Factors Influencing Academic Achievement for

Salt River Students

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Native American students from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community have attended Stapley Junior High, one of 13 junior high schools in the Mesa Unified School District, since its doors opened in the fall of 1994. Over the years a variety of instructional practices have been used in an effort to improve academic outcomes for these students, who have posed a challenge to traditional educational methods.

Interviews were conducted with eight educational professionals, including teachers, administrators, and a tutor who worked with these students on a daily basis. They each responded to the same series of questions, providing their insights based on first-hand interactions and knowledge. The interviews revealed factors that influenced student academic success, including caring, trust, communication, tutoring, and administrative support. Factors posing challenges to student success were identified as attendance, parental support, and gangs and drugs. In-school influences were arts and sports, friendship, inclusion, and behavior. Out-of-school influences were home and family, the concept of time, and educational considerations.

The conclusion is that this is a complex problem, fueled by the proximity of the reservation to a major metropolitan area, the gang culture that is prevalent in the Salt River community, poverty, attendance issues, and the impact of parental involvement and support. The things that made a difference at Stapley Jr. High included staff who demonstrated caring by establishing trust and getting to
know students on a personal level, teachers who were consistent and held students
to a high standard, and teachers who were flexible with regard to time.
To everyone who helped along the way.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most sincere thanks go to Dr. Nicholas Appleton for his support and encouragement throughout this process, and to Dr. Dee Spencer and Dr. Mark Duplissis for their advice and support. Special thanks and sincere appreciation also go to my husband for being quietly supportive, which is exactly what I needed. And finally, a most heartfelt thank you to the Salt River students who attend, and have attended, Stapley Junior High, and to all of the people who work to support and educate them.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................................... ix

CHAPTER

1  INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 1
   Background ................................................................................................................................. 1
   Introduction and Statement of the Problem .............................................................................. 3
   Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 6
   Overview of the Study .............................................................................................................. 6

2  LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................................................................... 7

3  METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................... 18
   Research Design ...................................................................................................................... 18
   The Salt River Community ........................................................................................................ 18
   Data Collection ....................................................................................................................... 19
   Participants .............................................................................................................................. 20
   Organization and Data Analysis .............................................................................................. 22

4  FINDINGS ............................................................................................................................... 23
   Part I—Student Success: Connections .................................................................................. 24
      Caring ...................................................................................................................................... 25
      Trust ....................................................................................................................................... 30
      Communication ...................................................................................................................... 31
      Tutoring ................................................................................................................................. 33
      Administrative Support ......................................................................................................... 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part II—Challenges to Student Success</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs and Drugs</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III—Other Influences</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Influences</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and sports</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Influences</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and family</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The concept of time</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational considerations</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More personal reflections</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Impact</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF SALT RIVER STUDENTS AT STAPLEY JUNIOR HIGH</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> IRB APPROVAL</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mesa Public School District Demographics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Eighth Grade AIMS Scores in Reading, Writing, and Math</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

In 1972 the Office of Indian Education and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education were established through the enactment of the Indian Education Act. This was considered to be landmark legislation since it laid the foundation for a more comprehensive path to meeting the educational needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students. The most recent revisions to the Indian Education Act occurred in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. At that time the program was reauthorized as Title VII Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and is unique in these ways:

1. It recognizes that American Indians have unique educational and culturally related academic needs and distinct language and cultural needs;

2. It is the only comprehensive Federal Indian Education legislation that deals with American Indian education from pre-school to graduate-level education and reflects the diversity of government involvement in Indian education;

3. It focuses national attention on the educational needs of American Indian learners, reaffirming the Federal government’s special responsibility related to the education of American Indians and Alaska Natives; and
4. It provides services to American Indians and Alaska natives that are not provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. (Ed.gov, 2005, Numbered Items 1 through 4)

Title VII has four guiding principles:

1. Stronger accountability for results
2. Greater flexibility in the use of federal funds
3. More choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds
4. Emphasis on research-based instruction that works (Ed.gov, 2011, para. 2)

School districts and schools in Arizona are held to accountability primarily through student demonstration of proficiency as measured by Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). Proficiency is measured in reading, writing, mathematics, and science; and the rating categories are *Falls Far Below* (FFB), *Approaches* (A), *Meets* (M), and *Exceeds* (E). Students whose scores are within the *Meets* and *Exceeds* categories pass the test; whereas, those whose scores are within *Approaches* and *Falls Far Below* fail. By the 2013–2014 academic year every student is required by NCLB to perform at least at the Proficient (*Meets*) level (Whitney, 2008). It is these scores that determine whether or not a school is making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and affects not only the school as a whole, but also subgroups within the school.

The Mesa Unified School District in Mesa, Arizona, is the largest school district in Arizona, and its demographics (Mesa Public Schools, Research and Evaluation, 2011a, March 20) are similar to those of the city as indicated in the
following table (U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, 2011, December 23, last revised).

Table 1

*Mesa Public School District Demographics (2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian &amp; Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MPS</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesa</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
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**Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

Stapley Junior High, one of 13 junior high schools in the Mesa Unified School District, has educated Native American students from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC) since its doors opened in the fall of 1994. These students have accounted for approximately 8% of the total school population since then. The administration and teachers at Stapley Jr. High immediately identified this student population as being in need of additional educational assistance, knowing from experience at other district schools that this group of students would pose a challenge to traditional teaching methods. A variety of educational practices were implemented (i.e., tutoring, home-school liaison), most meeting with limited success for some students but nothing that contributed to higher achievement for the group as a whole.

Since the school opened there have been some significant shifts in meeting the educational needs of its Native American students. The first shift occurred in
the fall of 2004, when community members from the SRPMIC, along with the administration at Stapley Junior High, began working together in an attempt to improve the academic achievement of the Native American students. The outcome was the formation of a new class, *Skills for Teens*, offered in the spring of 2005. Sixteen Native American students from the SRPMIC were selected based on the following criteria: (a) failing two or more core academic classes; (b) not a behavior or discipline problem per office referrals; and (c) had the potential to see the importance of doing better academically based on teacher and administrative referrals. These students were given a sixth hour class where they worked on assignments from other classes with a teacher and an aide. Additionally, they participated in discussions related to culture and school, as well as hosting visits from guest speakers from the SRPMIC and the school. This class was discontinued after its inaugural semester.

