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# No Reservations: Teachers Who Stay

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**No Reservations: Teachers Who Stay**

**By**

**Elizabeth Dawn Smith**

M.S., University of Wyoming, 2013

**Plan B Project**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters in Science in Natural Science/Mathematics  
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Masters Committee:

Professor Ana Houseal, Chair  
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## **Abstract**

Despite a vast body of research on why teachers choose to leave the education profession, less is known about why teachers choose to stay, and even less is known about the perspective of veteran non-Native teachers teaching in American Indian country. This study captures some of their perspective and reasons for longevity at reservation schools through five qualitative interviews with non-Native teachers averaging fifteen years experience in reservation classrooms. An analysis of these interviews yield the participants own explanations arranged into three common factors that play a part in why they choose to stay: (a) a feeling of acceptance from the school and reservation communities; (b) a sense of appreciation for Native ways of being, knowing, and living; (c) the belief that teachers with their skills, knowledge, and views on social justice are needed more in Indian country. Their stories add a nuance to our understanding of why non-Native teachers choose to stay committed to their students and schools despite the challenges of teaching a culturally diverse and impoverished population. Recommendations for school leaders in Indian country for retaining teachers include a stronger push to provide professional development for attaining knowledge and skills to be successful and feel purposeful in teaching Native populations. This study is part of a growing body of research on why teachers stay in education and will contribute to further research on similar topics.

*Dedication*

*To my supportive family who believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself, Thank you all for encouraging me to follow my dreams, not letting me give up, and for your constant love and support.*

*To Rory, thank you for not complaining about what I didn't do, thank you for entertaining our boys, cleaning the house, making dinner, and otherwise allowing me to be locked in the basement office for weeks without interruption.*

*To Tara and Spike, without you to relieve me of parenting duties this would have been impossible. Thank you for your encouragement.*

*To my children, Sonny and Ryne, thank you for enjoying your father and grandparents so much that you barely missed me, and for providing me with needed distractions at the right moments.*

*To my mother, thank you for making me strong and hopeful.*

*I love you all very much.*

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I want to thank my committee members Diana Wiig and Jay Norton for your patience with this project and flexibility in your schedule that allowed me to finish and defend on time.

I would also like to thank the Sigrid See foundation for providing monetary awards that allowed me to take this challenge on in the first place. You are making a real difference in the lives of so many. Thank you for your generosity.

Finally, my gratitude to the teachers who agreed to be participants in this study is unbounded. Your willingness to contribute time and thoughtfulness to this project made it all possible. Thank you for caring about our students and working so hard to give them as many opportunities as you can. Thank you for your involvement, you are amazing teachers and wonderful people.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Background**

Eleven brown faces looked at me with bright expectations. Six years old, dressed up in their first day finery, new school supplies smelling of hopes and dreams, freshly polished faces and hair, and best behaviors on prominent display. The excitement was palpable. As a first year teacher, I started with my smallest class ever and remember the nervousness, the anticipation, the eagerness to launch into the work awaiting me. Each year since, the feeling has been the same. New beginnings, a fresh start for all each fall. A rebirth in teachers, who so yearn to see their students' desires for themselves fulfilled, unreservedly embracing renewal. Teaching on the Wolf Creek Reservation (pseudonym), I have stayed for 12 years, committed to elevating ideas of equality and justice for my students. I endeavor to preserve and guard my enthusiasm for teaching in the face of disappointments in, and anger against an educational system that does not always make sense for kids.

Even under the best of circumstances, teaching is a demanding job. The enthusiasm and idealism that bring educators to teaching quickly dissipates for many. Teachers in all parts of the United States face challenges in education that affect their intent to remain in the profession. The inherent problems associated with working in poverty-stricken areas, outside pressures of standardized testing, unrealistic student achievement goals, and teaching in rural isolated areas can influence whether teachers stay with or leave their jobs (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

Teachers on the Reservation face these challenges too. In fact, a non-Native teacher on a Reservation will face even more challenges. These could include, but are not limited to the following: establishing and maintaining relationships in a cultural community in which they are

not an inhabitant; integrating cultural values and native language into curriculum; working toward expanding their knowledge of the Native<sup>1</sup> culture they are teaching within to ensure a sensitive approach to education of that particular population; and gaining the trust of the Native community, both within the school and within the wider community at large.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law more than ten years ago, has emphasized an awareness of student achievement and calls for educators, policy makers, and parents to focus on strategies for increasing achievement for all students in every school (NCLB, 2002). Individual states developed assessments used to track students' academic progress and the results are published publically in a school-by-school format each year in an attempt to reflect the importance of school and teacher accountability. These reports show a distinct deficit in both mathematics and reading test results for students who attend Reservation schools in this rural western state. These Reservation schools are performing below the state average. The disconnect between where students should be performing according to national standardization and the actual performance of students on the Reservation cause teachers to become disheartened and question their effectiveness, and influences public opinions about the quality of instruction occurring in Reservation school.

Reservation schools serve a predominantly Native American population. The test scores they produce can be partially explained with reasons that include poverty levels, acculturation<sup>2</sup>, nonstandard English backgrounds, and differences in testing motivation (Brescia & Fortune,

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is preferable to refer to Native people by their distinct tribal names, in order to protect the

<sup>2</sup> Acculturation is defined as a change in the cultural behavior and thinking of a person or group of people through contact with another culture or the process by which somebody absorbs the culture of a society from birth onward (Acculturation, n.d.).

1989). Despite reasons for the disparity in academic achievement as measured by state standardized tests, the fact remains that schools on the Reservation, although showing growth, are still significantly lower performing than schools that serve predominantly non-minority students in the state. To protect confidentiality the website name has been changed but this information can be accessed if requested from the author <http://edu.state.gov/Default.aspx>.

Retaining teachers in schools with high percentages of minority and poor students is more problematic than retaining teachers in more affluent schools (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003). Despite the challenges, many teachers stay in teaching and teachers on the Wolf Creek Reservation stay committed to their schools far more often than what may be the public perception.

These teachers are motivated to stay for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Intrinsic rewards include some of the following: They stay because it is a rewarding job. Teachers see the effects of what they do take seed in a young person's mind and grow into something not yet imagined. Teachers' actions reach students academically and for the benefit of the whole child. Williams (2003) notes that, "teachers are engaged in a life-changing activity, a fact that sustains them in both the good and bad times of their career" (p. 74). Besides what they do for the students, teachers are continually learning themselves. Problem solving and improving their practice creates a sense of well being and purpose in teachers' lives as they evolve into a whole person (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione, Petersen, & Rosser, 2008). Teachers know they are contributing to a student's learning, making a difference in the lives of their students, and growing as individuals; these are powerful intrinsic motivators.

In addition to intrinsic motivations, extrinsic rewards are considered important by teachers who have been in the profession for a long time (Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al.,

2008). Having a schedule that suits you, adequate working conditions, great leadership, a collegial atmosphere, opportunities for professional development and collaborative work, retirement benefits, and recognition for a job well done are extrinsic reasons that motivate teachers to stay in teaching.

Intrinsic rewards provide personal fulfillment while extrinsic rewards support the capability of teachers to actually perform their duties. It is most likely a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards providing attractiveness to teaching that keep teachers in the profession (Johnson et al, 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008).

Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers has been a concern for school districts for a long time. Since 1957 conversations about the challenges of teacher attrition, or turnover, and its cost to school districts have buzzed among the education community (Field, Jablonski, & Levy, 2006). With nearly half of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years, and 30% of those leaving within their first three years, funds are diverted to finding, employing, and preparing new teachers to replace those who leave on a regular basis (Ingersoll, 2002). Teacher turnover is costing America's schools about seven billion dollars each year (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007).

In addition to monetary costs, the cost to students' academic achievement, although hard to measure, must be considered. Teacher attrition rates have been linked to student achievement. Most often cited are the differences, including deficits, in student achievement of students who are taught by inexperienced teachers (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Another cost that high teacher attrition rates incur is the load to school districts in organizational labors to maintain consistent

procedures, practices, and buy-in for district efforts (Johnson et al., 2005). It takes time to build relationships with staff and gather energies for momentum in cooperative manners.

Teacher retention has been looked at through multiple studies focused on why teachers leave the field. These studies state the reasons most commonly given for their exits, other than personal reasons such as retirement and starting a family, are the pressures exerted by testing mandates such as the NCLB act, unrealistic workload, student discipline, lack of support from administration, lack of resources and planning time, inadequate preparation, and job dissatisfaction (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Erickson, Ruff, & Terhune, 2008; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003, Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003). What is not asked as often, and could be more important is: Why do teachers stay in the profession? What reasons do they have to continue to remain employed in a profession that can be perceived as demanding, judgmental, un-respected, overwhelming, and unappreciated? Does negating one reason why teachers leave mean that you cause more to stay; is there an inverse relationship? Why do some teachers thrive in the same setting that drives others out? What sustains teachers in the classroom? What inner sources of strength do long lived teachers employ to cope with stress and nurture personal fulfillment and professional satisfaction? What do these teachers that last, have to say about it all? Although not all these questions were answered completely, the participants in this study provided both predictable and surprising answers for what keeps them satisfied enough to continue working on the Wolf Creek Reservation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teacher attrition rates have been linked to student achievement in a variety of ways. Differences in student achievement when being taught by inexperienced teachers have been

noted. A negative effect in student achievement is found to exist in many classrooms for the first three years of a teacher's career (Boyd et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003).

It stands to reason that if a school is experiencing a higher rate of staff turnover, then they may also be experiencing a higher influx of inexperienced educators. Recruiting and retaining quality teachers, being aware of factors that influence teacher attrition, and providing new teachers with specific instruction on how best to handle the particular challenges of teaching on the Wolf Creek Reservation may help leaders decrease teacher attrition and ultimately realize school improvement efforts (Erickson et al., 2008).

### **Purpose**

This research will add to the scant body of literature that looks closely at why teachers stay in education. The intent is to increase understanding of the factors that contribute to non-Native teacher's longevity in Reservation schools as expressed by themselves. The approach used will be a qualitative study with an ethnography method. Ethnography is intended to allow someone to understand another's point of view.

### **Research Questions**

This research project has been designed to address and explore the following questions.

1. What reasons do non-Native teachers who stay employed at the Wolf Creek Reservation schools for more than five years give for their longevity?
2. What can school leaders do to maximize the retention of teachers on Wolf Creek Reservation?



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This review of research literature is intended to fulfill two purposes. The first is to build some appreciation of the factors that can potentially influence teacher decisions about whether to stay in education, transfer to a new school, or elect to leave the teaching profession altogether. These factors include intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, challenges encountered in the teaching profession, and conditions that are particular to the area and culture of this study. Secondly, an awareness of the research method of ethnography is developed.

It is important to realize the topics of teacher attrition, teacher retention, and ethnography are broad. This literature review is not intended to be comprehensive but instead is primarily designed to build a reference and background for the results and discussion of this study.

#### **Interrelatedness of Factors Influencing Teacher Attrition and Retention**

Although only partially explored in this literature review, the research logically indicates variables of teacher attrition and retention are highly interrelated (Certo & Fox, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003). Certo & Fox (2002) conducted a study in which they asked teachers questions about two topics, their personal perspectives of why they stay employed as a teacher with their district and their personal perspectives of why their colleagues are leaving or moving. Corroborating the interrelatedness of attrition and retention, their study states that, “reasons for leaving and reasons for staying often acted as inverse variables, for example, a teacher may leave because of poor administration or stay because of quality administration” (p. 9). Another



example of the interacting factors of retention and attrition would be knowing that salary is rarely the driving incentive to become a teacher, yet may become more important if other factors that influence job satisfaction are absent or lacking, such as availability of supplies or opportunities for professional development (Johnson et al., 2005).

### **Reasons Teachers Stay**

In a recent review of literature Johnson et al. (2005) note that, “retention, in and of itself, is not necessarily a positive outcome” and that what defines quality teachers and what persuades them to stay in the teaching force requires further research (p. 43). Existing research suggests that teachers make decisions about their career paths based on motivations that are both intrinsic and extrinsic. In addition to the motivations that fuel their behaviors, teachers consider the conditions, challenges, and specific situations they work under when deciding whether to leave, move, or stay.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is an internal desire to perform a particular task that may enhance or maintain a person’s self-concept. People do certain activities because it gives them pleasure, develops a particular skill, or it is the morally right thing to do (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivators for teachers can include the joy of being with students, feeling passionate about a subject matter taught, knowing you are helping children learn, feeling like you make a difference, exerting influence within your school, or getting better at the craft of teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Erickson et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2005; Lampert, 1985; Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003).

**The desire for intellectual work.** The challenge of meeting students' needs requires teachers to continually reflect on their approaches, presentations, methodologies, and curriculum. Teaching is an art; a nonstop quest for new techniques that potentially maximize or refine student learning and also the craft of teaching (Nieto, 2003; Williams, 2003).

An intrinsic motivator, the intellectual work of education, is the invisible part of being a teacher. With their minds constantly at work, teachers will tell you that they learn more than their students and they embody what they envision their students will eventually be, lifelong learners (Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Williams, 2003). The dilemmas teachers face daily in their work become fodder for their own learning (Nieto, 2003). Constructing solutions paths for these dilemmas enhances the expertise of teachers and contributes to their sense of purpose in the classroom.

Teaching is not a question of skill and knowledge alone, but a matter of how to take what one has studied and learned and fit it meaningfully into a thousand different contexts, to think about how to connect particular subject matter with specific students in concrete situations that are different from all others.... It is a grueling [and deeply satisfying] challenge. This is what it means to approach teaching as intellectual work. (Nieto, 2003, p. 87)

The uncertainty and complexity of teaching are sometimes overwhelming but it is the best classrooms where mindful efforts to improve teaching and learning are actually attempted, even at the risk of failure. Again, this kind of intellectual stimulation builds expertise, feelings of

satisfaction, and improves self-efficacy<sup>3</sup> adding to the intrinsic motivation to continue practicing teaching because one perceives it as a worthwhile venture.

**Rewards from relationships.** Teaching is enhanced by relationships. This includes relationships with students, other staff in the school community, and with oneself. These relationships are important facets in a teacher's contentment with the teaching profession (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003). The trust, respect, and caring built between people contribute to a fulfilled, spiritual, whole person and sustains motivation to stay in teaching.

**Relationships with students.** When asked, most teachers will say that the reasons they stay despite the challenges that come with teaching are the students, above all else (Certo & Fox, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003). While teachers may receive feedback from parents or administrators about their effectiveness, research suggests that the most powerful feedback that teachers receive and want are from the students themselves (Johnson et al., 2005; Williams, 2003). Captivated by the problems and potential of students, and fueled by their belief in their ability to make a difference in a student's life, teachers are motivated to stick with their profession.

**Spiritual rewards.** In a review of literature on teacher retention, Johnson, et al. (2005) states "...the psychic rewards of working with students are still critical to teachers' sense of efficacy and satisfaction..." (p. 74). It is of great importance that teachers feel they have reached

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Bandura developed the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as one's belief in one's ability to succeed. Self-efficacy affects every area of human endeavor. It strongly influences both the power an individual actually has to face certain challenges competently and choices the individual is likely to make (Bandura, 1977).

their students, inspired them to learn, led them to believe in themselves, and watch them change and grow both personally and academically (Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Williams, 2003). This enhances a feeling of connectedness that is often described as spiritual. Williams (2003) conducted interviews with 12 teachers who had been in the classroom for at least 15 years and found that “these educators say that the personal bonds that they form with young people are a kind of spiritual connection that often lasts for years” (p. 72).

Sonia Nieto (2003) conducted a year-long inquiry group with eight teachers to explore the question of what sustains teachers in their jobs. She wrote a book about it called *What Keeps Teachers Going?* One of the powerful ideas debated in their focus group was the idea that some teachers think of their destinies and those of their students as intertwined. Developing these relationships with students provides a deep spiritual fulfillment for teachers.

*Making a difference.* The role of teaching inherently carries with it the tremendous capacity to influence the lives of others. In a number of studies, a primary source of satisfaction reported by teachers was their confidence that they were making a difference in the lives of their students (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008). The teachers in Nieto’s (2003) group acknowledged frustrations with various aspects of teaching but maintained their belief that teachers could make a difference in students’ lives and this was a powerful reason to persevere in their jobs.

