

# Perspectives on Change: A Continued Struggle for Academic Success and Cultural Relevancy at an American Indian School in the Midst of No Child Left Behind

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Warrior Elementary is a public school within the Navajo Nation. District and school reforms fought against school closure or private restructuring due to pressures associated with repeated failure on standardized tests under the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Warrior Elementary saw tremendous academic gains on these tests one year after a districtwide standards-based reform. This study documents the perspectives of the school staff on recent academic growth, the factors attributed to the increase in scores, and the implications of NCLB for Navajo students attending Warrior Elementary School. Allegations of fraud and intense test-preparation emerged along with discourses of prejudice against the local Navajo community. Additionally, due to pressures from state agencies acting under NCLB, a new era emerged at Warrior Elementary: achieving standardization.

**T**he first time I walked into Warrior Elementary School<sup>1</sup> I could not help but notice its decrepit shape: Water dripped from brown crevasses dividing ceiling tiles, neon fluorescent lights faintly shone rays of greenish-yellow pigments upon doors and walls, and smells of must overwhelmed hallways. This was my home for the next three years. I was soon told the physical state of Warrior Elementary, a predominately Navajo school, matched its academic success and was analogous to many schools on American Indian reservations: It was established to assimilate American Indians into American society and its purpose continued to be the same. With 78 percent White instructors, Warrior Elementary promoted the dominant culture and contributed to a painful divide between American Indian students and their culture. Warrior Elementary School repeatedly posted failing scores on norm-referenced standardized tests, and soon after enactment of the No Child Left

Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (signed into law in 2002), found itself on New Mexico's "corrective action" school list.

Warrior Elementary School had not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for three consecutive years, and pressure on the school became enormous. From 2001 to 2004, change was rapid, as the consequence of not meeting AYP would entail school closure or private restructuring. All teaching positions would be lost or teachers would be required to re-interview for current positions. A new administrator was introduced in 2003 to help raise the school's ailing scores and bring accountability. A standards-based reform was implemented districtwide, with content and performance standards guiding all instruction. In addition to the school and district reforms, the K-5 Navajo language program was eliminated based on state recommendations.

Academically, the school responded to reforms. A small group of teachers and administrators dedicatedly fought for school improvement in conjunction with the standards-based reform (SBR) movement and NCLB. Warrior Elementary appeared to find a path of hope, as student achievement unexpectedly showed tremendous growth on both the TerraNova Assessment Summary and the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment (NMSBA) for the 2003-2004 school year. Fourth-grade scores rose from the 13th to the 69th percentile in mathematics, from the 24th to the 54th percentile in writing applications, and from the 28th to the 61st percentile in reading comprehension (all percentiles are national percentiles). The third grade rose from the 22nd to the 45th percentile in mathematics, from the 22nd to 44th percentile in writing applications, and from the 18th to the 34th percentile in reading comprehension.

Yet Warrior Elementary did not possess all the attributes believed to be required for success in an American Indian/Alaska Native school (Deyhle, 1998; Fox, 2001; Hermes, 2000; Jester, 2002; Kaomea, 2005; Lipka et al., 2005; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002; McCarty, 2003; Peewewardy, 1998). As this study reveals, an assimilationist ideology and teaching practices continued to dominate school curriculum, qualified teacher retention was minimal (with a consecutive 50 percent turnover rate over three years), and a perceived divide existed between the school and local community. Given these features, this study attempts to identify the factors that contributed to the improvements in student achievement as described through the perspectives of teachers and administrators at Warrior Elementary School. In addition, this study examines the impacts of the SBR movement and NCLB on Warrior Elementary and its Navajo student population.

### **Warrior Elementary in Social-Historical Context**

To understand contemporary issues in American Indian/Alaska Native education one needs to understand its historical context, philosophies, and prevailing ideologies. One compelling study by Adams (1995) focuses on the historical origins of Native schooling and its effect on American Indian communities. According to Adams (1998, 1995), one theme permeates every educational

initiative forwarded by the American government: civilizing the “savage” Indian. As the U.S. moved from war to assimilation efforts in 1871, “Congress officially confirmed the altered status of Indians: they were now deemed to be wards of the government, a colonized people” (Adams, 1995, p. 7). To many, the assimilation stance was a humanitarian platform; the only other option for the “Indian problem” was extermination (Adams, 1995, pp. 9-15). Thus, schooling was chosen over war in an effort to conquer the Indian spirit, with Native children the primary targets. In the words of William Jones, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, “To educate the Indian in the ways of civilized life,... is to preserve him from extinction, not as an Indian, but as a human being” (cited in Adams, 1995, p. 21).

