were made during the interviews. These
profiles contextualize the interview process and provide content that may not be adequately reflected in the textual analysis of the interviews. After the participant profiles, dominant and subordinate themes found across participant interviews will be presented. The words of each participant are used verbatim to best capture the perspective of that individual in his or her own language. However, some of the repeated words have been removed to provide clarity in the narrative.

*Position Statement*

I am a fifty-five year old White male from a lower middle class mixed race neighborhood four blocks from the Carrollton and Claiborne intersection in downtown New Orleans. My mother was a chain-smoker, who by today’s standards would have been considered a racist. She routinely used obscenity in reference to African American people. My father was also a chain smoker and also would have been considered a racist by today’s standards. He also used obscenity in reference to African American people. I do not want to give the impression that my parents were evil people but only to acknowledge that as a young White child I routinely heard the hateful language of racism. I remember vividly my grandfather and father running next door during Hurricane Betsy to save an African American family whose house had collapsed during the storm. I also remember my mother and grandmother bringing fried chicken every Sunday to an old African American woman who was sick and who lived down the street. On the day of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral, African American families and a few White families in our neighborhood hung black rags on their mailboxes in a demonstration of mourning. I remember seeing that black rag on our mailbox and not fully understanding the significance but feeling good about the presence of the black rag
on our house. It was on my friend Michael’s house across the street and they were afraid and for some reason I felt like I also needed to feel afraid. Over the next five years, I would watch every single White family move out of that neighborhood to the suburbs of Jefferson Parish until we were the only White family left on the block. During my ninth grade year in high school, we also joined the White flight and moved to the suburbs of Metairie. Needless to say, from a very early age I was aware of racial differences, inequality, and racism. My first point of reflection is that racism exists within the White racial frame and is endemic to our society (Feagin, 2010).

When I was a student in New Orleans, school was a racially polarizing experience. Most White families sent their children to parochial or private schools, while most African American families sent their children to public schools. It is fair to say that for the most part school attendance in New Orleans was a racially segregated factor of socio-economic status. I attended a predominately White Catholic elementary school and a predominately African American public high school until my family also made the migration out to the suburbs where I graduated from a mixed race large suburban high school. I would like to say that I made a conscious and altruistic decision to teach in a public school in New Orleans upon graduation from the University of New Orleans. However, the truth is there was nothing altruistic about my employment decision. I was offered a job where I did my student teaching and I spent the next ten years teaching English in a predominately African American high school before moving to Alaska.

After ten years of teaching in New Orleans, living through the crack cocaine epidemic that claimed many of my students, and struggling to pay my bills on a teacher’s salary, I met a teacher who occupied the classroom across the hall. His name was John
Jameson and he had been teaching science in New Orleans for thirty-two years. I had just gone through another personal separation with a girlfriend and was smoking a cigarette in the teacher’s lounge. John asked me what I was going to do next year and off the top of my head I just said, “I don’t know…go to Alaska.” It had been a tough school year. I had 162 students on my class rolls, and I taught ninth and tenth grade English. It was a grind. Just off the top of my head, I said I was going to Alaska. I didn’t know anything about Alaska. Anyway, the next day a stack of Alaska magazines showed up on my desk. I didn’t know who put them there but they were dated back twenty-five years. So I just started looking at these magazines. At that time, I thought the great north was Nashville, Tennessee. The next week, another stack showed up. I found out that it was John Jameson who was placing the magazines on my desk. Twenty-five years prior, he and his wife went to Alaska on a mission trip. He wanted to move to Alaska, but his wife did not. He had every copy for the prior twenty-five years in his garage. I spent the rest of that year reading Mr. Jameson’s magazines in the teacher’s lounge while on my breaks, learning about Alaska. Then, I don’t know, I had a rough spell with the girlfriend, a rough day at work, and decided it was time for a change. At Mr. Jameson’s encouragement, I went to a job fair in Anchorage and was offered a job making three times more money than I was making in New Orleans and only having fifteen students in my classroom. I took the job, threw care to the wind, and embarked on a new journey of adventure. I didn’t know where I was going, but I figured it had to be better than where I was leaving behind.
My first indication that things would be complicated in Alaska occurred on the plane from Anchorage to Barrow. I spent the prior week hiking around the Anchorage area with another new teacher who was to become my roommate at the Meade River School in Atqasuk, Alaska. Throughout the week, he seemed very excited about the upcoming school year, telling me stories about hiking alone all over rural Alaska. He was a large, strong man with long hair and an Indiana Jones hat. A Native couple boarded the plane with four children. I could smell vodka as the Native family sat in the next row. The children were loud, jumping in the seats, pressing the service buttons, and running up and down the aisle. After the obviously inebriated man and woman got themselves and their bags situated, the woman yelled at the kids and they settled down for the three and a half hour plane ride to Barrow. But I noticed a change in my friend. He went very quickly from being excited to unresponsive and withdrawn. I realized for whatever reason he did not want to talk.

As a teacher with ten years of experience in New Orleans, I had a lot to learn about teaching in rural Alaska. First, a sustained temperature of thirty below zero is very cold, and the school is the only outlet for a community who otherwise spends the majority of time in crowded, small houses. Second, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and alcoholism are debilitating diseases. They are not choices. Third, and probably most important, if I was going to be successful with these children, I was going to have to be strong and I was going to have to teach differently than I had ever taught in my ten years of experience in New Orleans. I needed to focus more on the why and less on the what, and I needed to invest considerable energy and time into building relationships. My
colleague with the Indiana Jones hat did not last three weeks before going into the principal’s office and asking to be released from his contract. He went back to Washington where he took a job picking apples.

For the past seventeen years, I have been a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent in Alaska. I know how hard it is to dig a grave in the frozen earth, to help a father build a coffin for his son, and to keep a team of teachers and students motivated through a long winter. During my first year as a superintendent, we had eight suicides under the age of twenty-one and we lost six people to the sea or the ice. Tragedy strikes quickly and Alaska can be a very unforgiving place. I believe the great challenge of a school leader anywhere but especially in Alaska is to build a shared responsibility for the health and well-being of the children in the community while maintaining faith among the staff that every child can learn if the necessary conditions are created within the four walls of the school. I have never blamed the community for a lack of success or abrogated my responsibility to provide a quality education every single day of the school year. I don’t make excuses in my efforts to provide a quality education to the community I am hired to serve. I am intentional about building relationships within the community and with the students.

Teacher turnover is commonplace in Alaskan schools making it difficult to establish relationships between teachers and students. Many Native communities experience a hundred percent teacher turnover every two years. I entered into this qualitative study of school connectedness among Alaska Native students certain that racism still exists and is endemic to the white racial frame. Based upon my experiences, I was also convinced that many White educators go to Alaska hoping to change Alaska
Native students and end up participating in deficit thinking, choosing to blame failure on the students instead of accepting responsibility for failure and changing practices to meet challenges. Upon review of the School Climate and Connectedness Survey data, I suspected that the results were not representative of the Alaska Native student experience in the Mat-Su Borough School District. I believed that since there were so few Alaska Native students in comparison to Alaska non-Native students and since there were so few Alaska Native educators in the Mat-Su Borough School District, Alaska Native students would not feel connected to schools.

Throughout the interview process, I worked diligently to recognize the influence of my own values and biases through examination of the transcripts and reflective writing. I believe my experiences growing up and working in highly racialized settings served as an advantage. While I may never have been a member of a racial minority or a victim of racial hatred, I do not understand but at least recognize the deep cultural insidiousness of racism within the white racial frame. In addition, my many years of association with Alaska Native communities provided a contextual understanding of the challenges involved with teaching Alaska Native students. I believe the participants who had lived in rural Alaska felt more comfortable with me because I also had lived in rural Alaska. We shared rural Alaskan experiences. However, the participants who had never lived in rural Alaska were curious and wanted to hear about my experiences in rural Alaska. My rural Alaskan experiences provided quick connections and facilitated willingness among the participants to suspend precaution and share in the interview process.
Participants

Participants were selected for this study if they self-identified as Alaska Native, if they were an adolescent student attending the Mat-Su Borough School District, if they participated in the 2014 School Climate and Connectedness Survey, and if they had parental/guardian consent to be included in the research. The participants varied in age from 15 to 17. Two focus group interviews were conducted with seven participants in the first group and six participants in the second group. Three participants in the first group had only attended school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Two participants had attended school in rural Alaska. Two participants had attended school in Anchorage. One participant in the second group had only attended school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Four participants had attended school in rural Alaska. One participant had attended school outside of Alaska. There were three females and four males in the first group. There were five females and one male in the second group. The participants in the first group were all high school students who attend Every Day High School, a school that serves a comparatively high socio economic population. The participants in the second group were all high school students who attend Second Chance High School, an alternative Title I school that serves a low socio economic and transient population. All of the participants were in the Indian Education Act (IEA) program. This is a federally funded program that provides funding for tutoring and reduced class sizes for Native American students. All participants are referred to by a pseudonym to protect the identities of the participants. The two schools and staff are also referred to by a pseudonym. Table 8 provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants.
Table 8

*An Overview of Qualitative Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kati</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Barrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mat-Su</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talis</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bethel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catlyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mat-Su</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Anchorage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mat-Su</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Anchorage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Arizona/Mat-Su</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nuiqsuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Nuiqsuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denali</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Larson Bay/Mat-Su</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Little Diomede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Bethel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

*Every Day High School*

Janet is a 10th grade female student who has red streaks dyed in her hair and a nose ring. She identifies as Alaska Native, but her racial-ethnic identity was not identifiable to me. She looked like a typical White teenager. She said that her mother is Alaska Native and her father is White but that she considers herself Alaska Native. She was born in Nikisiki but has lived her entire life in the Mat-Su Valley. She is an only child and was adopted by her parents. She reported that her biological mother, who was addicted to alcohol, already had two kids and could not care for another baby. She said I don’t have any siblings. I was adopted. My biological mom couldn’t, she already had two kids or her own and so my parents now adopted me. And so I’ve grown up my entire life as an only child. My mom is Native and my Dad is White. My biological mom is also Native. I don’t know who my biological dad is, but I don’t look Native.

She also reported that she has learning difficulties and does not get good grades but that she manages to pass all of her classes. Her favorite hobbies are reading, writing, drawing, and lifting weights. She was very proud of her weight lifting skills. She reported that she feels very accepted at school and that she is proud of her racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student.

Talis is an 11th grade male student who has an easy and engaging smile. He identifies as Alaska Native. Both of his parents are Alaska Native and he reported having four brothers and four sisters. His dad had three sons and a daughter before marrying his mom. His mom had one son and two daughters before marrying his dad. Together, they
had him and another daughter for a total of nine children. He reported that they all treat each other as full brothers and sisters and that while his family struggles financially they are happy. He is originally from Bethel, moved to Anchorage in the 6\textsuperscript{th} grade, and moved to the Mat-Su Valley in his 10\textsuperscript{th} grade year. He reported that Every Day High School is a lot more accepting than the schools he attended in Anchorage. Talis said:

Yeah, this place, the Valley, is a lot more accepting than in Anchorage. I like a school with a lot of windows…like, and in Anchorage it always felt like I was in a box. They didn’t have hardly any windows…(he laughs) I think it made everybody, like…sad. You gotta have a lot of windows. When I first got to Anchorage, kids they use to make fun of my village accent, but then the accent, you know, it just went away and that’s all gone.

He also reported that he does well in school and is proud of being in advanced math class. His favorite hobbies are working with his hands, hiking, and riding his four-wheeler. He enjoys all outdoor activities. He reported that he feels accepted at school and that he is proud of his racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student.

Catlyn is an 11\textsuperscript{th} grade female student who dressed in clothing representative of her racial-ethnic identity. She wore a beaded headpiece and a kuspuk which is a typical dress worn by Alaska Native women. She would hiccup loudly when speaking and referred to this as her anxiety hiccups. She identifies as Alaska Native and is very proud of her racial-ethnic identity. Both of her parents are Alaska Native. They are divorced and remarried. She has two sisters and one brother. She reported that her sister is not as proud of her racial-ethnic identity and that her two brothers are indifferent regarding racial-ethnic identity. Her sister is attending college in Washington. She has lived in the
Mat-Su Valley since kindergarten and is originally from Bethel. She reported that her first two years in high school were not easy, that she felt unaccepted, but that things have changed since the beginning of the Native Youth Olympic (NYO) team. She described this gradual acceptance:

We’ve gotten a lot more recognition and I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t know. It is hard to explain, things just got easier as I got older and the NYO team did better. We are the best NYO team in the Valley. We even have some non-Native kids on our team. Everybody’s proud of that.

Catlyn feels like the NYO team gives Alaska Native students status in the school and is proud that Alaska non-Native students want to be a part of the team. She is politically active in student government and participates as a student representative on the Parent Advisory Committee for Alaska Native Students. She reported that her grades are generally not great but good and that she feels very accepted by staff and peers.

David is a 10th grade male student who seemed quiet and thoughtful, not as easy to read as the others in the group. He identifies as Alaska Native. Both of his parents are Alaska Native. His father is from Dillingham, and his mother is from Bethel. He has two brothers and two sisters, but he does not live with his family. His family lives in Anchorage. He lives in a small apartment with his grandfather. He is new to the Mat-Su Valley, having just moved this year with his grandfather. He reported:

I had to leave my parents. I just couldn’t stand being with them anymore. They drank too much and their friends. So I moved up here with my grandfather when he moved out here last year. (Have you felt accepted?) Well, at first, no. I kinda felt like an outsider. I really didn’t know anybody out here. It was completely
new. I was completely, I felt like I was stranded at first but then as the school year went on, I felt more accepted by everybody. The staff is extremely friendly and everybody seems to like having me around.

His facial expression was very serious throughout his comments about his family. He stared straight ahead without making eye contact with anyone at the table. He reported that he is behind in his credits and that his grades are not very good but that he is working hard to improve. He is proud of being Alaska Native but admitted he has very little knowledge of his cultural heritage and suggested the school do more to help Alaska Native students learn about their culture.

Paul is an 11th grade male student who is notably friendly and outgoing. He identifies as Alaska Native. Both of his parents are Alaska Native. He has lived in the Mat-Su Valley his entire life and has just recently left the Valley for the first time on a trip to Hawaii. He lives with his biological parents and his two brothers and two sisters. He has a twin brother. He is very proud of being a twin. He reported that he thinks the fact that he is a twin helps him gain acceptance in school. He also reported that he gets very good grades and is in an advanced math class. He attributes his good grades to his parents. He reported that they are very strict about school. He cannot do anything with his four-wheeler or snow machine until he gets all of his homework completed. He enjoys being outdoors and claimed to have climbed every mountain in the Mat-Su Valley. He proudly said,

I’ve lived in the Valley my entire life and I’ve been everywhere in the Valley. I’ve been on every single mountain in this Valley. I have a twin brother, and me and my brother are the last ones right now in the house so it’s nice. Most people
around here don’t look at my race. They just look at me cause I am a twin
and say, “You’re twins, that’s so cool.” So our entire life, it’s always been,
because we’re twins we actually get accepted.

He reported that he feels very accepted at school by staff and peers but that he wishes he
knew more about his Alaska Native cultural heritage. One of his favorite things to do is
to listen to his parents and grandparents talk about life in the village, though he has never
traveled to the village where his grandparents and parents were born.

Tyler is a 10th grade male student who seemed quiet and guarded. He identifies as
Alaska Native. Both of his parents are Alaska Native. Tyler is new to the Mat-Su Valley
having moved from Anchorage last year. His father is deceased and he lives with his
mother and younger sister in a small apartment. He reported that he watched his father
die of alcoholism and that he is now watching his mother die of alcoholism. He began to
cry when he mentioned being homeless before finally finding a small apartment that he
and his mother could afford. He enjoys fishing and camping. He reported that his grades
are not very good and that he is behind in credits toward graduation. He also reported
that he feels accepted by staff and peers but that he still only knows a few students in
school.

Yeah, well, the thing I’d say about it, too, was while I’ve been in Anchorage, I
have noticed that people would like specifically target like a specific group, like
Natives or Whites or Blacks or whatever, and mainly from almost every school I
was in when I was in Anchorage, they really did make fun a lot to Alaska Natives
and that was really making me mad. I came close a couple of times of almost getting at them but I really didn’t. I chose not to because that would’ve not been a great thing for me on my record.

He reported that he appreciates the IEA program because he gets the help that he needs from his IEA teacher and that he wishes more teachers understood what some students are going through in life. He is proud of his Alaska Native racial-ethnic identity but wishes he knew more about his cultural heritage including how to speak Yupik. He enjoys biking and just walking around town.