*Teaching with love.* Love for students is total acceptance and an attempt to understand who students are and where they come from, to respect and affirm students’ identities (Nieto, 2003). Nieto (2003) states, “love, then, is not simply a sentimental conferring of emotion; it is a blend of confidence, faith, and admiration for students and an appreciation for the strengths [and differences] they bring with them” (pp. 37-38). Love for students is one major passion that keeps

teaching alive; it is pivotal in the effectiveness of a teacher and fundamental to the pleasure found in teaching (Nieto, 2003).

When a student does not achieve like their teacher expects them to, some may revise their expectations in order to maintain their feelings of efficacy and satisfaction with their jobs (Johnson et al., 2005) In contrast, Nieto's (2003) group talks about how they love their students enough, especially the ones who others may not believe are capable, to hold high expectations for them despite the disappointment in their failures. When failure happens, teachers love their students enough to try another way, and resist taking it so personally that it damages their morale. Paulo Freire (1998) wrote, "it is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up" (p. 51).

***Relationships with the school community.*** Collegiality, defined as the cooperative relationships with colleagues, supports teachers in their work (Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Williams, 2003). Building relationships with colleagues and participating in conversations about issues that matter in teaching validate the importance of teachers' work (Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008). "The evidence suggests strongly that students learn more and teachers experience greater satisfaction and commitment when they are engaged with their colleagues, improving instruction and strengthening the school" (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 72). Planning together, collaborating on lessons, and discussing student progress build supportive professional relationships, contribute to a shared responsibility for student learning, and increase teacher motivation to stay with their jobs.

Feeling valued and appreciated by administrators is a powerful incentive to remain employed as a teacher (Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008). Having the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the school and having ideas listened to respectfully can strengthen

feelings of efficacy and satisfaction in the workplace (Perrachione et al., 2008). Being recognized for the intellectual work of improving their practice, efforts to increase student achievement, and contributions in developing school and district relationships reinforces a teacher's sense of value in their learning community (Johnson et al., 2005). Feelings of professional worth inspire deeper commitments to a school that respects and values teacher input in decision making (Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008).

***Relationship with oneself.*** The intrinsic motivation to remain in teaching is influenced by the relationship that one has with oneself. The journey that leads to understanding why one continues to teach is about how one views teaching as a way to live, to foster self-improvement. Good teachers are always in the process of becoming better at what they do.

The dynamic nature of their job allows teachers to continually rediscover who they are, what they are capable of and what they stand for through their dialogue and collaboration with colleagues, through ongoing and consistent study, and through deep reflection on their craft. (Nieto, 2003, p. 125)

One of Nieto's (2003) focus group teachers reported that, "...the principal reason why I continue to enter the classroom with energy and a sense of hope lies in how I view what I do. Teaching is not just my profession; it is my calling; it is my mission" (p. 128). Abraham Maslow discussed his theory of self-actualization and his description as cited in Cooper & Pervin (1998), is analogous to that teacher's statement,

"A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization.... It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially" (p. 177)

The way teachers view what they do, their relationships and interactions with students and staff, and their personal journey's towards self actualization, fulfills them and makes it more likely that they will remain invested in their work (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003).

### **Extrinsic Motivation**

Motivations that are extrinsic are external to the individual and unrelated to the task they are performing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Examples of extrinsic motivators for teachers can include administrative support, salary and benefits, and the overall environment in which they are required to work. The discussion of extrinsic motivations as having a role in increasing the likelihood of teacher retention calls for a reminder that variables contributing to teacher retention and attrition are highly interrelated (Johnson et al., 2005).

**Supportive administration.** There is limited empirical research demonstrating that the link between administrative support and the probability of teacher retention exists. However, research has identified it is widely thought schools structured in certain ways can help teachers be more successful with their students and feel greater satisfaction with their work, perhaps influencing retention. Structures that allow principals to be visible in classrooms, maintain consistent policies and procedures, provide relevant professional development opportunities, allow adequate time and resources, and make flexible staffing arrangements are valued by educators (Certo & Fox 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008).

**Visible administration.** Johnson, et al. (2005), discussed Blasé & Blasé's 2004 research, and commented, "...[the visibility of principals] lead to high motivation and morale, an

increased sense of security, and willingness to comply with the school's agenda for improvement" (p. 72). When administrators spend time in the classroom, listen to teachers' needs, and observe the work that happens in their school, teachers feel that they truly care about the vision of the school. This encourages good attitudes among teachers in relation to their duties (Certo & Fox, 2002).

***Consistent procedures and policies.*** Providing structure and thoughtful organization to maintain consistency in administering policies and procedures is reported to increase satisfactions with the job of teaching (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Nieto, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008). Support for teachers when implementing procedures for handling disobedient students is related to teachers' contentment with their teaching position (Williams 2003).

***Professional development opportunities.*** The opportunity to continue growing and learning is important to educators and enhances satisfactions with their occupation. Supportive administrators provide sufficient and relevant professional development (Certo & Fox, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008; Williams, 2003).

***Adequate time and resources.*** Scheduling time to collaborate with peers in learning communities allows teachers to be more effective with their students. It also permits them to reap the rewards that attracted them to teaching in the first place, including the psychic rewards of effecting students' lives in positive ways (Johnson et al., 2005). Providing resources, materials, and training to implement school improvement goals is seen as a powerful way for administrators to provide support for their staff. This could potentially influence whether teachers choose to stay employed at their school (Certo & Fox, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005).



***Flexible staffing arrangements.*** Considering the possibilities of dual roles for educators, is a way to utilize staff effectively and gives teachers various opportunities to be effective in their goals for the school. Ways to make this work might include job sharing with another teacher in order to meet familial commitments or combining part-time teaching with leadership roles. Providing this flexibility could be avenues for administrators to retain valuable teachers (Johnson et al., 2005, Nieto, 2003). Cochran-Smith (2004) in her review of publications from the Teacher Education Program Research Group at Center X at the University of California backed this up. She stated that, “staying needs to include a variety of career trajectories with multiple avenues for leadership roles and advancement during the career span” (p. 391).

**Salary and benefits.** In a recent review of teacher retention literature Johnson et al. (2005) found that salary was reported as a major reason that teachers leave the profession or choose not to enter it at all. This finding was corroborated by Perrachione et al., (2008) in their research on elementary teachers’ perceptions of job satisfaction and retention. Salary as an indicator of retention is a complicated matter and is intertwined with other variables influencing retention. Even though some correlation for higher salaries and increased retention can be found, precise conclusions are impossible to state without further research (Johnson et al., 2005). Because teachers are motivated to enter and remain in the profession for the intrinsic rewards, Johnson et al. (2005) concludes that, “pay matters, but largely because it makes teaching possible. In itself, higher pay is unlikely to retain teachers...” (p. 46).

Perrachione et al. (2008) found that other benefits such as retirement, schedules, and time off in the summer impacted teachers’ decisions to remain in teaching. In contrast, Johnson et al. (2005) could find “...virtually no research available about the role of health and retirement benefits in a teacher’s career decisions” (p. 47).

**Work conditions.** There are numerous factors related to the work conditions, or overall environment, in which teachers are asked to perform. The work conditions addressed in this discussion are: (a) the general state of the facilities and equipment, (b) the climate of the school, and (c) teaching assignments that have implications for student learning. These can affect teacher's satisfaction and sense of efficacy. This in turn, affects their commitments to remain at their school (Certo & Fox, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008).

**Materials and equipment.** Having well-maintained equipment and facilities is important to the health and safety of both teachers and students. Up-to-date equipment and materials are needed to teach and learn well; with deficient or decrepit materials and physical environment, teachers report feeling discouraged (Johnson et al., 2005).

**School climate.** School climate is important in the quality and character of school life. The National School Climate Center, at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/>, states, "school climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (2013). School climate is multi-dimensional and how it is perceived by teachers greatly influences their job satisfaction and intent to remain in the profession (Perrachione et al., 2008). McMillen (1988) and Perrachione et al. (2008) found that positive school climate exists in schools that have a clearly communicated school wide vision that is shared by staff, administration, students, and the larger community as a whole.

**Teaching assignments.** A manageable workload with tolerable class sizes influence teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction and sense of fairness in the working environment (Johnson et al., 2005). If teachers believe they are unprepared to teach content for the courses they are assigned and are overloaded with large class sizes, they may feel stress and dissatisfaction with their

profession. This may influence them to transfer to another school or leave the profession altogether (Johnson et al., 2005; Perrachione et al., 2008). Johnson et al., (2005) states “there is no evidence that any one of these factors [extrinsic motivators], in and of themselves, leads to turnover” (p. 55), but due to the interrelatedness of the variables effecting teacher attrition and retention, one could infer that if teachers have a favorable outlook on their teaching assignments they would be more likely to be retained.

### **Exceptional Challenges on the Reservation**

#### **Poverty and Social Ills**

Poverty and social ills are not exclusive to Reservation communities and schools. Many schools deal with the surrounding conditions of poverty that negatively impact an individual’s access to opportunities for educational and economic success (Rank, 2004). The prevalence and depth of poverty on the Wolf Creek Reservation affects student achievement in a variety of ways. The most critical aspects include high absenteeism, lack of parental involvement in student’s education, and the use of drugs and alcohol (Antell, Blevins, Jensen, & Massey, 2002; Bowker, 1993; School’s Executive Summary, 2012).

Lin & Harris (2008) took a fresh and critical look at what is known about the causes of poverty and how they are related to race and ethnicity. They propose that 50 years of research about poverty executed through multiple disciplines in the social sciences have been unsuitably attempting to find the one cause and one cure for poverty. In addition, they believe that persistent poverty is due to an accumulating cascade of disadvantages that become more and more difficult to overcome. This exacerbates existing disadvantages. As a result, any one solution, even though effective at treating the symptom of one disadvantage, is unlikely to produce any real change in

the life paths of poverty ridden people. They acknowledge that the causes of poverty are complicated, dynamic, and reciprocal; these are difficult to understand and influence. Some causes of poverty include lack of social capital<sup>4</sup>, discrimination, and attitudes of both the poor and non-poor. Lin & Harris (2008) probed for a deeper understanding of poverty and framed their results in a new way, "...public policy is, in and of itself, a primary contributor to racial vulnerability in the United States" (p. 12) and conclude that, "...the first goal of policy should not be to remedy inequality, but to avoid concentrating it" (p. 8).

Ruby Payne (2005) differentiates between generational and situational poverty. The former, lasts two or more generations, but situational poverty lasts for a shorter amount of time. Situational poverty can be caused by unforeseen life circumstances such as temporary unemployment or death. She also defines poverty in terms of a lack of resources in several categories. These include financial, emotional, mental/cognitive, physical, available support systems, role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. Ruby Payne (2005) outlines a framework for understanding students who live in poverty and suggests strategies for educators that could be helpful in diminishing achievement gaps for the poor children of the United States. She believes that teaching the hidden rules of school can help students learn the difference between appropriate and inappropriate responses and be able to choose actions and attitudes that help them get ahead in school. Payne illustrates a difference in the hidden rules of home and school environment, "...the student's environment at home may be unpredictable. Having reactive skills might be particularly important. These skills may be counterproductive in school, where a learner must plan ahead, rather than react, to succeed" (Payne, 2008, p. 4). She recommends

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<sup>4</sup> Social capital is the relationships with people outside one's own personal circle who can help one achieve goals (Becker, Krodel, & Tucker, 2009).

teachers capitalize on the characteristics of students living in poverty. Some of those would be enhanced non-verbal communications and student's use of personal relationships to internalize meaning and develop motivations for learning content (Payne, 2005).

David Ellwood (as cited in Bowker, 1993) characterizes the poor as having a myriad of social ills and “a frightening array of negative forces: deprivation, incarceration, isolation, discrimination, poor education... crime, drugs, and alcohol...” that keep them disadvantaged (p. 127). Bowker discussed the connections between poverty and culture, and how many believe that the culture of Native Americans itself is responsible for the poverty they experience. Attitudes about culture and dysfunctional behaviors became so intertwined that Native Americans themselves began to ascribe to the belief that poverty and its associated social ills are an “Indian thing” rather than perceiving the symptoms of poverty as separate from their culture (Bowker, 1993, p. 129).

The educability of Native students and those living in poverty is subject to hidden curriculum norms and can often contribute to the lack of success in school for poor children (Bowker, 1993). Failure of the students to succeed in school is often blamed on students and their families. This may be because teachers expect students to come to school with four underlying premises that make up the hidden curriculum of schools that they may or may not have. First, educators expect children to come to school with experience and knowledge of appropriate adult-child relationships such as how to attend to and follow adult directions. Second, children are expected to have had experiences in exploring and analyzing their world in ways that develop cognitive and perceptual skills for the school setting. Third, “...educators expect that children will enter school with the motivation to achieve. This motivation is developed by parents encouraging their children to hold positive feelings toward school and

about adult praise and approval” and finally, it is assumed that the child speaks and understands standard English (Bowker, 1993, pp. 129-130). These things are the delineation between a good student and a struggling student but are not always available to children living in poverty.

Bowker (1993) states, “Poverty is strongly associated with...socialization factors that influence the development and education of children. But what is important is that we separate the issues of poverty from the issues of culture so that we may employ appropriate educational interventions” (p. 131).

Poverty is unquestionably linked with ethnic status due to the fact that many people who are poverty laden are also minorities. It is also true that minorities suffer poverty in higher proportions than mainstream society (Bowker, 1993; Lamont & Small, 2009; U.S. Bureau of the Census [USBC], 2011). This tangled up presentation of poverty and culture may become harder to distinguish over time as disadvantages are passed down from parent to child. Educators must guard against perpetuating the misinterpretation of behaviors related to poverty and behaviors related to culture in order to best educate American Indian youth (Bowker, 1993, Lin & Harris, 2008).

### **Absenteeism**

Andrew Gulliford taught college classes in Durango, Colorado. At least 75% of the students in his Tribal Preservation museum classes were Native American. He discussed absenteeism of Native students as he understood it. He listed two reasons he saw as contributing to a higher absenteeism for Native students above and beyond the absences caused by staying up late and not studying hard enough to meet deadlines that many college students incur. First, in his opinion, “the tribal ceremonial calendar, not the academic calendar, takes precedence” and college students may be required to participate in ceremonies regardless of the impact on their

studies (Gulliford, 2004, p. 161). Second, unexpected tragedies, “because Native Americans have a much higher, younger death rate” and illnesses of family members cause Native students to be absent from class for days or even weeks for funerals and healing ceremonies (Gulliford, 2004, pp. 162-163).

The rules of kinship for Native Americans are far reaching with great aunts and uncles accepted as grandparents, and cousins regarded as siblings. Kinship is a social organization system involving groups related by blood but members that are not blood related are sometimes adopted into the system. Kinship rules vary from one community to another and provide advantages for family security, identity, and social values. Native American kinship rules are strongly upheld, so ongoing health problems and mortality among such extended family continues to affect student achievement (Francisconi, 1997; School’s Executive Summary, 2012).

### **Educational Justice and Dysconscious Racism**

Dysconscious racism is a complex concept. It is defined by Joyce King as “...an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justify inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (1991, p. 135). She goes on to explain in another context, “dysconscious racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness [about racism]...but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race” (King, 1991, p. 135).

King (1991), a college professor, asked her preservice teachers about what they believed were reasons our society still has persistent racial inequities. Her preservice teachers expressed

belief in the presumed effects of slavery or oppression as, "...negative psychological or cultural characteristics...[where] no motivation or incentive to climb the socioeconomic ladder...and devalued cultural mores..." exhibited by minorities perpetuated racial inequities (pp. 137-138). The students acknowledged that the characteristics may be caused by historical injustices, but still laid responsibility for continued inequities at the feet of the people who are marginalized, perhaps accepting meritocracy as a valid theory. Meritocracy is built on the principles of achieving as a result of effort and talent. Belief in the system of meritocracy, or achieving because of personal merit, is a hallmark of dysconscious racism (King, 1991). Another distorted view given by the students was the denial of equal opportunity, or racial discrimination, as causation of our biased social order. Although both of these ideas are linked to societal inequity, they lack critical and knowledgeable judgment that recognizes the "...structural inequity built into the social order" (King, 1991, p 138). These distorted views are part of dysconscious racism, embraces the "myth of equal opportunity" and allows Whites to feel justified in their place in the social order.