Methods for assimilative education were numerous: immersing children in “civilized” society, removing tribal influences of culture and language, and a strong reliance on English instruction and mastery. Forced acculturation and social conditioning were used as well. Students were given European names, long hair was cut for males and “properly” maintained for females, and Indigenous clothing was exchanged for military attire. Western etiquette and mores, along with religious indoctrination, were taught along with strict regimentation and citizenship training. These factors, entwined with the slow integration into the dominant society, would show Native pupils the social evolutionary dominance of White society over Native traditions. Thus, the paradigms of social Darwinism and paternalism guided legislation, education ideologies, and assimilative techniques (Adams, 1995; Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

“Civilizing the savage” became the new humanitarian battle cry and a new weapon was used in the war against American Indians: the classroom. Removing children from their native communities, stripping away the external trappings of their tribal identity, and initiating them into the routine and discipline of institutional life were just a beginning. The battle for children’s hearts, minds, and souls could not be won simply with barber shears and marching drills. If Indians were to be prepared for citizenship, if they were to become economically self-sufficient, and if they were to adopt the values and sentiments of American civilization, then they must be instructed to achieve these ends. For this reason, while new recruits were adjusting to life in the total institution, they were also being introduced to the world of the classroom, and with it, the curriculum of the white man’s civilization. (Adams, 1995, p. 136)

The classroom therefore provided the space for “forced or permissive acculturation” (Adams, 1995, p. 212; Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Despite student resistance to these alien and culturally intrusive structures, one objective was clear: “[T]he white man had concluded that the only way to save Indians was to destroy them, that the last great Indian war should be waged against the children. They were coming for the children” (Adams, 1995, p. 337).

## **American Indian/Alaska Native Education and the Contemporary Education Reform Movement**

Legislation and policy over the next 80 years has aimed at enhancing educational and tribal sovereignty (e.g., the Meriam Report [Meriam et al., 1928], the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Indian Education Act of 1972, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988; see Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002, 2006 for in-depth analysis). However, educational self-determination continues to confront assimilative techniques and goals. Timothy Jester (2002) identified contemporary assimilation techniques implemented through SBR in the pseudonymous Tikishla School District. These reforms had numerous implications for Alaska Native students. The Tikishla School District is an urban district with a diverse student population consisting of Whites, Asian Americans, and Alaska Natives. In 1990, the district underwent state-adopted reforms in content and performance standards, and benchmark exams in grades 3, 6, and 8; high-stakes graduation exit exams and a school ranking system for all Alaska public schools began in 2004 (Jester, 2002). Due to low standardized test scores and reading levels, the district was placed under new leadership in 1995 with a new superintendent who initiated a districtwide SBR agenda in 1997 (Jester, 2002).

The reforms appeared successful. In 1995, the district was at the 36th percentile in national standardized test scores. By 1999, the district was at the 74th percentile in national standardized test scores, resulting in an award by the Alaska Department of Education for innovative education in 2001 and an additional award of \$5 million by a private foundation to disseminate their reforms to other Alaska school districts (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2004; Jester, 2002). However, despite the apparent success, the celebrations surrounding student achievement were found to be premature when, upon further scrutiny, it was discovered Alaska Native students were not meeting the graduation exit requirements after completing the program.

In addition to the problems of [Alaska Native] students' failure within the district's standards-based system, the district was concerned that these students would not pass Alaska's high-stakes exams and consequently fail to graduate according to the State's criteria.... In sum, beneath the Tikishla School District's successful reputation flowed a discourse of concerns related to students' academic failure in the district's high-stakes testing environment. This failure placed the students at risk of not graduating and it threatened the validity of the district's standards-based system and successful image. (Jester, 2002, p. 9)

Jester found that in response to the reform measures, teachers and administrators created an "unhealthy Native" construct — a reactionary, inherently prejudiced dialogue — to explain the academic failure of Alaska Native students in a district recognized for its academic success. The "unhealthy Native" discourse included assumptions that all Alaska Native students were

entrenched in alcoholism, family/emotional abuse, poverty, low self-esteem, and other factors contributing to academic failure (Jester, 2002).

