

Barriers and Supports of Female School Administrators  
of Primarily Native American Students

by

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on determining barriers and supports of female school administrators. The barriers that prevent female school administrators from being successful in school improvement was reviewed. The supports that female school administrators have, which assist them in meeting the unique challenges of a school administrator serving primarily Native American students were reviewed. Female school administrators or former school administrators were interviewed for this study. The female school administrators or former school administrators interviewed were presently employed, or had been employed at a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school, a public school, or a Bureau of Indian Education Grant/Contract School. There is much research regarding school administrators in general. However, the research on female school administrators is limited. This study revealed unique aspects of the female school administrators, which may include Native American cultural topics. A goal of this study was to provide information to future educational leaders. These future educational leaders were informed about some barriers and may be able to avoid similar barriers or resolve some issues more effectively. The future educational leaders were informed of some supports that could assist them in coping and become more prepared to tackle various educational issues. Educational leaders will be more empowered to lead successful schools. Perhaps this will help in the retention of female school administrators and lower turnover rates. This, in turn, will support the school staff, the students, and the parents.

To the Salabiyees/Salabyes and Gisheys, my family,

and

To all fellow educators to inspire them to continue teaching our beloved children.

In honor of my father, the late, Jerry Salabiye, Sr.,  
Navajo Code Talker

And all Navajo Code Talkers,  
who inspire me to keep Navajo traditions going.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Personal Background and Perspective**

I am Leclare Salabiye-Gishey, of the *Ma'iideeshgiizhinii* Clan (Coyote Pass), born for the *Todich'ii'nii* Clan (Bitter Water). My maternal grandfathers are the *Naakai dine'e* (Mexican Clan) and my paternal grandfathers are the *Tsi'naajinii Clan* (Black Streak Wood People). That is how I am a Navajo woman.

I attended elementary school at a United States federal government school, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Greasewood, Arizona, from beginners to sixth grade. I attended seventh grade in a public school in Flagstaff, Arizona, and lived in a BIA dormitory while there. I attended Ganado Junior High and Ganado High School, public schools near Greasewood. I attended Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff and received a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. My first teaching job was at Greasewood Boarding School, teaching eighth grade. I was working and teaching at the school where I attended elementary school. Later, I received a Master's degree in Education, and Principal certification. The second school I worked at is Cottonwood Day School. I have work experiences as a teacher, reading coach, and as a school administrator in BIA and BIE schools (in recent years the BIA changed the Education department to the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)).

I was born off the Navajo reservation. As a toddler, my family moved to the Navajo reservation. Home is in a small community, Greasewood Springs, in northeastern Arizona. Life on the reservation is living without many conveniences. I am happy and content living on the reservation, and I consider myself very fortunate to have obtained a

college education. I have a loving family, beautiful children and beautiful grandchildren. It is for them, that I work hard every day.

I have worked many years, taught many children, and worked with school staff. It is during times of contemplation that I think about my life experiences and feel content about the positive aspects. However, as I think about the negative aspects, I ponder what the future holds for future generations, for the Native American youth and for education in the Native American Nations and communities. I wonder if future generations of Native American youth will have equal access to education opportunities, and if there will be equity in education in relation to other United States citizens. I wonder about America's youth and all the youth throughout the world, and hope their world, their education, and their quality of life will be excellent in the future. Perhaps having grandchildren drives me to be concerned about the future of education.

It seems that every time I think about education, I come to the same conclusion; that school leadership drives academic achievement and school climate. Along those lines, I wonder if school leaders, specifically, female school administrators at schools serving primarily Native American students, are effective. If the female school administrators are not effective, then what are the barriers? Are the barriers unique because many of the schools serve primarily Native American students? What are the supports? I wonder about this because I am a female school administrator in a school serving primarily Native American students. I remember that I had many situations and problems. As I think back, I see new female school administrators coming on board, and wonder if experienced administrators shared and served as a support system, then the new administrators can focus on other issues and tasks.

## **Identification of Native Americans**

Throughout history, educational experiences of Native Americans have been dismal (Native Americans, American Indians, Indians, and Indigenous peoples of the United States are all names that are used interchangeably in this dissertation). As Fleming (2006) stated,

The first question people often ask me, as a Native person, is “What do you want to be called?” Often, this is asked in the interest of political correctness, but as often it is a sincere question. There are several choices—including “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Native”—and good arguments for, or against, using any one of these. “Native American” seems to be the preference in academic circles. (p. 214)

There are many stereotypes about Native Americans. I remember several years ago, a new teacher from the East came to teach the eighth grade students. In planning to participate in the “Native American Day” parade, the teacher asked the Navajo students how many students could bring their headdress to wear in the parade. I took the teacher aside, and informed him that Navajos do not wear headdresses. He clearly needed professional development or more exposure to the Navajo culture. So why are there so many stereotypes about Native Americans? Fleming (2006) wrote,

Because so many people have such a limited knowledge of Indians, we are, arguably, among the most misunderstood ethnic groups in the United States. Native Americans are also among the most isolated groups. Thus the knowledge that most people have about Indians does not come from direct experience. What people know is limited by their sources of information—and, unfortunately, much of the information about Indians is derived from popular culture. (p. 213)

How many Native Americans are there? At one time, it seemed as if many Native American tribes were dwindling in numbers and that many tribes seemed to be dying out.

According to the 2010 Census, 5.2 million people in the United States identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with one or more other races. Out of this total, 2.9 million people identified as American Indian and Alaska Native alone. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, p. 1)

Looking at the numbers of Native American and Alaska Native population may offer a different perspective:

According to the 2010 Census, on April 1, 2010, the U.S. population was 308.7 million people. American Indian and Alaska Native in combination with one or more races totaled 5.2 million people or 1.7 of the total U.S. population. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, p. 3)

In 2010, the Navajo population was comprised of 286,731 members; whereas, the Cherokee tribe reported 284,247 members (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 17). Therefore, the Navajo Nation had the highest number of members who identified with only one tribal grouping. In the category of American Indian population (tribal grouping alone or any combination), the Cherokee Tribe was listed as 819,105 members. The Navajo population, in that same category, was listed as 332,129. In this category, the Cherokee tribe had the highest number of members who identified with one tribal grouping of multiple races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, p. 18).

The Navajo reservation is located in three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Arizona's American Indian and Alaska Native population in 2010 was 353,386. For New Mexico, the American Indian and Alaska Native population was listed as 219,512. For Utah, the American Indian and Alaska Native population was listed as 50,064 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 7).

In the category, "Ten Places with the Largest Number of American Indians and Alaska Natives, 2010," Phoenix, Arizona was listed as third largest. New York City, New York, was first and Los Angeles, California, was second. Albuquerque, New Mexico was listed as seventh, and Tucson, Arizona was listed as 11th (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 11). This list was significant because there are many young Native American people

living off the reservations, although there was no breakdown by tribal groupings in this category.

In the category, “American Indian Reservations and Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas With Largest American Indian and Alaska Native Populations, 2010,” the Navajo Nation reservation and off-reservation Trust Land, including Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, was listed as the largest population at 173,667. The second highest in that category was the Knik Alaska Native village statistical area, records Alaska with a population of 65,768. The third highest in that category was the Osage reservation, Oklahoma, with a population of 47,472 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 14). This list indicates that many Navajos still live on the Navajo reservation.

The Navajos had their share of negative educational experiences. Our Navajo grandparents and parents suffered through a time period that was spent under the United States federal governments’ attempts to stifle and delete Native American languages and cultures. On the other side of the coin, the United States federal government explained its intentions as educating Native Americans. However, this was accomplished by forcing Native Americans to speak English-only and to adopt the ways of general American society. The effects on the Navajo grandparents, parents, and youth were devastating, and are still being felt today.

### **School Administrators on the Navajo Reservation**

School administrators, particularly female school administrators, have challenging tasks and overwhelming responsibilities, such as bridging the gaps of inequality of access to resources and services that are not readily available to the people who live on the Navajo reservation. School administrators of schools on the Navajo reservation in



Arizona have unique barriers in addition to these challenging tasks, as well as overwhelming responsibilities such as Native American cultural issues, language issues, identity issues, isolation factors, students' time on buses, and high poverty rates to name a few. According to Pavlik (1988),

Instead, Indian schools are characterized by the existence of a multitude of variables such as native culture and tradition, entangled community kin relationships, bilingualism or native lingualism, and often physical isolation, factors which most traditionally trained administrators perceive as threatening. (p. 4)

The late Dr. Robert Roessel was a well-known educator on the Navajo reservation. He was the first director of the Center for Indian Education and his leadership led to the founding of two educational institutions on the Navajo reservation, Dine College and Rough Rock Demonstration School, which are among his many accomplishments. Trujillo and Shepard (1999) described Dr. Roessel as “a distinguished name in the field of American Indian education” (p. 19).

Regarding teachers and their pre-service training, Dr. Roessel stated the following before the Senate Indian Education Subcommittee, “It is extremely important for the teachers . . . to understand the culture, language, and the family life of the children they are involved in educating” (Bill, 1955, *From Boarding Schools To Self Determination*, p. 10).

### **Effects of NCLB on Navajo Schools**

In my experiences as a Dean of Instruction, Assistant Principal, and Principal, I found the adherence to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requirements challenging. This mandate has some excellent concepts of accountability for students, staff, and parents. However, I feel the consequences for not meeting Adequate Yearly

Progress (AYP) are unfair to Native American students and stakeholders in the schools serving primarily Native American students. Furthermore, I consider the concept to be excellent because it would be wonderful for all students to reach those high standards of academic achievement. However, the reality is, too many Bureau of Indian Education schools are not achieving academically, according to the NCLB standards.

Nationally, only 30 percent of the 184 Bureau of Indian Education schools run by the federal government on reservations and formerly called Bureau of Indian Affairs schools are making AYP, the central gauge of performance under the 5-year-old No Child Left Behind Law. In Arizona, 55 percent of the 141 regular public schools on American Indian reservations made adequate progress last year. (Zehr, 2007, p. 2)

Zehr (2010, p. 1) also reported that the average reading and mathematics scores for Native American and Alaska Native students remained flat on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2005 to 2009 (p. 1).

### **Other Challenges in Navajo Nation Schools**

#### **Teachers Shortages**

As a school administrator, one of the main problems I experienced was teacher shortages or lack of substitute teachers when I supervised the teaching staff. It was not unusual to begin the school year lacking a teacher or two. Chaika (2006) confirmed this problem:

Attracting teachers to teach on Indian reservations presents unique challenges too. If the local community and tribe support bilingual and bicultural education, then teachers hired must learn how to integrate the local tribal language and culture into the regular school curriculum. Isolation, salary, housing, social life, educational opportunities for children and employment issues for spouses often lead to high turnover. (Section titled Adding to the Shortage, para. 3)

Teacher shortages lead to students being left behind due to inconsistency of instruction and lack of qualified teachers. As a result, student achievement becomes a greater challenge.

### **Lack of Parental Support**

As a Navajo female school administrator, there were times that I felt a lack of confidence on the part of parents and staff, when I overheard comments indicating that it would be better if we had an Anglo principal. One reason was that there were too many blood and clan relatives within the school systems, which gave a perception of favoritism or nepotism. Some fellow Navajo female school administrators shared similar stories with me as well. Perhaps this perception occurs in other schools, and results in Navajo female principals facing a barrier to gaining respect by staff and parents. Does this occur in other cultures?

One example was found when describing women principals in Turkey. Celiketen (2005) explained that

that when one compares the number of women teachers with the number of women in school administration the percentage is disproportionate, because the majority of teachers are women and their number is not reflected in the number of women in administration. Turkish society still seeks out women to be teachers, to take care of the children, nurture them and make sure they are safe, but not to be administrators. (p. 208)

### **Gender Roles in leadership**

Extensive literature discusses the roles of women historically and their having been denied equal access and equal treatment as compared with their male counterparts or with males in general. Cress, Dinnerstein, Miller, and Hart, (2001) found that “race and gender affect the amount of compensation received, independent of whether personal and professional goals fit within institutional values and norms” (p. 1). In schools, men

have held most of the supervisory positions and leadership roles. There are few male teachers at the elementary level, yet most supervisors tend to be male. However, there have been important changes. Nugent (2003) stated that

according to Hamley (Saginaw Chippewa College President Jeffery L. Hamley), the demographic profile of America's tribal college students reflects the social stresses they face. About 65 percent of the students are women, and more than half are single parents. Their average age—31.5 years—is slightly higher than the average age of U.S. community college students, which is 29. (p. 2)

Men have dominated the school district superintendency for so long that they've defined the position (Vail, 1999).