Many people are unaware that dysconscious racism exists and say they deplore white supremacy attitudes. They are unconscious of their internal intellectual biases, prejudices or bigotries. Confronting dysconscious racism means considering that equity for all includes decreased advantages for Whites. David Wellman (as cited in King, 1991) said, "...the existing social order cannot provide for (unlimited) or equal opportunity while maintaining racial privileges for Whites (p. 139). This usually causes feelings of guilt and hostility when Whites have to reevaluate their self concepts, identities, and place in the social order (King, 1991).

Often, teachers come to classrooms without having thought seriously about how schooling processes influence or actually contribute to societal inequities. They may be unaware



of the dysconscious racism that limits their thought and action when educating diverse student populations. Teachers must have opportunities to think about what social justice means and what needs there are for societal change. In order to do that they must have knowledge of how society works and experiences that will lead them to an understanding of how their miseducation contributed to their dysconscious internalized ideologies (King, 1991). They will then begin to realize all they do not know about the struggles of minorities, look critically at how the existing curriculum contributes to inequity, and develop a value commitment to liberatory pedagogy.

It is the responsibility of teacher educators and institutions to look carefully at how teachers are prepared for the classroom and “...articulate a vision for teaching and learning in a diverse society” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 30). Teachers must be made aware of what it takes to be culturally responsive teacher for classrooms of increasing diversity. Although it is unrealistic to think that novice teachers are ready to take on this challenge with sophistication, which will come from experience, it is reasonable to expect that our future educators have more than superficial knowledge of what culturally responsive teaching entails. Villegas & Lucas (2002) proposed that institutions invested in the education of prospective teachers employ a framework for qualifying them with a readiness to be culturally responsive. Permeating teacher education programs with attention to the issues surrounding diversity is necessary.

Recommended ways to develop the characteristics of culturally responsive teachers include ideas on how to teach them to, “...a) be socioculturally conscious, b) have affirming views of students with diverse backgrounds, c) see themselves as capable of and responsible for bringing about change to make schools more equitable, d) understand how learners construct knowledge and be capable of promoting knowledge construction, e) know about the lives of their students, and f) design instruction that build on what their students already know while stretching

them beyond the familiar” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 20). An eloquent and articulate explanation of these ideas are presented by Villegas & Lucas (2002) that readers are invited and encouraged to review.

When teachers are able to look critically at their own autobiographies and determine who they are socially and culturally they may be ready to confront their dysconscious racism. When they understand that the schooling process is not neutral in its role pertaining to social inequity and see that the system of meritocracy is flawed, they will begin the journey as a culturally responsive teacher. When they gain the knowledge necessary to point out the difference between simply truth and complete accuracy in our curriculum they will be ready to bring forth the silenced voices of the poor and oppressed in historical contexts. These are desired traits of our future educators. Striving for them may facilitate a more equitable education for all students.

Villegas and Lucas (as cited in Cochran-Smith, 2004) explore the disparity between the percentage of students that are minorities and the percentage of teachers that are minorities and say that it is necessary that the racial and ethnic diversity of the teaching force be expanded. The argument they present points out that teachers of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds could contribute greatly toward building the cultural knowledge of the general public and help mitigate dysconscious racism (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Villegas & Irvine (2010) explored the topic of teacher diversity further and researched literature to find out what is known about the effects of diversifying the teacher workforce. Three ideas were presented throughout the literature, a) teachers of color serve as role models for all students, b) there is potential for teachers of color to improve the academic outcomes and school experiences for students of color, and c) the “workforce rationale” describes how teacher retention is improved in hard to staff schools when teachers of color are hired; teachers of color

stay longer in high minority schools. This is likely because they came into teaching for the specific purpose of “raising the race” and they hope to advance motivations of minority students to strive for social success (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Their literature review revealed no empirical evidence that merely having teachers of color in schools as role models motivate students. This is not to say that benefits do not exist when there are diverse teacher role models, but more research on the vague notions of the presumed positive benefits for student motivation is needed (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). There was a clear pattern of academic benefits for culturally diverse students who experience school with a same-race teacher. These benefits may be attributable to cultural congruence or “synchronicity” in the classroom where the same-race teacher uses techniques that imitates interaction patterns existing in the home. Benefits were measured in standardized tests in some studies and by alternative indicators in others, such as, higher graduation rates, increased enrollment in college, and lessened absenteeism. The benefits remained intact even for students of color who did not have a same-race teacher but who attended school in districts employing teachers of color in a proportion that approximately represented the populations they served (Villegas & Lucas, 2010). On a final note, Villegas & Lucas (2010) clarify that teachers of color need to have more than just an insider’s knowledge of a culture that give them an advantage over their White colleagues when teaching diverse students. They must also possess adequate knowledge and pedagogical preparation to be successful teachers. Teachers of color also need a more thorough preparation for how to be culturally responsive in the classroom. This would permit the use of their cultural expertise to reach its fullest potential for affecting student outcomes.

## **Ethnography**

Ethnography is a method of research that is designed to gather information in such a way as to facilitate understanding of the experiences in a particular group of people. It is qualitative, not quantitative, and reflects the complexity of real life with human resonance that cannot be recreated with any other method of research (Fetterman, 2009; Hobbs, 2011). Interviews, observations, and visual images can provide a vivid description of the “...everyday perspectives of the group members...” in order to derive meaning from the social lives of that group that may otherwise be hidden by prejudice (Hobbs, 2011, p. xiv).

Ethnography echoes a grounded theory research method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory allows for the discovery of new theories from data through logical deduction. Instead of merely verifying or building small gains of knowledge for existing “grand theories”, grounded theory methods “...generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). Hypotheses are generated around the conceptual categories then constantly compared to other data to discover similarities and differences. In this way, generalized relations among the categories and their properties can be used to explain a theory for the behavior under observation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In ethnography, description of small details and facts are used to provide a larger picture of common beliefs and actions in a group of people. The results are interpreted by the reader as much as by the researcher (Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). Because we can never gain access to reality except through the lens of our own experiences, the reader does much of the work in understanding and creating meaning from the research. In addition, readers and

researchers find themselves in the stories of others; when asking questions about other people, we learn about ourselves. Because of this, researchers can never be neutral and must guard against imbedding personal biases in the coding and analysis of the data (Bresler, 1994).

Reality is interpreted through the time and context in which situations occur, and in various ways by various people. Ethnography is intended to allow the audience to briefly grasp a view of the group, their relation to life, and to realize their vision of their world as they themselves verbalize it (Bresler, 1994; Malinowski, 1922). Learning about someone else's reality is what ethnography aims for. As a written account, ethnography focuses on a particular population, place and time with the deliberate goal of describing it as it exists for others.

Ideas evolve as the data are exhaustively read and re-read. Final theories emerge only after repeated exploration (Bresler, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Wright & Hobbs, 2006). The conceptual complexity of ethnography often makes data analysis time consuming. Coding the data can happen in several ways although the following list is not comprehensive. Constant comparison coding is where new data is constantly compared to older data in order to sort them into categories of common characteristics with a focus on naming and identifying categories. Axial coding is also used to develop categories where links and relationships to an already identified category are sought after when re-reading the data (Boeije, 2002; Hobbs, 2011; Wright & Hobbs, 2006).

Subjectivity is inherent to ethnography and must be examined carefully. Validity in ethnography is enhanced when triangulation, member checking, and self-checks are used. Triangulation is when a third element outside the cause and effect items in the data is used to corroborate apparent relationships. Member checking and self-check involve having participants and researchers analyze the results of the study for accuracy (Boeije, 2002; Bresler, 1994;

Hobbs, 2011; Wright & Hobbs, 2006). It is assumed that just hearing what people say and watching what they do can reveal what they think, but for results to be valid and authentic, the participant must agree that what you write about them is reflective of what they are actually trying to represent.

### **Summary**

The interrelatedness of factors affecting retention and attrition among teachers make it difficult to pinpoint exact reasons that teachers choose to stay or leave the profession. Of the reasons given for retention, intrinsic rewards are cited as the strongest influence although extrinsic rewards are considered as well. Being prepared to effectively teach the population you serve contributes to a teacher's sense of worth. Understanding the culture you teach within and thinking critically about what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher can positively affect student achievement and by implication, increase job satisfaction. Ethnography can give a picture of situations in which teachers are satisfied enough to stay. This method of research requires consideration of its limitations, which include extensive time and resources to execute well. Unique circumstances and perspectives can be illuminated through ethnography aiming for an interpretation of multiple realities where the reader ultimately creates their own meaning from the data. Ethnography is helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of why teachers stay in education through changing policies, demands, and rewards. Knowledge garnered from this type of research may help school leaders implement supports that could impact a teacher's intent to remain.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Introduction**

To better understand why non-Native teachers choose to remain employed on the Wolf Creek Reservation, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The transcripts from the audio recordings were analyzed and coded using the constant comparison method to identify common themes in the thoughts and actions of a selected set of educators (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although Native teachers may face similar challenges as non-Native teachers, the reasons Native teachers stay will not be explored since this is outside of the scope of this project.

As safeguarding and respecting the rights and welfare of human subjects involved in research is vital, it was necessary to apply for consent and receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Permission from the IRB to conduct this study was obtained by the researcher during the fall of 2012.

#### **Population**

The criteria for participants of the study were teachers that had been employed at schools located on the Wolf Creek Reservation for more than five years who were not enrolled as tribal members. A pool of eligible teachers, known personally by the researcher, through collegial and community experiences, were invited to participate in a study. A recruitment email was sent to 17 potential participants outlining the study and soliciting involvement. Consent forms were personally delivered to those who responded with interest. It contained a more complete explanation of the study, a description of their rights as a participant, measures taken to

safeguard the welfare and confidentiality of the participant, possible benefits and risks of participation, and expected commitments of participation (See Appendices B and C).

Five teachers were recruited for this study ranging in experience, age, personality, gender, and teaching assignments within their districts. They ranged in age from 29 to 63 and their average time teaching experience was 15 years. Four participants were female with one male participant and they hailed from two different school districts on the Wolf Creek Reservation. Each teacher held a slightly different position in their school. Three were classroom teachers, including a middle school teacher; the other two were elementary teachers. A school librarian and a Title 1 teacher also agreed to participate in this study.

### **Setting**

The study took place in a sparsely populated rural western state on a large American Indian reservation, an area of land managed by a two Native American tribes under the United States Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs. This rural community is geographically isolated and is a two-hour drive to a city with a population over 15,000. The intense beauty of rugged mountains with pristine and diverse ecosystems, and surrounding opportunities for outdoor activities make this an attractive place to work and live.

**Population, poverty, and unemployment.** The population of Wolf Creek Reservation is approximately 22,000 with approximately 13,000 of whom are enrolled members of one of the tribes. The other people who live on the reservation are either non-Native people or “mixed blood Natives” who do not have enough blood quanta to qualify for enrollment in a nationally recognized American Indian tribe (USBC, 2010).

Like other American Indian reservations, Wolf Creek Reservation endures the strain of poverty and lack of resources. This particular Reservation has two sets of numbers used to report



poverty and unemployment statistics. Because there are many non-Native residents on this reservation, statistics are reported first for the entire reservation and separately for the enrolled American Indian population who live on Wolf Creek Reservation.

Poverty is defined as an annual household income less than or equal to \$21,000 for a family of four. Additionally, extreme poverty is defined as an annual household income less than or equal to \$11,000 for a family of four (USBC, 2011). Currently our national poverty rate is at 15% (United States Department of Labor [USDL], 2012; National Poverty Center [NPC], 2012).

The USBC (2010) reported approximately 23% of the entire Wolf Creek Reservation population was living in poverty; double the rate of the rest of the population in the state where it is located. Furthermore, 13% were living in extreme poverty. For the enrolled Native population on Wolf Creek Reservation, the reported poverty rate is 56% (USBC, 2011).

The current rate of national unemployment is 8% (USDL, 2012; NPC, 2012). The USBC (2010) describes unemployment for the entire Wolf Creek Reservation as much higher than the national rate at 42%. The unemployment rate for the American Indian population living on Wolf Creek Reservation jumps to 78% as reported by the US Department of the Interior (2005).

Opportunities for employment on the Reservation are scarce and mainly provided by schools, government agencies, casinos, and seasonal work such as road construction. A significant reliance on government employment is evident as approximately 50% of the employed Native population work within the federal, state, and local government agencies. This extensive governmental bureaucracy provides some of the most lucrative jobs on the Reservation (Antell et al., 2002).

There is a high incidence of working poor on the Reservation among those that are employed. Education and employment are commonly viewed as ways to overcome poverty.

However, the data from Antell et al., (2002) show that although the education levels are increasing and the unemployment rates are decreasing on the Reservation, poverty is nearly as pervasive as it has been for the last 30 years. This can partially be explained by an increase in the population for both tribes and the resulting decline in per capita payments. Per capita payments are provided by earnings that have accrued from royalties derived from capital assets jointly owned by the two tribes. Predominantly coming from natural resources, this revenue is being spread further to accommodate the new tribal memberships and fluctuating market values (Antell et al., 2002). Other influences that Antell et al., (2002) give for the large percentage of working poor on the Reservation are national economic shifts and "...policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs over which neither tribe has much control" (p. 11).

**Conflicting data.** There are conflicting data about poverty and unemployment rates on the Wolf Creek Reservation. In addition to the two sets of data reported above, there is this third, differing set. A panel study initiated by a state university has gathered data through a census like process for households on Wolf Creek Reservation. The intent of their project was to identify elements of poverty that make it so persistent, assess the social and personal consequences of tenacious poverty, to examine poverty and poverty policy longitudinally, and to use the data to examine the effectiveness of poverty programs implemented to mitigate poverty. They collected their first round of data approximately 25 years ago and their most recent interviews were completed around 14 years ago (Antell et al., 2002).

Antell, et al. (2002) claim that they were able to reach and survey approximately 83% of all Indian homes and 61% of all non-Indian homes located on the Wolf Creek Reservation in their most recent survey. The data they present excludes Natives who are enrolled in one of the two tribes but who do not live on the Reservation. In addition, a city located on Reservation

lands but not under tribal jurisdiction, Hill Valley, was excluded from the data as well, and a portion of the Native population is known to reside within those city limits. This influences all the figures for demographic data and highlights the economic differences between Reservation Indians and those who live off the Reservation.

Antell et al. (2002) contended that the population of the Wolf Creek Reservation in 1998 was 7,680 including about 1,600 non-Indian individuals. Keep in mind the estimate for surveyed homes came from just over half of non-Indian homes and more than three quarters of Indian homes. They reported that 57% of the surveyed Indians actually living on the Wolf Creek Reservation were living below the poverty line and 38% were officially unemployed. It is important to note that official unemployment numbers do not take into account the percentage of people who are unavailable for employment (e.g. non working elderly or disabled, stay at home mothers, and retirees) and those who are not actively looking for work. Additionally, twenty years ago the average Indian family's annual income on the Reservation was just under \$5,000 while non-Indian families living on the Reservation had annual incomes almost triple that at about \$13,000. In a comparison with data from 1987 and 1998, poverty and unemployment rates were seen to be "moving in a positive direction but remain alarmingly high" (Antell, et al., 2002, p. 12).

The statistics are conflicting due to differing methods of calculating Reservation population, poverty, and unemployment. Differences may also be shown due to the 10 year gap between data sets. Regardless of the differences, the statistics demonstrate a depth of poverty and unemployment that limits opportunity in attaining a desired standard of living on the Reservation. See the table below to compare the numbers.

Table 1

*Poverty and Unemployment on the Wolf Creek Reservation*

Reporting Agency	Wolf Creek Reservation Entire Population	Wolf Creek Reservation American Indian Population
US Bureau of the Census (2010)		
Living in Poverty	23%	56%
Unemployed	42%	78%
Antell et al., 2002		
Living in Poverty	Unreported	57%
Unemployed	Unreported	38%

**Schools.** There are five schools in three different school districts located on the Reservation, excluding schools within the city limits of Hill Valley. These districts serve approximately 2,500 school age children (USCB, 2010). The diversity of the school population is limited; the majority of students are American Indians. Typical challenges for the educational systems on the Reservation include (a) lack of parental involvement and communication, (b) high absenteeism, (c) high mortality rates for residents of all ages, (d) the use of alcohol and drugs, and (e) unresolved or ongoing health issues all of which continue to effect the achievement of students. The graduation rate is problematic (less than 60%) and reflects the challenges that students face (School’s Executive Summary, 2012).