A second shift occurred transitionally, beginning in the fall of 2005. Students received more one-on-one help with core academic class work via tutoring, and the relationship continued to strengthen between Stapley Jr. High and the Salt River community. Since these shifts began, Native American student AIMS scores have improved.

AIMS scores for eighth grade students are provided in the following tables and show the percentage of Native American students at Stapley Jr. High who scored at the *Falls Far Below* (FFB), *Approaches* (A), *Meets* (M), and *Exceeds* (E) levels. The impact of the *Skills for Teens* class, and especially the interventions that followed, can be seen in the overall improvement in scores.
Table 2

_Eighth Grade AIMS Scores in Reading, Writing, and Math_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>FFB%</th>
<th>A%</th>
<th>M%</th>
<th>E%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
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<td>48</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2002-03</td>
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<td>2008-09</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
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<td>2007-08</td>
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<td>2008-09</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note._ Eighth grade writing was not tested in 2009-10. From _School Report Card Search and Review_, by Arizona Department of Education, 2010 (retrieved from http://www.ade.az.gov/srcs/find_school.asp) and Mesa Public Schools, by Research and Evaluation Department, 2012 (retrieved from http://www.mpsaz.org/research/parents/demographics/)
There are compelling reasons for districts, administrators, and teachers to focus on student proficiency for these high stakes tests, not the least of which is the very real threat of restructuring and/or job loss for underperformance. The administration at Stapley Jr. High works with due diligence to ensure the teaching staff is kept in the loop regarding district policies and procedures, and provides planning time so that departments are able to plan lessons and assessments that are data driven in order to improve student achievement.

**Research Questions**

The primary research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What do the teachers, administrators and Salt River community members believe have contributed to the raising of academic achievement of the Native American students from the SRPMIC at Stapley Jr. High since 2004?

2. What role did the community members from the SRPMIC play?

3. What role did the Stapley Jr. High administration play?

4. What role did Stapley Jr. High teachers and tutors play?

**Overview of the Study**

Chapter 1 focuses on background information, introduction of the study, and the research questions that guided the study. Chapter 2 provides an exploration of pertinent literature relative to the study. Chapter 3 highlights the methodology and the collection and analysis of the data; Chapter 4 presents the data results and analysis; Chapter 5 provides conclusions and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The responsibility of American Indian education began to be addressed in the early 1900s when the states started taking this responsibility over from the federal government. This transition meant that eventually there were more children in public schools than in the federal boarding schools (Reyhner & Eder, 1992). Reyhner (1994) noted that many schools attended by Native students had “an unfriendly school climate that fails to promote appropriate academic, social, cultural, and spiritual development among many Native students” (p. 16); and that when combined with other factors, such as low teacher expectations and racism, the fact that Native students have the highest dropout rate (36%) of any minority group in the United States is not surprising.

There have been many theories to explain the problems of education for ethnic minority students. These theories tend to focus on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and place the responsibility for low achievement on the minority group instead of on the school. Jacob and Jordan (1993) stated there were four explanations for low achievement with the first three being the most significant: “one stresses their genetic heritage (termed the genetic explanation) and two focus on their home environment (termed the cultural deficit explanation and the status attainment approach). A fourth explanation focuses primarily on the role of society and schools” (p. 4).

According to St. Germaine (1995) many of the problems minority students have encountered in the public schools can be attributed to “cultural
discontinuity.” The general premise of this theory is that minority children, after having been raised in their own distinct culture, are put into a school system that tends to promote the culture of the majority. While this theory has been looked at specifically with regard to dropout rates, it is not unrealistic to assume being educated within a different culture would have an impact on students throughout their earlier school years.

One can see how this could be a significant social issue at school. If the children feel as though they have entered a different world every time they go to school that does little or nothing with regard to their values or beliefs, it is realistic to expect that some of the children will eventually lose all desire to go to school.

Among the Native Americans, values and beliefs are extremely important—ideals that have to do with materialism, time, and competition. The Indian cultures and non-Indian cultures have different views on these ideals. For example, the Indian cultures feel that time is relative—there is always time to do what needs to be done, so pressure to do something at a certain time is a foreign concept. Many non-Indian cultures place a great deal of importance on material possessions, which in turn relates to the happiness of those who acquire them. In the Indian cultures, tribe members are sometimes suspicious of those who have many material possessions. For them, giving is an admirable virtue (Mesa Public Schools, n.d., p.vii).

A major part of the problem can be attributed to the learning expectations for our Native American students. Pavel (1999) stated that the public has not
really been aware of the commitment within Native communities to provide their students with a solid education. One of the elements of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* passed in 1994 encouraged schools to use their federal monies for projects to help improve teaching and learning. In addition, they were asked to form partnerships with parents, tribes, and businesses (Orbis Associates, 1996).

As with children of any ethnicity, Native American students need positive role models (Pavel, 1999). Non-native educators have most likely grown up with biased portrayals of American Indians, and this contributes to the continued stereotyping instead of a better sense of understanding (Almeida, 1996).

More recent research addresses the need to explore in greater depth the importance of multiple perspectives. Merryfield (2002) stressed the need for students to learn about issues “through multiple, usually conflicting, perspectives” (p. 19). This attention to different perspectives causes the student to begin to consider how past and present events shape both our own and other cultures. This type of critical examination will be necessary if we truly hope to bridge the chasm between our cultures and to expand our knowledge and understanding of the realities of living in a global age.

Selby and Pike (2000) made the point that we need to engage in *worldmindedness*, defined as

a commitment to the principle of ‘one world’ in which the interests of particular societies and nations are viewed in light of the overall needs of the planet. Education, it is argued, has a role to play in the development of young citizens who demonstrate respect for people of other cultures, faiths
and worldviews, who have an understanding of global issues and trends, and who commit to acting for global peace and environmental/social justice. (p. 139).