Katie is a 10th grade female student with dyed red hair and glasses that seemed too big for her head. She seemed nervous but quiet one moment and then excited and unable to sit still the next. She identifies as Alaska Native. Both of her parents are Alaska Native. She has only lived in the Mat-Su Valley for two years. She is originally from Barrow. Her parents are separated but not remarried. Her dad has three daughters and two sons with another woman. Her mother has two sons with another man. She and her sister are the only children from the union between her mother and father. She knows a few words of Inupiaq but is not fluent in her Native language. After settling in for the interview, she was quiet and listened to the other participants, often nodding in the affirmative as if she related to and agreed with what they were saying. When pressed to share in the interview, she put her head on the table and started crying. I tried to get her involved twice and both times I got the same reaction. It took a few minutes for her to recover each time. Once, she reported that she gets in a lot of trouble and that she doesn’t get good grades before starting to cry. Another time, she reported that she feels accepted
by staff and peers before starting to cry. In a follow up with her IEA teacher, I learned that while she may want to feel accepted by staff and peers, she really does not have many good, supportive friends in school.

The Every Day High School focus group consisted of seven participants. Three participants only attended school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Two participants migrated to the Mat-Su Borough School District from Anchorage. Two participants migrated to the Mat-Su Borough School District from a village in rural Alaska. The three participants who only attended school in the Mat-Su Borough School District have good grades and are on track to graduation. One of the participants who migrated from rural Alaska has good grades and is on track to graduation, while one participant who migrated from rural Alaska does not have good grades and is not on track to graduation. Both participants who migrated from Anchorage do not have good grades and are not on track to graduation. In the initial biographical profile question of the interview protocol, all of the participants reported that they are proud of their racial-ethnic identity and that they would like to learn more about their Alaska Native cultural heritage. The participants in the Every Day focus group each compared their experiences outside of the IEA program with their experiences inside of the IEA program. In the initial biographical profile question, all of the participants reported that they feel accepted by staff and peers in school.

Second Chance High School

Sally is an 11th grade female student with a piercing in her nose and a piercing in her lip. It appeared that she had drawn all over her left arm with a pen. It was not a tattoo. She identifies as Alaska Native. Both of her biological parents were Alaska
Native, but White parents adopted her when she was two years old. She does not remember her biological parents and does not know if they are still living in Alaska or if they are still alive. Her adopted parents are divorced. She lives with her adopted mother. Her adopted father lives in Hawaii and she does not get to see him often. She has six stepbrothers and sisters. She has attended nine different schools because she reported that her mom "never wanted to sit in one place too long." She has attended school all over Arizona, Washington, and Alaska. She reported that she had a bad experience in middle school and did not feel accepted by students or staff in middle school. She reported that she always felt like the new girl who looked different and that she had often encountered racism. She said,

I had a boyfriend and he was White and it was Valentine’s Day and I spent it at his house. And his dad got really drunk and his dad came in and said I have to see you to my boyfriend and then he came back in and said I understand you are seeing my son and his grades are really bad and he can’t see you anymore. I was like ok I understand that because he does need to get his grades up. And he started like you are not going to be allowed to talk to him and I was like ok now that is a little over the top and he started yelling oh you’re Alaska Native and Alaska Natives are like scum bags and dirt and they all need to go die in a ditch and I was like oh and cause he knew I was Alaska Native and he was just a big jerk.

Sally gets good grades and is graduating early. She reported that she is very proud of her racial-ethnic identity but wishes she knew more about her Alaska Native cultural
Rhonda is an 11th grade female student who was quiet at first but who opened up throughout the course of the interview. She is originally from Nuiqsuit and has lived in Anchorage and Fairbanks before moving to the Mat-Su Valley two years ago. Both her parents are Alaska Native and she has seven brothers and sisters. She reported that her house is small and very crowded.

We can’t ever get in the bathroom, it’s like always loud and noisy and there is always something going on that is making noise. I go sit in the yard a lot just to get some quiet. My sister comes out there too. We just sit and talk. But my parents work hard. They just have a lot of kids. I’m never having kids. Her sister was also in the group and they sat very close, looking at each other for approval after each response. She reported that she has always felt accepted by staff and peers but that she misses life in the village because there she knew everyone in her classes. She enjoys playing basketball and takes pride in her basketball skills. She is also proud of the fact that she has her driving permit and that her dad bought her a used Subaru. She enjoys riding around with her sister and listening to music. She is proud of her racial-ethnic identity and while she has not always felt accepted by peers in other schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District, she feels very accepted at Second Chance High School. She is proud that she made the honor roll for the first time in her school career and that she has caught up in credits toward graduation.

Susan is a 10th grade female student and is Rhonda’s sister. Throughout the interview, she looked to Rhonda for approval after each response. They were very
Denali is an 11th grade female student. Both her parents are Alaska Native. She was born in Larson Bay on Kodiak Island in a small village, but her mother did not want to live in the village so they moved to the Mat-Su Valley when she was in 2nd grade. Her
father is a commercial fisherman. She is proud that her father has his own boat and that they have been able to afford many things including a big house because she has seven brothers and sisters and two nieces who live in her house. She reported that her parents are strict about school work but that she had never done well in school until coming to Second Chance High School. She was proud of being on the honor roll for the first time in her school career. When she said that, Rhonda and Susan began to clap in celebration of Denali’s accomplishments. They were obviously good friends and proud of Denali.

When asked why she thought she never did very well in school, she replied:

I am not a person who likes school work and nobody ever pushed me so I just didn’t do it. Even when I was in elementary I would just put my head down and the teacher never called my mom so I just figured if I could get away with it then I would just not do it, that’s it, I just didn’t do it. Here in this school, they will not leave you alone. They will look for you and push you even if you get mad at them, they never leave you alone so you have to do it. In other schools it was always just different I guess. That’s it. It’s like a whole new ball game.

Denali is very proud of being Alaska Native and wishes she knew how to speak her Native language. She enjoys fishing with her dad and eating Native food. She especially enjoys eating the eyeballs of salmon. "Whenever mom cooks fish, I always get a knife and run in there and get an eyeball first. They are the best." She feels very accepted by staff and peers at school.

Avu is a 10th grade female student who is from a very small village on Little Diomede Island. It is by many accounts the most remote location in Alaska. The weather often makes it difficult for regular air travel. Approximately 123 Siberian Yupik
Eskimos live in weather beaten houses perched on the side of a steep mountain in the middle of the Bering Sea. There is one school, a small clinic, a small store, and about twenty houses. Both of her parents were Alaska Native. Her father died while in prison, and her mother just died last year of cancer. She was living with her grandmother and her four siblings when her mother died. She reported that her grandmother woke her up one morning and told her that she had to get ready to catch the plane that would be there in one hour and that she was going to live with her older sister in Wasilla. She had not seen her older sister in many years and did not really even remember her because she is so much older. She is currently living with her older sister and her sister’s White boyfriend who works in construction and who is by her account an alcoholic. She reported that the boyfriend is abusive toward her sister and he is always telling her that she is stupid. The other students in the group seemed genuinely sympathetic, shaking their heads in disapproval. Avu reported that she does the best she can to stay out of the house often sleeping on a friend’s couch down the street just to avoid going home. She loves Second Chance High School:

I feel good when I am in this school because everybody is so nice to me and wants to help me like when I have troubles some people will just sit and listen to all my troubles. No one is judging here at Second Chance. It is like it was back on the island where everybody just cares about everybody. I miss my aaka (grandmother).

She reported that she is proud of her racial-ethnic identity and that she enjoys listening to music and just hanging out with some friends around a fire. She reported that she feels
very accepted by staff and peers at Second Chance but that she misses the way it was in
the village.

Thomas is an 11th grade male student. He was the only male in the focus group
but when asked he did not mind being the only male. Both of his parents are Alaska
Native. He is originally from Bethel, but he got in a lot of trouble in Bethel with drugs
and alcohol. He was arrested and served six months and seven days in the youth
detention facility in Palmer. As a condition of probation, he has to live in the
Presbyterian Hospitality House while attending school in the Mat-Su Borough School
District. He is a tall young man who has a glass eye. He reported that he was standing
too close to his dad one day while his dad was fishing and the hook hit him in the eye.
He lost his eye when he was in the first grade. He reported that he is doing well at
Second Chance High School and that he does not want to go back to Bethel.

When I got in trouble and had to go to jail…my mom cried and my dad he got
real mad. I don’t want to go back to jail…like that is really bad and …I’ll do
what I have to do so I don’t have to go back to jail. They give me drug tests and
so far I have been doing good. I don’t want to go back to jail.

He reported that for the first time in his life he feels good about being in school. He is
making good progress and plans to graduate in two years. He is proud of his racial-ethnic
identity and feels accepted by staff and peers.

The Second Chance High School focus group consisted of six participants. One
of the participants had only attended school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Four
of the participants had attended other schools in the MSBSD before attending Second
Chance High School. Two of the participants had only attended Second Chance and
were new to MSBSD. Four participants migrated to MSBSD from a village in rural Alaska. One participant migrated from Anchorage, and one participant had been living in the Mat-Su Borough for most of her school career. All of the participants had experienced times of low grades and poor performance but are now on track to graduation with good grades and a renewed sense of hope and promise. In the initial biographical profile question of the interview protocol, all of the participants reported that they are proud of their racial-ethnic identity and that they would like to learn more about their Alaska Native cultural heritage. The participants in the Second Chance focus group each compared their experiences at Second Chance with experiences they had in school before coming to Second Chance. All of the participants reported that they felt accepted by staff and peers in Second Chance High School.

Thematic Overview

Qualitative research is endlessly creative and interpretive (Creswell, 2013). The researcher uses the text that has been collected and attempts to make sense out of what has been learned from the participants in the study. The qualitative phase of this study resulted in the identification of four main themes: (a) factors of the student/teacher relationship, (b) factors of discouragement, (c) factors of motivation, and (d) factors of racial-ethnic identity. Each of the main themes contains subordinate themes that emerged during the process of the focus group interviews. Neither the main themes nor the subordinate themes are completely independent. Main themes and subordinate themes may overlap during the process of interpretation. For example, factors of student/teacher relationship can overlap with factors of discouragement and factors of motivation. A participant may have experienced a teacher who causes discouragement and a teacher
who causes motivation all in the same day. In addition, subordinate themes may overlap between main themes. For example, feeling understood is a subordinate theme of factors of student/teacher relationship and factors of discouragement. The main themes and the corresponding subordinate themes are outlined in Table 9. The participants will be labeled with either an E for Every Day High School or an S for Second Chance High School to distinguish the focus group and school the participant attends.

Table 9

*Overview of Main Themes and Subordinate Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
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<td>Factors of the Student/Teacher Relationship</td>
<td>Absence of Encouragement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Presence of Encouragement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factors of Discouragement</td>
<td>Feeling Understood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Issues Beyond Control Outside of School</td>
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<td>Frustrations with Perceived Judgment and being Stereotyped</td>
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<td>Factors of Motivation</td>
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<td>Parents and Family</td>
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<td>Factors of Racial-Ethnic Identity</td>
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<td>Racist Encounters</td>
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<td>Association with Alaska Native Cultural Heritage</td>
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Factors of Student/Teacher Relationship

Factors of student/teacher relationship is a common main theme within the responses from all the participants in both focus groups. The significance of the student/teacher relationship emerged as the participants gave emphasis to the following subordinate themes: (a) absence of encouragement, (b) presence of encouragement, and (c) feeling understood. The absence of encouragement was a prominent subordinate theme within the Second Chance focus group when participants spoke about experiences in other schools before attending Second Chance. All of the participants had attended school in other schools before attending Second Chance, and four participants commented about the absence of encouragement in those schools. All of the participants either commented or affirmed that there is a strong presence of encouragement at Second Chance. The comments of Denali and Amanda indicate that they attributed their disengagement from school before coming to Second Chance directly to the absence of encouragement.

*Denali (S):* Teachers would help other students and wouldn’t help me. They won’t give you any help so you are kind of feeling like they don’t care so why should you. The teachers didn’t tell me and they didn’t bug me to do my work. They just whatever she’s not doing her work so we’ll just fail her…no need to talk. So I never felt like I…I never felt motivated to do my work so I never did it and I failed all my classes.

*Sally (S):* Like in my elementary school since I was different…my teachers treated me different. There was only one teacher that actually cared about me. It was cause I was a new student and she wanted to take me and catch me up on my
work. All my other teachers always picked favorites and I was on the least favorite because I was hyper and I was loud and I didn’t want to do my work and I just wanted to draw and like hang out with my one friend that I had so they would get really upset with me and I like failed all of elementary school and all of middle school. I don’t know how I didn’t get held back but I was always like a least favorite. My teachers just did not want to help so eventually I just gave up.

When referring to experiences at Second Chance High School, all participants agreed with Denali (S) that encouragement is present and serves as a motivating factor within the student/teacher relationship.

*Denali (S):* Then I came here (Second Chancel) and they’re encouraging me to do my work and encouraging me to go to college after school, which I never even thought of college. That could never cross my mind. I thought I don’t need to go there. But they’re pushing college and pushing me to do my work and I’ve gotten good grades. I haven’t failed any of my classes yet. And I actually got honor roll for the first time since forever…first time ever.

The absence of encouragement was a prominent subordinate theme within the Every Day focus group when participants spoke about experiences in other classrooms outside of the Indian Education Act (IEA) network of support within Every Day High School. The IEA network of support is a federal program dedicated to providing smaller class sizes to Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. All of the participants in the Every Day focus group participated in the IEA program. Three participants commented about the absence of encouragement in classrooms outside of the
IEA program. All of the participants either commented or affirmed that there is a strong presence of encouragement from teachers within the IEA program.

Unlike participants in the Second Chance focus group, participants in the Every Day focus group were not as absolute and consistent in their responses regarding the absence of encouragement within the student/teacher relationship outside of the IEA network of support. David (E) responded that "sometimes, not one hundred percent, but sometimes" he feels encouraged to excel by his teachers outside the IEA network of support. David said, "Like certain teachers do but other teachers, it seems like they kinda expect less from other students and expect more from others." The participants in the Every Day focus group seemed to attribute teacher encouragement to whether or not the teacher has had a prior relationship with the student or with the student’s family. One participant attributed the presence of encouragement to academic performance.

Talis (E): Yeah, I’ve noticed a difference in how teachers treat students. Maybe it’s because just the class that you’re in is the class that everyone else around you is pretty set for what they’re doing in there…I don’t necessarily think that it’s based on ethnicity. I think it’s more based on your performance. Like cause teachers can look at somebody who doesn’t do their work and they expect them to be able to do it because they know that they can do it but because they don’t show the want to do it. They have a higher expectation for them than they’re willing to offer.

Another participant in the Every Day focus group did not attribute high academic expectation to teacher encouragement. She reported that sometimes teacher encouragement makes her feel bad.
Janet (E): I have to disagree with that statement…a lot because I guess if you have high expectations for something like say you have dyslexia or maybe you read numbers backwards, like I do, so math is extremely difficult for me. And so they (the teachers) want you to have, you know, A’s and stuff and that’s what I want too but the fact that I can’t achieve that makes me down on myself. Makes me hate myself because maybe I can’t read a number right or maybe I can’t do the math that some 6th grader can do and I’m in high school.

When referring to experiences with teachers in the IEA program, all participants agreed that encouragement is present and serves as a motivating factor within the student/teacher relationship. When asked to compare teachers who do not demonstrate encouragement and teachers who do demonstrate encouragement, Paul (E): They’re a lot more caring. They want to know how we’re actually doing. They want to know about your home life. They want to know the things you really like doing or, you know, what you’re really good at doing and some things, things you like doing, stuff like that. They never give up on you.

Researcher: How do they make you feel, the ones who never give up?

Paul (E): Kind of excited to go to their class. Like you go to all these other classes, like oh man, I really don’t want to go to this class. Then you got that one and it’s like, ooh, I’m excited.

Feeling understood was a prominent subordinate theme within factors of the student/teacher relationship for the Every Day focus group. All of the participants in the Every Day focus group commented about unreasonable and seemingly irrelevant expectations in the form of too much homework. When asked how that makes them feel,
they responded that it makes them frustrated and makes them feel like the teachers do not care about them as people who have other obligations. Paul (E) who is an advanced math student responded:

Paul (E): Like not turning your stuff in. Like it’s bad to not turn your stuff in on time but sometimes you just don’t have the time to do it. Like last night, I had to do a bunch of chores when I got home. I didn’t get any of my homework done because I was trying to put a tire on the rim and I didn’t have my dad’s help. He was gone. He was working. So I had to do that by myself and I’m just a kid. I barely even know how to do it so I spent all my time trying to get that done. I couldn’t even get my homework done.