Antell et al., (2002) noted that, “...tribal governments [of Wolf Creek Reservation], albeit sovereign, often lack stability and the capability to effectively mediate between conflicting claims...” (p. 13). Although Antell et al., (2002) was not directly referring to challenges tribal governments encounter concerning the enforcement of truancy laws, the failure of their agencies to ensure attendance in school is detrimental to student achievement. The tribal courts and law

enforcement that are supposedly responsible for carrying out the laws related to student absenteeism are unreliable and so schools depend on threats of student retention to encourage families to get their students to school

### **Data Collection**

Each participant agreed to engage in an open-ended interview that lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. In addition, participants were advised of their opportunity to reflect on and report any further insights about reasons for continuing to teach on the Reservation within four weeks of the interview. Data were collected through both interview notes and audio recordings taken during the interview process. Immediately following each interview the researcher spent time reflecting by writing short summaries, trying to capture the insights and revelations experienced during the interviews.

Interview questions were designed to elicit conversations about reasons teachers verbalize for their longevity at Reservation schools. Subsequent questions were asked depending on the answers to the previous questions. This questioning technique is similar to laddering. Laddering is where the researcher continues to ask questions about previous responses in order to determine the underlying attributes, consequences, and values of the stated belief (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The initial list and samples of additional interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Because the participants were personally known to the researcher through work environments, social situations, and friendly interactions, care was taken to make sure participants understood that their responses during the interview process would not be disclosed in any social situation. Furthermore, unless participants asked specifically to be identified, any identifying information in the final paper was changed. Participants were also given the chance

to review the interview transcripts in a process called *member checking* and were able to clarify or remove any text they felt did not precisely represent their viewpoint.

Although there were no direct benefits for the participants, an indirect benefit might have been the ability to have someone to talk to about these issues. Articulating their reasons for remaining in the profession of teaching as a non-Native teacher on the Reservation could help them come to a better self understanding and reaffirm their satisfaction with their choices.

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data and transcribing the interviews participants were invited to review them in order to verify accuracy. Then, systems of constant comparison and axial coding were used to identify themes that emerged from the participants' responses that were interpreted by the researcher to have bearing on the main objective of this study (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hobbs, 2011; Wright & Hobbs, 2006). Using the first step in constant comparison, a technique developed to analyze narrative data called open coding, patterns were preliminarily identified and placed into categories. They were sorted, refined, and then resorted with new data continuously compared to old data and grouped accordingly. The categories continued to evolve as new information was analyzed and reanalyzed to discern meaning. The analysis of this data is based in grounded theory methodology where the findings emerge in an inductive way as the discovery of relationships surface while the data is being coded and analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data was then triangulated with a third element when possible; usually a reference to literature or another theory that corroborated identified patterns in the thoughts and behaviors of the participants (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hobbs, 2011; Wright & Hobbs, 2006).

As themes became apparent, were sorted and organized, and more data compiled, subcategories sometimes emerged. The data transcriptions were reread to analyze them for any

further contributions using the axial coding method of reviewing the data with the specific intent of finding elements that match with previously identified categories (Boleije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hobbs, 2011; Wright & Hobbs, 2006). If any were found, they were incorporated to the findings.

Finally, personal journals kept since I started teaching on the Reservation 12 years ago were reviewed using axial coding to connect new information to existing themes. Any entry describing experiences or reflections related to the identified themes were added to the data for analysis. Meaningful connections between different ideas and theories explaining why this particular group of teachers, including me, invested their careers on the Reservation for so long began to solidify through this iterative process.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The participants of this study shared stories and perceptions of their lives as teachers. They told about their insight into education, articulated values and beliefs about their work and community; expressed that teaching is difficult work, but noble, important, and meaningful. Although sometimes they felt hopeless in their ability to impact change in ways they deemed beneficial to students, they resist feeling futile about injustices that they and their students face. Throughout the interview process the participants gave expected and sometimes unanticipated reasons for why they stay in their schools.

The structure of this chapter starts with the limitations of the study. Next, the participants are introduced using a short synopsis of their teaching experiences and personality traits. The main content of this chapter is structured in a way that interweaves the data from the interviews with discussion. Blocks of narrative text from the interviews are included as evidence and interpretation of the themes that emerged from the data analysis. In some cases, my voice is presented at the end of the discussion surrounding a theme. I have included my own perspectives with blocks of text mined from my journals. References to literature that corroborated the evidence in the interviews are also included when they are evident. The summary of this study is embedded within the recommendations section.

#### **Limitations**

This study is not meant to be generalizable to all non-Native teachers teaching in Indian country, since it is focused on a single location and only a few representative teachers. However,



it can contribute to a wider understanding of the various reasons that may influence teacher decisions to remain employed on Reservation lands in spite of the challenges of their assignment.

Ethnography presents its own limitations and advantages merely by the nature of its subjectivity. Ethnography reveals multiple truths that are not found out through objective quantifiable data. Instead, knowledge is gleaned from the intersections in the points of view of the researcher, the participant, and the consumer where meaning is individually interpreted (Kvale, 1996). The multiple situational realities do not have a fixed meaning independent of how the data was elicited. Emerson (1995) says, “*what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out” (p. 11) and the researcher cannot avoid “...mediating effects” on the data (p. 13). However, to throw out ethnography and other qualitative research due to concerns about validity and reliability would be remiss. This type of research is valuable in adding detail and depth to the understanding of any issue studied (Emerson, 1995; Kvale, 1996).

Another limitation was the researcher’s initial lack of knowledge in qualitative research methodology and theory when beginning this study. A lack of experience in ethnography, interviewing, and qualitative analysis may have impacted the data elicited from the participants and the ensuing analysis.

### **The Participants**

**Cassie.** Cassie has been an educator for 38 years, 35 of which have been spent at Eagle Wing Elementary. She is a young 59 years old, divorced, with two grown children. She has taught kindergarten, first, and second grades, and for the majority of her career, third grade. She also instructed children as a Title 1 reading recovery interventionist. Several Native employees of both classified and certified status at Eagle Wing Elementary had Cassie as a teacher.

She is down to earth, quietly funny, and enjoyable to be around. Cassie doesn't exhibit stressed behavior very often, and obviously cares for her students unconditionally. She often sings songs that support content learning with her students in their classroom and laughs with her students. They respect her and it is rare to see her engaged in a quiet conversation with one of them in the hallway, a strategy used to redirect inappropriate behavior.

Her sincere reflection on her practice is methodological and evaluative. Her long tenure in the district and shared vision for the school makes her a valuable and respected member of professional learning teams. Described by her principal as 'one of the best' she continually impacts students in positive ways.

**Sally.** Sally is an active 48 year-old teacher who works as the librarian for Eagle Wing Elementary. She is a single mother of two boys, the youngest of whom just graduated from high school. Her conservationist efforts have led the school in a recent recycling renaissance with the enthusiastic participation of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade *Mother Earth Club*. She is constantly seen in the Reservation community photographically documenting sporting and cultural events. Some people may describe her as eccentric or quirky but her dedication to the students, their families, and the Reservation is never questioned.

Sally has worked on the Wolf Creek Reservation for more than 20 years. She started her journey here as a probation officer for Native youth. After 12 years, she moved into education through substitute teaching, and then decided to attain her teaching certificate. She has been employed at Eagle Wing Elementary for six years.

**Wayland.** Wayland is 51 years old, a cowboy rancher who in his spare time participates in rodeos with his wife and two teenage sons. He began his teaching career on an Alaskan Reservation and stayed there for two years before moving back to the lower 48. Next, he taught

for six years at a school specifically for at-risk kids. Wayland has been an educator at Tonemah School on Wolf Creek Reservation for the past 18 years. He teaches middle school students and is in charge of conducting guided reading groups, careers classes, and woodshop. He cares for the students and they usually respond well to his brusque humorous personality.

Wayland is a sensitive coworker who supports and unofficially mentors new teachers. He has a dry sense of humor and loves to play jokes. Wayland has developed some cynicism about the school's ability to provide solutions for social challenges that poverty on the Reservation has engendered.

**Dora.** Dora has taught at Tonemah School for seven years as a Title 1 teacher providing interventions for reading and math. She works within classrooms and with small pullout groups as well. She is a 43 year-old single mother of three adult children, one of whom is special needs and lives with her.

Dora is a quiet, gentle teacher, with a slightly saddened perspective due to particularly difficult situations she has grown through in her life. She is intelligent and introspective. She is also empathetic and this shows in the ways she cares for her students and coworkers. Dora thoughtfully contributes to her professional learning team and is flexible in understanding the needs of others. Her warm steadiness provides security for her students and her conscientious work ethic sustains school improvement efforts.

**Moriah.** Moriah has worked for seven years as an early primary classroom teacher at Tonemah School and is known to be one of the best and brightest teachers. Her dedication to her students and job are so intense that some question her ability to sustain her enthusiasm for teaching. Her students' test scores always reflect incredible gains.

Moriah is very sensitive, empathetic, compassionate, and highly idealistic, and believes it is her calling to make the world a better place. She has a talent for seeing the injustices in her environment and can usually identify what needs to be done, even if she has little control over the actions that will improve the situation.

Moriah's contributions to her professional learning teams are fluid, unexpected, and thoroughly logical. Her brain never shuts off and she drives her team to consider connections they never noticed before, increasing the problem solving capacity of the group. This sometimes made other members of the group feel intimidated or uncomfortable. Because of her unique personality and intense communication style some may view her as eccentric.

### **The Themes**

Several themes common in the participants' responses illustrate reasons they chose to remain employed on the Wolf Creek Reservation. An evolving understanding of the population they teach embedded within a sincere appreciation of Native ways of knowing impacted their sense of fulfillment with their work. A sense of purpose in educating the general public about the population they serve and advocating for Native students increases their dedication to their school communities. Filling an essential role for students they perceived as "needing the best teachers most" also encouraged them to stay. Although they did not describe themselves as teachers for social justice, their responses indicated this is indeed one reason they felt so needed here. Finally, they verbalized finding satisfaction in their place of service because of their perceived acceptance and approval from the school and cultural communities.

## **Theme 1: Perceptions of Native Ways of Life**

Teachers in this study expressed wonder and appreciation for Native cultural values, norms, and beliefs. In their tenure on the Reservation they raised their critical consciousness through evolving understandings of whom they served by recognizing the value of and embracing what they perceived as Native ways. Participants described how they felt about aspects of spirituality, humor, communication styles, and strength in family. These topics do not exclusively capture Native ways of life, but they are referenced in the interviews as noticeably different from the participants' experiences of social norms in mainstream society.

At the risk of perpetuating broad stereotypical views I would caution the reader to refrain from generalizing these results to all American Indians. Inaccurate and misleading stereotypes of Native behavior and beliefs exist. Stereotypes may be rooted in an element of truth or have no basis in fact at all and Bowker (1993) said, "...such stereotyping has strongly influenced teachers' attitudes toward Indian children" (p. 40). Many of the values the participants listed as especially revered are also referred to in Bowker (1993) as commonly stereotypical. The perceptions presented are only one person's interpretation of how they experience relations with Native Americans and the values they identify with or find commendable.

**Spirituality.** For participants in this study, spirituality was referred to as more than a belief in a higher being or the fatalistic dependence on a supernatural power. Spirituality might be perceived an awareness of how all things are connected. The results of this study suggest that spirituality includes taking responsibility for one's place in the scheme of things with an enlightened view of the purpose of life on Earth. Bowker (1993) also included a strong moral purpose and an inner voice that guides individuals in her definition of spirituality.

The routine smudging, drum groups, and prayers before any major event increased spiritual awareness for the entire school. Smudging is where sacred plants are burned and the smoke brushed over the body to cleanse oneself of bad spirits, feelings, or influences. Some plants are burned to invite good spirits and influences in. Sage, cedar and sweetgrass are commonly used for smudging and each plant has a specific purpose. The smoke is believed to carry prayers to the universe and allow entry into sacred realms. It is a reminder that everything on Earth, both living and non-living, are considered relatives. Drum groups serve a variety of purposes. Some songs are believed to have come from the Creator. The drum is sacred and used to perform honor songs, tell stories, and situate power in competitive events. There are many ceremonies and rituals involving the drum; some are public and some are secret. Both smudging and drum groups are ways in which spirituality is nurtured within the school setting.

These traditional practices enriched the teachers' working lives and reminded everyone about the importance and power of collective intent to do the right things in life. In this way and many others, spirituality is integral in the operations of the school. While it is absent in town schools, it is expected in Reservations schools. It would be a frowned upon oversight for the school to congregate without prayer. Schools and the community are inextricably entwined, as is spirituality in the community.

Spirituality is interpreted in as many individual ways as there are humans on this Earth. It is hard to describe the intangible ideas that people attribute to spirituality. I would like to note that my interpretations of what the participants perceived as spiritual are my own, perhaps colored by my experiences in spirituality and how I understand it.

Moriah experienced spirituality through her students' stories and her observations. She told me about how the eagles circled in the sky over the drums every time they were played

outdoors; I noticed this as well and felt a thrill of the unseen forces each time I did. She talked about her understanding of the Sundance ceremony as a gateway to the spirit world.

She spoke of one incident where her students, two sisters, were talking intensely about the death of their older sister and how their grandfather told them stories about the meaning behind the event implying that it the event was related to spiritual deficiency.

[My students were telling me] there were animal tracks around but no people tracks and that it [their story] was...[all about] how the Devil had come up and taken the sister as a punishment for how the people were living.

Moriah noted that there were many opportunities to connect to the spiritual world as a school community on the Reservation that did not exist in town schools. She said she used conversations with students to explain science, and attempted get away from extreme superstition. At the same time she worked to leave room for validating students' ideas about, "different possibilities and beliefs, things experienced in ways that I have never experienced them before".

Cassie talked about how intrigued she was by "the pace and the culture and some of the practices I had never been a part of" when first came to the Reservation 35 years ago. She mentioned the cedar ceremony, or smudging, and how she learned to "cleanse" herself of bad feelings while concentrating on positive thoughts for her classroom. She stated, "I just love the culture" in an attempt to express appreciation for the opportunity to engage in spiritual group efforts to replenish her emotional resources and energy for teaching.

Couched in terms affiliated with religion, Sally simply stated the clear connection to spirituality for her. "I feel spiritually richer because of the Native American community; in my church community as well. I really like the idea of worshiping with them".

Wayland, in his typically brief way, depicted his value for the community, "... I appreciate the traditions and the work they do to keep their traditions alive". Although he did not specify that he appreciated spiritual traditions, I interpreted it in that way because Native traditions that I am most familiar with that are performed in the school setting are ceremonies or rituals that are spiritual by nature.

Spirituality for Dora came through her participation in funeral and burial ceremonies. She told me this is one way she connected at a deeper level with the broader community outside of the school district. She spoke of how teachers from town might be shocked to learn how knowledgeable reservation students are about death and burial customs; how even the youngest students know how to prepare the body, and what rituals to perform at the wake and graveside. She remarked, "Death is looked at differently. The world doesn't stop and the kids come right back to school. If it happened in town, it would be different. It's just different". My own interpretations of spirituality as I experienced it through my workplace and relationships with the Native community are complicated and hard to describe. Isn't spirituality as I understand it similar to how many people understand it—whether they live on the Reservation or not? What difference in my perceptions exists because I work on the Reservation? I'm uncertain if it is a difference necessarily, but certainly a growth, a larger understanding.

I have always felt like I was connected with everything around me and that everything that happened did so for a reason. Everything was part of me, and everything I did would last forever in some way. The moments that stood out as the best in my life are moments when everything happened just the way I needed it to. There are many of these strange instances, some call them coincidences, where I would go to call someone, pick up the phone, and they would already be on the line without it having rung. Small things fed my growing belief in the power of



the mind to create realities and manipulate unseen collective forces beyond the conscious level to influence our daily lives. In many instances it was as if the universe provided me with the tools I needed just exactly when I needed them. My perception was many Native Americans also embraced this type of mystical belief.