This concept of *worldmindedness* is becoming more prevalent, particularly in social studies and science curricula, and in recent textbook adoptions.

Pike (2002) used the term *connectedness*, which refers to universally shared qualities among people, or “real or desired links between areas of knowledge, curriculum subjects, aspects of schooling, or humans and their environments” (p. 65). This sense of global connectedness appears to be lacking between Native American and non-Native American cultures, and is likely to be a reason why the Native American students develop such strong cliques with those who share the same cultural values and experiences. The same can be said of the other ethnic groups; and although there are always exceptions, students of similar ethnic backgrounds do tend to gravitate toward each other.

According to DeVoe and Darling-Churchill (2008), a child’s socioeconomic and academic future is linked to four primary factors: single-parent family, poverty, mother without a high school education, and a home language other than English. Children from racial and/or ethnic minorities experience these risk factors much more frequently than children from White families. A child with even one of these risk factors can fall behind children with none of the risk factors in the areas of mathematics and early reading. (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, cited by DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008, p. 97).
Three of the four risk factors are relevant with regard to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian community. There are many single parent families or situations where a child lives with a grandparent or other relative, and the percentage of residents with income below the poverty level in the community in 2009 was 37.9% (City-Data.com, n.d.). A dropout rate study done by the Mesa Unified School District looked at the 2002-03 through 2006-07 school years and determined that the average dropout rate among Native American secondary students in grades 9 through 12 for those five years was 5.5% (Mesa Public Schools, Research and Evaluation, 2012b).

Geneva Gay (2000) pointed out that achievement trends will not be reformed by placing blame on social class and families, and that, as in health care, “treating symptoms does not cure diseases” and “simply pointing out achievement problems does not lead to their resolution” (p. xiii). She went on to state that there were five foundational premises that set the stage for being culturally responsive as teachers.

The first premise is that culture matters, and whether we are conscious of it or not, culture “determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (Gay, 2000, p. 9). The second premise is that conventional reform is not adequate because current practices focus on what “ethnically, racially, and linguistically different students don’t have and can’t do” (p. 12). Achievement is hampered without social supports and cultural connections.
The third premise is that “many educators have good intentions about not being academically unjust and discriminatory toward ethnically and racially different students” (Gay, 2000, p. 13). Gay stated, however, that being aware and having good intentions is not enough to promote the changes that are needed. The fourth premise is that cultural diversity is a strength—a persistent, vitalizing force in our personal and civic lives—although this may not be realized. It is, then, a useful resource for improving educational effectiveness for all students. Just as the evocation of their European American, middle-class heritage contributes to the achievement of white students, using the cultures and experiences of Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Latino Americans, and African Americans facilitate their school success. (p. 14)

The fifth and final, premise is that “scores on standardized tests and grades students receive on classroom learning tasks do not explain why they are not performing at acceptable levels. These are the symptoms, not the causes, of the problems” (p. 16).

There is no doubt that teachers bring their own cultural background into the classroom. Gay (2000) stated that they perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preconception. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural backgrounds that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself. Together students and teachers
construct, mostly without being conscious of doing it, an environment of meanings enacted in individual and group behaviors, of conflict and accommodation, rejection and acceptance, alienation and withdrawal.

(p. 9)

Gay posited that culturally responsive teaching is the new pedagogical paradigm that is necessary for improving performance of ethnically underachieving students. She stated,

It is at once a routine and a radical proposal. It is routine because it does for Native American, Latino, Asian American, African American, and low-income students what traditional instructional ideologies and actions do for middle-class European Americans. That is, it filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master. It is radical because it makes explicit the previously implicit role of culture in teaching and learning, and it insists that educational institutions accept the legitimacy and viability of ethnic group cultures in improving learning outcomes. (p. 24)

Culturally responsive teaching, according to Gay (2000) “can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching has the following characteristics:
• It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic
groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and
approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal
curriculum.

• It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences
as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.

• It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to
different learning styles.

• It teaches students to know and praise their own and each others’ cultural
heritages.

• It incorporates multicultural information resources, and materials in all the
subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.” (p. 29)

A number of studies (Damico & Scott, 1988; Good & Brophy, 1994;
Gay, 2000) have concluded that

students of color, especially those who are poor and live in urban areas,
get less total instructional attention; are called on less frequently; are
encouraged to continue to develop intellectual thinking less often; are
criticized more and praised less; receive fewer direct responses to their
questions and comments; and are reprimanded more often and disciplined
more severely. Frequently, the praise given is terse, ritualistic, procedural,
and social rather than elaborate, substantive, and academic. General praise
of personal attributes is less effective than that which is related to task-
specific performance in improving the learning efforts and outcomes of students. (Gay, 2000, p. 63)

Technology has become part of the educational process, both at school and within the home. Limited availability and use of technology within the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community interferes with the potential for being well connected. Many of our Salt River students do not have computers or Internet access at home, and even though they are acquainted with this technology through their classes or for testing improvement, they go no further than learning simple basics. Fitzsimons (2000) stated that the elements of cyberspace shape many aspects of society, including education. DeVoe and Darling-Churchill (2008) contended that students with access to computers at home are more able to develop essential computer literacy skills. In 2007, 78% of the nation’s eighth grade public school American Indian/Alaska Native students had a computer to use at home compared to 95% of White, 84% of Black, 82% of Hispanic, and 96% of Asian/Pacific Islander eighth graders.

In addition to the social and cultural concerns, there is the ever-present reality of testing and academic achievement. The Center on Education Policy (CEP, 2009) has observed some trends over the past several years, even going back before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted. Achievement gaps, according to nationwide data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have been decreasing for decades (CEP, 2009). This was not due to decreased performance by White or non low-income students, but because this group improved less than the target group. The gains made at the basic and
advanced levels do affect gaps in mean scores, but do not influence percentage proficient gaps (CEP, 2009).

Within the realm of academic achievement is the reality of attendance. The rate of absences among American Indian/Alaska Native public school students is a major problem. DeVoe and Darling-Churchill (2008) stated that children with high rates of absenteeism do not have the same amount of learning opportunities as children who attend school regularly. In 2007, some 66 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native 8th grade students reported that they were absent at least once in the preceding month. (p. 52) This ranged from 9 to 30% higher than any other ethnicity at that time.