Paul lives in a home with both of his biological parents who both have jobs and who set high expectations for their children. The response was similar from Catlyn who has a relatively stable home life but who reported that she struggles with depression.

Caylyn (E): Yeah, I would have to agree that teachers need to do better understanding what is going on because I struggle with depression and that causes me to not want to do my homework. That’s what happened last semester. I failed one of my classes because I was totally consumed with what was happening at home and it ruined a lot of my chances of doing things I really want to do in my life. They (teachers) did not understand what was happening in my home life. I think teachers should try to understand kids’ home life a little better.

The responses were also similar regarding feeling understood from David (E) and from Tyler (E) who have both experienced homelessness and circumstances that have resulted in disrupted homes.
David (E): Definitely, need understanding teachers because freshman year, we ended up going homeless…well, right before freshman year, summer, my family went homeless and when we moved out to the Valley, our point was to get a house and then my family went back to Anchorage and me and my grandpa, we’re in an apartment now. And I think just a stable place to stay is something you need to do homework because my grades got super bad.

Tyler (E): Yeah, I personally have to agree with a lot of these guys, what they were just talking about. I pretty much had the same problem from bouncing back from Anchorage to the Valley, being homeless, not being homeless, and I had a lot going on last summer with my dad dying, and everything was just crazy for me. And I was trying to tell my teachers what was all going on in my home life and most of them kind of did understand but not really and they would like forgive me for a couple assignments, then everything else, they told me, well, it’s your fault. You have to get it done or not get credit.

For David, feeling understood is not only a factor of the student/teacher relationship but is also a factor of emotional security.

David (E): I feel like we shouldn’t have to explain ourselves and say, you know, if we come crying to a teacher and say I’m just not having, you know, I’m not having a good time at home or something’s going on, they shouldn’t deserve to know what’s going on. That should just be the last thing, like…because some things can be too emotional, too personal to have to tell a teacher.

In general, all of the participants from both focus groups perceived that the absence or presence of encouragement is important to factors of the student/teacher
relationship. Participants in the Second Chance focus group did not comment on feeling understood as important to factors of the student/teacher relationship. Participants in the Second Chance focus group reported that they are encouraged to do well in school by the teachers at Second Chance, that their teachers understand them as people, and that their teachers have empathy for their obligations and issues outside of school. The participants from the Every Day focus group reported that the absence or presence of encouragement is teacher dependent and that teachers need to do a better job getting to know their students and the difficulties their students must go through in life outside of school.

Factors of Discouragement

Factors of discouragement is another common main theme within the responses from all the participants in both focus groups. The significance of factors of discouragement emerged as the participants gave emphasis to the following subordinate themes: (a) absence of encouragement, (b) issues beyond control outside of school, (c) frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped, and (d) parental involvement. Several reports from participants regarding the absence of encouragement have already been noted under factors of the student/teacher relationship. The absence of encouragement also emerged as a subordinate theme under factors of discouragement. One participant in the Every Day focus group reported about an absence of encouragement from teachers in relation to factors of discouragement. All participants in the Every Day focus group confirmed his comment with nodding heads and other expressions of agreement.

David (E): I think because sometimes they (teachers) can come off a little biased and have a little more encouragement with some students than with other
students. And when that happens, it makes you not want to be and not want to learn and it ends up consuming you. You feel left out and you’re stuck not learning what you need to learn.

Five of the participants from each of the focus groups reported that issues beyond control outside of school are factors of discouragement. Rhonda and Susan (S) both reported that their house is crowded making it difficult to concentrate on school assignments and learning because things are so loud in their house. When they get behind in their school assignments, they "lose hope and give up." Avu (S) reported, "This White guy living with my sister, he just always drinks and yells and tells me and my sister we are just stupid Natives. He makes me so mad and it makes it hard to think sometimes." David and Tyler (E) reported homelessness as an issue outside of school that is a factor of discouragement. David reported, "Going back and forth between Anchorage and the Valley, not knowing where you will sleep, you just feel lost and like you don’t want to talk or eat or anything." Two participants reported the death of a family member as an issue outside of school that is a factor of discouragement.

Catlyn (E): In the beginning of the school year, my grandma passed away this past summer and towards like the beginning of the school year it was hard, you know, trying to get back into the line of things and her and I were really close and it was just hard to like focus on school because they’d (teachers) be like, oh, what’d you do this summer? Go to a funeral. Oh, how was that, you know how was your summer? What’d you do? Where’d you go? It was just hard in the beginning. And then right now, we’re trying to sell our house and move out and that’s kind of like emotional. Don’t want to cry.
Tyler (E) reported that he watched his dad die of alcoholism "and now I am watching my mom, and that is hard." All of the participants listened as Tyler talked about his feelings of not belonging to anything due to his experiences that are beyond his control outside of school. "My head is just mixed up and I keep thinking about what to do with my sister and my brother. They are just kids." He shook his head and looked down at his desk. Two participants reported divorce as an issue outside of school as a factor of discouragement.

*Tyler (E)*: We were constantly bouncing back and forth between our parents because they were fighting for custody and my grades dropped tremendously. My test scores were just so low. You can’t do your work in that kind of condition at home. It’s hard to, especially going back and forth, from Anchorage to the Valley.

*Thomas (S)*: My parents got divorced right before I went into 8th grade year. If you look at my grades, they are probably the worst in the school, the worst they ever were. And I’m still struggling, trying to catch up with stuff I didn’t learn because I was struggling with my home life. I was trying to take home and bring it to school and dealing with it there, not just dealing with it at home. And then I got into trouble and went to jail, and that was it for school. That shit was over until I got here (Second Chance).

Another subordinate theme associated with factors of discouragement was frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped. Several participants spoke about being stereotyped and judged because of his or her Alaska Native racial-ethnic identity. Two participants noted that they have been mistaken as Asian.
*Sally (S):* Some people they would think like I’m Asian and they would be like you’re Asian aren’t you? You have squinty eyes like Asians. You must be really smart. And I would be like no I’m Alaska Native. It’s ridiculous like I’m getting really tired of it since like people call me Asian and like I would say no I’m not Asian. They’d think I’m super smart and then I’ll tell them I’m Alaska Native and then that thought just flew right out of their minds. Totally, if you’re Asian you’re smart, but if you’re Native you’re really not.

*Researcher:* Have you ever been mistaken as an Asian person?

*Catlyn (E):* I’ve had that happen in my freshman year, from everybody I knew, they all thought I looked Asian and I would have to literally tell them I’m Native and then I’d show them images of Asians. Here’s an Asian person, here’s me. Do I look Asian? That was just always conflicting with them but after a while they finally realized I’m not an Asian person. I literally pulled out my phone, like okay, here’s an Asian person, here’s me. Do I look Asian at all?

Several participants noted that peers often joke around about Natives and that they usually just go along with the joking unless it gets out of hand and crosses a line. I asked where the line was, and no participant seemed to have considered predetermined limits for racially motivated stereotype humor. One participant did not mind when the jokes are about her as an Alaska Native, but she hates it when White men who are friends of her dad tell racially motivated stereotype jokes about her dad. Denali (S) said that sometimes her White friends ask questions about whether or not she rides polar bears or whether or not she hunts whales. She suggested that just because she is Alaska Native does not mean that she hunts. "A lot of White people just assume that all Native people hunt."
Catlyn (E): We watched this movie called like *Smoke Signals* and I was the only Native person in the class. I am ok with the movie but I did not like watching that movie when I was the only Native kid in the room. People were making comments and making fun of the movie. They were trying to like, they were really trying to stick their bottom jaw out, like this and trying, like mimic their accent or what not. Like I was just like, oh my gosh, I was so, like every day when I went to that class, I was just like I’m not looking forward to this. I was really uncomfortable.

Talis (E) and Catlyn (E) recalled an incident of racially motivated stereotype behavior in a class they shared. The discussion of the class was on stereotype behavior. According to Catlyn, many non-Native students were making generalizations about Native people that were stereotypes but the teacher did not correct the class or attempt to guide the conversation.

Catlyn (E): They (the White students in the class) started talking about stereotypes of different ethnicities, like they went Blacks, Whites, and then they’re like, oh, Natives. I looked right at Troy and was sitting across the room from him and was just like did they have to bring this up? And then the kids (White kids) were just like, oh, they just drink. They’re all homeless and they have a lot of kids. They do drugs and walk around town drunk. It’s so hard. I had to bite my tongue.

Researcher: If you didn’t bite your tongue, what would you have said?
Catlyn (E): It’s not all of us. It’s just the people you see walking around the streets of Anchorage because you think that way. That is the only Native people you see so that is all you know. We’re not all the same. We’re all different. This comment seemed to be a point of great interest to the group. I observed that participants sat straighter in their seats and became more attentive as Catlyn discussed her experiences.

Talis (E): Yeah, it’s definitely in the village, you have to respect your elders. There’s…especially in the dry communities, like people that don’t prefer to drink, like my grandparents, are pure Christian, that’s definitely not an outcome of what’s happening…what you see in Anchorage.

Every participant nodded his or her head in approval, suggesting that he or she personally understood the discouragement that comes from the experience of being judged and subjected to racist stereotypes. Talis (E) concluded, "Yeah, when that stereotype happens, like …I don’t want to be a part of it, I don’t listen…like, I just go away."

One participant noted that the school system stereotyped her and made what she and her family perceived to be a racist decision by putting her in a program that she didn’t belong in just because she is Alaska Native and that the experience caused feelings of discouragement not only for her but also for her mother.

Denali (S): When I was in middle school at Central Middle, they had SWS (School Within a School) which was for kids doing drugs and stuff and kids that got in trouble so they had to discipline them and they put them in school within a school. I got put there because of my grades, because I wouldn’t do my homework and do all my work in class, which I shouldn’t have been in there. My
mom found out that the counselor put me in there and she wasn’t allowed to take me out of it. (How did your mom feel about the school’s decision?) She was mad because I didn’t need to be in there. I heard her tell my dad over the phone that they put me in there because I was Native, and there were a lot of Native kids in there, but I didn’t need to be put in SWS. That’s for people that got caught on school property with drugs like kids that actually had issues and I just got put in there because of my grades.

Several participants in both focus groups reported the absence of parental involvement as a factor of discouragement. Every participant in the Every Day focus group reported that their parents do not feel comfortable coming to school and that their parents’ reluctance to come to the school causes them to not feel as much a part of the school. However, not one participant attributed his or her parents’ reluctance to being involved in school as a factor of their parents’ disinterest or racial-ethnic identity.

_Talis (E):_ My family really don’t like coming to big schools like Colony here. They find it overwhelming to see so many people throughout the school and they really don’t like being in front of many people. (Do you think your parents might be reluctant to get involved in the school because they don’t see other Native parents involved with the school?) Talis (E) responded, No. They just don’t like coming to school but it might be better if they saw other Native parents.

_Catlyn (E):_ The only time my parents ever had to come to the school is when I was having problems like with my anxiety and what not and people were, you know, I was getting comments on that and that the only time they had to come in. They were just upset with the situation. My mom does not like coming to this
school at all. They like Colony as a school and all…they just don’t like coming here. I don’t know if they understand the environment or not.

Several participants in the Second Chance focus group reported that their parents like coming to school, especially for family nights, and that their parents’ occasional participation in school makes them feel more connected to school. However, three participants in the Second Chance focus group did not have parents who regularly come to school not because they do not feel welcomed but because they are no longer involved in their child’s life on any level. Thomas’ parents live in another area of the state and have not been involved with his school for a very long time.

*Thomas (S)*: They quit doing pretty much everything at the school. The last time my parents have actually come to school with me was like in fifth grade. That’s when they dropped it and they said, we’ll just either do it on the phone or get paperwork and take care of it that way. I don’t exactly know why but my parents do not like coming to school. Maybe they would like Second Chance if they lived here.

But Thomas’s experience is different than Susan's experience and does not represent the norm for the other participants in the Second Chance focus group. Many of the other participants would align with Susan in her comment about parent involvement.

*Susan (S)*: My family is accepted at school. Yeah. I always feel like my mom can walk in and talk to the principal. I like the family nights that we do. Every month we have a family night and we get together and we watch movies and we play basketball or do something and just visit. You can bring your whole family too. It’s really fun. I like it.
The results within factors of discouragement are paradoxical. Throughout the course of the interviews with both focus groups, participants consistently referred to the absence of encouragement, issues beyond control outside of school, frustration with perceived judgment and stereotypes, and parental involvement as factors of discouragement that by most standards are relative to racial-ethnic identity, racial barriers, and in some cases blatant acts of racism. However, when explicitly asked whether or not they perceived their specific experiences were factors of racial-ethnic identity or racism, there was consensus among all participants that race and racism had nothing to do with how they have been treated in school. Even though every participant in both focus groups reported having been victims of racially motivated stereotyped behavior at school, they all refused to acknowledge that their teachers or their peers have treated them differently because they are Alaska Native. This seems to be contradictory to the experiences that were reported in both focus group interviews. The reports from most of the participants in both focus groups appear to suggest that they have been treated differently based upon racial-ethnic identity. However, when asked explicitly whether or not they perceived their experiences were attributed to racial-ethnic identity, most responded that their experiences were not attributed to their racial-ethnic identity. When pressed for a reason for their experiences, a few participants reluctantly agreed that maybe their experiences were attributed to racial-ethnic identity and possibly racism.

Factors of Motivation

Another common main theme within the responses from all the participants in both focus groups relates to factors of motivation. Factors of motivation emerged as the participants gave emphasis to the following subordinate themes: (a) good grades and
accomplishments, (b) parents and family, and (c) Alaska Native cultural heritage.

Several participants noted good grades and accomplishments as a factor in whether or not they feel motivated to do well in school. Several participants in the Second Chance focus group noted that they are on the honor roll for the first time in their school experience and that they never knew how good it feels to make good grades.

Denali (S): This is my first year here and my previous school I wasn’t doing much work. I wasn’t paying attention to any of the classes or what they were doing and when I got here like I started paying attention and people were encouraging me to do my work and like I’ll be done soon and when I got honor roll for the first time ever and I felt really proud of myself.

Students from both focus groups noted that good grades and accomplishments are a source of motivation. Worth noting is that all members of both focus groups seemed genuinely proud of and in some cases clapped for the members who offered their grades or accomplishments as representative of their motivation to succeed in school. In the Every Day focus group, Janet, who admitted she has trouble learning but manages to keep up with her grades, offered that her skill as a weight lifter is a source of motivation. Paul (E) spoke up, "Yeah, she is one of the strongest kids in this school. She can lift 540 lbs. with her legs. I would not want to get kicked by her." Janet (E) smiled at Paul’s comment.

Janet (E): I found out last week that I had three D’s. They’re already up to B’s. That was actually this week. That was on Tuesday. So two days, I brought all my grades up. So I have really high expectations for myself and I think that’s really what makes our school have those, the highest GPA, because it’s not that the
school has high expectation, well, they do, but it’s the students, too. I see that in a lot of our students.

Other students in the Every Day focus group offered examples of grades and accomplishments as a source of motivation. Talis (E) said, "my personal expectation for myself is pretty high, nothing below a 90 percent and I try to stay up there in the A’s."

Paul (E) offered that he also gets good grades in advanced math class. Catlyn (E) noted a school accomplishment for all Native students as a source of motivation. She mentioned that things have gotten a lot more accepting for Native students since the beginning of the Native Youth Olympic (NYO) team.

Catlyn (E): At first it wasn’t so easy at this school and then, like now, this year, it’s gotten a lot better because, mainly because of our NYO team here at Every Day. We’ve gotten a lot more recognition and I don’t know how to explain it. We’re the best NYO team in the Valley. The NYO team just makes everyone proud of us I guess. Even Caucasians are coming to our tournaments and practices and everybody’s proud of that.

Many of the participants in both focus groups reported grades and accomplishments as a source of motivation. Sally (S) reported about her awards for poetry. Rhonda (S) reported about her accomplishments in the music program, and Susan (S) reported that she is trying out for the basketball team, that she can play better than most of the male students in the school. Most of the students in both focus groups offered examples of good grades or accomplishments that serve as a source of motivation.
Several participants reported issues beyond control outside of school as a source of motivation in the form of good, hard working parents and a stable family. Denali (S) reported that her father is in the commercial fishing business and that he owns his own boat. She said that he is away at work for long periods of time but that her mother runs the house in his absence and that "she keeps everyone in line. She makes sure everybody does their chores and their homework." Rhonda and Susan (S) reported that even though they took a long time to get settled in a place after leaving the village their parents have stayed together and have managed to establish a comfortable home for all of their siblings. "My parents are strong. My dad works on the Slope and my mom she keeps everybody...like, she makes sure we all get along and we all get our work done." Paul (S) reported, "I don’t always know where my dad works because he works so many different jobs but he gets up every morning and goes to work. My mom works too and she works hard and then comes home and takes care of the house and kids." When asked about homework and parental support, several participants reported that their parents pay attention to their grades and ask them about what is going on in school. David (E) reported that his grandpa gets up early every morning to make him breakfast and he always asks about school. With the exception of those participants who either do not have parents present in the home such as the case with Thomas (S) who is living in a group home, all of the participants’ responses were similar to Talis (E), "My parents work hard, and they want me to do good in school."