Native schools have spirituality, prayers, and ceremonies of Native religion embedded in them while off the Reservation, public schools have a vacuum of spirituality. The participants made connections they perceived as spiritual with their community and schools. Those connections seemed important to them and they stated this influenced their desire to stay. They enjoyed the sense of spirituality in their work environment and felt that it helped them flourish in their jobs.

**Strength in family.** A description of the “telling about whites, talking about Indians” concept presented in the book, *Disciplined Hearts*, claimed, “the overt messages about whites in these savory conversational tidbits communicate equally important reciprocal messages about what it means to be Indian” (O’Neill, 1996, p. 20). O’Neill went on to say, “storytelling about contemporary encounters with whites are widespread narrative practices in which the reprehensible behaviors of whites are used to construct, through contrast, a sense of Flathead identity as exemplary” (pp. 20-21).

Moriah used this same compare and contrast method when she talked about her perceptions of strength in family on the Reservation as compared to her town experiences. She told about the pride that Native families had in grooming their children for school where families sometimes took more than an hour just to braid hair. Moriah admired that many Natives took care in making their children highly presentable for school and by comparison insinuated that town parents might be considered lazy.

People spent time getting everyone looking good for school. People take pride in the kids' [appearance].... and [there] is not a sense of pride [in town] to send your kids out with really nicely braided hair. It is not a distinguisher [in town] of who is being taken care of and who is not. There is a "poor because you're lazy" and a "poor because you are unfortunate" and it is distinguished between the two on the Reservation.

Moriah said the interconnectedness and closeness of the large families were some of her favorite things about working on the Reservation. She felt this gave her an opportunity to impact more students just by knowing one of their family members. She observed, "It's like if you know one student, the door opens for five other kids".

Dora indicated that one of her reasons contributing to her decision to stay on the Reservation was what she considered to be strength in family. She discussed how supportive families are when providing care for a child in times of need. She said,

I know that there is breakdown in family and the parents don't always raise their kids, so that seems like an oxymoron, but [their support is tangible in the] way they pick up the loose ends for each other, and the way it's not a second thought to say, 'oh, I will raise that kid'. But in a white family, it might be like, 'I don't know if I can make that sacrifice'. They might say no. But that wouldn't happen on the Reservation. Someone is going to take that kid even they already have ten in their trailer house, and raise it. I can admire that bigheartedness.

This kind of selflessness is common. Many times children are looked after with love when their parents or guardians are experiencing difficulty in providing for them. The surrogate parenting may last for short or long periods of time.

Sally noted that having “different [extended] family structures than we have as non-Native people” means that attending funerals and dealing with long term health issues affect student achievement sometimes, but the importance of family is stressed for the school community as well as for the Reservation community. Sally appreciates this and declared, “I know that family comes first and that is not the case, I think, off the Reservation. I feel like they [employers] really care about us as people and support us in our need to be with family”.

In Cassie’s 35 years of experience at Eagle Wing Elementary, she noticed changes throughout the years with family structures. She saw that younger parents are now less intimidated by the school setting and the home to school communication became better over time. She talked about a Native student who went to the state University, but then dropped out and came home because he missed his family support too much and felt strange in not knowing anyone around him. Bowker (1993) discussed how family supports are determinate in the ability of the Native students to persevere in higher education.

Both Cassie and Moriah mentioned how children in the family were more independent and mature for their age because they were often required to take on responsibilities not usually expected of children in white cultures. Cassie said,

They [children] can be more responsible in ways, because they have to step up in the family and do things. Even though it is a hard path to walk as a child sometimes, I think it builds strength in you that is positive in a way.

Moriah noted something similar as she discussed the ways she perceived child rearing of Native families where young children are valued as the eternal hope for the future.

I get the sense that the most precious resource [for Native families] is a child under the age of third grade. And then you get to a semi-independent age and you are viewed as a semi-adult before other cultures might view you as a semi-adult.

Helping your family with major responsibilities such as childcare and other chores is expected, even necessary in poverty-laden environments (Hall & Patrinos, 2006). Moriah reinforced this idea when she talked about students who were responsible for their baby siblings during the night so that parents could work late. This led to tired students in class the next day and probably affected her student's achievement. She also noted that while there may have been a lot of responsibility put on kids at an earlier age, there was not, in her opinion, a lot of training.

My own perceptions of strength in family on the Reservation were similar to the participants' descriptions. I did not come across any entries in my journals to illustrate an experience where I noted strength in Native families. However, several strong personal friendships with Native people in the community have established my belief that these families are strong, extended, close-knit, and are generous in spirit during times of need and plenty. My observations of students' families also confirmed my belief that Reservation families depend on each other in different ways than families in town.

'On the Reservation, you learn to share' is a line I remember from a poem we read in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. One time, I was admiring an Indian ladies earrings; she took them right off and gave them to me. I saw the same thing happen three other times with other people and asked my Native friend about it. She told me that a giving heart is highly sought after and to give is a high honor.

This friend also told me about the giveaways at any special event like funerals, weddings, graduations, powwows, honoring ceremonies, or naming ceremonies. The person who is being honored is the one to give their stuff away. She told me that in the old ways, the giveaways

would include 85% to 90% of all your possessions. You just shared them with everyone else, supporting your community and extended family. I found that to be another expression of strength in family.

Sally talked about how families pulled together to overcome consequences of poverty and housing shortages. She described students who lived in a small trailer without running water along with 15 other family members. She said, "...they did their homework, had things they were looking forward to, were 'A' students, and granted, they didn't have all the necessities in life, but in a way, they did, because they had each other, [their family]".

In my readings about Native families, I found support for the idea that "Indian families have strengths--respect, generosity, and harmony within the context of spirituality..." (Light & Martin, 1996). They went on to say these strengths are significantly stronger than in other American cultures and their findings indicated family strengths help Indians deal with poverty and poor living conditions with optimism.

Bowker's (1993) research acknowledged elements of Native people's strength in family but painted a dismal picture when describing high rates of abuse for Native American girls and women, usually linked with the perpetrator's abuse of alcohol. She said, "...the traditional image of the doting, loving American Indian parent may be a fallacy" (p. 240) and "...there is overwhelming evidence that abusing parents and/or other relatives are seldom punished for their misdeeds" (p.240). This may be where strong family loyalties become detrimental to their group's health as relatives protect each other from legal consequences.

The participants said the value placed on family relationships from both the school and the community fostered their desire and determination to stay. They felt the support from the school district in prioritizing their families was above and beyond other places they had worked

in the past. They also admired the support among the extended family groups of their students and verbalized that it contributed to strength within the school ‘family’ too. It is clear that relationships of support help in keeping teachers satisfied with their jobs (Perrachione et al., 2008).

**Other admired ways.** Each participant noted spirituality and strength in family as reasons they felt contributed to their longevity of employment. Although the following appreciated ways were not mentioned unanimously, each participant felt that one or more of the following traits were a reason for feeling satisfied while working on the Reservation. The participants in their workplaces and in the wider Reservation community enjoyed native humor, communication styles, respect for teachers, and the freedom to take things less seriously.

**Humor.** Participants stated that humor made life and work more enjoyable on the Reservation. Both Dora and Wayland listed humor in the context of work. They said respectively, “It makes me want to come to work every day” and “You can typically enjoy your workday”. Cassie elaborated on humor and laid back perspectives:

I have enjoyed the sense of humor on the Reservation. The people in the community, their perspective on life, I like it. It is a little more down to Earth than some places. We take things really seriously, and they have taught me over the years, to sometimes, just lighten up.

**Communication styles.** Sally described her preference for non-verbal communications she experienced in a richer fashion on the Reservation.

I love the Native way of communicating...you don’t always have to verbalize it. With Indians, I have learned more of the non-verbal ways of communicating and I am very moved by that. I think it is powerful and says so much more sometimes.

Moriah continued in the vein of communication styles and commented on perceptions of understanding one another. She said, “There is a greater ability to understand, like there is a higher emotional intelligence... or awareness on the Rez. Like how each person is more than that one, egocentric part of the brain”.

***Respect for teachers.*** Participants felt respected by the community in their role as teachers. Moriah compared the level of respect for teachers to how grandparents are respected in the Native community and said, “the high level of respect for teachers...in many people’s eyes, it is the highest calling. Anyone who takes care of children, they [Native Americans] have respect for them”.

I felt valued as a teacher as well. The families gave respect to teachers in unique ways. I received gifts of cultural value from parents and grandparents. I was lucky enough to work especially hard with a special needs student one year and remember the awe that my classroom aide displayed when the family honored me with traditionally smoked leather gloves. My aide was a Native woman and told me that it was a high honor to receive them. She gathered other Native ladies who worked at the school around to inspect and admire them. My classroom aide also received gifts from families. Last year, a former student of mine moving up to middle school gave a blanket and beadwork earrings to each teacher she had ever had from preschool on up.

These gifts and personal regard in the community made me feel extremely valued and respected. Although this type of respect was not shown by all Native parents, it was a prominent characteristic of Native families in my career and contributed to my commitment to stay.

The data showed how participants, like me, learned about and expressed great appreciation for Native ways of life. Our ability to come to work in an environment seen as spiritual, laid back, and humorous with strong values of generosity, respect for teachers, and

familial supports strengthened our desire to stay. In spite of the heart wrenching challenges teachers face in educating people in poverty, and instances when these values failed to thrive, we stayed. We were enriched by our experiences with Native ways of life and felt like we learned how to be better people and employees because of our exposure to them. We are motivated to try harder and give more. Moriah observed, “You go home and really think about it. How am I going to be a better person; how am I going to be a better teacher, because it really, really matters”.

## **Theme 2: What I Wish the General Public Knew About my Job**

Again and again, the naïve and unconscious viewpoints of white people from towns surrounding the Reservation were referenced when the participants answered the question, “What do you wish the general public knew about your job?”. Their answers were poignant and thoughtful. In this section I have chosen to use larger blocks of narrative from the interviews interspersed with comments in order to maintain the complete messages of the participants.

**Culture of poverty is not the culture of American Indians.** When asked what they wished the general public knew about their job, many of the teachers thought of misconceptions that exist in the ideas and mindsets of the mainstream white population of Salty Flats, commonly referred to as “town”. Moriah talked about how she was ignorant of the prevalence of these types of viewpoints when she first started to work on the Reservation. She said, “I never knew that there was this depth of disconnect [between the two communities] until I worked there. I think it taught me as much about Salty Flats as it did the Reservation, and [the ignorance], it is a pretty hard pill to swallow”. She talked fast and emphatically,

I’m very hesitant to even talk about my work on the Reservation to people in town because if I say one sentence, if they don’t understand the whole context



around my sentence, it can appear either prejudice or they can cling to it as THE way it is.

Moriah implied there are many contexts in working on the Reservation she believes are not understood by people in Salty Flats. She continues,

Something I think that they could grasp is how people get confused about Native American culture and the culture of poverty. They see drunk Indians and things that just make you cringe, and they see THAT as Native American culture. I was driving with someone the other day and we were passing the casino and there was all this trash on the side of the road and they were like, '[Indians] want us to take care of the Earth and be protecting things and this is how they are taking care of the Earth'.

This is that culture of poverty that is sitting on top of that culture that values the Earth. When I say culture of poverty I mean, the high amounts of incarceration...drug use...mortality; the high amounts of...everything. The depression that comes with not having a job or not having any sense that eventually your life will get better...it is hard. There are beautiful gems still...but it is harder for them to get to the surface. It is because poverty is what poverty is; it is so all encompassing.

And ...the way they deal with poverty, let's say I have a child in my class...whose parents go off to the casino all the time to gamble...let's look at why are you doing that? It's because you want a sense of hope that your life is getting better. Everybody wants hope that things are going to get better [and] a sense that their children could have better lives than themselves. But...there are

not a lot of examples of that. That idea of...not understanding how poverty affects a people, I wish they [Salty Flats] knew better than that.

In her work, Lin (2008) cites Heather Bullock when she discussed how American ideas of individualism and meritocracy create false hope for people in poverty and strengthen the idea that people are responsible for their own poverty. Sonia Nieto (2003) corroborated this idea when she talked about how we have become “complacent as a nation” and the idea that “anyone can make it if they work hard enough” only makes us feel good (p. 93). She goes on to say that even though there are heroic cases of success against all odds, “No child should have to overcome the odds faced by young people who live in poverty. It is not simply individual personalities or willpower that makes the difference” (p.63). The authors advocate for a national commitment to alleviate poverty (Lin & Harris, 2008; Nieto, 2003).

**Educational inequalities and anger.** The question brought out other responses illustrating the participant’s beliefs that there are educational inequalities built into our systems, like testing practices, and assigning interventions taught by unqualified teachers. They also felt anger at the public’s perceptions of teachers on the Reservation. “I think the general public perceives teachers on the Reservation as teachers who can’t get jobs elsewhere,” Wayland said heatedly. You could see the irritation on his face as he continued, “We [teachers on the Reservation] have to be very motivated and have a strong work ethic here...you have to set a goal every day. It’s a tougher job here, and you have to be a better teacher”.

The participants clearly loved and respected their students, worked to understand their identities, held them to high expectations, and were resilient enough to stay. Dora wanted Salty Flats to know, “[I wish people understood] just because someone’s culture is different than yours doesn’t mean that is worse than yours” she said with conviction. She continued, “...our kids

have just as much potential as the kids in town”. She expressed disappointment about the schools in town basing their acceptance of out of district Native kids on test scores. She questioned the validity of the state standardized tests and discussed how being compared as so far behind the national norm on those tests did damage to the student’s self esteem and motivations to achieve. Dora commented, “Just because they [Native students] continue to be behind doesn’t mean that the teachers didn’t work hard and that the students didn’t grow a lot”.

Systems of providing interventions were problematic for Moriah. She talked about students who were failing being assigned an extra class after school taught by an untrained teacher. We discussed how ridiculous it is to require a failing student to attend a class like that. Moriah said, “. . .it is likely they are not learning what they need to know and [are] becoming resentful for the waste of their time”.

Garcia, Haberman, and Gordon (as cited in Nieto, 2003) are researchers dedicated to discovering what makes some teachers successful with under-resourced<sup>5</sup> students. Based on an analysis of their data, Nieto (2003) lists factors or strategies common for the most successful teachers of diverse students. These factors necessarily take time and energy beyond the scope of a teacher’s job description to implement well, substantiating Wayland’s opinion that teachers, who are successful, are “better” on the Reservation. Sally’s views on valuing the community as participants in the education process were also validated. She wished that there were more opportunities for parents to explore new ideas, access knowledge, and understand more fully that they have “. . .a lot to do with the children’s education”. Many of the participants’ qualities are

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<sup>5</sup> Under-resourced means having inadequate resources such as money, equipment, mentors, support systems, or knowledge (Becker et al., 2009).

listed by Nieto (2003) as factors of successful teachers for minority students. She said successful teachers are,

...among the most experienced teachers, place a high value on student's identities (culture, race, language, gender, and experiences, among others), have high expectations for all students, stay committed to students despite obstacles that get in the way, view parents and other community members as partners in education, create a safe haven for learning, dare to challenge the bureaucracy of the school and district, are resilient in the face of difficult situations, [and] care about, respect, and love their students. (pp. 38-39)

**Dysconscious racism and separation of communities.** Moriah and Cassie wished that the communities of Salty Flats and Wolf Creek Reservation would be able to come together more. They pointed out how the culture of privilege, that dysconscious racism, prevents people from stepping outside the comfort zones of their own culture. Salty Flats residents did not have to go to the Reservation for anything they needed. Even if they did, they would be uncomfortable because they were unfamiliar with the community and might be the only white person there. That was not the case for residents of the Reservation. They have to come into town for things they cannot access on the Reservation, like gasoline at a certain time of night, movies, or swimming lessons, and so they step out of their culture often.

Moriah believed that many white people do not know that you cannot buy alcohol on the Reservation and wondered about how that affected the views of the townspeople. She said,

I think wine is a good example, because you can't buy it on the Reservation but you can buy it in town. So of course you only see them [buying alcohol

there]...you are not going to see more Natives buying bread in town, you can get Rez bread at Hadley's Grocery.

She worried, "...there is not even an acknowledgement [in Salty Flats] that there is this culture of privilege and the extent of this culture of privilege, not having to be outside your element".