Jester therefore concluded that Adam's (1988) "civilization-savagism paradigm" had been recast by the SBR movement in the Tikishla School District, as Western Eurocentric pedagogy continued to dominate Alaska Native education and discourses were created to explain and justify academic failure of Alaska Native students (Jester, 2002). He also determined that schools are "a site of struggle" for Alaska Native students, as culturally relevant pedagogy is continuously absent in the district's standards-based approach and boarding schools supplement the reform by teaching "nonacademic areas of career, personal, and social development" (Jester, 2002, p. 13).

Jester is not alone in defining contemporary schools as "sites of struggle" for American Indian/Alaskan Native students. Donna Deyhle (1998) argues that American Indian students consciously use academic failure in school as a means to resist assimilation into the dominant society, specifically when culturally relevant pedagogy is absent in the curriculum. Deyhle further contends that failure and resistance silently oppose assimilative curriculum used in schools and surrounding popular culture, a finding echoed by John Ogbu (1995) and A.L. Davidson (1996). Deyhle concludes that Navajo youths' fight against racial politics, through resisting assimilation, "has been ignored and their visible presence has been suppressed by those around them" (1998, p. 16).

American Indian/Alaska Native schools are sites of struggle in additional ways. Lomawaima and McCarty (2002, 2006) address the issue of government encroachment on tribal and educational sovereignty through the SBR movement, high-stakes testing, and the elimination of federal funding for American Indian/Alaska Native school initiatives. Citing federal testimony by Native educators, the authors argue that a "monumental hoax" has transpired in American/Alaska Native Indian education, consisting of supportive language by governmental agencies for tribal sovereignty while the federal government simultaneously "constrained, even throttled, local opportunity" to build Indigenous language and culture programs through inadequate or eliminated federal funding (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002, pp. 292-293). Thus, Lomawaima and McCarty argue the national push for standards-based education and high-stakes testing "standardizes inequality and ensures that existing race- and class-based hierarchies are legitimized and reproduced" (2002, p. 298).

Complementing Lomawaima and McCarty's findings, Linda McNeil (2000, p. 730) identifies a unique "non-curriculum" emerging in low socioeconomic, minority schools pressured to increase scores on high-stakes tests. This "noncurriculum" solely focuses on test-taking skills and therefore minimizes quality curriculum and cultural relevancy. McNeil argues that intense preparation for standardized tests contributes to the achievement gap, regardless of increased test scores. This occurs as minority populations abandon school, are taught only test-taking skills, or are denied the quality education and curriculum taught in higher socio-economic schools. In short, preparing students for high-stakes tests

does not make schools more equitable nor close the achievement gap. It does, however, deepen discrimination and inequality in public schools. Reyhner and Eder (2004) concur, echoing McNeil's findings when stating, "Perhaps the greatest danger facing Indian education at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the push for outcomes assessment, state and national standards, and the associated increased use of high stakes testing in all facets of education" (p. 11). Yet these practices — specifically high-stakes assessments as indicators of accountability — are central to NCLB.

#### The Mission of NCLB for American Indians and Alaska Natives

With the emergence of research citing problems associated with contemporary educational policy, how does NCLB affect the direction of American Indian/Alaska Native education? First, it is important to evaluate the mission of NCLB for American Indian/Alaska Native students:

The mission of the Office of Indian Education [under NCLB] is to support the efforts of local educational agencies, Indian tribes and organizations, postsecondary institutions, and other entities to meet the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives so that these students can achieve to the same challenging state standards as all students. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007)

Of consequence, few studies have explored the effects of NCLB on American Indian/Alaska Native students to see if and how the mission is being accomplished. *The Preliminary Report on No Child Left Behind in Indian Country* (Beaulieu et al., 2005), conducted by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), has introduced discussion on the effects of NCLB on American Indian education. Meetings were held across the country to hear tribal testimony. Despite tribal differences, the preliminary report voiced common themes, including intense focus on preparing students for standardized tests, the use of traditional Eurocentric pedagogies, removal of American Indian language and culture in schools, and greater federal and state control in tribal jurisdictions.