All of the participants reported that Alaska Native cultural heritage is a source of motivation. When asked whether or not they are proud to be Alaska Native, all of the participants affirmed that they are proud but that they wish they knew more about their
culture. The NYO team came up in several comments as a factor of motivation. Likewise, subsistence hunting and fishing came up as a factor of motivation for those participants who have the opportunity to go hunting or fishing. Throughout the course of the interviews with both focus groups, participants consistently referred to encouragement from teachers, good grades and accomplishments, parents and family, and Alaska Native cultural heritage as factors of motivation.

Factors of Racial-Ethnic Identity

Another common main theme within the responses from the participants in both focus groups relates to factors of racial-ethnic identity. Factors of racial-ethnic identity emerged as the participants gave emphasis to the following subordinate themes: (a) racist encounters and (b) Alaska Native cultural heritage. When asked whether or not participants perceived that they receive respect as Alaska Native students from teachers and peers, most participants in both focus groups agreed that they are treated with respect and are not treated differently due to racial-ethnic identity. Paul (C) responded, "I feel like respect is really important because if nobody respects one another, there’s just going to be like an unbalance. Nothing will get done or work." All participants agreed that respect is important and that they receive a sufficient level of respect, but three participants gave examples of when they felt they were not treated with respect. One participant responded that issues of respect are not always obvious and are sometimes hidden.

Janet (E): So I think it depends, because there’s a lot of side things that teachers and other students don’t realize are happening. And I just think kids are too afraid to come out and say hey, I was being harassed by this person for such and such a
reason. Can you do something about it? And so lot of it happens in the background that no one really notices and I think it happens all over, in all my schools.

Other participants gave examples of isolated incidents when they were not treated with respect. Catlyn (E) said, "I just feel like people already know that I’m Native and I’ve been respected by teachers, staff, other adults but by kids, not so much a couple of times." Catlyn reported about an incident that occurred in one of her classes.

*Catlyn (E):* I personally know Mr. Walker. He was my kindergarten PE teacher and I looked up to him…(she gets lost in her thought) oh wow…And his son is, his son and his friends in my math class one time, they called me a Native bitch because I told them to please be quiet. I was trying to study. Wow! (She shook her head as if remembering something hurtful that she would have rather forgotten.) It hurts to know that, you know somebody that I looked up to when I was younger, you know, his son was taught, you know, they’re not nice people or whatever. I don’t know. That was this year. And then my mom called the school and my counselor didn’t do anything about it. And my mom said, you know if it was the N word, it would be, you know, all hell would break loose, excuse my French.

*Paul (E):* Oh, yeah, probably. We, we smack down on that word hard but it seems like they brush off the Native ones. Like oh, it’s nothing.

However, Catlyn agreed with David (E) who said, "I feel respected in this community. Pretty mellow community. I wouldn’t say there’s that much racism to Natives. They respect them." Even though all participants reported that they feel
respected by staff and peers, several participants reported about a time when they had encountered racism and had been disrespected. Most participants in the Second Chance focus group had a racist experience to report at some point in school before attending Second Chance.

_Denali (S)_: One time somebody vandalized something at the school or did something and the troopers were called in and they took all the people from my own group a Native group and they took them and put them on lie detectors without notifying the parents and we came home from school that day and said we went to the police station and got put on a lie detector test. My mom wasn’t too happy. She wasn’t… (She shakes her head with her eyes closed.)…no teachers called, no cops called, they went and took the kids out during school time. My mom didn’t know. She thought we were at school the whole time. They looked strictly at the Native group. And they took everybody. They didn’t look at the White. They didn’t look at the Pilipino. They just took the Native group. Everybody, without notifying any of the parents they put them in the lie detector test.

_Rhonda (S)_: In elementary school the secretary called the cops on me. We were on the bus and this girl tried to say that I punched her before she got off the bus. She said that I punched her in the stomach before she got off the bus. And then later that night the cops came and talked to me at my house. I was nine or ten. My mom wasn’t home. I had a baby sitter. (How did things go the next day at school with the teacher?) That lady never liked us because we were Native. She worked at the school in the office. She was always like very rude because her
daughter didn’t like us. She basically just looked at us like we were dirty or something all the time. She worked in the office and every time I went in there she looked at me real mean.

Reports such as these were recollections from childhood. Based upon observation of closed eyes and shaking heads during the reports, the researcher assumed that these experiences have made a significant impression on the minds of these two participants. The predominate encounter with racism reported by the participants in both focus groups was primarily in the form of racist comments made by peers.

David (E): I’ve had people make fun of me when I said I was Native. Like I was in a gym class and one of my friends was like, are you like Native or something? You’re really tan. And I was like, yeah. I’m Alaska Native. And then somebody overheard and they just started making fun of me for it and then somebody asked me if my, if I had a dad and I was like, yeah, but my parents are divorced. He was like, oh, is your dad a drunk? The other kids started laughing.

Tyler (E): I just feel like it’s kind of embarrassing when somebody points out, you know, the bad things about Alaska Native people and just automatically assumes that you’re one of those stereotypes and I don’t know. I feel like I’m always trying to prove there’s good, good in us and, you know, that we’re good people and it’s just really embarrassing when somebody points that out and, you know, nobody would, you know, stick up for you or say anything. Probably just be like, like they’re too embarrassed to say anything or to help you because everybody else thinks Alaska Native people are drunk or on drugs too.
Most of the participants in the Every Day focus group listened intently as David and Tyler reported these encounters with racism. Janet commented, "I hate it when I hear people talk about Alaska Native people as if we are all drunks and homeless. I’ve got an entire family that is not drinkers." Nevertheless, most of the participants in the Every Day focus group agreed with Talis when he said, "These things happen definitely, they are hard to step around, but it’s only once in a while. It’s not all the time." Most participants in both focus groups reported that they have experienced some form of racism.

Most participants also reported that they would like to learn more about their Alaska Native history and culture and that they are proud to be Alaska Native. Participants from both groups suggested that the school district provide Inupiaq or Yupik language classes, field trips to the Alaska Native Cultural Heritage Center for all students, and urban/rural exchange programs. Several of the participants in both focus groups shared Paul’s sentiment regarding Alaska Native culture.

**Paul (E):** I don’t really know much about my Native culture because I have lived in the Valley my entire life and we’re isolated away from our family in the village. My mom moved here with her dad after her mom and her dad got divorced and she got pregnant and her mom shipped her off to her dad. But then her dad died when I was three and we just never left the Valley. So I never had a chance to go and learn my culture. I got online a few times, tried learning the language a little bit but it’s just really hard and I feel like I need a tutor, someone that’ll actually talk to me about it.
Even though many of the participants came from different situations and locations, they all agreed that they would like to learn more about their Alaska Native culture and history. In addition to a desire to learn more about their culture, most of the participants in both focus groups reported that they are proud to be Alaska Native. Most participants expressed some statement that demonstrated pride in his or her Alaska Native cultural heritage and racial-ethnic identity. Catlyn’s (E) comments expressed the sentiment of both focus groups succinctly when she said, "I am Alaska Native, and I am proud to be Alaska Native and teach people who just don’t know the truth about Alaska Native people." She said it again, "I am proud."

Mixed Methods Results

Four themes emerged from the qualitative phase: factors of the student/teacher relationship, factors of discouragement, factors of motivation, and factors of racial-ethnic identity. There were seven dimensions purportedly measured on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey: high expectations (HE), school safety (SS), school leadership and student involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), caring adults (CA), and parent & community involvement (PCI). Throughout the course of the interviews, the researcher infused one of the seven dimensions of the SCCS into each question on the interview protocol. The following is an example of an interview protocol question that was related to high expectations (HE) dimension on the SCCS:

How important do you think high expectations are in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that teacher and school staff expectations for students are not important, somewhat important, or very important? In your experiences, do you feel like your teachers have the
same high expectations for all members of your classroom? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to your teachers’ academic expectations? Have you ever felt like you were treated differently by your teachers because you are Alaska Native?

The results from the qualitative phase indicate that the seven dimensions of the SCCS are embedded in these four themes: factors of the student/teacher relationship, factors of discouragement, factors of motivation, and factors of racial-ethnic identity. In spite of being common for most participants, these four themes differed in the number of times they were mentioned in relation to dimensions of the SCCS and agreed to by participants. The researcher asked a question and then went around the group after the responses to determine how many participants agreed with the statement, identified with the statement, or had a similar experience or perception. Table 10 provides an overview of the number of times participants either mentioned, agreed with, or identified with reports relative to the four themes and the seven dimensions of the SCCS.
Table 10

*Joint Display of Qualitative Themes and Seven Dimensions of SCCS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven Dimensions of SCCS</th>
<th>Qualitative Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Expectations</strong> <em>(M = 4.10, SD = .577)</em></td>
<td><strong>Factors of Student/Teacher Relationship</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Teachers would help other students and not me, but here they encourage me.</td>
<td>9 Teachers need to get to know their students better because there's a lot of stuff going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 I am on the honor roll for the first time ever.</td>
<td>13 Teachers do not treat me differently because I am Alaska Native.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Safety</strong> <em>(M = 3.82, SD = .751)</em></td>
<td><strong>Factors of Discouragement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Teachers who are happy make me feel safe.</td>
<td>6 When I feel discouraged, it is not because of school safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I feel safe at this school because there are more people who look like me.</td>
<td>13 I feel very safe at school. There are drugs at my school, but I don't fool with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Leadership and Student Involvement</strong> <em>(M = 3.53, SD = .723)</em></td>
<td><strong>Factors of Motivation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 We are very proud of our NYO team. Teachers even like it.</td>
<td>3 There are groups of students who think they are cool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Our NYO team really got people paying attention to us and liking us.</td>
<td>13 My principal does not treat me differently because I am Alaska Native.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respectful Climate</strong> <em>(M = 3.55, SD = .687)</em></td>
<td><strong>Factors of Racial-Ethnic Identity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 They're encouraging me to go to college because they think I can do it.</td>
<td>13 We watched this movie and people started making fun of Natives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I lift weights and that earns me respect.</td>
<td>13 I am treated with respect. No one treats me different because I am Alaska Native.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This concludes the results chapter. In this chapter, there has been a presentation of the quantitative data, the qualitative data, and the mixed data. The next chapter will be a discussion about the quantitative phase, the qualitative phase, and the mixed phase.

Table 10 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven Dimensions of SCCS</th>
<th>Qualitative Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer Climate (M = 3.16, SD = .683)</td>
<td>3 These kids were making stereotype comments but the teacher didn't do anything. 10 There are these kids who do drugs and think they are cool and these kids who stare at me, but overall kids are pretty accepting of Natives. 8 There are even these kids who are now trying out for NYO and trying to learn our dances. 13 I have been subjected to a few bad experiences, but that is just how it is. It wasn't because of my racial-ethnic identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adults (M = 3.51, SD = .767)</td>
<td>13 Some teachers care about you and some don't. The classes where the teachers care about you are exciting and fun. 7 I pretty much had a problem when I was homeless and I needed teachers to understand what I was going through. 12 My teachers at Burchell (or IEA) ask me all the time about things going on outside of school. They try to get to know me. 13 My racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native has nothing to do with whether or not adults care about me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent &amp; Community Involvement (M = 3.51, SD = .628)</td>
<td>10 My parents do not feel comfortable talking to my teachers. 11 Sometimes my friends make fun of my mom when she comes to school. 9 My grandpa came to school once and played basketball. 13 Racial-ethnic identity has nothing to do with parental involvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will first present a discussion of the quantitative results as those results relate to the research on school connectedness. The chapter will then present a discussion of the qualitative results as those results relate to Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness in relation to racial-ethnic identity. Finally, this chapter will present an interpretation of the mixed quantitative and qualitative results with recommendations for further research and implications for current practice.

Quantitative Discussion

School connectedness includes the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals (Osterman, 2000). Research has demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes (Klem & Connell, 2004; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998). The four factors that can increase school connectedness are: adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education, and school environment (Osterman, 2000). Adult support has been defined as the degree to which school staff can dedicate their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to students. A positive peer group has been defined as a stable network of peers that can improve student perceptions of school. Commitment to education has been defined as the degree to which students believe school is important to their future and that the adults in school are invested in their education. Finally, school environment has been defined as the
physical and psychosocial climate of the school (Osterman, 2000). All seven dimensions of school connectedness purportedly measured by the School Climate and Connectedness Survey used by the Mat-Su Borough School District and twenty-eight other school districts in Alaska fall within these four factors of school connectedness.

The quantitative findings of this study were consistent with some research on school connectedness but not consistent with other research. Many researchers have found gender and ethnicity differences in school connectedness (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Watson et al., 1997). Goodenow (1993) found gender and ethnicity differences in school connectedness that he suggested could influence intrinsic motivation to learn and persistent academic effort among African American students. However, Singh, Granville, and Dika (2002) found in another study that there were significant ethnicity based differences between White and African American students in self-concept and in school engagement but no significant differences in perceptions of school connectedness. Other studies have found that African American students feel less a part of their schools and less close to their teachers compared to White students (Hudley, 1995; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dombusch, & Darling, 1992).

The quantitative findings from this study seem to support that there are differences in the levels of school connectedness based upon ethnicity between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. The evidence from this study would seem to put Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District somewhere in the middle of the research. There is some evidence to suggest that Alaska Native students perceive lower levels of school connectedness that would align with Hudley (1995) and Steinbert et al. (1992), but those
differences were small and primarily limited to Alaska Native students’ perceptions about school safety. There is also some evidence to suggest that Alaska Native students perceive higher levels of school connectedness, but those differences were also small and primarily limited to Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school leadership and student involvement. However, there is no information in the literature specifically about how Alaska Native students perceive school leadership and student involvement or school safety. These may be areas for future research. For all other dimensions of school connectedness, Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District seemed to more closely align with the findings from Singh et al. (2010). There were no significant differences in the other five dimensions of school connectedness purportedly measured by the School Climate and Connectedness Survey: high expectations (HE), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), caring adults (CA), and parent & community involvement (PCI).

In the quantitative phase of this study, Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District differed most on the school safety (SS) and school leadership and student involvement (SLI) dimensions of school connectedness. School safety has been defined as students’ feelings about bullies and gangs at school as well as general crime and violence that affect the school (Spier et al., 2012). School leadership and student involvement has been defined as students’ feelings about decision-making of school leaders as well as student participation in the decision-making process in school (Spier et al., 2012). Alaska Native students scored lower than Alaska non-Native students on the school safety dimension, suggesting that Alaska Native students may feel less safe at school than Alaska non-Native students. However,
Alaska Native students scored higher than Alaska non-Native students on the school leadership and student involvement dimension, suggesting that Alaska Native students may feel more positive about school leadership and more involved in the decision-making process at school than Alaska non-Native students.

The findings from the quantitative phase of this study suggest that Alaska Native students feel more positive about school leadership and their involvement in the decision-making process than Alaska non-Native students. If student government participation is used as a measure for student involvement in the decision-making process, this finding could not be supported. A review of membership in student government on the web sites of all seven high schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District revealed that there is not one student government office holder who is Alaska Native. From interviews with student government advisors at all seven schools, there are only three Alaska Native students who are members of a student government organization and those are primarily in the alternative schools that have a higher percentage of Alaska Native students. Alaska Native students represent 17% of the total student population in the Mat-Su Borough School District, yet they represent less than 2% of the total student government participation.

Another finding from this study was that Alaska Native students feel less safe at school than Alaska non-Native students. This finding could not be supported by discipline records from the Mat-Su Borough School District. In 2014-2015, there were only seven long-term suspensions for violent behavior in the entire district of 17,687 students and none of those incidents involved Alaska Native students (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2013). There were also very few
reported disciplinary infractions for bullying or harassment that involved Alaska Native students as victims. Of course this is not to suggest that there were no unreported incidents of bullying and harassment involving Alaska Native students as victims. In fact, there were reports of incidents that could be perceived as bullying and harassment in our qualitative data that went unreported to school officials. However, this finding is consistent with other research on African American students and perceptions of school safety. In a study of student perceptions of school safety, race was associated with negative perceptions of school safety with male and minority students tending to perceive school as less safe. Minority students perceived school as less safe and reported lower levels of achievement motivation as a result of their perceptions regarding school safety (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).

Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students had similar high scores on five of the dimensions measured by the SCCS, scoring highest on high expectations and lowest on peer climate. The findings from this study seem to indicate that both Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District perceive that their teachers hold high expectations for their learning in school but that they are either not treated well by peers in school or that they do not fit into any specific peer group. In regard to high expectations, such findings do not align with other studies of African American adolescents. In their study of African American adolescents, Smalls et al. (2007) found that the overwhelming majority of their sample reported experiencing some racial discrimination in the form of lower academic expectations suggesting that racial discrimination represents a normative developmental risk factor for many
adolescents of color (Spencer et al., 2001). In regard to peer climate, the findings of this study may be cause for concern given the findings of Ladd (1990) that students who experience greater peer acceptance, defined by higher numbers of friendship nominations, reported more favorable perceptions of school and better school performance.

Both Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District scored highest on high expectations. As a construct, high expectations has been defined as students’ feelings about their own expectations as well as those of adults in their school and community (Spier et al., 2012). Alaska Native students statewide also scored highest on high expectations. According to the findings in this study and a review of state findings, Alaska Native students attending the Mat-Su Borough School District and Alaska Native students statewide perceive that adults in their schools have relatively high expectations for their learning that are similar to the perceptions of Alaska non-Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Research has suggested that there is a direct relationship between high expectations and student achievement. Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found that teacher expectations and support have the strongest and most direct influence on academic outcomes. The perception of high expectations or, conversely, the absence of high expectations was a significant predictor of interest in school and academic performance (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). The findings of this study pertaining to Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District are not consistent with the research on high expectations and academic outcomes. If high expectations as a construct is used as a potential positive moderator for academic outcome and graduation rates are used as a measure, the
academic performance of Alaska Native students is not consistent with their perceptions of high expectations. The Alaska Native 2014 graduation rate in the Mat-Su Borough School District was 62% compared to a graduation rate of 78% for Alaska non-Native students (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2013). It appears that high expectations is a better predictor of academic outcomes for Alaska non-Native students.

There are two programs in the Mat-Su Borough School District that could explain the scores on the high expectations dimension of the SCCS and could potentially raise scores on the peer climate dimension. The Mat-Su Borough School District is in the third year of a comprehensive implementation aimed at increasing connectedness among staff and students called Capturing Kids’ Hearts. The goal of CKH is to develop safe, trusting, self-managing classrooms. Through a process of interpersonal engagement, educators and students learn and practice the skills necessary to create positive learning environments that motivate and inspire a collaborative approach to learning. The results in the first three years of implementation have been a 15% decrease in disciplinary infractions and a 7% increase in School Climate and Connectedness Survey data. Results demonstrate that all students are feeling more connected to school and to each other as a result of the Mat-Su Borough School District’s focus on building quality relationships within the context of the school environment.

The Mat-Su Borough School District is in the third year of a comprehensive implementation aimed at raising academic expectations for Alaska Native students. In a partnership with the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP), the number of Alaska Native students who have completed Algebra I by eighth grade has
risen from 63 to 112 over the course of three years. ANSEP is a longitudinal education model within the University of Alaska system that provides a continuous strand of educational supports beginning with students in sixth grade and on through high school, into science and engineering undergraduate programs, and through graduate school. The Mat-Su Borough School District currently has 174 Alaska Native students involved in the ANSEP program. The Alaska Native ANSEP program students start in cohorts of approximately 50 sixth grade students and continue with that cohort through high school and into college. Results demonstrate that higher academic expectations with nurturing support are influencing academic engagement among Alaska Native students.

Although this research focused on Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District, the quantitative phase of this study has implications for other minority groups of students. Many minority students feel alienated and disconnected from schools (Goodenow, 1993; Hudley, 1995) demonstrating that there is a need to provide protocols that facilitate healthy and positive peer to peer and student to teacher relationships. In addition, many minority students feel like their teachers do not have high expectations for their learning (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) demonstrating that there is a need to build programs that increase the level of academic expectation while providing the necessary level of support to guarantee success. Researchers have demonstrated that students are most likely to be motivated and successful in schools in which they have a strong sense of connectedness (Ryan, 2001) and when they believe that teachers establish high academic expectations (Harris, 2011).
Qualitative Discussion

Research on racial-ethnic identity in the school setting is divided into two approaches and has been primarily focused on African American students (Smalls et al., 2007). In one approach, racial-ethnic identity is viewed as a risk factor placing African Americans at risk for decreased academic engagement as a result of a heightened awareness of the negative status their racial group receives in society (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986). The second approach views racial-ethnic identity as a positive factor serving as an important resilience resource allowing African American students to define racial membership consistent with academic success in response to structural and individual level racial barriers (Chavous et al., 2008). The qualitative results from this study of Alaska Native students do not align with the risk perspective of racial-ethnic identity. Instead, the results of this study more strongly support the positive perspective and suggest that embracing racial-ethnic identity may enhance school connectedness among Alaska Native students.

The school setting is one in which race often becomes salient for adolescent minority students upon entering high school (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000). Racial opportunity cost has been defined as the price that students of color pay in their pursuit of academic success (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Racial opportunity cost represents “the options that are forgone and the losses that result from those foregone options when students of color pursue academic success” (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014, p. 191). The losses are a result of the internal and external conflict that may occur as students of color move further away from the norms and values of their
racial community while attempting to fit into White middle class norms and values represented in their schools (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). In essence, racial opportunity cost represents a loss or an erosion of racial-ethnic identity.

There are five interrelated school level factors that either alleviate or exasperate racial opportunity cost for high achieving students of color: (a) centrality of school norms and values, (b) the influence of school community and belonging, (c) importance of conversations about race and racism in school, (d) the role of tracking and within school segregation, and (e) the influences of teachers and school personnel (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). A narrow school culture that privileges White middle class norms and values can exacerbate racial opportunity cost for students of color. Schools that support a range of cultural norms and values may alleviate racial opportunity cost for students of color. Second, the degree to which students feel a sense of community and belonging in school may either exasperate or alleviate racial opportunity cost. Third, the degree to which schools explicitly address race and racism as opposed to ignoring them as if they do not exist, may either exasperate or alleviate racial opportunity cost. Fourth, classroom level segregation or tracking exacerbates isolation and loneliness for students of color who attend advanced placement classes. Finally, teachers and school personnel play a significant role in either exacerbating or alleviating racial opportunity cost for students of color (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014).

In his book, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, Joe Feagin (2010) presented a theory of racial framing. Feagin suggested that racism is endemic in the United States. He used the term racial frame to describe an overarching world view, “one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images,
emotions, and interpretations” (Feagin, 2010, p. 3). Most people carry more than one racial frame in their heads at all times and typically rely on more than one frame in any given situation. Relative to race and racism, there are four categories of frames: (a) the dominate white racial frame, (b) a white-crafted liberty and justice frame, (c) the anti-oppression counter frames used by Americans of color, and (d) the home culture frames also used by Americans of color (Feagin, 2010).

The white racial frame is the dominant frame in society and contains several layers of understanding and making sense of race. At the most basic level, the white racial frame views Whites as generally superior to persons of color (Feagin, 2010). At the next level, the white racial frame rationalizes White control of social institutions and economic opportunity. At the lowest level, the white racial frame reinforces negative racial stereotypes about people of color. The white crafted liberty and justice frame exists within the overarching white racial frame. It came into existence around the mid to late eighteenth century as the colonists proclaimed their freedom from British officials who were suppressing their liberties (Feagin, 2010).

The white crafted liberty and justice frame has been used throughout history by White Americans to justify racial dominance and economic hegemony. It is replete in the language of revolution and freedom: don’t tread on me, establish justice, secure the blessings of liberty, and all men are created equal. Feagin (2010) noted it is ironic that the white crafted liberty and justice frame was formed during a period of savage injustice
and inequality for African and Native Americans. The white crafted liberty and justice frame started as a white racial frame of independence and the protection of property rights but evolved into a frame used most often by White Americans to justify racial dominance and control of economic power.

For centuries, Americans of color have developed anti-racist counter frames that have provided alternative or countering perspectives to the dominant white racial frame. These counter frames have assisted Americans of color in their struggle to adapt, thrive, and in many cases survive White hostility and discrimination (Feagin, 2010). Over the long centuries of racial oppression that is our shared history in the United States, Americans of color have used these anti-racist counter frames to make sense of and resist racial discrimination. Ironically, many anti-racist counter frames have used language taken from the white crafted liberty and justice frame (Feagin, 2010). There are many concepts and words of freedom and justice that have been taken from the white crafted liberty and justice frame and used by Americans of color to not only make sense of their experiences but to fight against racism and for equal rights (Feagin, 2010).

The home culture frame is one of many anti-racist counter frames used by Americans of color. Home culture frames draw heavily on concepts and language taken from the cultural backgrounds of those who have been oppressed (Feagin, 2010). Home culture frames have been throughout history a source of great strength for Americans of color who have often had to rely on frames of reference that are hybrid for survival, containing elements of whatever it took to make sense of and survive the white racial frame and elements of home cultural frames that drew substantially on family, spiritual,
and moral elements of life within their home cultures (Feagin, 2010). African Americans and Native Americans have throughout history relied on home culture frames for “positive cultural elements that assist in crafting a successful counter frame with anti-oppression strategies” (Feagin, 2010, p. 87).

In the school setting, racial framing manifests in the form of structures that exist such as policy and curriculum, peer to peer relationships, and student/teacher relationships. All of the teachers reported on in the interviews of both focus groups represent various degrees of the white racial frame, primarily because they represent a school system that is a product of the white racial frame and they are indeed White. Feagin (2010) suggested:

Historical research demonstrates that there is in North America and elsewhere a dominant, white-created racial frame that provides an overarching and generally destructive worldview, one extending across white social divisions of class, gender, and age. Since its early development in the seventeenth century, this powerful frame has provided the vantage point from which white Americans have constantly viewed North American society. (p. 10)

According to Feagin (2010), the white racial frame is a primary perspective for most contemporary White Americans and it is so prevalent that most White Americans are not conscious when they are operating from the white racial frame. The white racial frame is the dominant racial frame in society. It exists in constant exchange with the resistance counter frames of non-White Americans. The results from the interviews from both focus groups indicate that most teachers have a system of accountability and meritocracy in their white racial frames. They expect all students to do well in their classes. Alaska
Native students spend a great deal of time trying to navigate these systems of accountability and meritocracy that are based on the norms and expectations of the white racial frame. As reported in the interviews of this study, many Alaska Native students do not fully understand the rules of the white racial frame and often develop various counter frames that assist in self-preservation.

The purpose of the qualitative phase of this study was to investigate how Alaska Native students perceive and experience school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity. In the data analysis process, the perceptions of Alaska Native students on school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity emerged in the form of four interrelated themes: (a) factors of the student/teacher relationship, (b) factors of discouragement, (c) factors of motivation, and (d) factors of racial-ethnic identity. My results indicate there are two general responses that emerged in these four themes across both focus groups. There is a response inside of a network of support and a response outside of a network of support. In the Second Chance focus group, participants reported about experiences before attending Second Chance and experiences while attending Second Chance. In the Every Day focus group, participants reported about experiences outside of the IEA program and experiences inside of the IEA program. Both Second Chance and the IEA program operate as networks of support for Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. There will be a discussion of experiences outside of the network of support and a discussion of experiences inside of the network of support.
Factors of the Student/Teacher Relationship

There were two subordinate themes within factors of the student/teacher relationship: the absence or presence of encouragement and feeling understood and known as a person. In general, the responses from all of the participants that pertained to the student/teacher relationship contained some element of either the absence or the presence of encouragement and the perception that teachers understand issues facing students outside of school.

The absence or presence of encouragement emerged as a subordinate theme within factors of the student/teacher relationship. The participants in the Second Chance focus group overwhelmingly reported about the absence of teacher encouragement in their experiences before coming to Second Chance. They spoke of large class sizes and overwhelmed teachers who routinely did not acknowledge their presence or unique learning needs. They spoke of feeling lost and lonely, of not understanding the learning objectives, of never really knowing whether or not they were meeting those objectives. The participants reported that they sat in the back of classrooms where they tried not to be noticed by teachers. There were reports of a few teachers who attempted to provide individual attention and encouragement, but for the most part participants spoke of teachers they had before coming to Second Chance who did not provide encouragement for Alaska Native students. All participants reported high levels of encouragement in the form of high expectations and caring adults from teachers at Second Chance High School.
The racial counter frame used by the Alaska Native students in this study before attending Second Chance was one of avoidance. The participants in the Second Chance focus group had all attended other schools in either Mat-Su or Anchorage. They had transferred to Second Chance after failing and getting behind in the credits needed for graduation. The schools they attended before Second Chance were all typical schools in urban Alaska. They were all large, comprehensive high schools with predominately White student populations and predominately White teachers and other staff. White racial frame interpretations do not "somehow stand outside daily life just in the minds of individuals but directly shape the scripts that whites and others act on, such as in acts of discrimination in important social settings—thereby re-creating, maintaining, and reinforcing the racially stratified patterns and structures of society" (Feagin, 2010, p. 16). Much has been written about the White middle class norms and expectations represented in most schools (Goodlad, 1985; Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). The Alaska Native students in this study all operated from a counter frame of avoidance in their school experiences before attending Second Chance High School. They did not perceive that their presence was important to teachers or to the school, so they chose to stay quiet and blend into the class. They chose a counter frame of avoidance in response to the perception that their majority White teachers did not care about their progress or that their majority White school did not represent their racial-ethnic identities.

The participants in the Every Day focus group were not as definite in their reports concerning the absence of encouragement outside of the IEA program. They spoke of various levels of encouragement from teachers outside of the IEA program. They reported that they work hard in classes outside of the IEA program, but that they do not
always perceive certain teachers acknowledge their efforts. They reported that encouragement outside of the IEA program is teacher dependent and typically based upon prior relationships with teachers and upon academic performance. In general, teachers outside of the IEA program provide encouragement to those students who are known from prior experiences either with the student or the student’s family and to those students who do well in school. There were reports of a few teachers who attempted to provide individual attention and encouragement outside the IEA network of support, but there were reports of some teachers outside the IEA program who did not provide encouragement for Alaska Native students. All participants reported high levels of encouragement in the form of high expectations and caring adults from teachers within the IEA program.

The racial counter frame used by the Alaska Native students in this study outside of the IEA program was one of acceptance. Every Day High School is typical of most large comprehensive high schools in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Four of the participants in the Every Day focus group had attended other schools in Anchorage or in rural Alaska. Three of the participants had only attended Every Day High School. Every Day is a large, comprehensive high school with a predominately White student population and predominately White teachers and other staff. Feagin (2010) suggested that "the white racial frame is more than just one significant frame among many; it is one that has routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society" (Feagin, 2010, p. 11). Much has been written about variations in White teachers' academic expectations and encouragement for minority students (Delpit, 1995;
Nieto, 2010). The Alaska Native students in this study all operated from a counter frame of acceptance in their school experiences outside of the IEA program. They understood that some teachers outside of the IEA program were not going to encourage them to do their very best in school, that some were just going to provide the assignment, the necessary instruction, and then expect them to complete the assignment. There were several reports of teachers who had lowered their expectations for Alaska Native students, so in response the students in the Every Day focus group lowered their expectations for those teachers. They again chose a counter frame of acceptance in response to the perception that some of their teachers did provide encouragement or try to develop a positive relationship.

Participants in both focus groups reported that teachers in Second Chance High School and teachers in the IEA program at Every Day High School provide high levels of encouragement and hold high academic expectations for Alaska Native students. They reported about times when teachers within the networks of support helped them understand an objective or helped them with some other issue they were dealing with in school. The participants from both focus groups perceived that the teachers within the networks of support have high expectations for their learning. In general, the participants from both focus groups perceived that the absence or presence of encouragement in the form of high expectations and caring adults is not a factor of racial-ethnic identity. The overwhelming report was that teachers who show high levels of encouragement in the form of high expectations motivate students to do their very best in school but that teachers who do not show encouragement do not do so because they are racist or have negative perceptions of Alaska Native students. The participants in the Second Chance
focus group chose a counter frame of avoidance while the participants in the Every Day focus group chose a counter frame of acceptance in response to the perception that some White teachers do not care about their progress or that their majority White schools do not represent their racial-ethnic identities.