Dysconscious racism is not typically ugly; it is interwoven into the very fabric of our society (Nieto, 2003). It was wrapped in the uncomfortable feelings preventing Salty Flats residents from participating more fully in Reservation events. I remembered being intimidated when going to the Reservation for the first few times to informal gatherings. I wondered if it was dangerous and deliberately made myself relax about it. I was able to overcome being uncomfortable and after a few experiences became more at ease. I wondered how many people chose not to go to the Reservation for any event, community or private, because it was unfamiliar. I wondered—if the general public had no idea they are so privileged as to not be required to step out of their comfort zones, how could they possibly know how underprivileged their neighbors were? Cassie also worried about this and pointed out a disconnect between the two communities in her heartfelt narrative. She spoke deliberately,

Maybe I want them to know.... just how resilient the children are and there are great people on the Reservation. I feel sad that we are kind of isolated from [Salty Flats] and I think that they don't have knowledge and understanding of the Reservation and the people there. I think they have some misconceptions that [might be alleviated] if they had more interaction somehow in positive ways so that they could see what an amazing place the Reservation is and the amazing people that are there. Some people want to go the Reservation to see it but with no

purpose of sustaining a relationship. 'Let me come in and peek for a minute and then I will be on my way'. I think that the isolation is something to overcome.

**Cultural discontinuity.** Discontinuity is a theory developed by Michel Foucault (1970) and expanded by anthropologists across cultural contexts. Simply put, it says there is a difference in the expectations of students and teachers concerning behavior in the school setting and this leads to failure for students. It can be argued that all students, regardless of ethnic status, experience some cultural discontinuity in their educational experiences. In addition, cultural discontinuity is criticized because it is contradictory to the success of some immigrant students (Ogbu, 1982). Ogbu (1982) defines several levels of cultural discontinuity and proposed they have different affects, some especially difficult for minorities who are participating in an environment controlled by a culture that has consistently denied them opportunity.

Cultural discontinuity can happen at all levels of schooling from early experiences into college. There are many strategies, more than 90 documented, to improve educational outcomes for under-resourced students in higher education institutions (Becker, Krodel, & Tucker, 2009). Yet molding to the expectations and norms of the college institution is difficult to do and proves too large a leap for many students.

Cassie noted this observation about the topic and reminded me of how the teachers in town think Native students are doing really well academically even if they are performing just under adequate.

My daughter is taking an engineering class at the University and she told me about a Native student there who is really bright. She said that people sometimes have impressions of him that show they have certain expectations, like how when he demonstrates knowledge of something, they are like...'Wow, you knew that?'

Like they didn't expect him to be as capable of a student as he is. I think that is really an obstacle for the youth coming off the Reservation, just that expectation of the larger culture and isolation at the University. I know they have groups now to support the Native population at the University. I hope that helps.

Becker et al., (2009) argue that measures already in place to mitigate cultural discontinuity are only modestly improving student outcomes and call for a paradigm shift in the premise of higher education. They call for changes across the board from accreditation standards to student services to classroom level teaching. Seeking a way to transform higher education institutions they worked with Ruby Payne, an expert in poverty's influence on student outcomes, to provide a strategic plan to circumvent institutions starting a corrective action before truly understanding why the condition of student failure occurred (Becker et al., 2009). Together Becker and Payne came up with some strategies to reduce the affects of cultural discontinuity including explicit instruction for both teachers and students on the causes of poverty and economic class systems of the United States. Along with civic engagement through experiential learning they theorized those strategies would "...give value to the world of the under-resourced student, resulting in educational experiences that are far more productive, engaging, and community based" (Becker et al., 2009, p. 11).

Some believe that a culturally integrated education would be a good strategy to minimize cultural discontinuity for students in Indian country while others believe that it may draw attention away addressing the political and economic issues facing Native students (Bowker, 1993; LeTendre, 2002; Ogbu, 1982; Villegas). It is difficult to say which strategies might make an impact on student achievement without more research. Bowker (1993) said that some Native women have a distinct viewpoint about the school's efforts to reduce cultural discontinuity by

adding culture classes. In her study, one Native woman said, “Once the school gets it [the language, culture, and spirituality] it becomes trivialized. If the Native language is important to us as Indian people, we should be teaching it, not the school” (p.161). Several others in the study said they were dissatisfied with the superficial knowledge about the culture taught at school and one participant proposed, “I don’t believe in a culturally relevant curriculum. I believe that we should promote a multicultural curriculum where Indian children learn about the world they live in, and not just the Reservation or Indian culture” (p. 165).

Regardless of which strategy would theoretically affect student achievement the most, teachers need to first be aware of the existence of the cultural discontinuity theory and how it applies to the population they serve. Tribes should seriously consider the cultural curriculum in school and be cautious of who they want teaching their kids to be Indian. Understanding that the cultural discontinuity theory may be a factor in an Indian student’s failure to achieve but not a completely convincing argument for why they fail may help the school decide which strategy to implement.

I believe a stronger focus on learning more about the sociological and political aspects of the education process are important for teachers to be more effective in educating minority populations. Providing teachers with that opportunity early in their careers might increase the attainment of school improvement efforts and help them feel satisfied with their jobs. Villegas (1988) said, “...culturally sensitive remedies to educational problems of oppressed minority students that ignore the political aspect of school are doomed to failure” (pp. 262-263).

In summary, the participants had many ideas about what they wanted the general public to know about their jobs, the people they served, and the community they functioned within. They understood the culture of poverty appeared so entangled with the culture of Native



Americans that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two, but they wanted the people to know that the culture of Native Americans is so much more than behaviors engendered by despair in poverty. The persistent lack of opportunity and stereotypical attitudes towards Indian people and children were other points brought up. Getting the public to become aware of dysconscious racism and help them understand these views contributed to the inequities that faced Native Americans was thought of as a worthy goal. They wanted the public to know that choosing to participate in Reservation events could bring border town populations closer and encourage a mutual growth in deeper understandings of neighboring communities. Finally, if both communities explored the possibility of the cultural discontinuity theory as an incomplete explanation for why Native students fail they could begin to identify other avenues to support the success of Indian students in the classroom. If the public were aware of these things they may be more likely to appreciate the challenges that teachers and residents face there. If this vision were realized it could potentially impact Native people's experiences in town, their students' success in schools, and teachers may be more inclined to remain committed to their jobs on the Reservation.

### **Theme 3: A Sense of Being Needed**

“In all our contacts it is probably the sense of being really needed...which gives us the greatest satisfaction and creates the most lasting bond” –Eleanor Roosevelt

Teachers are needed to educate the young people of the world. We can help students learn what systems contribute to social and economic disparity. Teachers are needed so that students can learn to think critically and rationally about issues that impact their lives (Nieto, 2003; Villegas & Irvine, 2002). Teachers help students imagine themselves and interpret their

realities. We are needed to empower the mind and soul to achieve its fullest potential. We are the architects of future generations.

The data showed the participants believed that they are important and make a difference in their students' lives. They believed the "best teachers are needed most" here on the Reservation. They felt like people with their background knowledge, experience, and devotion are required on the Reservation. Moriah stated that she felt that, "If you leave, there could be a hole left. I could be replaced more easily in other places, but not here:. That is one reason she stayed. Nieto (2003) confirmed that schools serving a high minority and low socioeconomic status population are indeed less likely to have as broad a range of teacher applicants as other more privileged schools.

The participants noted challenges in educating students living with poverty and injustice but offered endless hope for their potential and possibilities. Although these teachers did not describe themselves as teachers for social and educational justice, what they said tells us they had that mindset. They are angry and sickened by the social ills that defeat our children and seek to teach students to be critical thinkers who are aware of their rights, responsibilities, and choices. They are committed to ideals of fairness and equality and caution against feeling frustrated or incapable. They also feel a need for more resources and knowledge to more effectively teach Native students.

Wayland discussed his disillusionment with the tenacity of poverty and its effects on families.

I thought the kids would want a better life instead of just accepting what they got.

I want more for them, but I understand you get used to wearing hand-me-down

clothes and your brother's old boots. You get used to it, and you accept it, because that's just what it is.

Wayland explained his frustrations with the apathy he sees, "...apathy with the kids, apathy with the parents" and clarified what he meant by wanting more for them, "...[being successful] is more than just being able to make money and buy stuff; it's about establishing an identity...". He went on to state, "It's a tougher job here and you have to be a better teacher because the kids are less motivated...there are so many obstacles to overcome". He echoed what Nieto (2003) and Lin & Harris (2008), said; apathy in students, and their parent's belief that they have little to contribute to the academic education of their children are characteristic of people living in generational poverty.

Sally talked effusively about the level of poverty she saw among some families on the Reservation. She felt their needs that were not being met. She was angered by "the stereotypes the kids endured", and "...how prejudiced our white culture is toward Native Americans...". This awareness is one of the reasons Sally lists for staying and said that she "...likes being a positive white model for them. They have a lot of negative experiences with white people so being the bright spot in their lives and being perceived as a person who really cares is awesome".

Sally also felt that it was her responsibility to be part of their social capital and a source for students and parents in locating information and resources. She continually made herself available. She worked to emphasize that 'if you don't know the answer to a question, there is always a place to go find it'. She said, "If you want to learn how to do something, someone has that skill, look outside yourself, maybe your Uncle knows, or maybe we could go here and ask". She taught students how to navigate information systems and get comfortable with asking questions.

Books, paper, pencils, and markers are resources that Sally was able to send home with students on a regular basis and said, "...that is a real plus of mine". She did public relations at book fairs, literacy lunches, and other family involvement efforts at the school and advocated for parents to understand that they are their child's first and best teacher.

Another way that Sally felt she was needed was in the realm of supporting the idea of having a more equitable ratio of Native staff in higher-level positions within the school. She worked to promote and encourage Native staff at Eagle Wing Elementary to complete their education degrees and become teachers themselves. She provided information and knowledge about how to find ways to do this and said, "I am hoping that when I retire, I can groom a Native person to take over the library. I think it is important for them [students] to see a role model from their own community".

Cassie felt her value to community when she worked as a mentor for new teachers and helped them begin to understand the population they served. She said that she takes her job as a mentor seriously and tried to emphasize learning about the culture of poverty and how that affects student behavior and achievement. She shared knowledge garnered from years of experience and enrichment and taught new teachers how to be sensitive to the stereotypes of Native Americans in literature. She said, "sometimes, if you do not have the [cultural training] background, you skip right over it and do not notice, you are not aware of how literature portrays things inaccurately or insensitively". She taught new teachers how to work at validating student's cultural identity by using literature that empowers Indians as more than helpers to white people. They would practice looking critically at curriculum together for ways to improve its cultural accuracy. Like Cassie, Nieto (2003) commented on the need to be critical consumers of curriculum, especially as teachers of minorities.

Cassie felt that the parent involvement in the school has improved over her 35 year tenure and illustrated her belief that one way we can continue to work for equity in the school systems is to affirm parent's sense of contribution to their children's education. She told about how she elevates the importance of teacher parent relationships in her mentoring and what affect that might have. She said,

Sometimes I have parents that say 'whatever you do, you know best'. Their vote of confidence was overwhelming. They trust you to be doing it, and they think that they do not have the expertise when actually they are the front line for that knowledge. I don't think that some of them realize that even yet. We have to convey to them that yes, you are an integral part in all this. I think those efforts have increased parent teacher conference turnouts.

Finally, Cassie talked about her ideas of what it means to be successful, her sense of being needed, and how she preserves hope in her profession.

I really do believe that there are many success stories that may not fit the 'occupation' success, but the ones that have become good mothers or fathers, and they can raise a child that loves reading, they are successes too. You have to have that eternal hope for the possibilities that may be for them. You have to believe that if you change even one child's life in a positive way, you have made a difference.

Understanding that these inequities exist for our students and knowing that we did what we could to prevent them from being perpetuated sustained our drive to be here and fed our need to contribute to society. A special love for those who are underprivileged existed for us. For me, my personal history is at the root of why I stayed. I hoped that my students would be lucky

enough to find their way out of poverty and dysfunction, like I did. I wanted to see them achieve an acceptable standard of living and I wanted to stick around to encourage them because I felt they needed me to.

Moriah knew from the start of her career that she wanted to work in a high needs area and considered inner city work. She said, “I feel like I have enough energy and I’m kind of a giver, just by nature. And I wanted to be where I was really needed”. She thought, “...well, this is way to work with impoverished people [when offered the opportunity to work on the Reservation] and still be within my own culture, this rural culture”.

Moriah’s discussions during her interview centered on equitable treatment and opportunities for Native Americans in many contexts. She is dedicated to being a change agent for equality in education, even at the risk of giving too much. She expressed her frustration with staff attitudes at Tonemah School and Native perspectives on educating Indian children, that in her opinion, perpetuated stereotypes. She described her perception of some staff member’s attitudes.

Their attitude says, ‘you’re young, you think you’re going to make some difference in these people’s lives, but you’re not’. You know that kind of cynicism that sinks in. It’s like, ok, if we all had my attitude instead of your attitude, we’d have my way instead of your way.

She goes on to describe that it is not just cynical attitudes that she feels appear to limit the success of Native students. She noted several professional development sessions she had experienced about Indian education which had what she considered erroneous and conflicting messages about how Native children learn best, based on one person’s viewpoint that was not necessarily research-based.

Eventually, it was so much, they can't work in groups, they only work in groups, or you guys [white teachers] shouldn't expect this and you can't expect that.

Don't lower my expectations, especially when I am having really good results.

Anything that is going to let my kids have a world view that is larger, less scary;

I'm going to bring it. Anything that will help me expand their world and make their world accessible to them, I will use.

Moriah talked about things she saw as more important than just getting the academic success of students in place. She discussed how she would speak with her students about coping with events or consequences they had no control over such as missing school to stay home with the baby so their mother could go to work.

Those kinds of conversations are a lot more meaningful. You know, even if somebody is to drop out later, understanding within...within these different proxies what they do and do not have control over and the choices they have. That is more important.

In Bowker's (1993) study, she interviewed more than 1,000 Native American women about their experiences in education. She found that a large number of them cited teachers who understood why they were late or missing from school as instrumental to their persistence in graduating. Attending to family responsibilities pulls students from the classroom at times and caring teachers are needed to help them understand how to cope with conflicting responsibilities.

Moriah felt her strengths were especially suited to her job. She provided a safe, affirming environment, and understood how poverty and trauma affects students. She commented on how trauma, such as losing a primary caregiver, can cause the loss of a year's worth of academic

growth, “It is likely that our children will suffer a major tragedy before they get to 6th grade, so I try to keep them a year ahead”.

Moriah talked about the importance of building an identity and how in cultural contexts, such as powwow’s the student’s typical reluctance to perform above and beyond the group disappears. She related that to having a cultural identity. She told of how she perceives her work on levels other than academics.

There are real consequences for how hard you work. It is important to realize that we are teaching more than academics....we are trying to help these people [kids] get the strength, the sense of self that it takes to be [successful] in this very hard place. Part of that is making a room feel so safe, comfortable, and affirming of oneself. But it is a bigger job [than getting] these first graders up to second grade status by the end of the year.

Another perspective on being needed is presented in Dora’s data. She said, “I think I do make a difference and that is an important part of how I feel about my work”. She classified her perception of her strengths on the Reservation into two categories, academic, and for the overall student. This reiterated Moriah’s beliefs on why the Reservation needed teachers like herself.

Dora felt like she made a difference on both sides of the coin. She discussed an incident in which she confronted her dysconscious racism to validate student experiences in a socially conscious way. She told a story about how she responded to a child’s swearing in class,

I remember working the first month here, and having a kid say a swear word, and thinking...that’s not right, you can’t say that...but then I had to stop and think, maybe in their family they do say that. So you have to rephrase and say, ‘that is



not a word we use at school'. It is not my place to judge what their family does, but it is my job to teach them what is expected in society.

Dora spoke of the challenge of not having effective tools to use with struggling students and knew there must be something out there that is effective and research-based. She wished she knew where to go to learn it. She verbalized how she thought society has a narrow viewpoint of minorities and wonders about the bigger picture of why that is. Dora wanted to know what resources were available to teach effectively in this culture. She said,

Why is there a breakdown in family, and how much do boarding schools have to do with that? It is not an excuse to not read or not do your homework, but it is a reason that we need to work around and figure out how we can make this work now, given these circumstances.