Nel Noddings is well known as an advocate of caring as it pertains to ethics and moral education. She believed that one of the most difficult responsibilities teachers and parents are faced with is that of responding to and assessing needs. Noddings (2005) stated that when the student expresses one need and the teacher infers quite another for him or her, it can be hard to decide which need should be pursued. A teenager, for example, may express a need to learn a craft, while his parent infers a very different need for him—possibly (likely!) the need for solid preparation in academic mathematics. The underlying inferred need here is for the teenager to go to college, but the teen’s own expressed need may be to become an apprentice in a field that does not require a traditional college education. A child may indicate a need to speak, while the teacher may believe that her real need is to listen. In general, teachers may infer a
need for children to learn the standard school subjects, while children—through their behavior or verbalizations—express a need to learn how to live. (p. 148)

Noddings (2010) believed that the ethic of care must become an integral part of society and education, but it will be dependent on people, in one-on-one relationships to do the “caring-for.” Institutions can create a “care-driven” concept so that the individual “caring-for” can become part of the culture.

The questions, “How should these needs be met?” and “Who should meet these needs?” have not changed. Noddings (2005) believed that the connection between needs and curriculum is bypassed in favor of the needs that “are inferred and written into the curriculum before we meet particular students” (p. 149). As standardized testing, pass to graduate, and other dominant testing requirements evolve, it seems that we are missing some critical pieces of the educational puzzle—pieces that may prove necessary in terms of improving academic achievement.

Teacher and student relationships are at the heart of this concept of caring. Teachers should be looking for involvement from the student, not simply answers—more of an apprenticeship in the educational process. Noddings (2003) stated that “the special gift of the teacher, then, is to receive the student, to look at the subject matter with him. Her commitment is to him, the cared-for, and he is—through that commitment—set free to pursue his legitimate projects” (p. 176).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research design of the study, background pertaining to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, the method of data collection, the participants, and the analysis and organization of the data.

Research Design

The research design for this dissertation is a descriptive qualitative study that involved interviews with community members from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, administrators at Stapley Junior High, district-based administrators, and teachers and tutors who have worked with the Salt River students (Appendix A). These interviews were theme-oriented, based on real life knowledge situations, and the relationships of the interviewer and interviewee. Kvale (1983) related that the main purpose of qualitative research interviews is to understand the themes as they pertain to the interviewee, and that observations are as important as what is said (Appendix B).

The Salt River Community

Established in 1879, the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community is a sovereign tribe with a comprehensive government and is comprised of two Native American tribes, the Pima and the Maricopa, each with a unique background and culture. The Salt River community is located in the metropolitan Phoenix area and is bordered by the cities of Fountain Hills, Mesa, Scottsdale, and Tempe, encompassing 54,000 acres. 19,000 acres consist of natural preserve, with approximately 12,000 acres used to cultivate crops. It is an urban reservation due
to its proximity to a major metropolitan area, but the contrast between the two is stark—truly different worlds.

Based on the 2010 census, the population of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community is approximately 6,289. The 44 Native American students who currently attend Stapley Jr. High account for approximately 6% of the total student population, which is lower than the historic average of 8.7%. Factors that explain the change include, but are not limited to, the decline in student population over the years, as well as the transition of the ninth grade into the high school. Prior to the 2011–12 school year, Stapley Jr. High was a 7 to 9 junior high, and is now a 7 to 8 junior high (Maricopa Association of Governments, 2011).

Data Collection

Questions were developed that were open-ended and required insightful responses based on the respondents’ personal history and background with the Salt River students and community. The questions focused on interviewee perceptions based on observation and personal interaction with teachers, administrators, tutors, and Salt River students. It was assumed that common themes would begin to emerge throughout the course of the interviews.

The first question was general in nature and asked for the interviewee’s perceptions regarding factors that allowed academic performance to improve among the Salt River students. The second, third, and fourth questions focused on ascertaining the impact of parents and Salt River leadership, the Stapley administration, and classroom teaching methods, including tutoring, that
contributed to improved academic achievement for Salt River students. The fifth question asked for information regarding non-academic factors that influenced academic growth, and the sixth question allowed the interviewee to provide input regarding concepts and concerns they felt to be most relevant for the future academic success of Salt River students (Appendix B).

Participants

The participants were selected based on the fact that they all worked, currently or previously, at Stapley Jr. High and were familiar with both academic and non-academic concerns of students from the Salt River community. All participants who were asked to interview did so.

The interviews were conducted at a time and place that was mutually agreed upon, and the participants were provided with the interview questions well in advance of the interview. It could be expected that the interviewer would have a certain amount of bias since she has worked closely with many of the people being interviewed, but Kvale (1983) felt this is an advantageous situation because it could produce a more in-depth look at the themes.

Elaine was born and raised on the Navajo reservation and maintained strong ties to her family and culture. Her degree is in Art Education, and she taught art at Stapley Jr. High from 1994 until she retired in 2008. Prior to teaching at Stapley she worked in the district’s Native American Education Program. Her relationships with Native American students were very influential because she shared so many cultural similarities, and her years at Stapley were marked by her sponsorship of the Native American club.
Sandra was raised in Illinois, eventually moving to Arizona and obtaining a degree in social science. Her teaching career in Mesa started at one of the junior highs where she worked as a part-time tutor in the Native American Program and also co-sponsored the Native American club. She began teaching history full time, moved to Stapley when it opened, and continues to teach history. She was co-sponsor of the Native American club at Stapley until it disbanded in 2009.

Monica was hired at Stapley as an alternative learning classroom instructor in 2004, and continued in that capacity through 2009. She developed a tutoring program for the Native American students at Stapley, took education courses, and received her post-baccalaureate degree in 2009.

Jason has been the principal at Stapley since 2005. He held similar positions in other metropolitan Phoenix districts, has a Bachelor of Arts in Education, and a master’s in Administration and Supervision.