Diana Lam, originally from Lima, Peru, is considered a pioneer for female school administrators. She was a superintendent for four different schools, and in each position, she was the first female and the first minority. She is described as small, with a melodious voice. She initiated change, and was considered as one who stands on her own feet. She rose rapidly into school administration, and she had a national reputation as an urban reformer.

Vail (1999) continued that "when Diana Lam took her first superintendency in 1989, women held only 3% of the top school jobs. She was a successful female, minority school administrator. In education, women are teachers, men are administrators (pp. 2-3).

Chavers (2000) indicated that currently, there are some 1,512 schools and districts serving Indian students in the U.S. These schools serve some 445,425 Indian students. The number of Indian superintendents in these 1,512 schools is only 42, or only 2.7% of the total. Currently, many Navajo women have begun to fill the leadership positions in the schools on the Navajo reservation as school administrators.

In recent times, women have begun to continue obtaining higher education credentials, and have begun to take leadership roles. Although there seem to be more Navajos acquiring teaching and administrative credentials, there is still a high dropout rate.

### High Dropout Rates

Table 1 is a subset of a table showing the percentage of 9<sup>th</sup>- to 12<sup>th</sup>-graders who dropped out of public schools, by race/ethnicity, grade, and state or jurisdiction (NCES, 2009-10).

Table 1

*Percentage of Dropouts in Grades 9-12 in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah*

| State      | American Indian/Alaska Native | Asian/Pacific Islander | Hispanic | Black / non-Hispanic | White |
|------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------|----------------------|-------|
| Arizona    | 14.6                          | 4.9                    | 8.1      | 8.8                  | 6.8   |
| New Mexico | 8.8                           | 4.6                    | 7.2      | 9.0                  | 5.3   |
| Utah       | 5.7                           | 2.8                    | 5.5      | 3.8                  | 2.1   |

As these figures indicate, Arizona has the highest percentage of dropouts of all race/ethnicity groups. Arizona also has the highest percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native dropouts in the three states in which the Navajo reservation is located. Clearly, in proportional terms, and in comparison to other groups, the American Indian/Alaska Native dropouts in Arizona have a very high rate of high school dropouts (NCES, 2009-10). Table 2 displays a subset of a table showing the percentage of high school dropouts

among persons 16 through 24 years old (status dropout rate) in the United States (NCES, 2014).

Table 2

*Percentage of Dropouts in the United States in Grades 9-12*

|                                  | Percentage Males | Percentage Female | Percentage Total |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| White                            | 6.1              | 4.5               | 5.3              |
| Black                            | 12.7             | 7.8               | 10.3             |
| Hispanic                         | 20.2             | 12.8              | 16.7             |
| Asian                            | 3.4              | 2.3               | 2.8              |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 4.9              | 4.8               | 4.8              |
| American Indian /Alaska Native   | 17.6             | 13.2              | 15.4             |

This table indicates that in the United States, Hispanic males have the highest dropout percentage, followed by the American Indian/Alaska Native males. These rates are much higher than those in the other categories. As for the females in the United States, the American Indian/Alaska Native group have the highest dropout rates, followed by the Hispanic females. In comparison to the Hispanic male group and the American Indian/Alaska Native male group, the Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native female groups have slightly lower percentages.

**Low Student Achievement**

Assessments are a major responsibility of school administrators. With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, accountability is highly stressed. Data indicate that

Native American children have consistently not performed well on assessments. For example, a 1991 Audit Report of the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Inspector General showed students in BIA schools achieving on average far below non-Native students and “generally not receiving quality educations.” On the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading assessment, 40% of White fourth graders scored at or above proficient, compared to only 17% of Native American students. In math, 34% of White fourth graders scored at or above proficient, while just 14% of Native Americans scored as high (Reyhner, 2002).

Zehr (2010) stated, “The average reading and mathematics scores for Native Americans and Alaska Native students remained flat on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2005 to 2009” (p. 1). According to The State of Education for Native Students, “In 2011, only 18 percent of Native fourth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as compared with 42 percent of white fourth-graders” (Education Trust, 2013, p. 5). The report also indicated that in 2011, only 17% of Native eighth-graders were proficient or advanced in math, as compared with 43% of White eighth-graders.

Table 3

*2000 and 2011 Performance on NAEP, Fourth-Grade Reading*

|                 | 2000 (Reyhner, 2002)   | 2011 (Education Trust, 2013) |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
|                 | At or above proficient | Proficient or advanced       |
| Native students | 17%                    | 18%                          |
| White students  | 40%                    | 42%                          |

Table 3 indicates that over a time period of 10 years, Native students' achievement did not show progress and remained much lower than White students.

Table 4

*Trend in NAEP Reading Achievement for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Students (Percentage of Proficient and Advanced)*

| AI/AN students        | 2005 | 2007 | 2009 | 2011 |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|
| 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 18%  | 18%  | 20%  | 18%  |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> grade | 17%  | 18%  | 21%  | 22%  |

*Note.* Adapted from *U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Services*, by National Indian Education Study, 2011, pp. 16-17. Retrieved from [nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2012466.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2012466.pdf)

Table 4 shows bi-annual achievement results for four benchmark periods. Within the time period 2005 to 2011, the reading achievement shows no progress in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and very slight progress in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. However, the overall scores indicate that AI/AN performance in reading is poor. According to the State of Education for Native Students (Education Trust, 2013), “Performance for Native students has not improved over time. While fourth-grade reading performance of every other major ethnic group on NAEP rose between 2005 and 2011, results for Native students have been virtually flat” (p. 6).



Table 5

*Trend in NAEP Mathematics Achievement for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students (Percentage of Proficient and Advanced)*

| AI/AN students        | 2005 | 2007 | 2009 | 2011 |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|
| 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 21%  | 24%  | 21%  | 22%  |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> grade | 14%  | 16%  | 18%  | 17%  |

*Note.* Adapted from *U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Services, by National Indian Education Study, 2011, pp. 30-31. Retrieved from nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2012466.pdf*

Table 5 shows bi-annual achievement results for four benchmark periods. Within the time period 2005 to 2011, the math achievement showed no progress in fourth grade, and less progress in eighth grade than fourth grade. However, the overall scores indicated that AI/AN performance in math is poor. According to the State of Education for Native Students (Education Trust, 2013),

In eighth grade math, the trends are nearly the same: Once again, results for Native students improved more slowly than those for every other ethnic group. Rather than catching these students up, our education system is letting them slip further and further behind. (p. 7)

### **The Effects of Attending Boarding Schools**

Many Native Americans of the older generation have lived the boarding school experience. Most Indians left boarding school ill-prepared to live in either White or Indian society (Reyhner, 2002). Many of our parents and grandparents were punished for speaking Navajo when they were attending elementary and high schools. However, many older Navajo people are fluent Navajo speakers, while Navajos, fifty years of age and younger, are not fluent Navajo speakers. Thus, a major communication gap has evolved.

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, of the American Indian Languages spoken at home by American persons five years and over, the Athapascan–Eyak languages, which includes Navajo, had 157,694 speakers--the highest of all other American Indian languages. The total number of speakers in the United States was 281,990.

An example is found in a conversation I had with my mother in which she informed me that when she was in elementary school, Navajo students got punished for speaking Navajo. I asked her if she had spoken Navajo and had been punished. She said, “Yes, the punishment was to stand against the wall during dinner.” I asked if she ate dinner on the day she was punished. She stated that she was not allowed to eat, just to watch the others eat, but she didn’t care, because dinner was beans, and they had beans almost every day. Although common in boarding schools, an unimaginable punishment today.

In the “We the People: American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States” 2006 report, Ogunwole (2006) indicated that Navajo had the highest percentage who spoke a language other than English at home (43.6%). Of the ten Native American tribes listed, three tribes had a percentage of at least 25% or higher, while six of the tribes had a percentage of less than 10%. It was also reported that 90% or more of Cherokee, Chippewa, Cree, Iroquois, Lumbee, and Tlingit-Haida spoke only English at home. These alarming figures point to the extent of native language loss (Ogunwole, 2006, p. 7). Ogunwole (2006) indicated on an Educational Attainment table that 37.3% of Navajos had less than high school education. A subset of the Educational Attainment 2000 data are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

*Educational Attainment, First Analysis: 2000*

| Navajo | Less than high school graduate | High school graduate | Some college or associate's degree | Bachelor's degree or more |
|--------|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
|        | 37.3                           | 27.7                 | 28.1                               | 6.9                       |

The Navajos ranked highest in least educational attainment. In reviewing the levels of other tribes, I noticed that the tribes that had higher levels of speaking only English at home were also the tribes that had higher levels of educational attainment.

**Statement of Purpose**

This study analyzed barriers to and supports for female school administrators. It is understood that school principals have a challenging job, especially with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The main requirements of the NCLB Act, however, that are especially challenging for Navajo school administrators are accountability through making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and parent involvement. Lack of English proficiency is a possible barrier to making AYP. Lack of many things that mainstream American society takes for granted, such as paved roads, access to technology, and electricity and print materials in the home are barriers for parental involvement. Another requirement that is difficult to fulfill is for schools to hire highly-qualified teachers. Nationwide, there is a teacher shortage, and the shortage is more pronounced on the Navajo reservation.

As discussed earlier, Navajo school administrators have the usual barriers such as teacher shortages, lack of parent involvement, AYP challenges, gang problems, plus unique barriers such as language, culture, isolation, and lack of access to convenient

services. The experiences of living in two worlds, which are the Navajo world and the world of global society, are a challenging juggling act. Living in two worlds means that a Navajo, who was raised and schooled on the Navajo reservation, has to adapt and change once they begin living off the reservation. Many times, the adaptations and changes are too difficult. Some examples of the two worlds of Navajo school administrators are physical, such as the lack of technological advances, lack of necessary services nearby (grocery stores, libraries, Internet access, telecommunication access, and hospitals), unpaved poor roads, and isolation factors. Other factors in the Navajo world include traditional beliefs, cultural aspects, kinship, and spirituality. According to Chief,

There are four levels of assimilation among Native Americans which can be illustrated in concentric circles. At the center is the traditional Native American such as her grandfather who has lived only Native American culture. The next layer is the bicultural Native American like her mother who can leave the reservation if she has to, but would have no problem going back to living with no water or electricity. The third layer is the acculturated Native American such as Chief herself who was raised on the reservation and has strong family ties there, but lives in the White world. The outside layer consists of people who have become assimilated by cutting all ties to the Native world. Chief considers these Native Americans “people who are lost, have no identity and no culture. (Chief, 2002, p. 1)

The schools on the Navajo reservation and on other Native American tribal reservations have a history of poor academic success. The dropout rates in the high schools on the Navajo reservation are very high. Many students who go on to college struggle, and eventually drop out as well. “Basic research is needed on education at both the college level and at the elementary level. The national dropout rate for Indian college students, for instance, is about 85.

According to Reyhner (2002), poverty and other social conditions have plagued American Indians. They want political and economic equality, and they want to regain

their Native identities, including their languages and traditions that historically were suppressed in school (Reyhner, 2002, p. 2). It is my belief that, in spite of so many barriers, Native American school administrators are among those students who persisted and succeeded in obtaining university degrees and state certification credentials.

According to McCarty and Benally (2003), “Numerous authors have written about the relationship between cultural norms and values and student self-esteem” (p. 297). Vadas (1995), for example, found a strong correlation between attachment to Navajo culture and student academic achievement. Perhaps, adherence to and respect for Navajo culture and traditions are supports for Navajo principals/school administrators.