The Reservation needs teachers who are thinking in these ways. Ways that promote a deeper understanding of the culture they serve and how they can improve students' lives through education and emotional support. Dora clearly communicated that she enjoys her work and thinks she is needed. She expressed,

I like being a bright spot in their day, so if they have negativity at home or in their classrooms because they are not very good at school, I can make a difference in letting them know that yes, you can be successful in things and you are valued as a human being. I like to go to work for those reasons....

I felt like I was needed because of my efforts at validating differences in the classroom. I tried to create a safe environment where children were allowed freedom to interact together on projects and make lots of mistakes. I told my kids, "If you are not making a mistake, you are not learning" and helped them realize that different people make different mistakes, we all learn

differently. I also wanted them to know that fair is not always the same for everyone. Fairness is relative to what people needed to achieve their fullest potential.

I did projects that helped students look outside themselves to find differences and similarities with others. For example, when we were learning about fractions in 4<sup>th</sup> grade we did a project with the book that illustrated how the world lives called *If the World Were a Village* by David Smith. David Smith asks you to imagine the population of the world as 100 and then he breaks those 100 down showing demographic differences in the world. We converted fractions of 100 to equivalent fractions of 360 and then used protractors to make pie graphs showing the information graphically. Many students were surprised at how many people on Earth are non-white, how many could not read, how many lived without enough food or clean water, who owned a computer, and who had the most money. The conversations the kids had as they worked together were thoughtful and rich.

I wrote a small entry in my journal about a 1<sup>st</sup> grade class early in my career. I had a boy who identified himself as a girl in his self-portraits and preferences for all things girly. He even verbalized that he was a girl to his classmates and me.

The kids looked at each other when Jason [not his real name] announced he was a girl ... as we were getting ready for recess. They looked at the yarn pompoms on his shoes and the drawings of fairies he had on his desk. The girls smiled at each other and one bold boy said to Jason, "You are a boy".

It was uncomfortable but honest. They all just stood there looking at each other, not moving or anything. Jason said, "I am a boy, but I'm really a girl". And just like that, he came out. I saw the look of confusion settle into acceptance on the bold boy's face, no disdain, no disgust, just acceptance... he turned to go

outside. Three students gathered around Jason, two girls and a boy, and asked him, “You wanna play ‘not it’?”

This was an enlightening situation for me and I loved that I did not have to intervene in any way. Even though I could tell that some of the kids still thought it was funny or weird that Jason acted like a girl, they did not try to make him feel out of place, they just asked him why if they needed to know, and then listened to his answer. I acted like it was no big deal and totally acceptable that he thought he was girl and everyone else did too, at least in front of me. In these ways, I hoped to further the idea of tolerance for differences, acceptance, and love.

Teachers are needed to help students question rules, regulations, and beliefs that are not in their best interest and to facilitate critical conversations about issues of inequity that affect their lives. On a recent 4<sup>th</sup> grade field trip, I had the opportunity to have this kind of conversation with my class. Even with my years of experience teaching on the Reservation, I felt limited by my lack of historical and cultural knowledge and am often confronted by assumptions I have left unexamined, my own dysconscious racism. I have improved over the years in recognizing good opportunities to approach important ideas about differing viewpoints with my students and was pleased to have this one.

On our field trip, the guide for the museum tour was a woman who had worked on the Reservation for years. She showed us the town buildings that had been restored and beautified for display. She was very proud of them. In transition to another site, she made a comment to me, “They don’t really take care of their culture out there, do they?” One of my students snapped her head around and looked at us. I immediately felt uncomfortable and worried that my students did too. She may have been referring to preserving historical buildings as her idea of culture in that context. I quickly ended the conversation but then had a discussion the next day with my

students after I had time to think about it. We discussed what culture meant to them. We had been reading in our social studies book and one student gave that definition of culture; the shared beliefs and values of a group. Others mentioned tribal affiliations and holiday family traditions. Still others mentioned languages you speak, culture classes in school, and the culture center near Hill Valley. We talked about how culture means something different to each person. We asked ourselves if our guide had meant to be rude. It was a quiet, serious conversation where everyone spoke; everyone had an opinion and I felt like each student took something new away from it that expanded their knowledge of themselves and gave them access to other perspectives.

To begin realizing the potential for improving minority students' experiences in school, teachers must be attentive to potential learning situations like these. The ways in which we questioned our previous knowledge and how we immersed ourselves in the community we served gave us the opportunity to know more about the different ways in which the world was perceived. We were better teachers because we realized that working to understand another's experiences and sharing how that happens with students, were essential to expanding our effectiveness with the Native community in the arena of social justice.

Sometimes we felt as if we were not doing enough, the situation would never get better, that we could not take it anymore, and that we could never know enough. Then we realized that everything we did mattered and we resolved to continue improving our skills in teaching for social justice. Paulo Freire wrote in his letters to cultural workers,

As far as making the world, our world, a better place goes, there is no need to distinguish between modest and extravagant actions. Anything that can be done with competence, loyalty, clarity, perseverance, anything that strengthens the

fight against the powers of non-love, selfishness, and evil, is equally important.

(Freire, 1998, p. 51)

Filling this need, as we perceive it, motivates us to stay in the trenches of our jobs.

Educating the young people of America is no easy task anywhere across our nation. There are similar situations, in inner city or rural schools, where populations affected by poverty and discriminatory practices struggle to succeed academically. Regardless of other situations, this is one reason that teachers on the Wolf Creek Reservation said they stayed; they felt like they are needed here more.

#### **Theme 4: Acceptance**

Social or cultural norms are responses or actions expected by the larger population, like getting a job, or going to school. It is what you do so that you are not left feeling out of place.

The definition of a social norm is,

A pattern of behavior expected within a particular society in a given situation. The shared belief of what is normal and acceptable shapes and enforces the actions of people in a society. Those who do not follow their social norms are considered eccentric or even deviant and are typically stigmatized. (Social Norm, n.d.)

People want to feel accepted and appreciated for their contributions. They also desire unconditional love and to be able to feel that they are okay just the way they are. The participants all experienced some level of stigmatization at certain points in their lives leading them to feel gratitude for the acceptance they now feel in their teaching positions and in the wider Reservation community.

**Experiences in feeling different.** The participants described incidents they had experienced where they felt unaccepted, different, odd, uncomfortable, or ostracized. Failing to

follow the social norms of the group they were participating in, whether knowingly or unknowingly, was the cause of those feelings. Much of the alienation was ongoing or lasted several years.

For example, Sally described her experiences of being accepted on the Reservation and implied that she did not always feel accepted in other situations.

I think that the reason, one of the reasons that I was very attracted to working on the Reservation is that I have lived as a minority before.... Being a minority ... allowed me to see how it felt...to have people have misconceptions about me and expectations of me that I didn't understand.

This experience gave a context in which Sally realized the way people perceive you is not always the way you really are. She discussed how disconcerting it was to be viewed as the authoritative “voice for Americans” while living among people who looked very different from her. She also described how being confronted with norms different from her own made her social world difficult to navigate. Bowker (1993) discussed how Native American women expressed these same feelings and experiences when describing their passage through formal education.

Cassie has worked on the Reservation for 35 years. Her love for her students and respect for the culture on the Reservation came out in her discussions of the community. She talked about how she felt isolated and misunderstood as a school-aged child in a parochial school where most students were Hispanic. “Just knowing how [being a minority] feels sometimes, makes me more accepting of people of color and diversity and I don't see them as very different than me”.

The participants' experiences with these isolating situations in one form or another built a sense of appreciation for the acceptance they felt on the Reservation. Mistakes are made when adapting to unfamiliar social norms (Nieto, 2003). The same is true for the participants when

they began their careers in the school systems and community of the Reservation. Many of them described an experience where they violated a social norm. In my experience, making a mistake like this on the Reservation was usually accepted without a feeling of lingering oddness that I have felt in other places. Someone would set me straight, let me in on the expectation, and I learned more about my students and where I worked. Diana Wiig once said, “If it comes from the heart, they [Native Americans] don’t care [if you make a mistake or ask a ‘stupid’ question]”.

Nieto (2003) and Villegas & Irvine, (2010) found that teachers who have experienced inequality and alienation in their own schooling and lives can relate to minority students in ways that other teachers cannot. Perhaps this increased the participant’s self-efficacy and satisfaction with their work, and indirectly, their retention. Our experiences increased our abilities to accept differences and because of that, we are more accepted on the Reservation.

**Interpreting feelings of acceptance.** Each participant described their experiences on the Reservation in different ways. It was not always easy to discern their responses as being related to feelings of acceptance. Participants portrayed their feelings of acceptance in terms of students, school community, and Reservation community. Some responses were long as the participants talked it out, while others were short and to the point. There were also statements alluding to feelings of rejection as a contrast to the acceptance they now feel.

Sally expressed feelings of acceptance from the kids saying, “you know that some adults will act like they don’t see you and turn the other way. But the kids just aren’t that way; they are excited to see you in any situation”. She continued, and gave different reasons for why she felt like she is accepted on the Reservation. She felt that she had never experienced a racist response in her years on the Reservation—even as a probation officer—and described how she did not feel better than anybody just because she might have more money, material things, or available

resources. Sally summed it up saying, “I think because I see myself as equal, different, yet equal...I think that I am accepted more”.

It was clear that Sally felt accepted and valued by the community. She has attended a church whose congregation is primarily Native for 10 years which adds to her sense of community. She also comments on her hobby of photography and how that connects her to the Reservation.

One of the reasons I take pictures is that they allow me in...to be in their community. I’ve taken thousands of pictures of kids, adults, and elders. Not only do I take their pictures but I *share* them with them. That is outside of my job... I feel like that’s my gift that I can give back to them. The coolest thing is that they accept it, they want it, and they even ask for it sometimes.

As a librarian, Sally sometimes struggled to feel valued in the school community. She worked to make herself that person who filled a gap in the operations of the school and contributed meaningfully. She expressed appreciation for the respect and value she felt from her principal. She said, “Feeling like a real educator is a challenge. The principal is great, the first to say, ‘she’s the teacher and then librarian’, one to understand my educational background as well as my skills”.

It was obvious that Sally felt as if she was an integral part of her school community, loved by her students, and accepted into the wider cultural community. She felt satisfied and encouraged to remain employed at Eagle Wing Elementary.

Wayland provided brief and sometimes curt answers in his interview. His outlook on the functionality of his school board is poor, and he is cynical about the school system’s ability to have positive impacts on students and by extension, the social situations that challenge the



Reservation. Despite his cynicism, he talked about his students with pride, admiration, and articulated several ideas that alluded to feeling accepted. Wayland noted, “I appreciate the sense of humor that some of the kids have. You can tell some kinds of jokes here that may be not be acceptable in other communities”. He went on to say, “I feel like they ‘get’ me. I’ve got students coming into class even when they are not in this class, just to check up, see how things are going, to say they miss my class”.

Dora framed her perceptions of being accepted in a comparison of school staff members who are employed in town and staff who are employed on the Reservation.

I really like the staff at our school. I look at the staff that works in town and I think I’m not perfect enough to work in town. It is intimidating, and I think the staff at my school is really human.

Dora described how she felt as if none of the female teachers in town were divorced implying that being divorced is in contradiction to her social norms and made her feel inferior. In contrast, she felt more accepted in the Reservation school. She also mentioned that feelings of acceptance from the Native community came as a package; they accepted her because she was part of the school and since Dora believed that the community saw the school as a positive thing, so was she, by association.

Cassie found that earning trust from the community was the gateway to acceptance. She talked about how it was important to prove that you were willing to accept them and learn about who they are in order for them to do the same for you. In addition, she disclosed how she felt this type of acceptance took time.

I think when you first come into the situation [teaching on the Reservation], I felt they kind of reserved themselves a little bit to see if they were going to accept you

Because [they might be thinking] ‘are you gonna stick around’ or ‘are you gonna be one of those people that just doesn’t see that we have anything to offer’ or ‘are you going to deserve us’.

Although Moriah did not use the word accepted or acceptance in her narrative, she was originally drawn to teach on the Reservation because of a “deep, really understanding, soul level connection” with her boyfriend of four years who was Native American. He died when Moriah was a sophomore in college. She felt this loss intensely and described how her acceptance into his family was carried into her experiences as a teacher on the Reservation. She said,

When I came back, I was still very much a part of Ansel’s family. Lots of the things I had with him, I had then with my classroom....Just having that continuation of the connection I made is a big part of why I stayed.

I found several entries describing my own feelings of pleasure and acceptance. I felt accepted when I was given my ‘Indian’ nickname, when I was spontaneously invited to be on an all Native shinny<sup>6</sup> team while attending a powwow, and when I felt a parent’s approval of my work as a first year teacher.

I worked at Tonemah School where our lead cook was known to be an influential but difficult and crabby person. She is the one who gave me my ‘Indian’ name. It took me a long time to earn her respect. I think she finally came to accept me after she saw how I loved my students. She knew I did not hold it against her when she snapped at me in the middle one of her small frustrations. She liked how I would sing aloud in the hallways before and after school while doing my work. We finally got to know each other well enough to share stories about our families. We both have multiple siblings, half of whom are addicted to alcohol or drugs creating

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<sup>6</sup> Shinny is a rough game reminiscent of field hockey traditionally played by Native Americans.

intense sorrow and anger for us. After two years she gave me a nickname, Songbird, but spoke it in her Native language. It was a big deal and made me feel truly accepted by this member of the school and tribal community. Many of the Native employees began to call me Songbird. I wrote about it in my journal saying,

Bell, yes Bell, the crabby lady in a good mood today, gave me a nickname. I'm in.

I'm finally in. I can't believe I have an 'Indian name'! I know, it is not really an

Indian name, but I have an 'Indian name'!

I realized how 'in' I was when I told the staff at Tonemah School that after nine years; I was going to teach at another Reservation school just up the road. It was the Native staff members, especially, who tried to persuade me to stay. One of my administrators, a respected member of the tribe, came to me. She cried, and told me that I was Indian inside. She asked me to please stay. Later her brother, a teacher in the district, came to me and lectured me about how the parents were counting on me to be there to teach their children as they grew up, how they needed me to stay. It was heart-wrenching because I knew they loved me and accepted me exactly for the reasons that made me feel so different outside the Reservation. I also wrote about that experience.

They love me because I am like them. That's why I love them too. My past experiences in life. They know that my life was hard, that my family is addicted and poor, and that I am a middle school drop-out. I escaped from a long-term abusive relationship to come here and teach. All these perspectives that make me feel so weird in some circles is why they love me, because those experiences help me understand them more.

In time, the community was willing to believe that the participants' hearts were truly committed to loving their children; we were striving to understand their ways. They saw what we had to offer was genuine and that we openly accepted differences. After we gained their trust, we felt they embraced our naiveté about their culture and mentored us in our growing knowledge.

I came here to heal, to find my way to a path of improvement, to drag myself away from addiction and loss, and they accepted me. I didn't know how good it would feel or how hard it would be either. To be patient enough, strong enough, accepting enough to withstand the bitterness that comes out of inequality, sometimes unexpectedly directed at you, and still continue to work at developing the symbiotic relationship.

This reciprocal acceptance is what heartens us to stay. Differences, quirks, misunderstandings worked through, and new learning all accepted and resolved into our deeper beliefs and values for this community. We stay because we are enriched by this community; we accept the people and in turn, are accepted by them.

### **Recommendations**

Retaining teachers on the Reservation can eliminate costly turnover. The cost of teacher turnover has at least three implications. There is a potential cost to student learning when an experienced teacher leaves the district to be replaced by a novice, a potential organizational cost because a new teacher will not have the same continuity of professional development and shared vision as the exiting teacher, and a financial cost to the district in recruiting and training a new teacher (Johnson et al., 2005). Listening to what teachers have to say about why they stay on the Reservation may help school leaders provide the kinds of supports and trainings that increase the effectiveness and satisfaction of their staff.

## **Participant Recommendations**

Participants stated they valued many things about their communities that encouraged them to stay. Feeling accepted by the community, appreciation for Native values as they experienced them, and a sense of being needed, really needed as they unknowingly teach for social justice were reasons they stay on the Reservation.