Witnesses agree that holding schools and school districts accountable for results is a positive aspect of No Child Left Behind. Some, noting the historic failure of schools, find this emphasis a welcomed change. These same witnesses however believe that the statute despite its title has not accomplished that result for a number of reasons and may in fact, contrary to its claim, leave Native children behind. (Beaulieu et al., 2005, pp. 5-6)

A review of literature describing the assimilative history of American Indian history and the implications of the SBR movement in American Indian/Alaska Native schools suggests the importance of culturally relevant curriculum and educational sovereignty to encourage academic gains (see also Demmert et al., 2006; McCardle and Demmert, 2006). This brings us back to a deeper examination of these issues in one Navajo elementary school. What factors contributed to the dramatic rise in test scores at Warrior Elementary? What other factors may have influenced these gains given little inclusion of culturally relevant

pedagogy? What impacts did NCLB have on Warrior Elementary, its teachers, and its students? And finally, what are the perspectives of the school staff and to what do they attribute this growth?

### **Methodology**

This study seeks to identify factors contributing to the academic growth, as measured by standardized tests, of students at Warrior Elementary as illuminated by the perspectives of the school's administrator and teachers. This study is a phenomenologically oriented case study (Creswell, 1998) with the dual goals of examining the meaning of academic growth as identified by the school administration and staff and the actual initiatives that contributed to improved school performance.

### Background

I was a teacher at Warrior Elementary School from 2001 to 2004 and capitalized on my role as a former teacher, American Indian advocate, and supporter of Warrior Elementary to gain access to teachers and school statistics. These roles had both positive and negative consequences during interviews. Positive consequences include the preexistence of interpersonal relationships with staff members, which contributed to a willingness and comfort in engaging in the interview process. On the other hand, some staff members knew of my personal biases and may have withheld perspectives reminiscent of Jester's "unhealthy Native" discourse, which blame Navajo culture for previous academic failure and which were used regularly and without reserve in teacher lounges and gatherings.

It is important to acknowledge my own stance as a former teacher and advocate for American Indian education at Warrior Elementary School. My ideology is influenced by tribal critical race theory (Brayboy, 2006) and Grande's "Red Pedagogy" (2000, 2004), which seeks moral and political commitment to American Indian peoples in their struggle to obtain economic, political, cultural, and educational sovereignty. I am committed to facilitating students' academic gains by incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy and promoting Navajo pride and sovereignty in my classroom. To some extent, these labels and influences predisposed my interpretation of the data.

### Setting

Warrior Elementary School is located in a rural town in the western Navajo reservation in the state of New Mexico. The town itself is tucked between mesas and thus geographically isolated. During the 2003-2004 school year, 359 students were enrolled in the K-5 school, 94 percent of whom were Navajo and 6 percent of whom were White. Fifty percent of the school's population were classified as English language learners (ELLs). Seventy six percent of the students were entitled to free lunch, 13 percent were eligible for reduced lunch, and 11 percent paid full lunch prices.

### Participants

Of 18 staff members employed at the school during the 2003-2004 school year, 14 participated in the study. At least one teacher from each grade level was interviewed in addition to the majority of third-grade teachers (standardized test scores were based on third and fourth grade). At the time of the interviews, one third-grade teacher no longer remained at the school and I was unable to locate his new position. Of the two fourth-grade teachers, one did not participate in the interview. For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, all participants, including the administrator, are identified as "teachers." Although identifying participant information such as ethnicity, position, years of experience, etc., would strengthen the study and give greater voice, it is equally important to respect the wishes of participants and protect their anonymity.

Of consequence, all participants lived in the community but in starkly different settings. Non-Native teachers lived in "teacherages," a government housing compound provided by the school district. The teacherage compound was gated and separated from the community with barbed-wire fencing. No American Indians lived in the teacherage compound. American Indian teachers and staff employed at Warrior Elementary lived on or off the reservation.

### Materials

Data collection took the form of a written questionnaire, which participants responded to during tape-recorded interviews. The interview questions were as follows:

1. In your opinion, in what academic condition was Warrior Elementary three years ago?
2. What aspects of the school do you think contributed to the overall increase in standardized test scores for the 2003-2004 school year?
3. How do you feel about the academic state of Warrior Elementary now?
4. In your opinion, does including aspects of Navajo culture in school curriculum support or inhibit academic success? Yes/No? Why?