The purpose of this study was to examine female school administrators’ barriers and supports. The barriers that prevent female school administrators from being successful in school improvement were examined. The supports that female school administrators have, which assist them in meeting the unique challenges of a school administrator serving primarily Native American students were also examined. The previous paragraphs illustrate some of the many barriers that currently exist for female administrators serving primarily Native American students in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school, a public school, or Bureau of Indian Education Grant/Contract Schools. Not only does the study identify barriers and supports of female administrators, but it also identified some recommendations that administrators to be successful in their roles in complex contexts. With this overarching purpose in mind, four key questions guided this research.

## **Research Questions**

These research questions focus on the barriers and supports encountered by female school administrators in schools of primarily Native American students. Studying school administrators' interview responses and looking for similarities and differences, may lead to information that can be shared with future principals and stakeholders in education. The results may help inform policy and the decisions made by district administrators and school boards.

*Research Question 1:* Are the barriers and supports different for female school administrators in a public school, BIE school, or BIE Contract/Grant school, serving primarily Native American students?

*Research Question 2:* Do Native American/Navajo language proficiency, Native American/Navajo traditions, and/or Native American/Navajo culture have a positive impact on female school administrator effectiveness?

*Research Question 3:* Do the Native American/Navajo cultural teachings and the Navajo matrilineal system have an impact on Navajo principals?

*Research Question 4:* What coping activities and strategies are used by female school administrators of schools serving primarily Native American students, when encountering barriers?

To answer these questions, qualitative research methods were used to gain the perspectives and opinion of Native American women administrators.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Bureau of Indian Education (BIE):* Formerly Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

*Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA):* An agency of the federal government of the United States within the Department of Interior charged with the administration and management of 55.7 million acres of land held in trust by the United States for American Indians, Indian tribes, and Alaska Natives. In addition, the Bureau of Indian Affairs provides education to approximately 48,000 Indians (Wikipedia, n.d.).

*American Indian/Alaska Native:* A term used by the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force for the initial reference to the indigenous people of North America (Reyhner, 2002). A member of any of the aboriginal people of the western hemisphere, except often the Eskimo, especially an American Indian of North America, especially the United States (American Indian/Alaska Native, n.d.); refers to people having origins from any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment (Ogunwole, 2006).

*Native American:* A term used interchangeably with American Indian or Indian when Alaska Natives are not being included for geographical reasons (Reyhner, 2002). A member of any of the aboriginal people of the western hemisphere, especially a Native American of North America, especially the United States (Native American, n.d.). An Indian who is a native or inhabitant of India or of the East Indies. A person who is of Indian descent (Native American, n.d.).

*Indigenous:* having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment (Indigenous, n.d.).

*Matrilineal:* Relating to, based on, or tracing descent through the maternal line.

*Matrilocal:* Of, or relating to residence with a wife's kin group or clan

*Monolingual:* having or using one language.

*Monoculture*: A culture dominated by a single element; a prevailing culture marked by homogeneity.

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a landmark in educational reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools. In amending *ESEA*, the new law represents a sweeping overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. It is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility. (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/index.html>)

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

A limitation of this research was that there were very few sources of information and very few studies on Native American educational leaders and school-related information, especially on female school administrators of primarily Native American students. When searching for resources, the information using the keywords American Indian, Indian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native American, and Indigenous people, all had to be searched. The keywords for Navajo, Navaho, Dine, and Dineh are also different terms for one tribal group, the Navajos. A further limitation was that the American Indian and Alaska Native population live on federal lands (on reservations) or off the federal lands (off reservation. This study focuses on female school administrators in schools serving primarily Native American students. Last, data and statistics for these schools was limited because most are not state public schools. The state public schools have more consistent and comprehensive data than federal schools (BIE) or Tribally-



controlled schools (Contract/Grant). Information and data also were limited due to the small population size given that the Native American and Alaska Native populations comprise only 1.7% of the U.S. population

### **Importance of the Study**

As a Native American, Navajo woman with experience as both a teacher and school administrator, this study is important because the exploration of barriers and supports for female school administrators is crucial for the Navajo youth of today. Female school administrators need to be successful school leaders in order to increase student achievement and improve the schools they serve. It is possible that the barriers are tinged with discrimination against female school administrators, specifically in schools serving primarily Native American students. It also is possible that Navajo cultural and linguistic aspects are barriers and/or supports. In addition, it is possible that there are other unique supports that will counter-balance the barriers. The ultimate goal of this study is to contribute to a successful future for our Navajo/Native American children so that they can be contributing members of Navajo/Native American society, as well as of the global society by preserving their culture and heritage and teaching them to be a global citizen. The results of this study may contribute to this overarching goal for our Navajo/Native American students on the Navajo Nation.

Pavlik (1998) stated his opinion that to be an effective leader in an Indian school, the leader should

Possess a People-Oriented Personality, Possess Flexibility, Accept the Indian School as a unique entity, Possess a self-perception as an Indian educator, Possess a body of specialized knowledge and skills, Believe that the Indian child can succeed, Make an effort to work with, and if possible, become part of the community, and to Possess dedication and commitment. (p. 6)

In addition, the issue of gender needs to be explored to ensure equity. My female colleagues would want to know if discrimination or negative perceptions are common to Native American women principals, so that equity will be in place. If there are aspects of discrimination, then the Native American women principals need to be empowered to avoid discriminatory practices and other negative consequences of this discrimination.

The information from this study will be significant for female school administrators and school stakeholders in order to work toward effective school improvement and to improve student achievement, especially in regard to current accountability mandates. According to Pavlik (1998), “We must identify, secure, and retain individuals who possess the “right stuff” to be leaders of Indian schools. Part of this process must include establishing specialized training programs of substance to prepare people, especially, though not exclusively, Indian people to assume vital administrative positions. Until we do these things we will continue to see very few schools which serve Native American students listed among the ranks of those classified as being “effective” schools.” (Pavlik, 1998, p. 8) The results from this study may encourage female school administrators to be proactive and diminish or remove problems before they become barriers.

This unique topic has few research sources available. Therefore, this study will become another source of information for future researchers by contributing to the scholarly information pool. According to Dean Chavers (1980), “While approximately 43 percent of all doctorates awarded to Indian people have been in the field of education, only about seven percent of Indians with doctorates in the field are active researchers in education” (p. 12).

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 introduces the study of the barriers of female school administrators of schools serving primarily Native American students. This chapter includes the introduction, purpose, research questions, methods, definitions of terms, and the importance of the study. Background information on Navajo culture and traditions is included. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to female Native American administrators. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this research, Chapter 4 contains participant profiles and the findings and analysis of the research and Chapter 5 contains conclusions, contributions of the study, and recommendations for further study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Navajo reservation is 25,000 square miles and is approximately the size of West Virginia. The reservation is in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The Navajo population is 286,731 people, one tribal grouping reporting, or 332,129 people, one tribal grouping together with multiple races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Navajo language continues to be a primary language of Navajo families. Of American Indians and Alaska Natives, 28% spoke a language other than English at home. Of residents of the Navajo Nation Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The median income of American Indian and Alaska Native household is \$35,062, compared to \$50,046 for the nation as a whole. The percentage of American Indians and Alaska Natives that were in poverty in 2010 is 28.4%, as compared to 15.3% for the nation as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The primary employment agencies are the Navajo Nation, Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education and the public schools.

For Native American female school administrators, the barriers are unique because most Native Americans have deep roots in Navajo culture and traditions. It is possible that female school administrators, including Native American female school administrators, face gender and minority inequities. In order to increase the retention of female school administrators and increase their effectiveness, this study will enlighten stakeholders, recognize the value of cultural aspects, and make recommendations for improvement.

The next section contains a brief review of the historical background of female leaders, female school administrators, Native American administrators, educational leadership skills, perspectives of Native American school administrators, educational leaders' career satisfaction, attracting future educational leaders, and ends with a chapter summary.

### **The Roles of Gender and Ethnicity in Administration**

More women get advanced degrees in law, medicine, business, and academic fields. More women are entering the professions. More equality is seen in rank and salaries early in people's careers. But the problem is that there has been little progress in promotion, partnership, and tenure (Valian, 1999, p. 1043).

Ethnic teachers currently represent about 9% of U.S. public school teachers, but that number is expected to drop to less than 5% in the coming years. Meanwhile, ethnic students constitute 40% of the total student body in the United States, and this proportion is expected to increase significantly (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1999; Jorgenson, 2001). The proportion of teachers of color is shrinking, and fewer culturally diverse college students are entering the profession. Most ethnic students in universities are pursuing degrees in business, engineering, and other fields that promise greater financial rewards (Jorgenson, 2001).

There are also barriers based on the historically entrenched perceptions of White teachers in Native American schools. Benedek wrote about a Navajo woman named Ella who stated,

"I idolized White people," says Ella. "They were so clean and so smart, and they spoke the English language so well. Did she have any idea that they spoke English well because English was the only language they knew? Ella says with

surprise, “I didn’t know that then. We were always told we were dumb Indians. We didn’t know anything. The teacher, the White teachers, told us that. We were dumb Indians and that’s why we were in school to learn. (Benedek, 1995, p. 64)

National data indicate that women are under-represented at the top ranks; in fact, the disparity of tenured men to women has not changed since the early 1980’s (Valian, 1999). According to Cress and colleagues (2001), “Women and faculty of color have consistently been under-represented in higher education. Those who do make it into the academy have often faced subtle as well as overt discrimination” (p. 1).

Although more women are taking the top education job than before, about 12% of U.S. superintendents today are women, up from 4% a decade ago, they remain extremely, disproportionately low (Vail, 1999), and to an even greater extent among Native Americans. The number of Indian superintendents in 1,512 schools is only 42, or only 2.7% of the total. Even though almost 10% of the teacher corps is currently Indian, less than a handful of the top leadership of the schools is Indian (Chavers, 2000).

Olsen (1991) revealed that race and gender affect the amount of compensation received, independent of whether personal and professional goals fit within institutional values and norms. Brunner and Grogan (2005) found that 35% of women superintendents raised children under the age of 20 while they were in the position; 32% of those women raised children ages 15 or younger. These researchers also reported that 13% of divorced superintendents cited divorce as a lifestyle change made to accommodate the demands of the superintendent’s position. The women who remained married were strongly supported by their spouses.

There are few women superintendents in the United States. Men have dominated the superintendency for so long that they’ve defined the position. In education, women

are teachers; men are administrators (Vail, 1999, p, 1). According to Blackburn, Martin, and Hutchinson (2006), “Women stereotypically are nurturing, passive, sensitive, compassionate, family-centered, and responsible for the education of children. Men are described as self-reliant, dominant, hard, impersonal, outer-focused, action-oriented, competitive, and assertive” (p. 244).

One reason may be that there is little job security. According to Vail (1999), if they appear to be too authoritarian, they risk censure. The author pointed out that women are more likely to have been elementary school principals than high school principals. About 41% of elementary school principals are female; nearly 14% of secondary principals are female. The jobs they take in the central office often are as curriculum or special education coordinators. The perception often is that women cannot handle finance or construction.

A study of the perceptions of superintendents and governing board members regarding leadership attributes of a successful superintendent was done using 10 characteristics. Superintendents and governing board members responded with the highest mean level of agreement to the same item: “Effective communication with board members, district and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent effectiveness” (Wilson, 2006). The characteristic with the lowest level of agreement, persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent, and school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent ineffectiveness.

According to Warner (1995), Navajo school board members felt that American Indian administrators exhibited better administrative skills and a better sense of the cultural context of their roles. Table 7 showing Race/Ethnicity of School Board

Administrators in BIA Schools, Navajo Area, in Spring, 1995, shows a breakdown of school administrators by agency of the five Navajo agencies (Warner, 1995).