Ryan began his Special Education teaching career in Flagstaff and started teaching at Stapley when it opened in 1994. He became Stapley’s assistant principal in 2006 and has since moved to another school.

Marilyn is the director for the district’s Native American Education Program and has been with Mesa Public Schools for over 29 years. She belongs to two Native American cultures, Hopi and Dine, and has both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree.

Erin is a counselor employed by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. One of the schools to which she is assigned is Stapley, and she has been there since 2008. She was born and raised on the Navajo reservation in Fort
Defiance, Arizona, and has a bachelor’s degree in Family and Human Development and a master’s degree in Counseling and Human Relations.

Virginia is the School and Community Relations Division Manager for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community and has been with the department for 33 years. She has a bachelor’s degree in management and is a member of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

**Organization and Data Analysis**

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. The process of organizing the transcribed interviews involved eliminating material that did not relate to the topic, and then looking for commonalities and categorizing the various threads, as well as the elements that make up each thread.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study sought to discover some of the contributing factors, including academic and non-academic components, for improved academic success among the students from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community who attend Stapley Jr. High. A sample of eight educational professionals was used because each person had unique insights and relationships with students from the Salt River community. The interviews occurred during the spring, summer, and fall of 2011, and were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

Throughout the course of the interviews it became apparent that there were common threads embedded within the reflections of those who were interviewed. Part I of this section focuses on the areas that had positive impact on the Salt River students’ academic improvement: connections, caring, trust, communication, tutoring, and administrative support.

Part II focuses on areas that were identified as posing challenges to student success: attendance, parental support, lack of cultural identity, and gang influence and drugs.

Part III articulates the reflections not covered in Parts I and II. These reflections are categorized as in-school or out-of-school influences. The reflections are informative and insightful, and provide a better understanding of some other issues that affect academic improvement of students from Salt River.

The interviews have been edited in order to eliminate that which does not pertain to the research, yet retains the spirit of the interview and the accuracy of
the reflections. The organization of this section is characterized by the introduction of each focal point, followed by the reflections of those interviewed pertaining to that point.

**Part I—Student Success: Connections**

The most compelling element was the concept of connections. This included building and maintaining connections and trust among all the stakeholders—teachers, tutors, support staff, students, counselors, administrators, and parents—within the Stapley Junior High community.

Published in 2002, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* by Henderson and Mapp is a synthesis of research pertaining to the importance of connections in the educational setting. One of the key findings is that “programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs” (p. 43).

Connections, in the context of this research, are all the various ways that those within the school community interact and are tied together—through conversations, shared experiences, extracurricular activities, classes, friends, staff, parents, and community. The connections that are made daily are most commonly bi-directional, those of teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-student; but there are other significant connections that are less tangible but no less important. These bi-directional connections are significant because they allow for the exchange of thoughts and feelings that are critical in developing and maintaining caring relationships.
Elements within the broader concept of connections that were significant and woven throughout the interviews were trust, caring, and listening. According to Noddings (2005) teachers should devote time not only to daily learning objectives, but also to the development of care and trust. Trust is one of the most important aspects of the relationship between a student and those with whom he or she interacts.

In addition to trust, the ability to actively listen is fundamental in building and maintaining connections. Brown and Skinner (2007) believed that listening is the first step in the development of a trusting relationship, and that it is important to be able to restate what was heard so as to provide validation that listening took place.

**Caring**

The connections that have been made through supportive caring have had a significant impact on Salt River students. The research participants made it clear that the Salt River students needed emotional support from whomever they connected with; and that if they had that support, they were less likely to struggle emotionally elsewhere. Sometimes it was as simple as letting a student sit with the adult and watch or listen, and sometimes it was to help with a task, such as cleaning the office or room. Many of the students formed such strong bonds that they continue to stay in contact with the adult who made that connection with them.

*Monica:* There was one student from my first early years. That one still calls me. That one sends pictures of her babies. That one tells me what’s going on with her brother, with her boyfriend. I have connections. She
went from having a really good life entering fifth grade to having some really bad stuff, and that’s when we got her. Scary. The administration really stepped up that year—if you can calm her down, calm her down.

Sitting, listening, and dialoguing with Salt River students has also produced positive results. The staff members who took the time to do these things have made a difference; and, according to Ryan, this is one of the ways the students determine that someone cares.

Ryan: Not too long ago I pulled out a Kachina doll from a parent who said it was everyone else’s fault. She even yanked her kids out of here and sent them to another junior high for a week because we weren’t protecting her kids and so many other things. And she came back, re-enrolled. We dealt with her kids, but when her oldest was ready to graduate, she came back with her other daughter and presented that Kachina and she said, “You know, at the time, we just didn’t realize, but what we understand now is that everyone here truly cared about our kids and it’s because of the staff here that my daughter’s graduating this year.”

I saw her while we were out there in the spring, and both came up and gave a big hug, but that’s how you change perception on the reservation. They will go and say nothing negative about this school, just like so many other people that when they’re here and they get to see what goes on in the classroom and how we work, from Native American counselors to the education department, they know that we really care. And when somebody uses the quick excuse like, “It’s the school’s fault,” “They don’t care,” “They don’t like those Native kids,” or “They just suspend them,” those are the people that go to bat for you, and that’s helped change so much of the perception.

Erin: I think the teachers getting to know them on a personal level has definitely contributed to them doing better academically, behaviorally, attendance-wise. You know, the students want to actually be there because the administration is making them feel welcomed. And that’s something that I definitely see. It seems like Stapley has a wide open-door policy. Parents come in and want to voice their concerns. Jason has his door always open which is amazing. So I think it’s really good, almost like a family feel there and everyone is on the same page.

The concept of supportive caring is an intrinsic part of building these connections, and this includes the informal, everyday conversations that occur in
hallways and during lunch. Things like knowing the students’ names and being able to talk more casually about academics and student concerns, or talking about weekend interests and knowing a parent’s name are important considerations for all students, but with the Salt River students these conversations point to the connection between home and school.

