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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE FACTORS RELATED TO THE ACADEMIC  
SUCCESS OF AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

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by

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### Objectives and Theoretical Framework

A qualitative study using grounded theory investigated factors contributing to academic success and failure of American Indian children in Waubun-Ogema-White Earth (WOWE) school district in west central Minnesota. WOWE is situated in an agricultural district which includes tribal lands. School enrollment is 70% American Indian and 30% Caucasian, with 65% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Among students self-identifying as American Indian, several different degrees of Indian identification are recognized based on skin color and tribal enrollment status. The achievement gap between American Indian and white students ranges between 20% and 40% during the high school years.

The study seeks to identify school and community factors that contribute to or inhibit academic success of American Indian students in WOWE, and to recommend curriculum and programming that would address their needs. While there are researchers such as Chinn (2002), Reyhner (1993), Hornette (1990), Stago (1998), and Strang, von Glatz, and Cahape Hammer (2002) who attribute the lack of academic achievement on the part of minorities to cultural incongruity and factors associated with an educational structure, culture, and curriculum that are incongruous with American Indian cultural factors and belief patterns, there are other researchers, including Ledlow (1992) who view the argument of cultural incongruity as a gross oversimplification of what ails American Indian achievement in schools. Within this cultural and ethnic context, this

study at WOVE sought answers as to what factors affect American Indian achievement, to what degree these factors affect achievement, and a discovery of corresponding interventions to improve academic achievement among American Indian children at WOVE.

### Methodology and Data Sources

To obtain a thick description of perceived factors that impact student achievement among American Indian children at WOVE, focus groups were used to gather qualitative data. Five homogenous groups were assembled: one comprised of students who had not passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests; one consisting of students who had passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests; one consisting of parents or caregivers of the students who had not passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests, one comprised of parents or caregivers of students who had passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests; and one that involved teachers and administrators. The groups varied in size from five to nine participants.

The focus group sessions were taped in order to allow verbatim transcriptions, and the researcher coded the qualitative data into categories with properties after the tapes were transcribed. The researcher followed established procedures in regard to open, axial, and selective coding, as originally established by Glaser and Strauss (1999). Through comparisons of corroborated or differentiated data from within and among the groups, the researcher used a form of triangulation, which both Gall, Borg, & Gall (2003) and Yin (1994) cite as critical in the validation of qualitative data.

Through the processes of coding and triangulation, the researcher developed a theory and subsequent recommendations for school reform measures capable of

improving academic achievement for not only American Indian children, but all children who attend school at WOVE.

The data were very telling in that parents and students generally agreed on factors that impact student achievement among the American Indian population, but teachers were either silent on those factors or identified other factors that influenced achievement. This dichotomy is significant in that the impact of teachers on student learning is considerable, and the finding that teachers perceive their roles and educational impact on children in a different light than do parents and students is problematic in terms of student achievement.

In addition to focus group comparisons, quantitative Minnesota Department of Education attitudinal survey data were used to validate the dissertation study findings through additional triangulation. The quantitative data corroborated qualitative data in terms of concern over teacher quality and effectiveness, student behavior, and societal influences.

#### Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

After multiple reviews of the pilot project and the five transcriptions related to this study, the researcher established nine categories. The established categories through open coding are as follows: 1) standards; 2) role modeling and support systems; 3) societal influences; 4) teacher quality and effectiveness; 5) relevancy of education; 6) ethnicity; 7) communication and recognition; 8) involvement; and 9) school environment. Although the focus of this study was American Indian children, the data made it clear that

properties of these categories were generally applicable to all children, whether Caucasian or American Indian.

While all of the categories and their respective properties yielded helpful information in terms of American Indian student achievement at WOVE, several noteworthy themes emerged. For example, the categories of standards, teacher quality and effectiveness, ethnicity, and communication and recognition indicate that parents and students were united in noting that teachers impact the educational experience in both positive and negative ways. Pavel (1999) concurred by noting that the quality of the students' educational experiences is determined, in large part by the learning environment that is created by educators. Parents took this concept a step further by indicating that teachers even have the ability to offset the negative effects of failed parenting and societal issues such as drug and alcohol use and abuse. To the contrary, however, it was clear that teachers do not view their capacity and impact in the same light as do parents and students. This finding is concerning because increases in student achievement are unlikely if teachers, parents, and students fail to view teaching parameters within the same vein. As one parent noted, teachers don't want to get involved in the lives of students because it is "icky."

It was evident that although parents and students recognize their own shortcomings in fulfilling educational obligations, the expectation of parents and students is that the bulk of responsibility for academic achievement should rest with teachers. Since teachers do not overtly recognize this expanded role as educators, the odds of increased academic achievement diminish. For example, parents and students devalue

the idea of homework as they want homework completed under the guidance of a teacher in class, not at home. The result is incomplete homework assignments. Teachers who fail to accommodate this belief are frustrated by a lack of homework completion, and student achievement decreases as teachers assign low grades and move to new subjects without ensuring student understanding of concepts.