Table 7

*Race/Ethnicity of School Board Administrators (1995)*

| Agency        | American Indian Navajo | American Indian Other | Non-Indian | Total |
|---------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------|-------|
|               | 9                      | 1                     | 4          | 14    |
| Eastern       | 3                      | 1                     | 11         | 15    |
| Fort Defiance | 2                      | 3                     | 15         | 20    |
| Shiprock      | 5                      | 0                     | 6          | 11    |
| Western       | 3                      | 2                     | 7          | 12    |
| Total         | 22                     | 7                     | 43         | 72    |

Table 7 shows that 43 out of 72 administrative positions in the Navajo reservation agencies are held by non-Indians. “Based on this data, it would appear that Navajo school board members felt that American Indian administrators were better qualified to run their schools” (Warner, 1995, p. 30). However, it was explained that the numbers on the chart can be misleading. The high number of non-Indian administrators was attributed to the lack of certified American Indian applicants, as well as to the high number of administrators who had tenured positions and were near retirement (Warner, 1995).

Wilma Mankiller, who became the first female deputy principal chief in Cherokee history and served three terms wrote,

In historic times, women played an important role in Cherokee government and in tribal life, but that role had diminished over time. As Cherokee people began to intermarry with whites and adopt the values of the larger society, women increasingly assumed a secondary role. When I first ran for election as deputy



principal chief in 1983, it seemed the strong role of women in Cherokee life had been forgotten by some of our own people. I vividly remember a man standing up in a campaign meeting and telling me “Cherokee Nation will be the laughingstock of all the tribes if we elect a woman. (Mankiller, 2004, p. 50)

Noble (2005) contended that because women have spent more time in the classroom teaching, they bring to their leadership positions a stronger level of expertise in curriculum design and staff development than do men. A different interpretation is based on a study of the accounts of eight secondary principals in the U.S. by Mortimore and Mortimore (1991). The results led the authors to conclude that “the traditional image of a White middle class principal is still widely held, despite that increasing numbers of highly effective principals who are women” (p. 40). It would appear that the traditional image of the masculine principal as someone strong, dynamic and in charge is an enduring one.

Men have spent more time in central office and bring to their leadership positions a stronger level of expertise in construction/bond issues, human relations, and labor relations (Noble, 2005). Gupton and Slick (1966), cited by Blackburn, Martin, and Hutchinson (2006), stated that with the trends toward participatory style leadership and decentralization of power on the upswing, women’s tendency toward a more integrative leadership style may actually be coming into vogue. The following are some concerns and problems school administrators working at schools serving primarily Native American students have.

### **Challenges of Native American School Administrators**

As briefly explained in Chapter 1, school administrators working in schools that serve primarily Native American students deal with several unique problems. Some of

the unique problems include the loss of Native American languages and culture, poverty, and a range of other social problems.

Reyhner (2002) stated that the final report of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force documented that about one-third of Native students never finish high school. The review of research commissioned by the Task Force identified seven school-based reasons why Native students drop out of school:

- Large schools that present students with an impersonal education
- The perception that teachers do not care about Native students
- Passive, “transmission’ teaching methods
- Inappropriate curriculum designed for mainstream America
- The use of culturally-biased tests and the flunking of Native students
- Tracking Native students into low achieving classes and groups
- Lack of Native parent involvement

With such a high drop-out rate for Native Americans, the tasks of Native American school administrators are challenging. Does it matter if Native American administrators speak multiple languages? Does it matter if Navajo principals speak Navajo fluently? Cantoni (1997) shared a recommendation that “all educators (including the school principal) should try to learn the students’ home language; even if they do not become very proficient, they will have indicated a certain degree of interest and respect ” (p. 4).

Vogelbacher (1999) stated,

Educational practice, beginning in colonial times and extending to the present day has focused on “christianizing and civilizing” Native children with the explicit purpose of eradicating Native culture. Boarding schools and even day schools on

the reservations discouraged native language, ceremonies, and reciprocal family relations with the explicit purpose of further alienating each successive generation from their native roots. (p. 1)

It is unfortunate that many Native American tribes have lost their languages or are on the road to losing their Native language. The Navajo people still have many fluent Navajo speakers, and have the best chance of keeping the language alive. Therefore, preserving Native language and culture is an added challenge for principals.

Another tragic consequence of the failure of educators to appreciate Native American languages and cultures is the well-documented over-identification of Indian children as learning disabled and mentally retarded. These labels are usually based on assessments by monolingual, monocultural school psychologists using ‘intelligence’ and other tests that measure ‘Standard’ English language ability and familiarity with mainstream American culture (Reyhner, 2002). Principals need to address the repercussions of the over-identification of students as learning disabled and mentally retarded.

### **Navajo Women Administrators**

The Navajos are a matrilineal society. A Navajo introduces oneself by revealing the mother’s clan, the father’s clan, the maternal grandfather’s clan, and the paternal grandfather’s clan. The Navajo takes the mother’s clan as the primary clan, as that is the most important clan.

Changing Woman is the principal deity in Navajo religion – she gave the tribe their first clans and guidelines for how they should live their lives. She represents woman’s continual transformation through the many roles she takes on in her lifetime. Through Changing Woman, the matrilineal system of the Navajo was established. (Tohe, 2003, p. 2)

Another description of Changing Woman is that the

Changing Woman is part of the tribe's creation story and is a spiritual deity who gave life to Navajos. Thus, Navajos are a matrilineal society where property belongs to the women and a child's identity is aligned to a mother's clan. (Reid, 2006, p. 1)

In the early days, Navajo women owned the home, livestock, and the land. Today, although Navajo women are still very important and are highly respected, Navajo women in leadership positions outside of the family are considered taboo.

It is said, when the Navajos made their journey in ancient times from the belly of the Earth through four underworlds, there was a quarrel that split the genders. Though the group reunited, the result gave birth to a woman-can't-be-a-leader mentality because they took a stand of, "we can live without men." Some Navajos, especially among the older women, respect the legend because of the belief that a woman's leadership only brought chaos and confusion in the third world. (Reid, 2001, p. 2)

It appears to be conflicting in the manner that Navajo women are important and respected, yet are not considered as leaders. According to Reid (2006),

Jennifer Nez Denetdale, a historian and history professor at the University of New Mexico, said the reliance on the creation story is not good enough reason to prohibit women from leadership. It (Navajo's first government) was founded on White patriarchal structure, Nez said, "Their structure already discourages women and people of color from leadership. (Reid, 2006, Section titled Other Theories, para. 1-2)

Navajo people have always illustrated the importance of gender roles and kinship systems through their creation stories and religious beliefs (Vandever, 2003). Many Navajo principals have been raised in the traditional, matriarchal Navajo way of life and at the same time, in the ways of western society. In the past, Navajo women have been leaders in decision-making and have controlled the land. Because the women inherited the land and have a greater vested interest, historically, they worked closely with their environment. Although many Navajo people continue to value the role of women in the

decision-making process, the current structure does not allow for significant female participation (Vandever, 2003). According to Vandever,

In the past, Navajo women have been leaders in decision-making and have controlled the land. Since the women inherited the land and had a greater vested interest, they historically worked more closely with their environment. Although many Navajo people continue to value the role of women in the decision-making process, the current structure does not allow for significant female participation. (p. 15)

She continued by discussing that Navajo women have decreased their control of the land.

Schwartz (1997) explained,

Through your mother's blood, she teaches you to love. Even if your mother is not here. Your mother is gone, but you already have that blood in your system so she is the one that teaches you how to love and then through that you learn how to love yourself, because you love your mother. That is how you take care of yourself. And then through that understanding, and then you are not alone. You have all these mothers. Just like Mother Earth and the Water [Woman] that is your mother too. . . . You call them Shima then that is how you use shima in that way you talk to Mother Earth and then that Water Woman or To' Azdzaan. (p. 75).

Benedek (1995) wrote about Ella, a Navajo woman.

Ella thinks their problems come from having a foot in each culture -Navajo and Anglo-but knowing almost nothing about either. They hear things on television about how Anglos live, but they don't really understand those ways, and they never learned Navajo values because the churches in town have influenced generations into thinking their ways were evil. (Benedek, 1995, p. 297)

They think that speaking your language sets your child back – that learning two languages, it's hard for the kids to comprehend. Navajo is phonetic and it's very descriptive. But whatever we name, we describe whatever it is. It seems when you try to describe something in English, it's very short and very simple. (Benedek, 1995, p. 113)

Benedek (1995) commented on the role of BIA schools:

When the boarding schools came, culture and tradition were thrown out – that it was bad. You were forced to learn English. Christianity came in, you were assigned to churches. I think back then, if (Navajo) culture had had a role in BIA schools, maybe it would have been different. I don't remember ever reading a book on Indians other than the history books where the Indians were portrayed as

the raiders – killing people – savages, being the dumb Indians. That was what I heard in history books. (p. 112)

Mankiller (2004) shared another female Indigenous leader's description about spirituality and helps explain why some Native Americans are also Christians.

I believe the Creator has always been in my life, and now I believe in Christianity. The true Christianity is so close to how we believe and how we lived before contact. When Christianity came to us in our area, we were receptive to it because we already believed in that way of life. Later on, we found out that some of those who taught Christianity to us did not really live a Christian life. (p. 34)

The traditional Navajo matrilineal structure and beliefs conflicts with the Western patriarchal structure present in current schools. Therefore, this presents additional challenges to female school administrators.

### **Educational Leaders' Career Satisfaction**

Vail (1999) stated that women who become superintendents must be prepared for scrutiny by the public and press because there is a high standard for female superintendents (p. 5). If women are scrutinized, and men are held to less scrutiny, I feel that is discriminatory.

Brunner and Grogan (2005) reported that “women superintendents of color generally believed they shouldered the burden of having to prove themselves over and over.” One commented, “A woman of color always has to do a better job. There is little room for error. Her actions are watched and evaluated more closely.” Another shared, “The expectations are higher and the tools are not as available as for white counterparts” (p. 3).

### **Attracting Future Educational Leaders**

Jorgenson (2001) suggested the following actions to attract and retain more ethnically diverse teachers:

- Prioritize the recruitment of ethnic educators.
- Consider nontraditional sources of teacher recruitment.
- Expedite the application materials of ethnic applicants.
- Discuss the possibility of offering hiring bonuses for ethnic candidates.
- Develop a paraprofessional-to-teacher program.
- Understand how ethnically diverse employees perceive the district.
- Create a support network for educators of color.

Jorgensen (2001) stated, “A school system with a reputation for valuing cultural diversity is far more likely to attract ethnic applicants than one that makes little effort to welcome or support them” (p. 4).

### **Summary**

In order to help Native American students form positive, mature identities and to reduce the number of dropouts, large schools need to be restructured to allow teachers to get to know and interact with their students. Caring teachers, especially Native teachers, need to be recruited who will spend the time and effort to learn from as well as teach their students. Furthermore, these caring teachers need to use active teaching strategies with their students to keep their students motivated (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1992). Native American school administrators will be the people to begin the work on restructuring schools and working with the teachers.

As stated several times earlier, school administrators of Native students need to address two worlds that contain a web of conflicts. According to Riggs (2001),

Acculturation works much better for Native American students, who may already experience trepidation about science and who may not wish to compromise their indigenous traditional ways of thinking about the natural world. But indigenous

teachings can co-exist comfortably with—and even enhance—geoscientific knowledge. (p. 2)

Brunner and Grogan (2005) indicated that the “superintendency is a lonely, highly public profession that can be dangerously stressful without adequate relief systems. Many women identified mentoring and support systems as crucial to their success” (p. 5).

Support for female school administrators of schools serving primarily Native American students is important. Overall, this study delved into female school administrators’ lives to see what the barriers and supports they face in schools serving primarily Native American students. Identifying barriers and supports will encourage retention of female school administrators to remain longer at their schools, and may encourage more Native Americans to enter the educational field. The ultimate goal of this study was to contribute to improving and providing excellent education for Native American youth as the leaders of the future. In the words of Vogelbacher (1999),

The educational goal of many modern Indian nations has become the mastery of two worlds, traditional and modern. Navajo (Dine) Philosophy in its theory and practice represents the foundation of Navajo thought and perception of life itself. *Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozhoon*, the central concept provides meaning and identity, and is therefore a crucial aspect of sovereign ethnicity. (p. 1)

This approach proves to be unique therefore carrying unique challenges.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine what barriers and supports are encountered by female school administrators. The need for the study was based on the paucity of research on female Navajo principals and Navajo education nor on the barriers or lack of supports they faced. In this qualitative study, nine female school administrators, serving primarily Navajo students, were interviewed. Individual interview questions focused on their perceptions of the barriers they face and the supports that help them to be successful.