### Procedure

After arriving at Warrior Elementary and collecting the school's demographic information and test scores, I sat in the school's teacher lounge and asked all teachers who had taught at the school during the 2003-2004 school year if they would be willing to participate in an interview. After creating an interview schedule of those willing to participate, I explained my research and interviewed teachers in their classrooms to promote confidentiality and anonymity. After participants signed consent forms, I allowed interviewees to read the interview questions to allow time for thought. During the interview process, I audio-taped responses and took notes. After the interview, I asked each teacher to read over my notes and interpretations of responses, thus ensuring concurrence as well as additional time to elaborate on or change responses.



For those who taught during the 2003-2004 school year but were no longer part of the Warrior Elementary staff, I called each teacher, explained my research, received oral consent, and proceeded to read the questions aloud to interviewees. After addressing any questions or concerns regarding the questions, I switched the telephone onto speaker mode for the formal interview, thus allowing me to record responses as well as to take notes on patterns or emerging themes. After the telephone interview process, I again read my notes to each teacher to ensure concurrence as well as to provide additional time for thought, changes, or elaboration.

### Data Analysis

The manageable sample size made it possible to transcribe interviews, code responses, and complete data analysis by hand. After distinguishing individual participants' points expressed in the transcribed interviews, points were summed. Using sums and percentiles, the themes of questions were identified. The data were then used to identify overarching themes. Beforehand, it is important to note a dominant association in teacher discourses between "the state" and NCLB. State pressures were due to NCLB as New Mexico accepted federal funding in compliance with the NCLB Act.

## **Findings**

### Question One: Lack of Discipline, Inadequate Leadership, Absence of Community Involvement

In response to the first question concerning the academic condition at Warrior Elementary three years ago, teachers consistently expressed feelings of inadequate leadership from the former administration and classroom discipline problems. One teacher stated, "There were no consequences for discipline. The teachers felt as if the children ran the school...there was no accountability or consequences for anything." Another teacher noted, "The school was in complete chaos. Our leadership had very little knowledge about academics; therefore very little academics went on. Morale was very low and teachers weren't teaching academics well at all." As evidence of the lack of administrative control at the school, six teachers recalled incidents in which candy had been distributed to students after disciplinary referral, undermining teachers' classroom control. "We did not have a strong leader. He wanted to be everybody's friend. He'd dig in his candy box when there was a disciplinary concern in the classroom." In addition to inadequate disciplinary procedures, teachers described a state of disorganization, as evidenced by repeated distractions during instructional time, teachers frequently being pulled from classrooms, and a lack of collaboration between grade levels.

The second theme emerging from teacher responses revolved around lack of community support. Teachers felt unsupported by students' families, a factor they said increased the difficulty of making significant academic gains. One teacher went so far as to portray this phenomenon as representative of Navajo educational values in general, stating:

There was no parental support for the education of their children...mostly due to the socioeconomic status of the region and the values they have. I don't want this to be taken as a discriminatory comment because it's not; there's a high rate of alcoholism and diabetes because [of] all of the food they ate and the drinking they do. That's what people of this socioeconomic status have as their values.

Another teacher believed it was not only community values inhibiting parental involvement, but rather racial tensions between teachers and community members.

There was a lot of discrimination amongst the locals against the teachers. They didn't want us there; they still don't want us there. They do not want White people teaching at their schools. They want the goods the White people make but they don't want us on the reservation. They really don't want us there. The parents didn't care [about education] because a lot of them were alcoholics and some of them were into drugs and I knew that, and I think that played into not wanting to be taught by White people. Some of them just don't care...

Not all teachers agreed with this perspective, but rather felt a continued colonial approach was still prevalent in the school curriculum and the community would not support such pedagogies. One teacher noted,

This school, because of its location, has to contend, in a very real way, with all the tangible effects of post-colonialism. That includes a warped relationship with teachers and the students being taught, and a warped relationship with teachers and the community.... We need to look at whether we are essentially an assimilative exercise or if we're an exercise which can be potentially liberating and we need to step back to admit, in the history of government-funded public education, that it has not been liberating...