Another finding of the study involved ethnicity. In terms of ethnicity, there was unanimous agreement that no overt connection exists between one's self-identified status as American Indian and academic achievement. In other words, there is no direct connection between being American Indian and succeeding in school. This finding would run contrary to those researchers who argue that cultural incongruity is the critical factor in terms of student achievement among minority children. The study did reveal, however, that American Indian children who have fewer physical traits such as darker skin, or who are descendants rather than enrolled members, feel that they are treated as second-class American Indians by those who possess more typically American Indian traits or who are enrolled members of the White Earth Tribe. Moreover, darker skinned American Indians are viewed as more inclined to misbehave in terms of frequency and severity. All five focus groups discussed the concept of more or less American Indian status, and the student and teacher focus groups indicated students who possess more physical American Indian traits are more resistant, as reflected in students' use of the term "sav [savage] out" for "act out." All of the groups cited misbehavior as not only an educational detriment to those who misbehave, but for compliant students who witness the misbehavior as well.

In the final analysis, the researcher concluded that the standards category should serve as the core category, and although all nine categories and their respective properties were important, the remaining eight categories all tied to the standards category in some way. For purposes of this study, standards were treated as synonymous with expectations (i.e. classroom academic and behavioral standards).

Although all five focus groups concurred that lowered standards decreased student achievement, the teachers did not identify themselves as culpable in regard to decreased behavioral and academic expectations. The other four groups, however, discussed teaching methodology and they identified decreased standards by teachers as a contributing factor to decreased student achievement.

The researcher theorizes that the fundamental reason for a lack of achievement on the part of American Indian students at WOVE is lowered standards on the part of students, parents, teachers, administration, and society. In other words, American Indian children at WOVE underachieve because those with a vested interest in their education have simply lowered standards to a point that underachievement is more likely than not.

The theory of lower standards is supported by gathered data that were categorized. The bottom line is that among other considerations, lowered expectations lead to decreased academic performance as tolerance of misbehavior, an absence of classroom decorum, and decreased academic rigor are accepted and in some cases promoted through poor role modeling and a compromised learning environment. It would be nothing short of erroneous to suggest that American Indian children do not succeed simply because they are American Indian.

As a result of this theory, the researcher made numerous recommendations relating to each respective category. Throughout the recommendations, the common thread involved the necessity of raising behavioral, academic, and teaching standards at WOVE. The local school board adopted these recommendations as a means to improve academic achievement for not only American Indian children, but for all children at WOVE.

### Importance of the Study

This research is significant at all levels. In terms of local impact, this study provides a rich and thick description of perceived factors affecting achievement of American Indian children at WOVE. Since approximately two-thirds of WOVE's children self-identify as American Indian, the implications of this study have the potential to impact a substantial number of students, as the local school board has adopted the researcher's recommendations as part of a school reform effort. In addition this study provides impetus for other studies at the local level including:

1. A future study should try to investigate intra-group differences in achievement and disciplinary referrals based on tribal enrollment status and perceived skin color. Faculty, parents, and the students themselves should be consulted as to how to adapt academic programming to minimize the educational effects of these differences.
2. A future study should use attitudinal survey instruments regarding behavior and achievement. These surveys should be given to students, staff, and parents. An initial survey should be given to establish baseline data. Future surveys should be compared to the baseline data in order to measure changes in perceptions.



3. Studies should be designed and conducted in order to gauge whether improvements occur in behavior or academic achievement as the result of the dissertation study recommendations that were implemented.

At the state or national level, other school districts with similar demographic considerations should feel comfortable in using this dissertation study as a template. If school districts want to understand achievement disparities, they need to corroborate available quantitative data with qualitative data to explain better the factors that affect student achievement.

The findings of this study both concur with and depart from available literature on the topic of academic achievement among American Indian children. For example, Hornette (1990) and Reyhner (1993) suggest that cultural incongruity is responsible for the lack of academic achievement among American Indian students. In other words, American Indian children fail to succeed in school because they are taught a White curriculum by White teachers. The data from this study disagree with cultural incongruity as a significant factor influencing the academic success of American Indian children at WOVE. However, the data tend to agree with Ledlow (1992) who views cultural incongruity as an oversimplification of a topic fraught with issues such as poverty and health care, and reservations exacerbate these problems. In addition, data from this study would agree with Chinn (2002, ¶ 14) who suggests that teachers need to be trained in “effective communication techniques with parents and students from diverse backgrounds and to prepare teachers to be able to understand interracial and interethnic

issues.” These and other literature comparisons to this study’s findings are worthy of further review and discussion.

This dissertation study was necessary in order for WOWE to achieve a greater understanding of the factors that relate to both achievement and underachievement of American Indian students. This type of study, when paired with quantitative data, has enormous programming, curriculum, and teacher training implications for districts with minority students.

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