Feeling understood was another subordinate theme that emerged within the student/teacher relationship in both focus groups. In general, the participants in the Second Chance focus group did not feel understood before coming to Second Chance. They worked hard at being invisible in schools before coming to Second Chance. They often chose to fail instead of asking for help and calling attention to the fact that they did not understand the assignment. However, they reported feeling understood at Second Chance. They spoke of teachers who know their parents and their unique challenges outside of school. In comparison, the participants in the Every Day focus group overwhelmingly reported that they do not perceive that their family or personal life situations are well understood outside of the IEA program. They spoke of teachers who give unreasonable amounts of seemingly irrelevant homework and who have inflexible homework policies. However, they reported feeling understood by teachers inside the IEA program. In general, neither the participants in the Second Chance focus group nor the participants in the IEA program perceived that feeling understood in the form of caring adults is a factor of racial-ethnic identity. Here again, the counter frames used by the Alaska Native students in this study were frames of avoidance and acceptance. The overwhelming response from all of the participants was to avoid the teachers who don't care about their personal lives (Second Chance) and accept that not all teachers are going to care about their personal lives (Every Day).
Teachers and staff can play either a positive or a negative role in any student’s frame of reference. There were numerous reports about teachers and staff who contributed in many positive ways to making school a very nurturing and accepting environment for Alaska Native students. Unfortunately, there were at least as many teachers and staff who did not play such a positive role. The counter frame used by Alaska Native students before coming to Second Chance was one of avoidance. The counter frame used by Alaska Native students outside the IEA program was one of acceptance. The findings in this study regarding the student/teacher relationship are consistent with the research conducted by Faircloth and Hamm (2005) who suggested that a teacher’s encouragement, the safety she is able to establish in her class, and her ability to listen are all vital components of increasing a student’s sense of belonging or connectedness to school. One significant finding in Faircloth’s research was that a teacher’s ability to increase a sense of connectedness to school was often related to the fact that she listened to and valued what the students had to say. From the reports of all the participants in both focus groups, teachers who are able to encourage students to do their very best do so by getting to know their students and by providing large amounts of encouragement.
Factors of Discouragement

There were four subordinate themes within factors of discouragement: the absence of encouragement, issues beyond control outside of school, frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped, and the absence of parental involvement. In general, the responses from the participants that pertained to factors of discouragement contained some element of either the absence of encouragement, issues beyond control outside of school, frustration with being judged and stereotyped, or the absence of parental involvement.

The absence of encouragement emerged as a subordinate theme within factors of discouragement among participants in both focus groups. These observations were also divided between inside and outside the networks of support. Participants in both focus groups spoke of feeling alienated and discouraged when their teachers did not provide encouragement or when they perceived that their teachers had lower expectations for their academic performance. There were reports of times when teachers did not acknowledge raised hands and when teachers did not realize how much work went into a project and a grade with no explanation seemed arbitrary and unjustified. In comparison, there were reports when participants felt encouraged by teachers and when efforts were rewarded with good grades. In general, the results from both focus groups demonstrate that the absence or presence of encouragement serves as a moderating factor in whether or not students feel a sense of alienation and discouragement in school. At no time in either of the interviews did the participants attribute the absence or presence of encouragement to racial-ethnic identity.
The interviews of the participants indicate that there is possibly a difference in racial framing between how teachers perceive the student/teacher relationship and how Alaska Native students perceive the student/teacher relationship. From a white racial frame, many White teachers see the classroom as a busy place with many things to accomplish and very little time in a day. They often forget or neglect to take the time necessary for building positive relationships with all students. From a counter frame of resistance or adaptation, the Alaska Native students from both focus groups perceived the teacher who does not provide encouragement not as a racist but as rude. The typical response from the participants in both groups indicates that Alaska Native students disengage from the learning process when they do not perceive positive encouragement from their teachers. They do not challenge the teacher. Feagin (2010) suggested that Native American counter-framing “often includes a strong critique of the materialistic greed, lack of spirituality, and human insensitivity of much in European American culture” (Feagin, 2010, p. 184). The findings from both focus groups indicate that the Alaska Native students in this study do not attribute the absence of encouragement to racial-ethnic identity. They attribute the absence of encouragement to rudeness and insensitivity.

Another subordinate theme within factors of alienation and discouragement pertained to issues beyond control outside of school. Issues beyond control outside of school ranged from lesser issues that none the less influence feelings of alienation and discouragement like a crowded house to more serious issues like divorce, alcoholism, homelessness, and death in the family. Four participants in the Second Chance focus group and three participants in the Every Day focus group reported that they do not
always have what is needed in the way of housing or food. There were reports of having
to go to the food bank, of having to buy second hand clothes at thrift stores, and of being
behind on the rent. There were also reports of incarcerated relatives and of family
moving in from the villages and needing a place to stay. A consistent theme among
several of the participants in both focus groups was of instability in the home life
translating for the purpose of this study into factors of discouragement. Only two
participants in the Second Chance focus group and three participants in the Every Day
focus group reported that their family is financially capable of making ends meet.
However, regardless of the SES of the participant, all participants reported that they are
focused on their grades and on graduating from high school. The counter frame that was
adopted by most participants in both focus groups in response to economic adversity is
one of diligence and perseverance.

In regard to issues beyond control outside of school, the findings of this study are
consistent with the Alaska Native Health Status Report prepared by the Alaska Native
Tribal Health Consortium (2009). Many Alaska Native youth live below the poverty line
and therefore are subject to various health and educational risk factors. Feagin (2010)
suggested that poverty levels among non-White Americans will not change until “there
are changes in the power and resources hierarchy” (Feagin, 2010, p. 210). He
unapologetically suggested there exists “a great need for significant remedial and
reparative action to restore those groups that have been unjustly oppressed for centuries
to their rightful place in society, with the socio-economic and other resources they and
their ancestors have rightfully earned but have lost over centuries of racial oppression”
(Feagin, 2010, p.207). As a nation, we may never be able to pay full reparation for the
tragic losses and injustices of history, but we should at the very least commit to an equal, high quality education, health care, and food for all students. Throughout the interviews, all participants responded to economic adversity from a counter frame of perseverance. This was an area where the participants also relied on a home culture counter frame. Participants spoke frequently of relying on relatives to help during periods of economic distress and of relying on family for comfort and acceptance.

Frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped was also a subordinate theme within factors of discouragement. The participants in the Second Chance focus group did not report frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped as often as the participants in the Every Day focus group. Quite the opposite, they were unanimous in their report that everyone is accepted at Second Chance. However, they did report frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped before attending Second Chance. The reports obtained from the Every Day focus group regarding frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped were paradoxical. Despite consistent and numerous reports of frustration with perceived judgment and being stereotyped in the Every Day focus group, not one participant chose to attribute those experiences to racial-ethnic identity or racism. There were numerous reports of insensitive peers and teachers who did not know much if anything at all about Alaska Native people, but the participants in the Every Day focus group refused to acknowledge that either Every Day High School or their peers and teachers were in any way racist.
Participants in the Every Day focus group all agreed with Talis when he said, “That is just the way Every Day is with so few minority students.” Participants in the Every Day focus group used a counter frame of acceptance and denial in reference to race and racism in Every Day High School.

The counter frame that was most evident in the responses of most participants was one of acceptance and denial in relation to perceived judgment and being stereotyped. A typical response was a shrug of the shoulders and an “Oh well…that is just how it is around here.” Feagin (2010) suggested that backstage racism occurs in social settings where only Whites are present. He suggested that frontstage racism occurs in social settings where there are strangers or people from diverse racial groups present. There were only a few reports of frontstage racism. The majority of the reports accented backstage racism, typically manifesting in the form of stereotype threat. “Today, numerous old racist views of Native Americans remain in the contemporary white framing, including images of Indians as lazy, drug or alcohol addicted, criminal, foreign, and not quite American.” (Feagin, 2010, p. 111). Most participants who responded from both focus groups reported having had an experience in which he or she was stereotyped in a manner described in Feagin’s definition of the typical Native American stereotype. The typical resistance counter frame among all of the participants in both groups was one of acceptance and avoidance. Participants from both focus groups responded that when they perceive that they are being judged and stereotyped, they may get angry but they never strike out or defend their position. They just accept it and avoid whoever it is that is judging them and making the racist comments.
Another and final subordinate theme that emerged within factors of discouragement was the absence of parental involvement. There was a difference in reports between the two focus groups in regard to parental involvement. Several participants in the Second Chance focus group reported that their parents feel comfortable going to the school and speaking to the principal. Not one participant in the Every Day focus group reported that their parents feel comfortable going to the school and talking to the teachers or the principal. Several of the participants in the Every Day focus group reported that their parents feel intimidated by the size of Every Day High School. They reported that their parents prefer to take care of school business over the phone or by mail. The participants from the Every Day focus group overwhelmingly reported that their parents are not comfortable going to the school.

In general, participants in the Every Day focus group did not report feelings of discouragement due to the absence of parental involvement. Participants again made excuses only this time for the absence of parental involvement. Janet reported, “My parents are just so busy.” Catlyn reported, “My parents are afraid of the size of Every Day and do not like to be put on the spot.” Not one participant in the Every Day focus group attributed responsibility to the Every Day High School staff for finding ways to make their parents feel more welcomed at the school. Only Katie came close to assigning blame when she said, “When my parents come here to school, some kids made fun of them.” And then she broke down and started crying. In comparison, the participants in the Second Chance focus group reported a greater sense of school ownership as a result
of parent involvement. There was a greater sense among participants in the Second
Chance focus group that Second Chance High School is their school. Hence in reaction
to the absence of parental involvement, participants in the Every Day focus group
adopted a counter frame of acceptance and denial.

Research has shown that parental involvement is vital to student engagement and
school connectedness. Restrictive school cultures that privilege White middle class
norms and values at the expense of all other norms and values exacerbate racial
opportunity cost for students of color and produce feelings of alienation and
discouragement (Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014). Reported incidents of being
judged and stereotyped by Alaska Native students are indicative of restrictive school
cultures that are not inclusive of norms and values outside of White middle class
expectations. Likewise, the absence of parental involvement is also indicative of
restrictive school cultures where some parents do not feel welcomed. Feagin (2010)
suggested there is a “progressive narrative in the counter-frames of black Americans and
other Americans of color about how students of color are eager to learn but have been
barred by whites from moving up the mobility ladder by means of an array of racial
barriers” (Feagin, 2010, p. 210). Feagin suggested that schools make every effort to
reinforce the progressive image of minority students as eager to learn in all messages and
communication. He suggested that such positive reinforcement would accomplish the
task of motivating students to learn by increasing the level of encouragement and bring
more parents of minority students into the school to be a part of the educational process
(Feagin, 2010).
Factors of Motivation

There were three subordinate themes within factors of motivation: good grades and accomplishments, the presence of strong parents and family, and Alaska Native cultural heritage. In general, the responses from all of the participants that pertained to factors of motivation contained some element of either good grades or accomplishments, the presence of strong parents and family, and Alaska Native cultural heritage.

Good grades and accomplishments emerged as a subordinate theme within factors of motivation among participants in both focus groups. Despite the reports from participants in both focus groups of having to contend with homelessness, alcoholism, incarceration, poverty, racial stereotyping, an absence of encouragement, and ignorance, a prevailing theme among all of the participants was pride in good grades and other accomplishments. Every participant spoke of working hard to make good grades and of the importance in graduating from high school. Not only were they proud of their own grades and accomplishments, but they were also proud of each other, clapping and smiling as participants reported about good grades and various accomplishments. Several participants in the Second Chance focus group reported getting good grades for the very first time while at Second Chance High School. Several participants in the Every Day focus group reported about being in advanced classes and holding high standards for their grades. A universal subordinate theme among the participants in both focus groups was that good grades and accomplishments are a source of motivation. Contrary to the racial
frames of many White Americans that minority students do not care about an education, the racial counter frame that these young Alaska Native students have chosen to use in response is one of conscientious young Alaska Native students who are serious about doing well in school.

Another subordinate theme that emerged within factors of motivation was the presence of strong parents and family. Even though most participants in both focus groups reported that their parents do not get involved in the school, the majority of participants reported that their parents ask about school and expect good grades. Many participants provided responses that align with Talis, “I don’t get to do anything until I get my homework done.” Contrary to what some people who are not Alaska Native believe, Alaska Native parents do care how well their children do in school. Contrary to the racial frames of many White Americans that Alaska Native people do not take care of their children, the findings from the interviews of both focus groups demonstrate that Alaska Native parents may not come to the school often but they do care about their children and they want their children to do well in school. Within the racial counter frames of Alaska Native parents is the belief that an education is valuable to overcome adversity.

Many participants in both focus groups spoke of being transient between rural Alaska, Anchorage, and Fairbanks, before finally settling in the Mat-Su Valley. They all attributed their success in finally finding a place to settle where they could be comfortable and secure to the strength and perseverance of their parents and family. Other than participants such as Thomas who was living in a group home or David who was living with his grandfather, several participants spoke of hard working dads who
work in difficult jobs in the commercial fishing industry or on the North Slope at Prudhoe Bay in the oil industry. Paul (E) was proud of his dad, “I don’t know where my dad works because he works so many different jobs, but he gets up every morning and goes to work.” Another consistent response among the participants in both focus groups was of hard working mothers who not only work in various types of low wage jobs but who also take care of the house and “keep everyone in line.” There were many reports of shared living spaces with family who have moved in from the village or from Anchorage. Denali spoke of having to rearrange her bedroom to make room for her cousin and her cousin’s baby who have moved from the village not as a hardship but as an obligation born of understanding the importance of family and what it is like to not have a place to live. A universal theme among participants in both focus groups was of hard working parents who care about school and the importance of family. It was evident from the reports of both focus groups that Alaska Native students rely heavily on a home culture frame that emphasizes family and hard work as sources of motivation.

These findings regarding factors of motivation are not consistent with some findings on academic outcomes and minority students and are consistent with other findings on academic outcomes and minority students. These findings are not consistent with Ogbu’s (1991) theory of oppositional cultural adaptation. Ogbu suggested that members of some minority groups choose self-affirming norms and values that undermine academic success in an effort to maintain boundaries between their cultural identities and majority group norms. According to Ogbu, minority students often chose to fail instead of fitting into White, middle class social norms of behavior. Alaska Native students in both focus groups are not choosing to fail. They are working hard and trying
to earn good grades regardless of the racial opportunity cost. These findings are also not consistent with the findings of Steel and Aronson (1995) who suggested that minority students are at risk of failure due to stereotype threat. Despite the numerous reports of being subjected to stereotype comments, the Alaska Native students in both focus groups are working hard to project a counter frame of Alaska Native students as students who are both conscientious and focused on academic achievement. The findings in this study support the research conducted with African American students by Spencer et al. (2001) finding that positive attitudes and identification regarding racial-ethnic identity are correlated with higher self-esteem, less stress, and less delinquent involvement. It appears that the Alaska Native participants in both focus groups are relying on a counter frame of academic effort in reaction to the prevailing image in much of society of Alaska Native students as lazy and disinterested in learning. The Alaska Native students in both focus groups conveyed images of well-adjusted young adults who are proud of their Alaska Native cultural heritage and of their parents.

**Factors of Racial-Ethnic Identity**

There were two subordinate themes within factors of racial-ethnic identity: encounters with racism and Alaska Native cultural heritage. In general, the responses from most of the participants that pertained to factors of racial-ethnic identity contained some element of either encounters with racism or Alaska Native cultural heritage.

Issues of racist encounters emerged as a subordinate theme within factors of racial-ethnic identity among participants in both focus groups. Many participants reported about encounters with racism. I found it interesting that many of the participants did not make a connection between respect and racism. They generally chose to attribute
their experiences with racism to a condition of the way things are but not an indication of
injustice or an issue of respect. One participant reported that “disrespect happens all the
time and that it is often hidden but it is not ever a factor of racial-ethnic identity.” Here
again there was a disconnection between the experience of racism and the assignment of
blame. Participants spoke of being called various racist names, of being accused of
things due to their racial-ethnic identity, and of feeling like they have to prove to the
world that the negative stereotypes regarding Alaska Natives are not true. “We are not all
the same,” was a consistent theme throughout the interviews with both focus groups. But
blame was never a part of the counter frame adopted by any of the participants. Instead,
participants demonstrated a positive attitude and a willingness to disregard racial
incidents and to work harder in an effort to demonstrate that they are not the racial
stereotype of Alaska Natives prominent within the white racial frame. In response to
various reports of disrespectful, racist encounters, participants in both focus groups
operated from a counter frame of acceptance and hard work.