#### **Restatement of the Problem**

The problem of this study was to investigate the barriers and supports that female school administrators that serve primarily Native American students face. As stated in Chapter Two, there is limited research regarding the general topic of Navajo principals, Navajo school administrators, Native American principals, Native American school administrators, American Indian principals, and Native American school administrators, despite the extensive literature on school principals, school superintendents, and school administrators, in general. The specific problem investigated was is if female school administrators of schools serving primarily Native American students have barriers and supports that are unique to them. My research questions were based on possible issues of gender, race, stakeholders' preferences, perceived effectiveness, cultural values and traditions, equity in compensation, and coping strategies. From the interview data, patterns were identified. Another question this study may answer is whether male and

female administrators face the same barriers and supports in their work, based on the perceptions of the female principals interviewed.

### **Research Methodology**

This study used qualitative research methods through open-ended interviews designed to elicit the experiences and perspectives of female school administrators in schools which enroll Native American students. More specifically, the interview questions asked nine participants to talk about barriers and supports that had affected their careers.

Female school administrators from various types of schools located in Arizona were the participants in the interviews. Nine female school administrators were selected who served in public schools, Bureau of Indian Education schools, and Bureau of Indian Education Grant/Contract Schools. The selection criteria of the participants were that they were: (a) Arizona certified school administrators; (b) female school administrators serving primarily Native American students; (c) school administrators with a minimum of five years of experience; and (d) school administrator at a primary, elementary, or middle school.

### **Instrumentation**

Interview questions were developed around areas considered crucial to understanding the women's work as school administrators and as Navajo woman in a positions of leadership. These questions were as follows:

#### *1. Introductory Information:*

- How many years have you been a school administrator?

- What schools have you worked at, as a school administrator of primarily Native American students?

*2. Personal:*

- Why did you choose to become a school administrator?
- Do you practice Native American traditional cultural traditions?
- Do you attend/participate in Native American traditional ceremonies?
- What are your religious beliefs?

*3. Bureaucratic:*

- Do you think there are differences in salaries and other factors for female school administrators as compared to male school administrators with similar qualifications and experiences?
- What supports have helped you in your career?
- Are there any other factors that strongly influence your work?
- What barriers have you encountered as a school administrator?
- What coping strategies did you use when encountering barriers?
- What recommendations do you have for female school administrators of primarily Native American students, which could help them enhance supports and face barriers?

*4. Community Issues:*

- Are you familiar with matrilineal societies? For example, Navajos are a matrilineal society. Navajo women in leadership positions were once considered as taboo in Navajo culture. Do such concepts affect women aspiring leadership roles?

5. *Cultural:*

- What languages are used in your home, and what is your level of proficiency?
- Does being fluent in more than one language have an impact on the school administration?
- What is your level of cultural ties to Native American traditions? (none) (some) (average) (above average) (strong)
- In what ways do these cultural ties influence your decisions as a school principal?

6. *Closing:*

- Is there anything important that you would like to add to my study in understanding the barriers and supports of female school administrators of primarily Native American students?

**Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection procedures were conducted in the following steps:

1. A file was made of all public, BIE and BIE Contract/Grant school in Arizona serving primarily Native American students.
2. Schools were dropped from the list if they did not have a female administrator.
3. Female administrators were selected with consideration of their availability and willingness to participate.
4. Female school administrators at these schools were contacted and the purpose of the interview and how the results would be used were explained.
5. Participants who agreed to the interview were given a form of confidentiality assurances.

6. Appointments were made for the interviews to be conducted either face-to-face or by telephone.
7. Interviews were tape-recorded.
8. Participants were given further assurance of the confidentiality of their responses as well as thanks for their participation.
9. All tapes were transcribed to prepare for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis procedures were carefully followed as recommended by Rossman and Rallis (2003).

1. Become fully immersed in the interview transcript data
2. Systematically organize the material into salient themes and patterns
3. Attach meaning to the themes in order to tell a coherent story
4. Write of the material in order for others to read what was learned. (p. 270)

Upon completion of the interviews, a table summarizing the results of the interviews was constructed. Of particular focus were patterns based on various categories, such as similarities and differences based on gender, age, region, or other factors, coping strategies used to deal with barriers, particular supports they had received, and their recommendations for improving leadership qualities for future female school administrators serving primarily Native American students.

In order to complete the second step, profiles were created for each principal using the individual interview data as a means to create narrative portraits of each participant. Interview transcripts were reviewed. Following Seidman's (2006) recommendations, the transcripts were chunked through markings. Then transcripts were

scanned for recurring key words or codes. Broad categories were created then scanned for emerging themes.

### **Summary**

Again, through the data received from the interviews, experienced female school administrators contributed information about barriers and supports they have encountered as school administrators. By identifying the barriers and supports, the ultimate result is a recommendation for an improvement for future female school administrators to be prepared, and take proactive steps for a successful school leadership experience. This in turn, may improve the education of our Native American youth so they will become successful, contributing members of Native American, Navajo, and global society. With an excellent education, Native American/Navajo youth will have the building blocks to eliminate or break generational poverty. With educated Native American leaders of the future, changes may occur in the social, political, and economical aspects of Native American/Navajo life. The Native American/Navajo youth are the hope of the Navajo Nation for maintaining the Navajo language, culture, traditions, as well as being a world citizen.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains participant profiles and participant characteristics of each female school administrator and a summary of each participant’s background information and work experience. It also presents some responses and summaries of the audio-recorded interviews and transcriptions. Pseudonyms were created for each participant. Of the female school administrators, eight out of nine participants were Native American, and one was not Native American.

Table 8

*Participant Characteristics*

| Participant | Years as school administrator | School           | Educational level | Race      | Language proficiency |
|-------------|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Augustina   | 31                            | Grant Public     | EdD               | Navajo    | Navajo English       |
| Beth        | 15                            | Public           | EdD               | Navajo    | Navajo English       |
| Camilla     | 14                            | Grant Public     | Masters x 2       | Navajo    | English              |
| Donna       | 8                             | Public           | EdD               | Navajo    | Navajo English       |
| Emily       | 10                            | Public           | Masters           | Navajo    | Navajo English       |
| Fern        | 7                             | Public           | EdD               | Caucasian | English              |
| Gwyneth     | 6                             | Public           | EdD               | Navajo    | Navajo English       |
|             | 12                            | BIE Grant Public | Masters x2        | Hopi      | Hopi English Tewa    |
| Ivy         | 5                             | BIE Grant        | EdD               | Navajo    | Navajo English       |

The purpose of the narrative profiles was to introduce readers to the lives of the teachers/school administrators, within their individual contexts, provide a comparative analysis of the participants, and to create a foundation for further analysis. At the end of the chapter, an analysis examines their background information that also included their work experiences.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), a holistic strategy was used to describe connections among the data in the context—“a place, an event, a person’s experience, a text” (p. 274). Broad categories were created by scanning, coding, and sorting data. Again, according to Rossman and Rallis (2003), after identifying the broad categories, “subthemes to elaborate the topography of meaning expressed by the participants” (p. 276) are sought. These subthemes emerged by comparing each transcript in a horizontal cross view of the coded data.

The following subthemes emerged from the two broad categories:

*Work experiences*

- a. Started as teachers
- b. I didn’t plan to be a principal/school administrator
- c. Desire to make a difference

*Cultural/spiritual background*

- a. Significant ties to Native American culture
- b.. Christianity and/or Native American religious beliefs

**Participant Profiles**

This section includes all of the nine participants’ profiles (Augustina, Beth, Camilla, Donna, Emily, Fern, Gwyneth, Hannah, and Ivy). The following are their



comments in response to the interview questions: Why did you choose to become a school administrator? What is your level of cultural ties to Native American traditions? Do you practice Native American/Navajo traditional cultural traditions? Do you attend/participate in Native American traditional ceremonies? What are your religious beliefs?

For the question, “What is your level of cultural ties to Native American traditions?” The response choices were *none, some, average, above average, and strong*. Broad categories were created for each participant: work experience and cultural/spiritual background.

### **Augustina**

Of all the participants, Augustina had the most years of experience as a school administrator at 31 years of experience. She speaks English and Navajo.

#### **Augustina’s work experiences.**

I started off as a Special Education teacher, and eventually I found myself in positions that required leadership, that required organization and decision-making. The more I did that, I realized being in a leadership position, I can make a difference, especially how Navajo children could learn. The other one was Navajo children with disabilities. I wanted to be in a position where I can make some decisions that would help them because I’ve been in the classroom and I know what it’s like so, that’s how I got into the leadership positions. I believed in myself. I trusted myself that I could make good decisions that would have a positive impact on the learning of our Navajo children.

**Augustina’s cultural/spiritual background.** Augustina indicated that her cultural ties to Native American traditions are “above average”. She practices Navajo traditional cultural traditions, “including family celebrations such as Baby’s First Laugh, Kinaalda, weddings, rug weaving, traditional foods, having sheep, goats, horses, cattle, wearing traditional clothes and jewelry, speaking Navajo as much as possible, respecting

K'e relationships, referring to our elders' traditional teachings about life, traditional stories (coyote stories) and having a hogan as a home. "I do not participate as a patient, but I do help with activities to support the patient. I value the biblical teachings and I uphold and honor those values and beliefs. I see great similarities between the philosophy of Diné life and Biblical principles."

### **Beth**

Beth has 15 years of experience as a school administrator. She has worked in schools in Arizona and New Mexico, public and BIE Contract and Grant.

**Beth's work experiences.** In response to why she chose to become a school administrator, she stated,

I didn't really choose to be it. When I first got out of high school, actually took classes to be a psychiatrist, and took classes in psychology. I had only one semester to get degree in psychology, somehow, money ran out my son's financial aid, so I couldn't go back to school. That's how I started in education. When I graduated with a Master's degree back in 97' it just so happened they needed an elementary principal, so the board said there's the position. So that's how I started in the education field. That path was already paved for me. Today it seems like it was path that someone else chose for me.

### **Beth's cultural/spiritual/background.**

I think my level of cultural ties to Native American traditions is pretty "strong" because that's what I grew up with and that's what I believe. I practice Navajo traditional cultural traditions on a daily basis. I attend/participate in Navajo traditional ceremonies every weekend. I think there's a difference between religious beliefs and cultural beliefs. . . . Cultural beliefs are our way of living, but religious beliefs are ranging from going to church, being Protestant, etc. My religion is the Native American Church and traditional (Navajo) ceremonies.

### **Camilla**

Camilla has 14 years of experience as a school administrator. She indicated that understands Navajo, but does not speak Navajo very well.

### **Camilla's work experience.**

I did not choose to become a leader. I kind of fell into it per se. As I was going to school, I was getting my Masters. Our advisor at that time, recognized we were a test away of becoming a principal, so he directed us to take the test. He said you're there, you got all your comps out of the way, and take the test and see what happens. So, that's what I did. I took the test. I passed it. I was a teacher at that time, a third grade teacher. I decided, I have my administrative certificate, I decided to look for a director position. I didn't want to jump into a principal position. There was a Title VII program director position open. I applied for it, and I got it. It gave me some experience, with budget and 8 staff. It taught me the in's and out's of being an administrator. I decided, I have my certificate, I gotta use it. I decided to apply here and there. I was actually hired as a principal. My plan was to try to get an assistant principal position, then I can learn from a principal. They got me for principal and I was put in there. It was a sink or swim kind of thing. It was really good experience. I was principal for public schools for 12 years. This is the first year I decided to move into a grant school and that's where I'm at right now.

**Camilla's cultural/spiritual background.** Camilla indicated that her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions is "above average," and that she is a traditional person. She practices Navajo cultural traditions and attends/participates in Navajo traditional ceremonies. She stated, "I'm really traditional. My dad is a medicine man, so I follow his traditions."