Although the participants are already committed to staying in their teaching positions on the Reservation, they gave recommendations for what would make them feel more valued and therefore more likely to persist in their work. Three key ideas were revealed as they expressed themselves. They feel like support, encouragement, and recognition from the administration, including the school board, was imperative to morale. Secondly, they suggested that school leaders exhibit an understanding of the particular challenges they face in educating a population of students living in poverty and develop realistic expectations of the time and resources needed to implement initiatives. Finally, thoughtful professional development and new information and orientation for teaching a culturally diverse population were also recommended as a condition for job satisfaction.

## **Researcher Recommendations**

After reviewing the data and literature, and stepping back to look at the bigger picture of what really motivates non-Native teachers to enjoy longevity on the Reservation, I recognized that teacher satisfaction is most influenced by student achievement and growth, a sense of effectiveness or positive self efficacy, and a desire to make a lasting difference in the lives of their students while empowering them to combat social injustices. Based on those observations school leaders should consider the following recommendations as ways to achieve teacher retention and a potentially more effective school.

**The vision.** A shared vision and mission for the school district needs developed and promoted. Although the district may have a vision and/or mission statement to empower students to be successful in two worlds, how it is employed in everyday lessons and goals needs specific augmentation to deepen its meaning. Recognizing the implications of the cultural discontinuity theory may help delineate a course of action for schools. The help of the tribe to determine a focus for cultural instruction of students on the Reservation must be revisited with a renewed understanding of the how the schooling process perpetuates the political and economic challenges faced by American Indian people.

**Professional development.** A sustained effort to provide ongoing professional development for all teachers in the district, including cultural mentors and culture teachers, about the underlying causes of persistent generational poverty and the effects of economic class systems on student achievement may transform how teachers teach and how students learn and perhaps increase student achievement. Teachers need a continually refreshed awareness of research based pedagogy and innovative ideas for teaching children of poverty and cultural diversity. Strategies for teaching with cultural responsiveness need to be reaffirmed each year.

Both Native and non-Native teachers might benefit from professional development on dysconscious racism and how the distribution of power in America is expressed through the schooling process. Teachers need to be encouraged to develop an understanding for the historical perspective of the relationship Native Americans have developed with the government of the United States concerning the education of children on Reservation lands. Eloquent reports issued by both United States government and Indian agencies illustrating such relationships should be required reading for all school employees. This may help individuals gain an understanding of how efforts to eliminate social inequality, including education, has exacerbated it.

**Native culture in the school.** The role of cultural mentors, culture teachers, and staff involvement in integrating culture into content areas need to be redefined. Scheduling culture classes as a specials class allows flexibility in providing planning time for teachers during the school day; however, it may be more beneficial to teachers and students to have culture classes integrated into the teaching day so that teachers, especially non-Native teachers, can also benefit from the culture class.

Time provided for culture teachers, cultural mentors, and grade band teachers to plan lessons, integrate academic content culturally, and develop a bank of activities designed to empower students through affirmation of their identities would be helpful in realizing a true integration of the Native culture into classrooms. There is a need for the school leaders and tribes to reevaluate research about the cultural discontinuity theory and study briefs produced by both the Native American community and the United States government about the status of education for American Indian people. In addition, the political history of tribes needs more emphasis in the cultural curriculum for the benefit of both teachers and students.

An effort to enlighten students about the differences in economic classes, the barriers in overcoming them, and the causes of poverty may help them understand how education can be helpful to them. Explicit instruction about hidden rules among social classes and school settings are necessary for student learning to become relevant and situated in life rather than looking at education as a preparation for life (Payne & Blair, 2005). Increasing teacher knowledge of how poverty is perpetuated with strategies for teaching with cultural responsiveness may improve the educational experiences of Native students. Uniting the efforts of culture teachers with classroom teachers in affirming student's identities has the potential to impart cultural wisdom to students and increase their academic achievement more than either of these things individually.

Cultural mentors need to be available for teachers on the Reservation; some districts on Wolf Creek Reservation already have cultural mentors in place. Opportunities for the cultural mentors and culture teachers to enhance their skills in effective mentorship should be sought through professional development opportunities.

Sharing a collective vision for the school, providing thoughtful professional development and a relevant political and cultural perspective for new teachers is important in nurturing a teacher's passion and idealism for making a difference in students' lives. Soliciting a renewed interest from tribal education agencies in the study of new research on how schools and culture are integrated will potentially give culture mentors opportunities to develop their skills. In following these recommendations school leaders can increase the likelihood of teacher retention. It could empower teachers to employ knowledge and tools to increase Native students' academic persistence and completion of high school. Additionally, campaigning to increase satisfaction of teachers and students by giving them a strong purpose for their work on the Reservation through the lens of social justice can encourage teacher retention, validate student identities, and may even attract the most pertinent teachers to the Reservation.

### **Summary**

My career choice has provided me with frustration, anger, anxiety, and disappointment. It has also given me more joy in my life than anything other than my family. The change I have undergone through the long process of attaining a Master's degree in education has been remarkable. I have learned so much about how to feel more effective at what I do. I began this project at a time when the pain and frustration of seeing so many young lives becoming impaired by social dysfunction was becoming too much to bear. I loved my students and had poured so



much of my energy into them, so I felt deep sorrow when I saw them making mistakes that would increase their likelihood of continued disadvantages in life. I thought that I could not do it anymore, that I could not see so many of my students become encumbered with the same impediments to a higher standard of living as their parents faced. I was disappointed and felt like nothing I did was going to make any difference anyway. So, I was ready to leave the Reservation, but then I found hope.

Learning about what other teachers had to say about why they stayed; those serious conversations that resonated with me helped me know that I was not alone in my struggles. I revised my attitude about my job. I discovered in those critical conversations that others wanted to do more to change the system, too. I began to believe ideas about teaching for social justice might positively influence our schools on the Reservation. I began to accept disappointments and self doubt for what they were and determined they would not keep me down.

An important part of what has contributed to my renewed sense of purpose for teaching on the Reservation is my new understanding harvested through my research. I have learned an amazing amount about topics including teaching with cultural sensitivity, dysconscious racism, affects of poverty, institutional discriminations, policies affecting Indian people, Native perspectives on education, and principles in teaching for social justice. Connecting these ideas has helped me define a potential new role for myself on the Reservation. As a math coordinator, perhaps I can influence attitudes and instruction with a social justice perspective. Perhaps I can begin building momentum for our school systems on the Reservation to employ orientation strategies for new teachers that will enhance their understanding of inequities in our political world; perhaps they will imagine themselves able to mitigate them. It is time to push ourselves to bring more than a superficial integration of culture to our Native schools. The support and

resources of the tribal agencies to explore what the research says about the integration of culture in schools is worthy of pursuit. Perhaps they will be able to help the schools redefine what cultural integration is. Hopefully it would include a goal for imparting a strong understanding of the economical and political issues facing Native Americans today.

Undergirding the new knowledge is an awakened appreciation for things I love about the community I work within. The realization of the unique opportunity to accommodate spirituality into my work environment reminded me of why I stay. My sincere appreciation for Native ways of knowing was recognized again. I am inspired to be a better teacher for my Reservation community and to continue learning about issues that are important in educating poor and minority students. I am invigorated, refreshed, and ready for the next chapter in this life I have chosen as a teacher on the Wolf Creek Reservation.

### **Direction for Future Research**

Bowker (1993) suggested that Indian students sometimes view Native teachers as just another 'white' person. She discussed how Phyllis Young of the American Indian Movement (AIM) viewed the Education and Self Determination Act of 1975 (ESDA) as an influence on indigenous people to identify their interests with those of the "colonial status quo". Young (as cited in Bowker, 1993) said Native individuals were groomed to administer the ESDA in such a way as to keep indoctrinating Indian youth with the same curriculum and values of the mainstream society. Young said,

“...aside from some cosmetic alterations like the inclusion of beadwork, traditional dance,... and some language classes, the curriculum remained exactly the same, reaching exactly the same conclusions....only now it was supposedly

more credible...because people who were visibly Indian were doing the teaching and administering” (p. 25).

It is a widespread belief among the Reservation community that having a larger population of Native teachers would benefit Native students. I am inclined to agree but would like to see research explore what affects are actually evident when this is the case.

Another area that needs to be explored concerns the affects of cultural integration and the Native teacher’s needs for culturally responsive pedagogy. How do Native teachers encourage equity in their teaching practices? Do Native students perceive their instruction as better than instruction non-minority teachers offer, more culturally relevant? How would Native teachers benefit from training in culturally responsive methodology and what affect would that have on their student’s achievement? What does the community/school/tribe believe about the current cultural integration that is occurring in our Reservation schools? Further research is needed to determine more precise answers to these questions.

I feel the new knowledge I have accumulated through this project will impact the way I teach. Would professional development for teachers in cultural responsiveness and teaching for social justice make a difference in student achievement? Would it affect teacher’s intent to remain employed in Reservation schools? How does knowing more about the historical, political, and economic aspects of Indian education change a teacher’s practice? Does that affect students at all? Could a screening process for prospective teachers be developed to identify individuals best suited to teach under the challenges offered by the Reservation?

The responsibility for educating future teachers lies in the hands of higher education institutions. Each state university should bring an awareness of issues in educating indigenous people. Furthermore, it should include specificity to the tribes that reside within those states.

What efforts are being made to make this happen? Can working with tribal governments more closely articulate both the university programs and local vision for what equity in education means? What is a culturally relevant curriculum for the Wolf Creek Reservation? Demystifying the reality of the deprivations experienced on the Reservation and encouraging university students to look at what that adds to a community versus what it takes away might lessen the shock experienced by entitled new teachers who come to visit our schools. What advantage does the deprivation bring to our community? What advantage might people in poverty have that more privileged people do not?

All teachers and students need exposure to the rich ideas of social justice. If schools are the vehicle for preparing our youth to be American citizens, shouldn't we start the change process for greater equity in our curriculum? How would teaching for social justice affect schools and students that are more privileged? What would a curriculum for social justice include?

Such research could uncover a deeper understanding of how to best prepare teachers to endure the strain of teaching in isolated impoverished areas with cultural differences. It may also reveal if preparing teachers to feel purposeful and effective with an under-resourced student population increased satisfaction with their jobs and influenced them to stay. Refining our knowledge on these points could lead to improved efforts of school leaders to recruit and retain the best teachers for the Reservation.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Interview Questions

Warm-up – demographic type questions:

1. How long have you been in education?
2. What kinds of jobs have you held in education and for how long?
3. How long have you taught on the Reservation?
4. What does a typical day of teaching look like for you?
5. What did your most recent day of teaching look like?
6. Can you describe the main things that happen over the course of a school year starting in September through May?
7. Tell me about typical interactions with other staff at your school.

Main Questions: (Subsequent questions to follow depending on answers to these)

1. I understand you have taught on the Reservation for the last \_\_\_\_ years. I'm interested in what keeps you here. What do you think has motivated you to stay in education on the Reservation? What about in education at all?
2. What are the best things about teaching on the Reservation?
3. You must have had some interesting experiences while teaching on the Reservation. Can you tell me about some of them?
4. If you could get the general public to understand one thing about your job, what would it be?
5. What would you tell a person who was considering coming to the Wind River Indian Reservation to teach?
6. Did you have any misconceptions about the Reservation and Native Americans that you discovered as you began to work here?

Follow up type questions:

1. How do you feel about your work?
2. Describe a challenge that you face as an educator and how you handle it.
3. Tell me about what supports you feel you receive as a teacher on the Reservation?
4. What experiences have you had that contribute to your preparedness to be a teacher on the Reservation?
5. What kinds of knowledge have you gained about the culture of the students you teach?
6. What do you value about the community?
7. How do you think the community perceives you?
8. What kinds of questions do you wish you could ask other teachers on the Reservation?
9. What recommendations would you give school leaders to encourage the retention of teachers?

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

How are you doing? I have not had a chance to talk to you lately and want to fill you in on some recent research that I have embarked upon.

As you may know, I have taught on the [REDACTED] Reservation for quite some time, almost eleven years now. You have also chosen to teach on the Reservation for a significant amount of time. I have often heard people express their thoughts about commonly held perceptions of high teacher turnover rates on the Reservation. This made me think about whether this was true or not and what the reasons might be. After some reflection, I have decided to look at the other side of the equation and conduct research about myself and others who have chosen instead to stay on the Reservation.

Many of the teachers we know who stay on the Reservation for considerable lengths of time are Native. There are seemingly obvious reasons for why they stay, but what might not be so obvious is why non-Native teachers continue to stay

When I started looking at the literature I found that there have been many studies done about why teachers leave our profession but few have been done about why they stay. Because of this I am curious as to what motivates non-Native teachers who stay to continue investing in careers here. Do those who stay have similar sorts of reasons and motivations? In this research study, I will be looking at both my own reasons for staying as well as those of my colleagues. In this way, I want to get a clearer picture of how non-Native teachers perceive their situations and the many reasons why they choose to stay

The research will be done as part of a Master's degree in Natural Science that I have been working on through the University of Wyoming. I have decided to do ethnography of sorts, a study designed to look at the thoughts and behaviors of a group of people to better understand the culture of the group. The project will seek to understand the group of people who are non-Native teachers teaching for more than 5 years on the [REDACTED] Reservation. It is designed to explore these questions: a) What reasons do non-Native teachers who stay employed on Reservation schools for more than five years give for their longevity? b) What can school leaders do to maximize the retention of teachers?

If you are interested in becoming involved in this project please reply to this email by January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. When you do, I can provide you with more details on how this will work. At that point, if you would like to be a participant, a consent form will be provided for you to review. The study would take no longer than an hour of your time. Thank you for your time spent reading this. I am looking forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Smith

## Appendix C

### Consent Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I would like to invite you to participate in the research study I am conducting as a graduate student under the supervision of Dr. Ana Houseal, at the UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING in the Masters of Science in Natural Science Program. By doing this study I am hoping to understand why non-Native teachers choose to stay employed on the \_\_\_\_\_ Reservation. I am curious as to what motivates this particular group of people to stay as identified and voiced by themselves.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in an open conversation with me, in the form of a personal interview. This interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon location and time. You will be asked to answer open ended questions about your experiences teaching on the \_\_\_\_\_ Reservation and why you choose to stay. Further questions will be asked depending on answers to previous questions. The interview will take no more than an hour of your time and will be recorded with your permission.

There will be very little risk involved in this study as it is completely voluntary. If you indicate to me that you no longer wish to participate in the study, all information, notes, and recordings regarding your interview will be destroyed. There are minimal risks to you in this data collecting method. You could possibly feel some embarrassment if in sharing reasons you stay in the teaching profession on the \_\_\_\_\_ Reservation you discover those reasons turn out to be external instead of altruistic. Because teaching is generally altruistic and I have already established relationships with you on both professional and personal levels, it is thought that the potential for embarrassment to be low. Therefore, the risk is minimal, not more than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

I cannot guarantee any benefits to you, although talking to others about the reasons you choose to stay in education on the reservation may feel beneficial to you.

Information gathered through the interview process including notes and recordings will be filed using a coding system instead of your name. All raw data (recordings, notes, transcripts) will only be accessible to me, and with your permission, my advisor, and will be stored in secure locations. The researcher shall maintain, in a locked media cabinet located in the RPI's classroom not accessible to anyone other than the RPI, all records relating to research which is conducted for at least three years after completion of the research. Unless you specifically asked to be identified in the research, all information provided through the interview will be de-identified and pseudonyms will be used in the final report and any subsequent publications. You will be offered a chance to review the transcripts and have anything you wish removed. You will also be able to turn the recorder off at any point or have sections erased. Further, anything you share in confidence during interviews will not be discussed by the researcher in any social situation.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship to the researcher in any way. If you decide to participate you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without recrimination.

If you have any questions about the research please contact Elizabeth Smith at 307-332-2350 or 307-349-5308 or her University of Wyoming Advisor Dr. Ana Houseal at 307-766-4925

or ahouseal@uwyo.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Wyoming IRB Administrator at 307-766-5320 or irb@uwyo.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above and that you willingly agree to participate. You will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims.

Participant's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviews may be recorded to preserve the natural flow of conversation unimpeded by excessive note taking. Recordings will allow the researcher to review interviews without inconveniencing the participant. The recordings will be kept in a locked media cabinet accessible to only the researcher for no longer than three years and will then be destroyed. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information above and willingly agree to allow your interview to be recorded.

Participant's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_