A final subordinate theme that emerged within the interviews with both focus
groups was association with Alaska Native cultural heritage. Most of the participants
reported that they feel disconnected from their Alaska Native cultural heritage and that
they wish the school district would provide opportunities that help them learn more about
who they are as Alaska Native people. This is a troubling finding given what Feagin
(2010) suggested about the importance of the home culture frame to a healthy and
effective overall resistance counter frame. David (E) reported that Alaska non-Native
students could benefit from learning more about Alaska Native cultural heritage. He
suggested it might help Alaska non-Native students better understand and become friends
with Alaska Native students. The participants spoke about the difference between being raised in the village versus Anchorage or the Mat-Su Valley and how having a connection to the villages in rural Alaska helps Alaska Native students stay connected to Alaska Native cultural heritage. If there was one subordinate theme that was consistent throughout all of the responses it was Alaska Native pride and a desire to learn more about Alaska Native cultural heritage. The findings within factors of racial-ethnic identity are consistent with other research among African American students that suggest feeling connected to one’s community provides a positive sense of one’s roots and a sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2001). Similar to other findings among African American students, the Alaska Native students in this study were very interested in learning about their racial-ethnic identity and their home culture.

In conclusion, the Alaska Native students in this study rely on a variety of anti-racist counter frames within the school context. In regard to the student/teacher relationship, the Alaska Native students in this study rely on an anti-racist counter frame of acceptance and avoidance. They accept that some teachers do not encourage Alaska Native students to do well in school and that some teachers do not appear interested in getting to know them as people outside of school and do not appear empathetic to their problems outside of school. In general, when possible they avoid these teachers. When they can’t avoid these teachers, they rely on a counter frame of diligence and hard work. They do not choose failure but instead double their efforts to demonstrate to the teachers who are not very good at showing encouragement that they want to do well in class and that they want to graduate from high school with good grades.
In regard to issues beyond control outside of school, the Alaska Native students in this study rely on a home culture counter frame of deep commitment to family. Many of the participants have experienced poverty and homelessness. As a result, they understand the importance of family as both an economic resource and an emotional support. Additional elements within their home culture counter frames that assist when contending with economic adversity are diligence and perseverance. They understand the value of staying together as a family and working hard. For many participants images of hard working parents were a source of motivation and central to their anti-racist counter frames.

In regard to racial-ethnic identity, the Alaska Native students in this study rely on a counter frame that is a complex mix of acceptance, avoidance, denial, and resilience. This counter frame exists within an overarching home culture frame deeply committed to family. All participants reported experiencing some form of threat to their racial-ethnic identity within the school context. However, not one participant reported that their racist experiences were due to their own racial-ethnic identity. They chose instead to accept that racist incidents are a fact of life, a conscious choice by a racist individual, that only happen on occasion and are not the norm of day-to-day existence. The majority of the participants ascribe acts of racism to the way that African Americans were treated during slavery, not the way schools are structured to represent White, middle class norms and expectations. In general, the participants in both focus groups accept racism as a fact of life, avoid racist individuals when they can, and deny that individuals who make careless comments that stereotype Alaska Natives are racists.
The participants in both focus groups rely on a counter frame of academic effort and Alaska Native pride. Throughout the reports from most of the participants, there was evidence of academic effort in their counter frames. Several participants reported that they are proud of making good grades and that their parents expect them to make good grades. Good grades are an important element for their home culture frames. In addition, most of the participants reported that they are proud to be Alaska Native. Mixed with the acceptance, the avoidance, and the denial in response to the white racial frame, the Alaska Native students in this study rely heavily on a home culture frame of hard work, family, and pride in Alaska Native cultural heritage.

Mixed Methods Discussion

In a sequential, explanatory mixed methods design, qualitative data is connected to the quantitative data to provide a fuller interpretation of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2011). The phenomenon of this study is the Alaska Native students’ school experience in the Mat-Su Borough School District. The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to answer the following research question: In what ways do the interview data from Alaska Native students concerning their perceptions of school climate and connectedness help explain the quantitative results reported on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey?

The following findings were made in the quantitative phase of the study:

- There are differences in levels of school connectedness based upon ethnicity, but the differences are small.
- Both Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students scored highest on high expectations (HE).
• Both Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students scored lowest on peer climate (PC).

• Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students differ most on school safety (SS) and school leadership and student involvement (SLI).

• Alaska Native students scored highest on perceptions of school leadership and student involvement (SLI).

• Alaska Native students scored lowest on perceptions of school safety.

The following findings were made in the qualitative phase of the study:

• Alaska Native families experience differences in economic resources but are most often at or near the poverty line, having typically gone through a series of attempts before securing employment and adequate housing in the Mat-Su Valley.

• Alaska Native students perceive encouragement and high expectations as critical to the student/teacher relationship.

• Many Alaska Native students want to do well in school.

• Many Alaska Native students have experienced some type of racist stereotype.

• Alaska Native students do not attribute school connectedness to racial-ethnic identity.

• Alaska Native students are proud of their Alaska Native cultural heritage.

There are differences in levels of school connectedness between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students as reported by the SCCS, but the differences are small. The scores on all seven dimensions of the SCCS were similar between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students. Alaska Native students actually scored higher than Alaska non-Native students on four of the seven dimensions of school
connectedness: school leadership and student involvement (SLI), respectful climate (RC), peer climate (PC), and parent and community involvement (PCI). The largest differences exist in the school safety dimension (SS) and the school leadership and student involvement dimension (SLI). Both Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students scored highest on high expectations (HE). Both Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students scored lowest on peer climate (PC). Many elements of these findings can be explained using the qualitative findings from the qualitative phase of the study.

The first finding that can be explained is that there are small differences in levels of school connectedness between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students. From the qualitative interviews, it is evident that the Alaska Native students in the study want to feel good about their schools. Many of the participants have come to the Mat-Su Borough School District after attending school in Anchorage. Many have also come to MSBSD after attending school in rural Alaska. All of the participants reported that school in MSBSD is better than schools in either Anchorage or rural Alaska. Many participants reported that attending school in Anchorage is difficult due to the size of the schools and the large number of students. They reported that Anchorage is much more diverse and that there are far more racist incidents in Anchorage than in Mat-Su Borough. Many also reported that attending school in rural Alaska is difficult due to fewer resources available in rural Alaska and the influence of the village. One possible
explanation for the comparatively high scores on all seven indicators of the SCCS is that Alaska Native students are comparing their school experiences in MSBSD with their school experiences before coming to MSBSD and perceive that they are more connected to their schools in MSBSD.

An additional qualitative finding that explains the small differences in scores on the SCCS is the presence of encouragement from some teachers in Every Day High School and Second Chance High School. Even though the participants in the Every Day focus group spoke most often of teachers within the IEA network of support as showing encouragement for Alaska Native students, they did mention teachers who showed encouragement for Alaska Native students outside of the IEA network of support.

Paul (E), “Mr. James loves everybody. He’s cool. Every single day, I don’t’ even have his class but he, every single day he’ll shake my hand before I go in Mr. Smith’s class.”

There are many good teachers both inside and outside of the networks of support who encourage Alaska Native students to do their best in school. The encouragement shown from good teachers increases Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness.

Mr. James is obviously an accomplished master at Capturing Kids’ Hearts, a MSBSD initiative to establish norms of behavior throughout the organization that emphasize professional and productive relationships with students and colleagues. Capturing Kids’ Hearts may be an explanation for the increased perception of school connectedness among Alaska Native students. The district is in the third year of implementation and there has been a 30% reduction in office referrals and out of school suspensions. All secondary teachers and principals have participated for the last two
years in staff development for three days at the beginning of the school year. The training focuses on group norms and standards of expected behavior for professional relationships in the work place: Leadership Blueprint. The training also focuses on strategies for building strong student/teacher relationships and peer-to-peer relationships such as a social contract and a handshake for every student every day at the doors of the school in the morning. The principal and other staff greet students every morning and make an attempt to shake every student’s hand as he or she enters the school. During the day, every teacher stands at his or her door between classes and shakes hands as students enter the classroom. During the course of the day, each student gets his or her hand shook on an average three times. It is as simple as a handshake and a greeting every day at the front door in the morning and a handshake and a greeting from your teachers throughout the day and all students feel more connected to school. Capturing Kids’ Hearts could be an explanation for the high scores on the SCCS with Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students.

An additional explanation for the high scores on the SCCS among Alaska Native students could be the influence of special programs targeting Alaska Native students. These special programs were mentioned throughout the qualitative data. In the Mat-Su Borough School District, in most secondary schools the average class size is 28 to 32. In alternative schools like Second Chance, charter schools, and specialized programs like IEA, the average class size is 8 to 20. Smaller class sizes allows for more time to spend on building relationships. Most Alaska Native students are in the IEA program. All of the participants in the qualitative phase are in the IEA program. The typical Alaska Native student at Every Day High School has three IEA classes a day. In IEA classes, all
of the students are Alaska Native. Alaska Native students feel very connected to their IEA classes and their IEA teachers. Native Youth Olympics (NYO) and the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANCEP) could also be influencing high scores on the SCCS among Alaska Native students. Every year, hundreds of students from across the state compete in Anchorage in events like the Eskimo stick pull, the seal hop, and the high kick. These events are a test of strength, endurance, and agility. Students train all year for a chance to break world records in the various events. NYO teams are a source of great pride and connection to school for Alaska Native students.

One more program that targets Alaska Native students and was mentioned in the interviews and that could explain the high scores on the SCCS is the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP). In a partnership with the University of Alaska Anchorage, the Mat-Su Borough School District targets a cohort of 50 Alaska Native sixth grade students each year to participate in ANSEP. There is an interview process for students and families to participate and they must commitment to providing the necessary support and effort to complete Algebra I by the end of eighth grade. In exchange, the students build a computer that they get to keep and they get to attend a two-week summer engineering camp at the University. These two-week long middle school academies are designed to promote science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Middle school ANSEP students can take a summer bridge and then launch into acceleration academies in high school. The ANSEP program has definitely become a source of great pride and increased connectedness to school for Alaska Native students.
Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students differed most on school leadership and student involvement (SLI) and school safety (SS). Alaska Native students scored higher than Alaska non-Native students on SLI. They scored lower than Alaska non-Native students on SS. These findings indicate that Alaska Native students feel better than Alaska non-Native students about the leadership in the school, which includes the principal and some teachers, and their ability to be involved in activities at school. However, it also indicates that Alaska Native students feel less safe than Alaska non-Native students. This finding did not align with discipline data from the Mat-Su Borough School District. In 2014-2015, there were only seven long-term suspensions for violent behavior and none of those incidents involved Alaska Native students. This finding does align with research suggesting that male and minority students tend to perceive school as less safe (Koth et al., 2008). The qualitative data suggests that many of the participants live at or below the poverty line and experience many factors beyond their control outside of school. These precarious circumstances could influence perceptions of safety both in and out of school. In addition, many participants reported being subjected to a stereotype at some point in school. These experiences could also contribute to perceptions of safety. From the comments of the participants in both focus groups, it is clear that Alaska Native students have some friends who are not Alaska Native, but the majority of their friends and classmates are Alaska Native. They tend to stick together in the lunchroom and in their IEA classrooms. Further study is needed to determine if there are differences in cultural perspective on issues of safety in school.
A significant finding of the qualitative phase was that the participants in both focus groups did not attribute any of the dimensions in the SCCS to factors of racial-ethnic identity. Every question had a sub question that was directly focused on the connection between racial-ethnic identity and one of the dimensions in the SCCS. Even though every participant reported that they had either witnessed or been subjected to a racist comment outside the network of support, not one participant perceived that those racist comments were evidence of racism in their schools. The participants in both focus groups unanimously denied that racism is a factor in any of the dimensions on the SCCS. Participants routinely attributed racism to “just the way things are.” Talis (E) said that racism is “not as bad as it can be at other schools.” Talis had gone to school in Anchorage before moving out to the Mat-Su Valley. There was a noticeable difference in perceptions of racism between the participants who had migrated to the Mat-Su Valley from rural Alaska or who had lived in the Mat-Su Valley their entire lives and those participants who had migrated from Anchorage. The students who had migrated from Anchorage appeared to have a better understanding of racism, with numerous reports of experiences with racism in Anchorage before migrating to the Mat-Su Valley. Nevertheless, Tyler, who migrated from Anchorage, said, “it happens a little around here, but not that much.”

Knowledge about race and racism in both focus groups seemed to be a factor of exposure and education. Most participants had experienced or witnessed isolated incidences of racism but what Feagin (2010) called frontstage racism is not the norm. Feagin defined frontstage racism as that which occurs in social settings where strangers or other people of color are present. The racist experiences reported throughout the
interviews in this study were manifestations of backstage racism. Backstage racism occurs in the social settings where only Whites are present (Feagin, 2010). Catlyn (E) gave an example of a teacher she had in kindergarten who she really liked and admired and then ten years later having been subjected to a racist comment from that teacher’s son in class. She wondered if racism is not practiced in the home. It influences how she remembers that teacher. In general, none of the participants had a full, comprehensive understanding of race or racism. Most of the participants had only experienced a racist comment once or twice in their lives. A few of the participants had never experienced a racist comment, but they remembered times when they did not feel accepted and they were the only Native person in the room. Backstage racism is much more difficult to detect and occasionally happens on the frontstage in isolated incidents which could explain why none of the participants considered racial-ethnic identity to be a factor in any of the dimensions on the SCCS. They don’t have sufficient experience and education to recognize elements of racism in all its forms and manifestations.

Another reason there were no reports that attribute racial-ethnic identity to any of the dimensions on the SCCS could be that Alaska Native students have assimilated into the majority and operate from an effective anti-racist counter frame. Throughout all interviews, participants operated from a counter frame of acceptance and avoidance in regard to race or racism. They accepted that racism exists and that there are times when they feel embarrassed and powerless as a result of racist encounters. Instead of choosing anger or despair, they choose avoidance. They stay away from people who could potentially be racist. When they have a teacher who does not show encouragement, they choose to work quietly and diligently to change the way that teacher perceives Alaska
Native students. The anti-racist counter frames of acceptance and avoidance fit within a strong overarching home culture frame. Most participants in both focus groups were proud to be Alaska Native and proud of their families who provide a cultural resource while they go to schools that are organized and operate very much so from a white racial frame. They work hard in school to earn good grades and they want to learn more about their Alaska Native culture and heritage that includes their languages. This strong anti-racist counter frame could explain why there are no reports connecting racial-ethnic identity to any of the dimensions from the SCCS. The results of this mixed methods study indicate that Alaska Native students do not perceive school connectedness as a factor of racial-ethnic identity. They perceive school connectedness as a factor of individual effort, positive relationships with some teachers, friends who accept them as Alaska Native students, parents who expect good grades, and participation in extracurricular activities representative of their Alaska Native cultural heritage.

Limitations of This Study

There are limitations in the quantitative phase of this study that should be noted. First, the unequal sample between Alaska Native students \((N = 325)\) and Alaska non-Native \((N = 4059)\) students is a noteworthy limitation. The sample of Alaska Native students represents those students who identified as full Alaska Native and who completed the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. There were additional students who identified as mixed race and who completed the School Climate and Connectedness Survey, but there was no way to identify whether or not the students were mixed with Alaska Native. A decision was made to include only those students who identified as Alaska Native. Nevertheless, future studies should include larger samples of
Alaska Native students. A second limitation that should be noted in the quantitative phase of this study pertains to the seven dimensions of connectedness used in the School Climate and Connectedness Survey. Although well-grounded in the literature on school connectedness, the quantitative phase of this study did not test the validity of the instrument and whether the proposed structure of the instrument best fits this sample of students. Future studies may want to test the dimensionality of the School Climate and Connectedness Survey among diverse samples.

There are limitations in the qualitative phase of this study that should be noted. The study is limited to Alaska Native students in two schools and does not incorporate academic achievement data. It is limited to the thirteen students who participated in the study and to the ages 15 to 17. Time was a limitation in the study. Due to the mixed methodology and the time necessary to complete the quantitative analysis, there was limited time available to get to know the participants before the interviews. More time to cultivate relationships with the focus groups could have yielded different responses. In addition, I recognize that limitations in the study are my own biases. Qualitative research is grounded in human reality, but it is subject to the researcher’s interpretation (Creswell, 2013). I came into this study with the perception that Alaska Native students do not feel connected to their schools, with the perception that the SCCS data was overinflated. I also came into this study with the perception that Alaska Native students may have a reduced self-esteem as a result of their experiences going to school in a predominantly White school District. An additional limitation in the qualitative phase of this study was my own presence as a school administrator. The students could have been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear due to my position in the school district.
Limitations have already been noted regarding the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. However, there are additional limitations that should be noted that emerged as a result of the mixed phase discussion. First, all of the participants in both focus groups are students who are highly engaged in school. Further study could compare results from Alaska Native students who are not engaged in school. Second, the participants represent just two schools. Further study could compare results to other schools with a focus on school level factors that influence perceptions of school climate and connectedness. The results of this study can only be generalized to the Alaska Native students attending school in the Mat-Su Borough School District. The small sample size of our quantitative phase of 325 Alaska Native participants has limited the ability to generalize our findings to other subgroups within the Alaska Native adolescent population.