### **Donna**

Donna has eight years of experience as a school administrator. She has worked with a variety of students: preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school. She has experience working in public and BIE grant schools.

**Donna's work experience.** Donna indicates that as a teacher, she wanted to make a change. She indicates that she is an initiator and a problem solver. She stated,

"I went into the school district being an administrator because I felt that as a teacher, I was a high school teacher for about 15 years before I decided to finally become a principal, and with the teachers' needs not being heard, I felt that I could maybe help solve the problems for teachers. But as I became an administrator, I found that administrators are not really there to problem solve,

they're there only surfacely, and that's why when I was a teacher, we were so frustrated. . . . so I came in speaking on behalf of the kids and the teachers, versus speaking on behalf of comfortable and retirement.

**Donna's cultural/spiritual background.** Donna indicated that her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions is "strong". She practices Navajo traditional cultural traditions. She stated,

My parents are very traditional, and at least twice a month we have something to do traditionally, and also my father is a Dine Healer, so me and my sons we go with him and help people wherever their needs are. And also, he's taught us how to sing and pray when we need to help ourselves, and go out in the morning and pray with the corn pollen, so we have a very strong foundation in that. I was raised Catholic. We have three: Catholic, NAC and Navajo traditions.

### **Emily**

Emily has been a school administrator for approximately 10 years. She is fluent in English and Navajo. She can read and write in Navajo.

#### **Emily's work experience.**

Actually, it was not by choice that I elected to pursue my leadership endeavors and as time went by, I become more conscious of my passion to be a leader. The university where I pursued my education allowed me to remain in my home town while I got my degrees in multicultural education and educational leadership. With the opportunity at my doorstep, I took advantage of that opportunity to continue my education in the two master degrees. I was able to get my degree in education, obtain a teaching job and continued my career in education. As time went by, I learned to apply my passion to become a leader and the interest of how to take the lead role of being an administrator. I had a teacher and mentor who was able to allow me to take the challenges as a problem solver and become an effective leader based on real-life challenges that leaders face on a daily basis.

**Emily's cultural/spiritual background.** Emily indicated her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions as "average". She stated,

Although, I did not often practice any Navajo traditional cultural traditions as an individual, I do respect the practices. I respect the practices and am very appreciative of the cultural and traditional events whenever I am invited. Personally, I don't truly identify with being a true believer in one particular

religion. I have been baptized in the Catholic Church and attend occasionally when time permits me to attend.

## **Fern**

Fern has seven years of experience as a school administrator. Her experience is at a public school.

**Fern's work experience.** "I didn't necessarily choose to become a school administrator; rather, it presented itself to me when I was approached about the possibility of being the principal at the school where I was the Head Teacher."

**Fern's cultural/spiritual background.** Fern indicates her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions is "some." She does not practice Native American traditional cultural traditions. She does not attend/participate in Navajo traditional ceremonies. His religious beliefs are Mormon.

## **Gwyneth**

Gwyneth has worked in the leadership capacity for five or six years. Her experience is at a public school.

### **Gwyneth's work experience.**

A true leader never negates or denies a role; a true leader fulfills these roles as often as they arise. I have always known that leadership roles are present in all areas of my life: my home, my work place, the community in which I reside, etc. I began teaching at a high school in August 2000. In that time, I worked as a coach to young Navajo women in volleyball and softball. I worked as a school counselor, a department chair for the English department and an English and Navajo Government teacher. I chose to become a school administrator because I was always told that you should not ask others to do what you are not willing to do yourself. It was always my dream that students of mine would continue their education after high school, embrace education as a means to empower and uplift the Navajo people and to assume leadership roles in their lives. I could not ask them to do those things, if I did not do them myself.

**Gwyneth's cultural/spiritual background.** Gwyneth indicates her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions as "strong". She practices Navajo traditional cultural traditions because she was raised as such. She attends/participates in Navajo traditional ceremonies. As for her religious beliefs, she stated, "I am a Navajo traditionalist. My family also participates in *Azeé Bee Nahagha of Diné Nation.*"

### **Hannah**

Hannah has been a school administrator for 15 years. She has worked at schools on the Navajo reservation and on the Hopi reservation.

#### **Hannah's work experience.**

I had made a five year plan in my masters program which included goals to become a school administrator. What made it a reality was when a non-Indian male, uncertified school administrator, attempted to intimidate me and tell me how to teach my Native American students on my reservation. If these types of people were in administration, then, it validated that I am better and can be a school administrator.

**Hannah's cultural/spiritual background.** Hannah indicated her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions as "strong". She practices Hopi cultural traditions. She attends/participates in Hopi ceremonies year round. As for religious beliefs, she stated, "My Hopi religious beliefs are intertwined with my life. It is hard to separate the two at times. "

### **Ivy**

Ivy has five years of experience as a school administrator. She has worked at BIE and Grant schools.

**Ivy's work experience.** Ivy indicated that she chose to be an administrator because it is a passion of hers. She comes from a family of educators. Her father was

influential and other role models. She aspired, learned a lot, and wants to give back to the community.

**Ivy's cultural/spiritual background.** Ivy indicated her level of cultural ties to Native American traditions as “strong”. She practices Navajo traditional cultural traditions. She attends/participates in Navajo cultural ceremonies. She goes to church and she practices Navajo ceremonies.

### **Participant Profile Summary**

This section provided all of the nine participants' profiles. Broad categories were created for each participant: work experience and cultural/spiritual background. The following sections contain themes that emerged within the broad categories and the interpretations.

### **Response Patterns and Interpretation of School Administrator Experiences**

Response Patterns were searched within each broad category. These patterns contributed to the collective knowledge to make possible interpretations. Interpretations were made by combining the categories and patterns. Participant quotes are included in the analysis to support the patterns that emerged.

### **Participants' Work Experience**

There were three patterns that emerged in the first category, “work experience” from the individual interviews: (a) The first prevalent pattern evident in this category was labeled, teacher before administration. Seven of the nine participants were teachers before they started their career in administration. The experiences ranged from teaching general education elementary to high school, special education, and head teachers. This may be a general reflection that most female school administrators were teachers first

before becoming school administrators. (b) The second pattern was, I didn't plan to be a principal. Five of the nine participants indicated that they did not plan to be a principal, but that the opportunity to become a principal presented itself. (This may mean there is a lack of school administrators or that few are available). (c) The third pattern in this category was that participants expressed the desire to make a difference in their administrative capacities. Five of the nine participants showed evidence of this pattern in the interviews. Although the participants did not use that exact phrase, most of them implied this concept. This pattern best captured the participants' expressed intentions. This may mean it's a leadership trait of wanting to help, make changes, and the like.

### **Participants' Cultural/Spiritual Background**

The second category, "cultural/spiritual background," presented two patterns. The first pattern is labeled, "significant ties to Native American culture." Seven of the nine participants indicated an "above average" or "strong" tie to Native American culture.

The second pattern is labeled "Christianity and/or Native American Religious Beliefs." Five of the nine participants shared that they have two religious beliefs. The religious beliefs include a combination of either of the following: Christian (Catholic, Mormon or unspecified Bible-based church), Native American (Navajo, Hopi or Native American Church).

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the process of the analysis of the interviews for the narrative profiles. The process of developing broad categories and identifying patterns were explained.



The following is a summary of the interpretation of the data regarding participants' work experience and cultural/spiritual background. "Started as a Teacher," appeared to be a general reflection of the female administrators' work experience. Furthermore, "I didn't plan to be a principal/school administrator" indicated that there may be a lack of school administrators or that few jobs were available. Next, these female administrators possessed the trait of having the "desire to make a difference." With regard to the participants' cultural/spiritual background, they showed "significant ties to Native American culture." Interestingly, with regard to "Christianity and/or Native American religious beliefs," most female school administrators in this study had more than one religious/spiritual belief, most commonly, they both Native American and Christian beliefs.

## CHAPTER 5

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter contains a summary and conclusions of the complete individual interviews. Recommendations for further study and closing thoughts are also included. The presentation of themes is organized according to the larger categories and includes a discussion and relevant participant quotes from the interviews to support the analysis.

#### **Summary**

First, a thorough data analysis of the individual interviews set was conducted by following the recommendations of Rossman and Rallis (2003) and Seidman (2006). Transcribed interview transcripts were first reviewed and in order to reduce the text, “passages that are interesting” were marked with brackets (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). Seidman also stated, “What is of essential interest is embedded in each research topic and will arise from each transcript. Interviewers must affirm their own ability to recognize it” (p. 118). With Seidman’s statement in mind, the chunked passages marked in brackets were scanned for recurring key words or codes.

Similar to the narrative profile analysis process, “decision rules help[ed] guide the assignment” to particular codes and categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.273). Holistic strategies were used again in order to “describe connections among the data in the actual context” of participants’ experiences (p. 274). Words or phrases describing some segment of data that is explicit was sought to develop categories (p. 282).

#### **Conclusions**

The main categories that surfaced were (a) supports, (b) barriers, and (c) recommendations. The themes that emerged from the category *supports* were *family*,

*traditional beliefs, mentors, and language.* From the category *barriers*, the themes that emerged were *gender issues, ineffective schools, leadership issues, and political issues.* The themes that emerged from the category of *recommendations* were *academic leadership, personal characteristics, and spirituality/traditional ceremonies.*

The following paragraphs were organized by category and themes within the respective categories. Also, each category contains supportive participant quotes.

### **Supports**

The first category *supports* revealed 11 themes. The themes and percentages of responses were family (30.5%), traditional beliefs (26%), mentors (16%), my beliefs (9%), spiritual (4.5%), friends (4.5%), fluency of Native language (3.5%), be current (3.0%), students (2%), experience (0.5%), and mission school experience (0.5%). The top three prevalent themes in the data were *family, traditional beliefs, and mentors.* Language is included as a theme due to its importance to Native American culture.

The responses to four questions were analyzed for support data: In what ways do these cultural ties influence your decisions as a school administrator? Are you familiar with matrilineal societies? What supports have helped you in your career? Are there any other factors that strongly influence your work?

The responses to two questions were analyzed for language data: What languages are used in your home, and what is your level of proficiency for each language? Does being fluent in more than one language have an impact on the school administration?

**Family.** The most recurring theme in this *supports* category was family. The participants shared that the familial support received, come from spouse, children, father, grandmother, and sister. It is interesting to note that “father” was specifically mentioned

twice, although “mother” was not mentioned at all, considering a majority of the participants are Native American with matrilineal traditions. An interpretation of this data may be that the family emerged as being very important as a support. Family provided role models, traditions, teachings, language, culture, balance, and K’e (kinship).

Augustina stated,

I use my language and culture, the values from parents and grandparents. I learned that the cultural teaching of our Navajo people, the teaching about life, about family, about marriage, about learning, about wisdom, about understanding . . . all those things we can define as elements that make you successful. All those things that I was taught by parents and grandparents . . . that’s the foundation I use.

Emily stated, her late father

being my milestone in continuing my education as he supported me emotionally, mentally, spiritually, financially, and strong encouragement not to give up on my life challenges. His primary guidance has inspired through talking to me on the hardship he faced as a child and didn’t want any of his children to experience it. With what little education he instilled for himself, he is a strong supporter in education. He knew that education was the future to living a good life.

**Traditional beliefs.** The second most recurring theme in this *supports* category was traditional beliefs. The participants’ responses revealed that support for their work came from prayers, songs, and teachings from parents. It was concluded that traditional beliefs were an important aspect of the participants’ home and school lives. Gwyneth shared, “I have understood my role as a school administrator/educator synonymous with being a leader, a *naat’aanii* (leader in Navajo).” She shared that she had a leadership role within her family, work, and community. She also shared the importance of kinship/clan system and “as an educator, these cultural ties, these truths for our people are never separated from us.” Emily shared that her Navajo clan are born leaders, and anyone can

be a leader if they desire, regardless of gender. She also shared that her mother and grandmother were working models in and outside her home.