#### Question Two: New Leadership, Test Preparation, Fear of Termination, and Allegations of Fraud

In response to question two, "What aspects of the school do you think contributed to the overall increase in standardized test scores for the 2003-2004 school year?," teacher comments centered on factors relating to administrative leadership following the hiring of a new principal. These factors included consistent discipline, teacher and student accountability, school organization, grade-level collaboration, and high expectations for students. One teacher avowed,

There were new expectations for teachers. You had to turn in lesson plans stating the standards and objectives, show and post objectives in the classrooms and time-on-task was absolute. Also, there were consequences for both teachers and students. She is consistent on the way she does discipline, and it's that way for everybody. She works well with the teachers [and] if you have a problem she's there.

Another teacher declared, "Teachers were forced to commit to teaching academics, discipline problems have decreased, and teachers are on-task and students are learning."

A second theme, with general agreement amongst all teachers, concerned the effects of intense preparation for standardized tests in an attempt to meet

NCLB requirements. One teacher stated, "We started doing an intense study group to work on specific things, especially with a group of kids that, from their test scores in previous years, were close but needed a boost in test preparation." Another teacher added, "There was an after-school program to help [the students] if they were low, until the state tests, and that helped them a lot." Yet some teachers stated that test preparation or "teaching to the test" infiltrated classroom instruction at all levels and inhibited appropriate instruction, as evidenced by one teacher's comments: "I really think the scores went up because we were told to teach the test, even in kindergarten. I was literally told to teach the test."

Teachers also believed that fear of job termination resulting from state pressures contributed to increased test scores. "Teachers worked harder. They were afraid of losing their jobs. They were afraid of getting fired." Other factors cited by teachers were decreased absenteeism, an instructional support teacher (a staff member dedicated to teacher and curriculum improvement), and better curriculum.

However, two staff members cited "dishonesty" as the reason for increased test scores. Although one of the staff members mentioned dishonesty in passing but could offer no direct evidence, the other reported direct observation of dishonesty in one third-grade classroom:

I know there were some dishonest things going on, as far as some teachers giving the kids answers on the test or hinting that the answer they had was incorrect. And those were the state tests! And that did occur. I know it's against the law and it's not supposed to happen but it did.

### Question Three: Hope and Pessimism, Release from State Pressures

For the third question, "How do you feel about Warrior Elementary's current academic state?," responses revealed two major themes. First, teachers had positive feelings about the current administration and the academic growth achieved during the 2003-2004 school year. Some also felt that standardized test scores would continue to improve. As one teacher stated,

I think we can get them into the 75 percent to 80th percentile level. I don't think we should ever put a label on our children that because they're on the reservation they're never going to be able to do any better than a certain level. I believe in setting the standard high and letting them reach that level.

Yet another teacher hoped the success would initiate the creation of culturally relevant pedagogy, therefore bringing sustainability to academic gains:

I think it's going to be interesting to see where the school takes this momentum because it could take it in a very proactive direction or a very reactive direction. In some ways, I'm not sure if we know what went right last year. But now is the time we may have the luxury of thinking beyond the test as well. We have the resources in the community to look at how to build a school rooted in the Navajo philosophy of education. We need to think about how to make these scores sustainable...

On the other hand, a group of teachers believed standardized test scores would decrease. As one teacher stated, “We were really shocked at how well the kids did, but to try to maintain [high scores] in this particular economic area is very hard.” Another teacher supported this view, stating, “We’re astounded at how well they did, but it’s unrealistic to maintain it.” Nearly all teachers expressed relief as state and district pressure would decrease in response to test score improvement.

#### Question Four: Conflicting Views of Academic Success and Culture in School

In reference to the last question, “In your opinion, does including aspects of Navajo culture at Warrior Elementary support or inhibit academic success?,” a majority of teachers stated that cultural inclusion was fundamental to academic success despite its absence in Warrior Elementary School’s curriculum. One teacher stated,

Including culture is one of the most important things we need to do for the pure and simple fact that our children’s culture is so different than the White culture and the White culture is what we’ve been trying to shove down these kids throats for all these hundreds of years and I think it’s wrong. I feel it is the responsibility of the teachers as well as the parents and the community to keep their culture alive and well in these children so when they do go out in to the real world, they have something that is uniquely theirs...