Jason: At lunch, knowing their name, being able to talk about previous conversations, being able to defer back to other commitments made in meeting with that child gets them to take ownership for what they’re expected to do; their expected behavior, their expected outcome for the day, being able to maybe even use their parents’ name in a conversation so that they know there’s a connection between home and school. I think all of those; recognizing the issue, not letting the issue exist, or even build, because no one wants to accept the responsibility for it.

Brown and Skinner (2007) acknowledged that permitting at-risk students to express emotions reinforces connections, and adults who take the time to learn about students as individuals bring a humanizing element to the learning process. Monica noted that some of the students she worked with had a better day if they could vent to her before school; and because she was able to provide that level of support, those students were able to more effectively leave their problems from home and school outside the classroom.

Sandra: You really do need to sit down and make some kind of initial one-to-one with the Salt River students so they get to know you, they understand that you care, and then you can work with them better; you have to make a rapport with them. But the other thing is, you have to have somebody that they can sound off on; they can talk to you, they can say this is what’s happening with this kid and you have a better insight as to what’s going on.

Erin: One thing I’ve noticed is just letting the students know that you are there not only to make sure they’re doing well academically, you’re letting them know that you actually care about their well-being at home. And also, I do a lot of home visits after I leave Stapley. If there’s a student
that’s missed a few days, just going out to the home and seeing what’s going on. You’re not necessarily there to say, “Well, you’re missing all these assignments, what’s going on?” You’re saying, “I genuinely care about you. Are you doing okay? Let me know if you need something.”

So I think that’s not really academic focused; however, I feel like it’s getting to know the students on a deeper level and seeing what’s really going on and showing that you care. Because you don’t have to do home visits, you don’t have to do any of that, but the fact that you do, I think it shows the students that you’re there for them and not just to have them in a seat and learning.

Another means of making connections was to attend Salt River community events, and that visibility had an impact on home-school relationships. Ryan made sure to try to publicize Stapley’s Salt River students in the Salt River newspaper and also was visible at pow-wows and other events. He stated that the initial reaction was

Hey, what’s he doing here?” But they see you, and they talk and they communicate, and you’ll see them in a completely different light, as well as their parents; and once you build that relationship they’ll protect you.

The thing that helps a lot with the reservation kids is knowing where they come from, where they live, what their challenges are, what gangs run certain areas of the reservation; but more than anything, knowing what happens on the reservation. Talking to kids, because they all interrelate, they all talk; but they know that you know what’s going on with them, whether it’s a drive-by shooting, or anything going on.

It’s the fact that somebody takes it outside of school and will go out there and go to activities like the Miss Junior Salt River competition, or going out to one of their pow-wows, or going out and seeing them in the basketball tournaments. It’s knowing that you’re not just here at Stapley and that’s the only place you reside. You’re a human that interacts with them outside.

Creating class schedules that allowed students to be more involved and successful was another way connections were made. Ryan created many student schedules based on student needs and strengths, and cited the situation of a student who had moved from a group home, to grandma, to aunt, back to group
home, to a therapeutic group home, and then back to her mother. Building a schedule and getting her involved in drama and other extracurricular activities provided stability for her, and she told Ryan that the best years of her life were the two she spent at Stapley.

For the past three years the Stapley counselors have supervised during seventh grade lunch. It has provided an opportunity to see students in a more relaxed atmosphere, to talk to them, to use appropriate sarcasm and humor, and to really get to know the students and their personalities. It has proven to be very good in terms of building relationships, informal talks about grades, peer problems, and involvement in athletics and extracurricular activities.

Erin feels that it was very important to get to know the students on a personal level. She related that when she was first hired by the Salt River Education Department she heard about how the Native students did not feel part of the team in Mesa because there is a school on the reservation; and the question that’s always asked is why don’t the Salt River kids go to this BIE school on the reservation.

Erin thought it was due to the different curriculum; those students want to learn and want to achieve better. They want to be mainstreamed into society because once they were done with high school, they are going to go out into the real world where not everyone is like them, not just Native. They are going to be amongst people who are different, so she believed it was very important to immerse them into diversity outside of the reservation.
Trust

Brown and Skinner (2007) stated that ongoing effort is necessary to connect with students, and that honesty is the best way to gain the trust of at-risk students. Henderson and Mapp (2002) believed that relationships make a difference and are a strong indicator of overall school quality. Staff relationships with each other, as well as with parents and community members, have a significant impact on the learning environment, which can be either positive or negative, and the authors refer to this as social trust.

Ryan: I’ll be honest, a lot of what goes on with the Tribe, in my opinion, is that the basic understanding with Native American culture is trust. For a long time, when we’d go to meetings and deal with kids, you’d have folks from the education department come out and they would want to blame the teacher or admin for why you’re not doing things for our kids. It was easier to try and put people on the defensive. I think as we’ve grown and people understood how we do things, we always talk about how things are black and white, but really the world is grey and they understood it that really when it came down to it—and this took us a couple years—that really our best interest were just the kids, and once we built that trust, there’s been so much growth out of that.

One of the best things that ever happened was a relationship about five years ago where we had a tough kid and I was working with the group home manager’s wife at the time. We had a lot of trust between each other and then the manager came in and he said, “Quite frankly, I don’t know you, I don’t trust you, so until that time comes . . .” And I said, “Fair enough.” I said, “I am what I am. I’m a straight shooter.”

What ended up coming out of that is he understood the same thing we’ve talked about, the best interest of the kids, and now he’s a director of the group homes. So when there’s ever an issue, he knows that because of our relationship, it’s a quick phone call and we get information. But that’s become really key with a lot of our kids because there’s a lot of dysfunction, so knowing the manager of the group homes, having built a tighter relationship with folks at Social Services and CPS has been a really big thing that’s needed in the development of our kids. So even when they’re in group homes, or there are custody or CPS issues, our kids trust us, but all those professionals trust us as well, and it’s helped actually keep our kids on the right track.
Communication

Brown and Skinner (2007) stated that in order to foster a caring attitude with at-risk students it is necessary to develop purposeful communication with them. Establishing bi- and multi-directional communication is another key component in strengthening the connections that need to exist between the student and the teacher, as well as all the other school stakeholders.