Implications for Future Research

The quantitative phase of this study makes an important contribution to understanding perceptions of school connectedness among Alaska Native students in the Mat-Su Borough School District. Future research could examine additional variables that pertain to Alaska Native students’ perceptions of school connectedness in a variety of school contexts including but not limited to perceptions of the student to teacher relationship and peer-to-peer relationship. Further research is needed to understand why racial-ethnic differences in students’ perception of connectedness vary across different schools and among different students. Although the quantitative phase of this study examined various dimensions of connectedness between Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students in the same school district, it did not identify the features of school
environments that make racial-ethnic differences in perceptions of connectedness larger at some schools and smaller at other schools. In addition, further research is needed on Alaska Native students’ perception of connectedness and academic achievement.

Attention to additional variables within a variety of school contexts, and the connection between perceptions of school connectedness and academic achievement will provide a more complete understanding of the Alaska Native student school experience.

The qualitative phase of this study also has important implications for research. It makes a contribution to the limited body of research on either school connectedness or racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students. The findings of this study could potentially be used in other studies of school connectedness and racial-ethnic identity among other minority students. Future qualitative research could examine racial-ethnic identity and school connectedness in single studies. The focus on each area would yield a deeper understanding of the Alaska Native students’ experience. Additional studies are needed that address the efficacy of White teachers with Alaska Native students, specifically in relation to the social construction of race and identity. Additional studies are also needed that examine curriculum used with Alaska Native students. In addition, further studies are needed that examine the peer-to-peer relationship and the student/teacher relationship with attention to cultural differences in racial framing.

This mixed methods study adds to the limited research on Alaska Native students. The quantitative data indicates that Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native students feel connected to their schools. The qualitative data confirms that Alaska Native students feel connected to their schools but that they have had to adopt various anti-racist counter frames in order to feel connected to their schools. Further research is warranted that
examines cultural differences in perspective regarding individual dimensions of school climate and connectedness. Further research is also warranted that examines the variables in the ways White teachers construct the social environment of classrooms to alleviate racial opportunity cost among minority students. Further research should also examine differences between students who are engaged and students who are unengaged in the learning process. A comparison may produce findings that assist school districts in designing programs that capture more students. Future research could examine gender differences in how stressful events impact school connectedness among Alaska Native males and females separately.

\textit{Conclusion}

This study relied upon two major philosophies as a theoretical foundation. Joe Feagin’s (2010) theory of racial framing provided a perspective from which to analyze and explain Alaska Native students’ school experience in a large, urban school district. As the researcher, I worked to understand the Alaska Native student experience in a predominately White school district from my own personal white racial frame. What I learned is that the Alaska Native students in this study use a series of anti-racist counter frames to navigate school and societal contexts that do not represent their Alaska Native cultural heritage but instead are organized and structured according to White middle class cultural norms and expectations. Like generations of other students of color throughout the history of America’s racist past, the Alaska Native students in this study rely heavily on anti-racist counter frames of avoidance, hard work, and perseverance within an overarching home culture frame that includes a deep commitment to family and culture.
An additional philosophy that was used as a theoretical foundation in this study is tribal critical race theory. A major tenet of tribal critical race theory is that colonization is endemic to society. Brayboy (2005) defined colonization as a historical and systemic effort to colonize or civilize Native Americans to be more like those who hold power in the dominant society. The results of this study seem to indicate that Alaska Native students have assimilated into the larger social context and have in the process lost a vital connection to their Alaska Native cultural heritage. This assimilation may explain why participants were not able to attribute their obviously racist experiences in any way to their own racial-ethnic identity. They did not have the language to explain race or racism within the school context. Tribal critical race theory rejects assimilation and integration of Native American students in educational institutions because integration and assimilation inevitably destroy cultural integrity by forcing Native American students to accept academic knowledge at the expense of cultural knowledge. The Alaska Native students in this study reported that they have very little awareness or knowledge of their Alaska Native cultural heritage. They have paid the ultimate in what Venzant Chambers and Huggins (2014) referred to as racial opportunity costs. Their cultural integrity has essentially been minimized by their experiences in the educational system of the predominately White middle class society.

According to tribal critical race theory, there are three different types of knowledge that are essential to the survival of Native American communities: (a) the ability to know what it means to be a member of a particular tribal nation, (b) the ability and willingness to adapt when change is required, and (c) academic knowledge that is not diametrically opposed to Native ways of knowing (Brayboy, 2005). The fact that so few
Alaska Native students in this study reported they know much about their cultural heritage could be a cause for concern, but the fact that they all expressed pride in being Alaska Native and a desire to learn about their Alaska Native cultural heritage is a cause for hope. An additional tenet of tribal critical race theory is the importance of story as a source of data when explaining the Native American experience. This study attempted to tell the story of 13 Alaska Native students in a large predominately White urban school district. Their story is one of resiliency and hope but it is unfortunately also a story of loss. The students in this study have lost a vital connection to their Alaska Native cultural heritage. A final tenet of tribal critical race theory is action and social justice. Based upon the findings of this study, it is incumbent upon the researcher to make the following suggestions to educators and policy makers who are charged with the task of providing educational services to Alaska Native students.

*Implications for Current Practice*

Based upon the assumption that all students deserve a school where people are accepting of others and everyone feels connected and involved in the learning process, where all students are proud of their racial-ethnic identities, and where the school is doing all that it can to support academic achievement without negating the cultural norms and values of any group of students, the following suggestions are offered:

- School Districts should provide opportunities for all students to openly talk about their feelings concerning race and racism in a safe setting;
- Teachers should facilitate conversations about race in ways that are sensitive to differences in cultural perspective;
• Policy makers and other educational leaders should provide a culturally proficient lens to federal and state mandates making certain that such mandates do not include culturally biased expectations;

• Teachers should assess the cultural knowledge that students bring to school: collecting, analyzing, and using data to guide decisions that explicitly teach cultural proficiency; and

• Systems of support should be established within larger comprehensive high schools that facilitate student/teacher relationships, facilitate positive peer-to-peer relationships, guide student led educational conversations, and help students navigate issues beyond their control outside of school.

There are many things school districts can do to alleviate racial opportunity costs and minimize the destruction of cultural integrity among Alaska Native students who attend predominately White schools in predominately White school districts. School districts should implement programs that explicitly target the development of positive relationships between Alaska Native students and their teachers and between Alaska Native students and Alaska non-Native students. They should also develop and implement programs of study that emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum content emphasizing the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future. School districts should work with tribal organizations to develop parent involvement plans that welcome Alaska Native parents into the discussion about an appropriate education for their children. In that discussion, school officials should recognize that traditional western schooling practices that emphasize competition between students might not be best practices for Alaska Native
students. School officials should be open to and willing to support the possibility that Alaska Native students need an education that is based upon a strong cultural foundation that emphasizes cooperation as opposed to competition between students. Finally, school officials should take the time to talk to and listen to Alaska Native students. It is only through a suspension of assumptions, a willingness to listen, and a commitment to act that the school experience will improve for Alaska Native students. They have an important and compelling story.
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTION REVIEW BOARD NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 14110602
PROJECT TITLE: School Connectedness and Racial Ethnic Identity Among Alaska Native Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Study
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Robert Picou
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Education Leadership and School Counseling
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 11/17/2014 to 11/16/2015
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX B

WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM PARTICIPATING SCHOOL DISTRICT

Oct 3, 2014

Re: Approval for Dissertation Study

To Whom It May Concern:

Please accept this letter as approval granted to Rob Picou to conduct a research study in the Mat Su Borough School District. His study will focus on school connectedness as it relates to racial-ethnic identity among Alaska Native students. I understand that he will be interviewing students and using archival data from the School Climate and Connectedness Survey.

Sincerely,

Gene Stone
Assistant Superintendent
Mat Su Borough School District
APPENDIX C

PARENT/PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Parent/Guardian/Participant:

I am an executive director of instruction for the Mat Su Borough School District. I supervise middle school and high school programs in our school district. I am conducting a research study on school connectedness as it relates to Alaska Native identity. As part of my research study, I will be interviewing twenty (20) Alaska Native students from the Mat Su Borough School District. The purpose of the study will be to find out whether our Alaska Native students feel a strong connection to their schools.

The interview process will be conducted in a one hour session and will be audio taped. The process will consist of a semi structured focus group interview with approximately ten students and a follow up meeting to review responses. There will always be at least one other student present in the interview. No students will be interviewed alone. The participants will be asked ten questions with the opportunity to provide any additional information. Student names will not be associated with the research findings in any way. All audio tapes will be destroyed after the study.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable harms or risks with this research study. Participants may withdraw from this study at any time. The results from this study will be used to advocate for programs that meet the specific cultural and heritage needs of Alaska Native students in the Mat Su Borough School District.

Questions concerning this research study should be directed to the researcher: Rob Picou; (907)-414-6525 or (907) 761-9212.

Please mark an X in the blank space to indicate you would or would not like to participate. Please sign your name and date below.

_____ I would like my child to participate.

_____ I would not like my child to participate.

_____________________________   ____________________________
Participant’s Signature     Parent’s Signature
APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

School Climate and Connectedness as Related to Racial Ethnic Identity

March 1, 2015

Welcome to our session today! My name is Rob Picou. Thank you for taking the time to participate in our discussion group. We really need to hear your opinions and your voice about what makes a school a place where all students want to learn. The purpose of today’s discussion group is to learn about your opinions regarding school climate and connectedness in relation to racial-ethnic identity.

School Climate refers to the tone or mood in a school. It also refers to the attitudes of staff and students toward the school. Positive school climate is associated with well-managed classrooms and common areas, high and clearly stated expectations concerning individual responsibility, feeling safe at school, and teachers and staff that consistently acknowledge all students and fairly address their behavior.

School Connectedness refers to students’ school experiences and their perceptions and feelings about school. This includes feeling that they are a part of the school, that adults at school care about them personally, that their learning matters and is a high priority, that they are close to people at school and have supportive relationships with adults, and that teachers and staff consistently treat them with respect.

Racial-Ethnic Identity refers to who we are as people. You have all been chosen to be a part of this study because you are Alaska Native. Our purpose today is to find out how you feel about school climate and school connectedness as an Alaska Native student. Your opinion is very important.

We will use the results of this and several other discussion groups to develop programs in schools that help all students feel positive about their schools and to feel more connected to their schools. We do not need to learn about what is good or bad about your school specifically. Instead, we want to know what parts of school life play the largest role in helping students like you perform well academically and graduate.

Before we begin, I would like to review some rules we will follow during the session. Nothing you say will affect your grades or be shared with your teachers or principal or anyone else at your school. The conversation we have today should be considered private and confidential. What is said in this room should stay in this room and not be discussed with other people. Please speak up and share your opinions. Only one person should talk at a time. Everyone’s opinion is really important so we will try to make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak.

We will only use your first name today. Your name will not be included in any written comments or appear in the report of this meeting. You may be assured of complete
privacy. Keep in mind that we’re just as interested in negative comments as positive comments. Sometimes the negative comments are the most important.

Our session will last about an hour and a half. We really value your time. If there are no questions, let’s begin.

First, we need to get your permission to participate in this session. I will read the permission form to you and answer any questions you may have. You must sign this form in order to participate in this discussion group.

Read the form to the group and address any questions. Have each form signed. Collect all of the forms and place them in the envelope provided. Excuse those who decide not to participate in the discussion group.

**Introductions**

We’ve placed name cards on the table in front of each of you so that we can remember each other’s name during the discussion. Let’s find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Please tell us your first name and something about you that other people here might not know. For example, I am Rob and I like to play harmonica.

**School Climate (5 to 10 minutes)**

1. What kinds of things make a school a good place for students to be?

2. What kinds of things would make a school a place where students do not want to be?

We would like to spend the rest of our time asking your advice on a few issues. We will talk about each of the areas of school life currently covered on the School Climate and Connectedness Survey you all had to take this spring. We would like to know how important each of these areas of school life are in making school a place where Alaska Native students want to do well. We will finish by asking if there are any other parts of school life that you think are important that are not currently part of the survey.
High Expectations (5 to 10 minutes)

Let’s begin by talking about expectations. Having high expectations means that teachers and other school staff let a student know that he or she can do well in school and can achieve his or her goals. They encourage each student to work hard and provide support to help that student be successful. The student feels like teachers and other school staff are there to help them succeed. In contrast, when teachers and other school staff do not have high expectations for a student, they may not encourage that student to work hard or may not provide that student with the support he or she needs to do well. The student may not feel that teachers or school staff have high hopes for them or believe they can achieve high expectations.

3. How important do you think high expectations are in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that teacher and school staff expectations for students are not important, somewhat important, or very important? In your experiences, do you feel like your teachers have the same high expectations for all members of your classroom? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to your teachers’ academic expectations?

Respectful Climate (5 to 10 minutes)

Now let’s talk about respect between school staff and students. When adults at a school treat a student with respect, they are polite to that student, use a positive tone when asking that student to do something or when discussing any concerns with that student, and the student will feel like he or she is being treated fairly. In contrast, when adults at a school do not treat a student with respect, they may not make an effort to be polite to that student, may take a negative tone when dealing with that student, or the student may feel like he or she is being treated unfairly.

4. How important do you think respect from adults at school is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that respect from adults at school is not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to the level of respect you have received in your school experience?

Peer Climate (5 to 10 minutes)

Now let’s talk about relationships among students. This is referred to as peer climate. When there is a positive peer climate at school, students treat each other with respect and help one another even if they are not friends. When there is a negative peer climate at school, students think it is okay to disrespect one another, and some students may feel picked on or isolated.
5. How important do you think peer climate is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that peer climate is not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to the level of respect you have received from your peers at your school?

School Safety (5 to 10 minutes)

Now let’s talk about school safety. When a student feels like they are safe at school, he or she does not have to worry about being hurt or threatened by other students or adults while at school. In contrast, when a student does not feel safe at school, he or she may worry about being hurt or threatened by other students or adults within the school, or that crime or violence in the community will affect him or her even at school.

6. How important do you think school safety is in determining whether you can concentrate in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that school safety is not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to your feelings about being safe at school?

Caring Adults (5 to 10 minutes)

Now let’s talk about the presence of caring adults at school. When a student feels like there are caring adults at school, this means that the student has one or more adults at school that he or she can talk to if they have a problem. Having caring adults also means that the student feels like he or she is someone that adults at school value as a person. In contrast, when a student does not feel like there are caring adults at school, he or she may feel like adults are not there to help them if they have a problem, or that adults do not care about them as an individual.

7. How important do you think having caring adults at school or not having caring adults at school plays a role in whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that caring adults are not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to the number of caring adults you have at school?

School Leadership (5 to 10 minutes)

Now let’s talk about school leadership and student involvement. School Leadership refers to the adults who make the decisions at school, such as rules and planning what will happen at school. When schools have good leadership and good student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school value student opinions and make decisions based on what is best for students. When schools have poor leadership or poor student involvement, a student will feel like the leaders at the school are not
interested in what students like him or her have to say, and do not make decisions based on what is best for students.

8. How important do you think school leadership is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that school leadership is not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has contributed to your involvement in the decision making process at your school?

**Family and Community Involvement (5 to 10 minutes)**

Now let’s talk about parent and community involvement at school. Family and community involvement can come from the school reaching out to people in the community as well as the community supporting the school. When students feel like there is family and community involvement at school, they may feel like the school welcomes and values their family’s involvement, that their families and other community members are interested in what happens at their school, and that their families and other community members show support for their school by attending school events. When students feel like their family and community is not involved in their school, they may feel like the school does not welcome or value families like theirs, that their families and other community members are not interested in what happens at their schools, and that their families and other community members do not show support for their school by not showing up for school events such as parent/teacher conferences.

9. How important do you think family and community involvement is in determining whether you work hard in school and learn as much as you can? Would you say that family and community involvement is not important, somewhat important, or very important? How do you perceive your racial-ethnic identity as an Alaska Native student has influenced your family or community’s involvement at school?

**Other Areas (10 minutes)**

10. Do you think your school is teaching you what you really need to know in life?

11. Are there other aspects of school life that we didn’t talk about that you think play a role in determining whether you work hard in school and learn in school as much as you can?

12. Any other comments or things that you think are important that we didn’t discuss?

**Closure**

Thank you for participating in this discussion group!

Put all of the forms (informed consent and questionnaires) in the large envelope.
REFERENCES