Yet of this majority, most expressed frustration at the absence of culturally relevant curriculum or felt unable to create such curriculum. One teacher reported deficient attempts to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy into school curriculum, as evidenced by the statement, “If we don’t incorporate culture, we’re not helping the kids here and I don’t think the school is supporting [Navajo culture] at all. But they did give us some Navajo letters to put on the wall...” However, another group of teachers believed cultural inclusion was important but was not “up to us,” referring to non-Native teachers at the school.

On the other hand, some teachers felt cultural inclusion inhibited academic success, although for different reasons. One teacher believed cultural inclusion was insignificant as culture was not present on standardized tests, stating,

[Cultural inclusion] inhibits [academic success]...unless that is something that they have to learn for the test. It’s not what we’re held accountable for, we’re all trying to hang on and do exactly what they tell us to be ready for the test. If it’s not on the test then it doesn’t become real important...

A few teachers believed cultural inclusion inhibited academic success because it lowered academic expectations. As one teacher stated, “Culture should be left out of school because culture is something that should be learned at home and I am not qualified as a teacher to teach them their culture. I think it inhibits [academic success] because it lowers expectations...”

## Discussion

This study sought to identify factors contributing to academic achievement gains of students at Warrior Elementary as seen through the perspectives of the school's administrator and teachers. Question one, "In what academic condition was Warrior Elementary three years ago?," revealed feelings of anger and resentment by staff toward the former administration. The staff believed inadequate leadership undermined teacher classroom control, inhibited academic success, and lowered teacher morale. In addition, a significant number of staff felt academic success had been negatively impacted by the community, as seen in discourses associating alcoholism with Navajo values and feelings of racial tension between non-Native teachers and the Navajo community. Undoubtedly, these discourses are reminiscent of Jester's (2002) "unhealthy Native discourse," as Navajo culture, alcoholism, drug abuse, and students' socioeconomic status were specified as reasons for academic failure. In contrast, a minority of teachers believed that colonial pedagogies still practiced in classrooms explained the divide between the school and the surrounding community, therefore continuing the historical alienation of the Navajo community from school involvement and development.

Question two, "What aspects of the school do you think contributed to the overall increase in standardized test scores for the 2003-2004 school year?," exposed numerous factors interviewees attributed to increased test scores. First and foremost was the new school administration. Teachers perceived that the new administration created teacher accountability, enforced test preparation in both classrooms and small-group settings, promoted high expectations for students academically and behaviorally, and oversaw the alignment of curriculum with focus on state content standards. Second, teachers also attributed increased test scores to pressures from state agencies acting under NCLB. The threats of school closure and staff firing were frequently mentioned. Teachers also felt pressures reduced or eliminated possibilities for the creation of Nativist/constructivist paradigms for learning, as evidenced by their comments about increased test preparation and minimization of Navajo culture.

Additionally, dishonesty amongst teachers in test facilitation may have been a significant factor in increased test scores. The possibility of dishonesty is undeniable in the context of burdening pressures felt among staff; yet this was purportedly witnessed in only one of the third-grade classrooms and there were no large discrepancies between individual classroom scores in the third and fourth grades. The other mention of dishonesty was not supported by evidence. Nevertheless, dishonesty must remain a significant factor. Potentially, Deyhle's (1998) contention that American Indian failure in American public schools is a result of resistance to assimilation was perpetuated at Warrior Elementary by the visible suppression of actual standardized test scores.

Responses to question three, "How do you feel about the academic state of Warrior Elementary now?," were polarized. Some teachers advocated higher

expectations for students and were optimistic about new pedagogical directions the school could undergo. Yet a majority of teachers felt the increase in scores was not sustainable. Reasons attributed to or implied about non-sustainability were the surrounding community's socioeconomic status and values, again reminiscent of Jester's (2002) "unhealthy Native" discourse.

Findings from question four, "Does including aspects of Navajo culture in school curriculum support or inhibit academic success?," showed an overwhelming majority view that cultural inclusion is fundamental to academic success. Many among this majority expressed frustration about the deficient attempts to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy into school curriculum. Ignorance of Navajo culture among non-Navajo teachers and, more significantly, time constraints imposed by content coverage for test preparation, were cited as reasons for this. In contrast to the view that there were insufficient attempts to include culture in school curriculum, some teachers believed cultural inclusion inhibited academic success, as Navajo culture and "values" contributed to academic failure.