Kochanek, Wraith, Wan, Nylen, & Rodriguez (2011, p. 3) found that studies suggest that student achievement is increased when teachers communicate with parents, but that many teachers do not because it can be time consuming and there is the fear that professional competence might be questioned. Teachers who are able to create bi-directional communication have students who are more likely to show academic improvement, and parents who are more apt to be connected to their child’s school.

There is also the fact that communication has become global and almost instantaneous, so lack of adequate communication creates more likelihood of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Noddings (2010) believed that moral education benefits from opening lines of communication and listening carefully to the needs being conveyed.

Marilyn stated that communication helps to build a bridge of connection, of trust, a bridge of “we know that you are part of our community and we welcome you.” She related that by communicating this invitation the students see there is a working relationship between home and school.
While communication between student and teacher is the most common, there are other significant interactions that impact these relationships. As a tutor, Monica was responsible for connecting with the teachers, building and maintaining those relationships, as well as her work with the students. Much of what she accomplished was due to the open communication she fostered with the students—they would tell her things that would normally have been kept to themselves.

*Monica:* It has to be the connections. You have to find them. You have to find that person. It would be cool if you could actually get the entire staff to do it. Seventy-five percent of the staff that was here did a poor job building any kind of relationship with the kids — it was their teaching styles. They never wanted to switch it up. Everybody did the same thing every day that they did the year before. It was their job; they were here to teach kids.

Sometimes the connections were only with the uppity White students; and there were many teachers that were very turned off with the hygiene. You know, it’s very hard to find love and respect for someone who doesn’t have love and respect for themselves.

And I got that. But then by the same token, I would look at the teachers and say, “Okay now, listen, they don’t have any running water at their house.” There were a few times that that was when I got the teacher to learn “There’s no running water, there’s no power.” Some families were gang-riddled. But do you know that one of those kids would come in and do social studies and read out loud for me? Never read out loud for anybody else. It’s got to be these connections, and sometimes it’s just going to be that one person that can do that for them.

Ryan stated that the connections go both ways, and that even though the Tribal government does not have much, if any, interaction with the school, the school has their support due to the fact that children of the vice president, as well as board members, have attended Stapley.

*Ryan:* When the vice president’s daughter played volleyball and basketball he was at every game, in his suit, very low key, but the other tribal
members in attendance saw him, and the kids saw him, and that made a huge difference because he is a role model.

Tutoring

The tutoring program at Stapley has always been open to any student in need of extra help, but part of the program dealt specifically with Native American students from Salt River. Monica, during the time she was at Stapley as a member of the classified staff, worked primarily with this group of students. Tutoring occurred at various times throughout the school day, including pullouts from elective courses, during Alternative Learning Classroom (ALC) time, and after school. At the request of the administration she developed a tutoring program, including a binder with process and procedures, so that anyone who followed her would be able to continue what she had started.

Once Monica left, however, the Native American tutoring program evolved, and now the Salt River Education Department provides a tutor. This tutor comes to Stapley and works with students in the classrooms, and also one-on-one. The students relate very well to her, partially because she is Native American, and also because she holds them accountable for quality work and behavior.

Elaine and Sandra both stated that the key to student success with a tutor was to connect with someone they liked and who would allow flexibility. Additionally, Elaine believed that every opportunity to have a one-on-one with a student should be seized. The tutor’s personality was also a factor, which meant
that conditions were likely to change from year to year as both students and tutors transitioned.

*Sandra:* The key is to find someone they like, and then give them some flexibility. When I was working at another district junior high I did tutoring; I was kind of like Monica over there for a couple of years, and the teachers would let me come and say, “Can I have somebody this hour?” They would let me have them, and we’d sit there and we’d tutor; and sometimes I’d have two or three, but then I could walk around campus. I was there most of the day and I was visible. But it’s just that flexibility.

*Ryan:* The one-on-one is huge, from the mindset that there’s somebody there that helps support them, somebody to help guide them, but the other reality is a lot of time the tutoring is just an escape because now I don’t have to go home for another half hour or 45 minutes or hour because they like it here. It’s an atmosphere where they can develop their talents and their skills. And you’re still like any other student in junior high, we still have our kids—no matter what you do, they’re never going to do their homework.

Tutoring is not always strictly about the academic side of learning. Jason said that Monica’s tutorial influence was more on the behavior-shaping side, and that her academic interventions were not on the same level as those provided by the remedial math tutor.

*Jason:* Those functions are incredibly important in being able to categorize students in a way that doesn’t exclude them from instructional remediation, but let’s you value students in terms of “I’m going to provide direct instructional support to you,” targeting that student who is willing to accept it and is willing to demonstrate their commitment to work on some area of weakness.

So you really have to separate the two, and once they’re separated then you can go into the tutorial mode with one set of students where you’re still on behavior shaping, no matter what you do tutorial-wise. If the behavior shaping hasn’t taken place where they’re accepting the fact that they need to work on something, nothing’s going to happen. We’ve demonstrated that for decades. It’s the sweat hog group from Welcome Back, Kotter. They’re not willing to accept the instruction yet, and until you change their behaviors they’re not going to.
One of the artifacts that Monica developed while at Stapley was a tutoring program for Native American students. She was asked to compile all of her logs and list everything she had done with tutoring, and the result was a complete tutoring program that encompassed before, during, and after-school tutoring.

*Monica:* Tutoring was in math, English, social studies—all curriculums except music, PE, tech, and home ec. The other thing that was kind of cool was the peer tutoring by kids who were in NJHS [National Junior Honor Society]. When I finally was able to work that out in the second year, all kinds of wrinkles ironed out. That was the last component that we needed to do what we were doing effectively, and be effective.

*Ryan:* Monica’s group and one-on-one tutoring had a really good impact, too. I thought it was really positive for somebody that was a para-professional and was going to school to become a teacher. What Monica did started at the foundation, or added to the foundation as she got to know kids on a very personal basis. She was instrumental in setting up the tutoring program. We have a whole handbook on how that operates so that anybody can step in and run the program.