Schwartz (1997) stated that through the mother's blood, she teaches one to love. The understanding is that, one has many mothers. For example, Mother Earth and Water Woman. Tohe (2003) also stated,

Changing Woman is the principal deity in Navajo religion; she gave the tribe their first clans and guidelines for how they should live their lives. She represents woman's continual transformation through the many roles she takes on in her lifetime. Through Changing Woman, the matrilineal system of the Navajo was established. (p. 2)

Vandever (2003) stated,

On the Navajo reservation, the economic and social structures have come to mirror the western structure. A tension has been created between traditional Navajo and western beliefs/practices, forcing the Navajo people to live with an irresolvable dichotomy in order to survive in a patri-biased capitalist structure. (p. 15)

Hannah shared that her Native American culture is who she is and therefore influences her decisions as it applies, sometimes causing conflict while making decisions.

Vogelbacher (1999) stated that

the educational goal of many modern Indian nations has become the mastery of two worlds, traditional and modern. Navajo (Dine) philosophy in its theory and practice represents the foundation of Navajo thought and perception of life itself. *Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoon*, the central concept provides meaning and identity, and is therefore a crucial aspect of sovereign ethnicity.

Mankiller (2004) shared a female Indigenous leader's description about spirituality.

I believe the Creator has always been in my life, and now I believe in Christianity. The true Christianity is so close to how we believe and how we lived before contact. When Christianity came to us in our area, we were receptive to it because we already believed in that way of life. Later on, we found out that some of those who taught Christianity to us did not really live a Christian life. I feel that this

explains why some Native Americans are Christian and at the same time, believe in traditional beliefs.

Ivy shared that she used prayer to influence her decisions as an administrator.

Beth indicated that the type of school determines how culture may be tied to the administrative role. For example, some schools have “laws, policies, rules and regulations that don’t allow cultural teachings.” Augustina shared that she used her Navajo values and teachings to interact with children, make decisions, gender-based interactions, respect, and knowing how to relate to other people using k’e, and hozho. She claimed she used Navajo cultural teaching, the elements of success, and those are teachings of life, family, marriage, learning, wisdom, and understanding. Camilla shared that Navajo culture provided balance for her. It allowed her to see “both worlds, view things as a whole and helps in making critical judgments, decisions, and responses.” Non-Native American Fern, shared, “I am culturally sensitive to students’ participation in ceremonies and the need to be absent from school. I also try to heighten my teachers’ awareness of culturally sensitive issues that may arise in the classroom.”

**Mentors.** The participants’ responses revealed that support for their work came from mentors. Camilla stated,

I’ve got really good friends who are administrators. I’ll call them up and say I’m experiencing this, I hit a wall, or I couldn’t decide what to do . . . kind of venting a little bit too. Then I try not to keep things inside and clam up, which is not good for people, in general.

Hannah stated, “I diligently had to look at my three grandparents who were important leaders in our village by practicing their techniques and attitude in leading our people with kindness, listening, making them feel important, and without conflict.” Beth stated,

You need one or two main people you can rely on and trust, who have a lot of knowledge in the educational field. For me, I had that one Navajo female who is very successful at being a Navajo administrator. When I was first starting out she would go in there. I call her up and she would be there to help me.”

**Language.** The participants’ responses revealed that Native language was a support. Augustina stated,

In terms of our language, we use both of them. I know we use the English language mainly for basic communication. But, we use the Navajo language for deep, deep emotions and deep, deep understanding of life, and that’s when we switch to Navajo because the English language doesn’t do the job for us.

Beth stated,

There’s certain things they don’t understand in English and you go back and use the Navajo language. I found this to be very effective, because when students come to my office for disciplinary reasons, I speak to them in Navajo. It seems like the Navajo language is a lot stronger than English. Navajo is more formal; therefore, they respect what you are trying to say to them and the disciplinary actions, therefore, they comply with it more. It’s a fact, as an administrator, you need to be able to use both languages on a daily basis.

Camilla stated, “Usually I explain to them to let them know my speaking is limited, but I can fully understand what they’re saying. I don’t think it impacts me because I understand what they’re saying.” Gwyneth stated, “I never felt that not being proficient in Navajo hindered my role as an educator/administrator in any way. The only time that I can see that being bilingual was necessary was maybe when there was a public forum.” Donna shared, “All the complex information that a school has to know of the Western education, it’s hard to translate that into Navajo, and somewhere the translation gets lost.” As a result, she stated that parents claim that administrators do not listen to them and don’t understand them. “That goes on all the time because of that miscommunication.” Ivy also shared that the Navajo language has an impact on communicating with stakeholders. Hannah shared that being fluent in more than one

language impacted school administration by better understandings and relations. Fern also shared that speaking more than one language did not have an impact on administration, although Emily shared that being fluent in more than one language had an impact on administration because grandparents were also caregivers. They came to parent meetings, enrolled their grandchildren, attended to health records, and other important related concerns.

The late Dr. Robert Roessel was a well-known educator, especially for laying the foundations for Rough Rock Demonstration School located on the Navajo reservation. In “From Boarding Schools to Self Determination,” Roessel stated the following regarding teachers and their pre-service training before the Senate Indian Education Subcommittee: “It is extremely important for the teachers . . . to understand the culture, language, and the family life of the children they are involved in educating” (p. 10). Roessel’s statement counteracts events such as according to Vogelbacher (1999), “Educational practice beginning in colonial times and extending to the present day has focus on ‘christianizing and civilizing’ native children with the explicit purpose of eradicating native culture” (p. 1).

Our Navajo grandparents and parents suffered through a time period that was spent with the United States federal government’s attempts to stifle and delete Native American languages and cultures. However, the United States federal government explained the forcing of Native Americans to speak English-only and to adopt the ways of general American society was to educate Native Americans. The effects on the Navajo grandparents, parents, and youth, have been devastating, and are still being felt today.



Presently, many Native American tribes have lost their languages, or are on the road to losing their Native language. Benedek (1995) stated,

Some of these people,” Ella related, “seem to have taken to heart the lesson they learned at boarding school: that their Navajo heritage has no worth or value. And now they don’t want their children to learn anything about being Navajo—even the language” (p. 104). Benedek continued, “It’s just what the BIA schools did to our students, where we were made to feel ashamed of our language and our culture and by the way we pronounced certain words and by the way we acted” (p. 105).

Interestingly, according to Ogunwole’s (2006) Educational Attainment graph, The the Bureau Census of 2000, 37.3% of Navajos had “less than high school graduate.” After further review of the table, Navajos ranked lowest or was one of the lowest in least educational attainment of the 10 American Indian tribes and four Alaska Native tribal groupings that were compared in Table 9.

Table 9

*Educational Attainment, Second Analysis: 2000*

|                                   | Less than high school graduate                                | High school graduate                                | Some college or associate’s degree                                 | Bachelor’s degree or more                               |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| American Indian and Alaska Native | 29.1%   | 29.2%   | 30.2%  | 11.5%   |
| Navajo                            | 37.3%   | 27.7%   | 28.1%  | 6.9%  |
| Navajo ranking overall            | #1/14 – highest percentage of less than high school graduates | #14/14 – lowest percentage of high school graduates | #11/14 – in the lowest three of some college or associate’s degree | #13/14 - in the lowest two of Bachelor’s degree or more |

Also, other tribes with higher levels of speaking only English at home, were also tribes with higher levels of educational attainment (Census 2000). Another tragic

consequence of the failure of educators to appreciate Native American languages and cultures is the well documented over-identification of Indian children as learning disabled and mentally retarded. These labels are usually based on assessments by monolingual, monoculture school psychologists using ‘intelligence’ and other tests that measure “Standard” English language ability and familiarity with mainstream American culture (Reyhner, 2002). Principals need to address the repercussions of the over-identification of students as learning disabled and mentally retarded.

After considering the participant data and related literature, the following conclusions on language are concluded. Responses to my question, “Does being fluent in more than one language have an impact on the school administration?” indicated that 44% of the participants felt it did not have an impact, while 56% of the participants felt it did have an impact.

The question, “What languages are used in your home and what is your level of proficiency for each language?” had interesting results. All participants were fluent English speakers. As for Native American language(s), the participants ranked themselves as one participant was not fluent in a Native American language, three participants were below average, one was average, and four participants were fluent speakers. Almost half (44%) of the female school administrators were fluent in Native language (Navajo or Hopi). My conclusion is that being able to speak a Native American language, along with English, is not a necessity; however, it is an advantage, to be fluent in Native American language(s). Possibly, 10 years ago, it might have been more of a necessity. I also come to the conclusion that the speaking of Native American language(s) are declining. (Cantoni, 1997) stated,

American schools are not alone in having contributed to the decline of home languages. Remembering the frustration they had suffered in school because they could not understand the teacher's language, parents all over the world have tried to protect their children from a similar ordeal. Instead of teaching them the language of their home, they made the effort and sacrifice of using only the language of the school. (p. 1)

Cantoni continued,

The Native families who decided to speak only English around their children in hopes of facilitating their academic progress have succeeded, in most instances, in raising a generation of monolingual speakers of English. They have, unknowingly, and unintentionally, deprived their children of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Moreover, they have become unable to transmit cultural knowledge that has no equivalent in the world-view and language of outsiders. The children of these families have been deprived of their rightful linguistic and cultural heritage. (p. 1)

## **Barriers**

The second category, *barriers*, revealed 13 themes. The themes and percentages of responses were gender issues (24%), ineffective schools (13%), leadership issues (10%), political issues (10%), local issues (7%), crab issue (7%), unawareness issue (7%), cultural issues (7%), nepotism (3%), parents (3%), support (3%), historical issues (3%), and none (3%). The top four prevalent themes in the data were gender issues, ineffective schools and leadership issues (10%), and political issues (10%).

The responses to four questions were analyzed for barriers data: What barriers have you encountered? Are you familiar with matrilineal societies? Do you think there are differences in salaries and other factors, for female school administrators, as compared to male school administrators with similar qualifications and experiences?

**Gender issues.** Gender issues was the top theme that evolved in the category of barriers. The responses from the participants to questions about barriers resulted in the following responses: "Competition with males for jobs and males get selected"; "male

dominance in the work force”; “perception of lack of competence as a female leader”; and “males think of themselves as the only leaders.” It was also shared that there is “discrimination against females”; “females get minimal roles”; and “females do all the work and the males get the credit.” Gwyneth stated, “I have always found the Navajo women in leadership positions as a *taboo* fascinating. A presence of conflicting paradigms arises when this is analyzed.” Fern stated, “I haven’t faced any cultural barriers; rather, I face gender barriers.” Emily stated,

I have applied for any administrator position and found that immediately the male administrators were selected despite my educational and work credentials. As mentioned before, people still view the male dominance in the workforce as leaders and females are considered to lead the role of being assistant to the administrators.

Controversy about females as leaders stems from a quarrel between males and females that split the genders resulted in woman-can’t-be-leaders belief because they took a stand of “we can live without men.” Some Navajos, especially among the older women, respect the legend because of the belief that a “woman’s leadership only brought chaos and confusion in the third world” (Reid, 2006, p. 2). However, the results of this study show that this has not prevented females from becoming educational leaders as administrators. Perhaps there is a clash of beliefs at play in these situations. Reid (2006) also cited historian and history professor, Denetdale, stating that the first Navajo tribal government was founded on the White patriarchal structure, a structure that does not encourage women and minorities to take up leadership positions.

**Ineffective schools.** Ineffective schools was the second top theme that evolved in the category of barriers. The responses from the participants to questions about barriers resulted in the following responses: “slow school”; “school with so much money not

spent on children”; and “change things within a system.” Donna stated, “I went to another school, and it was just too slow, everything was too slow so I just revised the database system and initiated some stuff.” Donna continued,

The money situation was not being spent for the kids and they had all this reserved money that they were going to send back and I couldn’t believe how many years the school was like that, broken up desks, no textbooks, no curriculum, etc.

Hannah stated, “Parents and communities that still believe schools are a scary place and uninviting.”