The current reforms implemented in Warrior Elementary may explain the increase in standardized test scores. However, allegations of fraud suggest that dishonesty may also be a factor explaining the turnaround in Warrior Elementary's scores. There are further implications of SBR and NCLB for Warrior Elementary. Because they ignored culturally relevant pedagogy, these reforms created a chasm between students and teachers: Teachers were required to focus on test preparation, not Nativist/constructivist pedagogies promoting American Indian identity and culture, or face job termination and potential school closure.

Thus, NCLB became a façade for assimilation. The historic assimilative tools identified by Adams (1995) had changed little: Academic content was immersed in the mores and ways of "civilized" society, tribal influences and languages were removed, and English instruction and mastery dominated classrooms. Teachers' comments show that Western Eurocentric pedagogy continued to dominate curriculum, promote hegemony, and alienate the surrounding community. Thus, Warrior Elementary reveals itself as a "site of struggle," as a minority of teachers fought for a culturally inclusive school in the midst of White prejudice, high-stakes testing, and the threat of school closure.

At Warrior Elementary, a new era emerged under pressures from state agencies acting under the umbrella of NCLB: achieving standardization. The new humanitarian battle cry was not "civilizing the savage," but increasing standardized test scores to avoid federal and state penalties and to ostensibly help American Indian students "achieve to the same challenging state standards as all students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Educational and tribal sovereignty, as well as culturally relevant curriculum, were seen as inhibitors to NCLB's goal: assimilation through standardization. Thus, the "monumental hoax" (Lomawaima and McCarty, 2002) of governmental support for tribal sovereignty in education continues. Despite NCLB's progressive language on promoting and

supporting the educational needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives, Warrior Elementary experienced cultural marginalization in its attempts to increase standardized test scores. State agencies acting under NCLB eliminated Navajo language programs and minimized or eliminated the possibility for the development of culturally relevant curriculum. Federal assimilative efforts therefore remain, cloaked in the language of NCLB, standardized curriculum, and the association between academic achievement and test scores.

There is nevertheless promise at Warrior Elementary, as represented by the growing minority of teachers historically and currently promoting culturally relevant education. To sustain academic gains at Warrior Elementary, and, more importantly, to promote American Indian/Alaska Native sovereignty in education, I propose five specific and immediate new reforms. First, culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum should be implemented schoolwide, including the reinstatement of Navajo language programs, with the expectations of academic rigor and success (Lipka, 2005; McCarty, 2003). Second, the school and school district should provide training designed to help teachers understand and critique the socio-historical context of American Indian/Alaska Native education, the dangers of post-colonial pedagogies, including the failure-as-resistance model (Deyhle, 1998), and racist discourses used to justify academic failure of American Indian/Alaska Native students. American Indian teachers employed by the district and at Warrior Elementary should be utilized and empowered in this process. Third, Warrior Elementary should help empower the local community to become active in school issues and the creation of culturally relevant curriculum. For example, a cooperative between the school and the local chapter (the local branch of tribal government) could be established to help create culturally relevant curriculum, establish a parent-teacher organization, or simply to generate dialogue between parents and the school. Fourth, American Indian teachers at the school should be given greater decision making powers, despite their smaller numbers. Community members teaching at the school should be placed in positions of greater authority regarding issues of curriculum, hiring, funding allocation, and school direction. Lastly, community members can be empowered to fill teacher and administrative positions by creating teacher preparation programs aimed at recruiting American Indians for American Indian schools, thereby minimizing teacher turnover, contributing to sustainable academic success and culturally relevant pedagogy, and promoting tribal sovereignty.

The experience of Warrior Elementary is distinctive, yet research indicates that its experience is widely shared among schools serving American Indian and Alaska Native students. Thus, the reforms proposed here have applicability beyond a single school and community. Adapted to local needs and conditions, these reforms have the potential to challenge and transform historical relations of domination and subordination, thereby ensuring that Native children, parents, and communities are not “left behind.”

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of anonymity, all names are pseudonyms. The name “Warrior Elementary” was chosen to represent the heroic teachers and students fighting for a culturally inclusive school and educational sovereignty.

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