**Leadership issues.** Leadership issues tied with political issues for the third top theme as a barrier. Camilla stated, “The lack of support from the superintendent, my supervisor.” Emily stated, “With so many turnovers with the leaders in the past five years [seven principals] they felt my goals would be short-lived.” Gwyneth stated, “Administrators are typically not people friendly; they are insensitive to the culture of the people and do not care to learn much of what encompasses the Navajo people; they are unapproachable and make top down decisions.”

**Political issues.** The political issues tied with leadership issues was the top third theme as a barrier. Gwyneth stated,

The culture of learning and education amongst underrepresented populations, especially Indigenous people, has a complicated history. This history includes forced schooling of young people, removal from their native homelands and forced acculturation to the norms of the mainstream society. Because of this truth education of indigenous people has been a journey of healing. One of the ramifications of this horrific time in the educational history of indigenous people is the apathy that has developed toward education in general.

Emily stated, “I had problems with acceptance because I was not a community member.” Beth stated, “I think a lot of it is internal politics, ranging from school board politics. . . . If you have another administrator higher up than you, then different politics,

especially if you work in your own community. That plays a huge part of whether you will be successful.” Beth continued, “Politics is the only thing that runs the schools nowadays. It’s really sad to say that, but that’s just the reality of how our schools run.”

### **Recommendations: Offered by Participants**

The third category, *recommendations* (offered by participants) revealed 13 themes. The themes and percentages of responses were academic leadership (30%), personal characteristics (23%), spirituality/traditional ceremonies (20%), mental well-being activities (12%), parents (4%), role models (2%), networking (2%), gender (2%), school staff (1%), other (1%), district/nation (1%), support (1%), and non-Native American administrator issue (1%). The top three prevalent themes in the data were academic leadership, personal characteristics and spirituality/traditional ceremonies.

The responses to three questions were analyzed for barriers data: What coping strategies did you use when encountering barriers? What recommendations do you have for female school administrators of primarily Native American students, which could help them enhance supports and face barriers? Is there anything important that you would like to add to my study in understanding the barriers and supports of female school administrators of primarily Native American students?

**Academic leadership.** This theme was the most prevalent theme in the *recommendations* category. The participants’ responses to the questions included the following: “I took the time to really understand the situation, to come to a solution/recommendation”; “Children and education are the priority”; “make sure that the people that I work with knew they were important”; “People need feelings affirmed and validated”; “identify the issue”; “hear all sides of the story”; “plan for corrective action”;

“remain focused”; “be a good communicator with a clear vision”; “be a good listener”; “involve others”; and “have an alternate plan.” It is also recommended “to stay current on research”; “know the standards /curriculum /assessments”; and “have knowledge and skills to keep pushing forward.” Also, “know your job, responsibilities, regulations”; “educate yourself on all aspects”; “have a purpose and a goal to drive others”; “never accept the status quo”; and “enjoy professional development.” Furthermore, “look at quantitative and qualitative data”; “look at perception data”; and “make decisions with children foremost.” Finally, “while in a principalship, stay there a long period of time”; “make yourself visible to others”; “have a clear vision”; “build future leaders”; “have effective communication”; and “develop yourself.” These responses are in the category of Academic Leadership due to the relationship to the instructional leadership traits of a school leader.

Hannah stated, “I would encourage female school administrators to know their jobs well, to include responsibilities and regulations. Be one step ahead.” Gwyneth stated, “Put in the time, stay humble, and never accept status quo.” Fern stated, “know and understand the culture and family structure (clans) of the students and always be sensitive to issues that may arise with cultural ties so they are able to respond appropriately.” Emily elaborated on her recommended topics: “have a clear vision, value people, build future leaders, communicate effectively, take risks and develop yourself.” Donna stated, “Just a lot of prayers, ceremonies, protection prayers”; “exercised a lot”; and “let everything go, and take care of yourself.” Camilla stated, “Just try to make yourself visible and be out there, show that you’re willing to stay there.” Beth stated,

It seems like you have to have that spiritual atmosphere. You always have to have that spiritual life on a regular daily basis. In order to continue being effective, no matter what it is. Spiritual aspects in your life will always be there and you had to be complete, in order for you as a person, to be whole and continue refreshing your mind and your soul.

Augustina stated,

Networking might help, meaning that have Navajo school female administrators association, that might help. Bring the minds of female administrators together and ask them to produce products, come up with books. . . . I think those initiatives would empower our female administrators even more.

Literature shows that nationally, only 30% of the 184 Bureau of Indian Education schools run by the federal government on reservations and formerly called Bureau of Indian Affairs school are making AYP, the central gauge of performance under the 5-year-old No Child Left Behind Law. In Arizona, 55% of the 141 regular public schools on American Indian reservations made adequate progress last year (Zehr, 2007, p. 2). This clearly shows that academic leadership to be addressed.

Literature also showed that superintendents and governing board members responded with the highest mean level of agreement to the same item: “Effective communication with board members, district and school staff, parents, students, and the community is essential in superintendent effectiveness” (Wilson, 2006). The characteristics with the lowest level of agreement was, persuasion is the ultimate tool for a superintendent, and school board turnover is a root cause of superintendent ineffectiveness.

Considering the participants’ recommendations and the relevant literature, here is my conclusion: Female school administrators have two main jobs: instructional leader and manager. Many times, school administrators spend most of their time managing, and don’t have time to be in the classrooms. Academic leadership is the most important



recommendation from the participants, and I conclude that the academic aspects of a school need to be priority.

**Personal characteristics.** This was the second most recurring theme in the recommendations category. Participant responses to the questions about coping strategies, recommendations to other female school administrators, and anything important to add to the study, included the following: “As an educational leader, “understand extrovert and introverts”; “understand your personal characteristics”; “know yourself and find the circle you excel in”; “get familiar with your school with a good attitude rather instead of better than thou attitude”; “treat people well”; “make a difference, make a change”; and “be really positive.” Also, “look for the good in your job and have fun at it too”; “you have to like your job”; “it’s not an 8-5 job”; “climb the career ladder”; “no support when you are a principal, so learn the ropes”; “you get stronger as you go”; “always remain humble”; “value people and take risks”; “approach barriers in a positive manner”; and “never give up on future endeavors.”

Pavlik (1998) stated to be an effective leader in an Indian school, the leader should (a) possess a people-oriented personality, (b) possess flexibility, (c) accept the Indian school as a unique entity, (d) possess a self-perception as an Indian educator, (e) possess a body of specialized knowledge and skills, (f) believe that the Indian child can succeed, (g) make an effort to work with, and if possible, become part of the community; and (h) to possess dedication and commitment (p. 6).

Pavlik (1998) also stated, “We must identify, secure, and retain individuals who possess the “right stuff” to be leaders of Indian schools. Part of this process must include establishing specialized training programs of substance to prepare people, especially,

though not exclusively, Indian people to assume vital administrative positions. Until we do these things we will continue to see very few schools which serve Native American students listed among the ranks of those classified as being “effective” schools” (p. 8).

Considering the participants’ responses, I concluded that female school administrators must be knowledgeable in academic and management aspects; however, personal characteristics also are important. Leadership styles, positiveness, perseverance, compassion, goal-setter, public relations, and humility, to name a few personal characteristics, are also important and usually not part of college classes or professional development, and are usually learned on one’s own.

**Spirituality/traditional ceremonies.** This was the third most recurring theme in the recommendations category. The following were participants’ responses to the questions about coping strategies, recommendations to other female school administrators, and anything important to add to the study, included the following: “prayers,” “protection prayers,” “meditation,” “spirituality,” “attend ceremonies,” “peyote meetings,” “hear songs,” and “hear prayers.” It was also recommended to “rejuvenate to become complete, to be whole, and continue,” and to “perceive yourself from a maternal aspect and view the school as your home.” Also, it is important to “balance the roles of being a mother, wife, and your whole life.” Furthermore, “if you come from a traditional home, it will work out”; know and understand the culture and family clan structure of the students”; and “be sensitive to the issues.”

Similar to other themes in previous categories, spirituality, culture, and religious beliefs play a significant role in the female administrators’ role as an educational leader. It is my interpretation that the female school administrators rely on spirituality or have

spirituality in their lives, and that is very important to them as well. Spirituality balances out the school administrator's immense responsibilities as a school leader.

### **Recommendations**

As stated earlier, literature regarding the barriers and supports for female administrators in primarily Native American schools is limited. This section reviews how the results and findings contributes or fills gaps in the knowledge base. It also identifies what remains to be investigated. The following needs to be further investigated for more effective leadership by female administrators of primarily Native American students:

1. Data for dropout rates are available for the general American public and larger population subgroups. American Indian/Native American statistics are lacking or limited in many topics, such as dropout rates, attendance rates, truancy rates, etc., by tribal groupings. Although, the schools serving primarily Native American students have small populations, the need for more specific data will give a more accurate picture of their schools.
2. School administrators have a major role in hiring teachers for their schools. What traits, attributes, skills, certifications, and knowledge are necessary for an effective teacher for Native American students?
3. More women are taking the top education jobs than before. About 12% of U.S. superintendents today are women, up from 4% a decade ago (Vail, 1999). What traits, attributes, skills, certifications, and knowledge are necessary for an effective female school administrator of Native American students?
4. Although not all of the participants practice a specific religion or specific pair of religions in this case, this may mean most female school administrators in this

- study have more than 1 religious/spiritual belief. To further understand this phenomenon, further study on this topic may need to be examined.
5. School administrators need to know if there is over-identification of students as learning disabled and mentally retarded in their schools. Statistics and more information on this topic
  6. Impact of BIA boarding schools still an impact on this generation of students?
  7. Non-Native American school administrators' perspective on schools serving primarily Native American students.
  8. Although Native American languages might be on the decline, Native American culture is still thriving. What is the impact on Native American culture if Native American languages continue to decline?
  9. What are the different tribal groupings doing to revitalize Native American languages? Is this a parent responsibility? School responsibility? Both?

### **Closing Thoughts**

The results and literature show that Native American culture cannot be separated from their administrative roles. The previous paragraphs have captured the various yet sometimes similar ways Native American culture impacts their role. It ranges from social interactions with various stakeholders to making important decisions. It is also evident that the patriarchal structure and controversial Native American belief that women should not hold leadership positions did not prevent them from becoming educational leaders. It is also important that there were some references to White Shell Woman being a leader for the Navajo people, as well as other familial female role models of the participants. This further complicates the contexts of which these administrators function because it is

in a sense contradictory. However, it also helpful that McCarty and Benally (2003), concluded that perhaps, adherence to, and respect of, Navajo culture and traditions, is a support for Navajo principals in referencing Vadas' (1995) strong correlation between attachment to Navajo culture and student academic achievement.”

Previous chapters and sections in this chapter have shown that there is a controversy in females serving as leaders that come from traditional stories. However, as stated earlier, there appears to be a contradiction in the stories that the participants and the literature refer to. White Shell Woman serves as a leader in the Navajo culture, yet the story of the battle of the genders tell that women cannot lead independently of men. Therefore, it was concluded that chaos will occur if women lead. Taking these two very different stories from the same culture of which a majority of the participants come from, it may be interpreted that although the participants felt some discrimination, there are instances of trying to correct those issues. The other conclusion is that the participants continued to remain positive and continued to work on behalf of the children.

Overall, the following interpretations from the data, indicates to me that I can share with potential female school administrators of primarily Native American students that:

- Family and traditional beliefs are very important supports.
- Gender issues and ineffective schools are key barriers.
- Academic Leadership and personal characteristics are the highest need of focus.

Learning more about these specific topics will help female school administrators of schools serving primarily Native American students to help improve education or to succeed as school administrators.

I reviewed my abstract for this study and this is a portion from the abstract: “A goal of this study is to provide information to future educational leaders. These future educational leaders will be informed about some barriers and may be able to avoid similar barriers or resolve some issues more effectively. The future educational leaders will be informed of some supports which could assist them in coping and become more prepared to tackle various educational issues. Educational leaders will be more empowered to lead toward successful schools. Perhaps this will help in the retention of female school administrators and lower turnover rates. This in turn, will support the school staff, the students, and the parents.” That was the intent of my study.

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