What she found in her own personal experience was learning where the line is and not getting overtly involved and making it personal and bringing them into your own family and doing those things. And that was a hard lesson to learn for her because it’s really easy with a lot of these kids to pull them in, and you have to draw a line. And she still communicates with a lot of our kids, and I think that’s a really nice contact for us, too, is that we still have a lot of kids that come back and talk with teachers and interact.

*Erin:* One of the tutors who comes to Stapley from the Salt River Education Department is Native American. Even if it’s someone of a
different tribe, the fact that they’re Native American makes it easier for that student to open up and communicate better with that individual. There are other teachers that you’ll see them attach to, but it’s a different feel of attachment when it’s with somebody who’s from one of the Native tribes. It’s palpable; you can kind of sense it, and I think it’s great. The students know that they have some sort of outlet or someone that they know is on their page.

I’m just so glad that the tutor is there and she’s able to work with the kids. When I do my counseling session with the students at Stapley, I ask them, “So, how is it going with the tutor there?” and it seems like they build a really strong rapport the first day, so it’s great to see that happening. The fact that the tutor goes into the classroom, gets all of the information from the teacher, and instructs the student in the classroom, I think it’s just great, because they’re all in one location learning.

*Marilyn:* A result of the one-on-one tutoring is that the kids are willing to share more easily as they develop that trust relationship to whoever is helping them. They’re able to share a difficulty they’re having and feel more comfortable as opposed to speaking out in front of a class. For some reason there is a tendency not to want to express themselves in a classroom full of kids, as opposed to individual or even small groups, which goes back to the non-threatening environment where the kids are more than willing to be able to relate to the person that’s working with them. And it’s helping them get comfortable by working with someone consistently.

**Administrative Support**

Support from the Stapley administrators has been a key element in helping the Salt River students to improve, not only in terms of academic support, but also by being visible and accessible at school, and occasionally in the Salt River community. Ryan had a very hands-on approach when working with Salt River students, including getting to know them individually; talking to them at lunch, in the hallways, or at sports events; and talking frequently to parents. Jason believes that because of this he does not feel a resistance or a hesitancy to support him from a vast majority of the parents or the Native American education program.
leadership. There’s an open dialogue versus a defensive mechanism being employed every time there is a conversation.

*Jason:* We’re very hands-on, very much recognizing the issues from the community that can interfere with education can also interfere with social behaviors. Knowing enough people in the community to ask follow-up questions on other people related to the family you’re dealing with, and probably positive word of mouth on the experience of actually being here, having communication and then going back into the community and saying that was a good interaction or that was a positive interaction, even if it meant that the child was suspended or kept their D or their F.

Monica stated that she had administrative support all the time, but that it was slower to come from the teachers. She said that the Salt River students had their chosen teachers because they liked the sarcasm, or the humor, or who broke the ice by offering assistance to students who needed extra help, but there were not a lot of teachers who offered extra support. She related that there was support, but it was limited. For her, that was the only negative aspect that she encountered, and at that point the administration stepped in and clarified Monica’s role for the teachers.

*Monica:* Ryan was a spearhead and I’ll always have an admiration for him and the utmost respect. It didn’t matter what it was. If it had to do with Native Americans, he helped me do whatever we needed to do so it was phenomenal. One-on-one. And I’m so lucky that I got to do that. It made me so much more diverse in the classroom.

The best thing was that I was classified, and Ryan and Jason backed me up. So when I had a serious problem with a teacher, I’d go in and shut Ryan’s door and vent to him, and he’d either laugh at me, or he’d look at me and say, “Consider the source,” or he would help me find a different angle to deal with the adults, to be able to fully help the child succeed.

*Ryan:* Teachers don’t understand the cultural piece all of the time, but from the administrative standpoint, to have someone like Jason, who gives you free reign to do what you need to do is big.
Virginia: I think it’s the community’s involvement here and the working relationship that we have established with the administration and school staff. Ryan and Jason really made this work, and I think without Jason allowing it to happen it wouldn’t have happened. And so it took that effort and that belief in our kids to turn it around, which is a very, very good feeling.

The Stapley administration has been very supportive. When our students first started here at Stapley they didn’t feel very welcomed. They didn’t feel a part of the school and because of that they didn’t participate. They didn’t feel valued. They didn’t feel like they wanted to be here. And if it weren’t for Ryan and Jason working through those issues and really supporting the students and supporting us to make that happen, it wouldn’t have. And I think that’s why we’re now seeing what that has done and how that has turned our students around. And that feels really good.

**Part II—Challenges to Student Success**

In spite of the positive interventions through the connections detailed in Part I, there are several areas in which the Salt River students struggle. Issues of attendance, parental support, gang influences and drugs, and how these impact cultural identity are significant in the lives of the students. Reyhner (1994, p. 31) cited documentation from the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force that identified the school-related reasons Native American students drop out, such as impersonal education, the perception that teachers do not care, passive transmission teaching methods, and lack of parental involvement. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that the studies they researched showed a strong positive correlation between parent/family involvement and student academic success, regardless of economic status, racial/ethnic background, educational background, or age.

Involvement with gangs is reflective of a loss of community and culture, as well as proximity to urban environments, according to Hernandez (2002). He specifically cited the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community as one of the
tribes that has taken steps toward dealing with the problem as a community (e.g.,
education, mentorship, football, Pima language classes).

**Attendance**

The attendance rate of Salt River students has been a concern throughout
the district for many years, absences as well as tardies. In its publication *Status
and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* (Aud, Fox, &
KewalRamani, 2010), The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
shows that there is a high correlation between absence rates and student
achievement. According to the study, students who are absent more often are
more likely to do poorly academically and are more prone to dropping out unless
interventions take place. Steps have been taken by the Tribal Council and the
community to improve attendance rates, and this is discussed in more detail in
Chapter 5.

Jason stated that mandating attendance is the only way to change habits
that have been established over generations, and that the incentive needs to be at a
monetary level. He cited the Fort McDowell Apache Tribe as a good example of
providing punitive monetary measures for families that do not support regular
school attendance, and related that this is what needs to happen with Salt River.

*Marilyn:* Salt River now has the monetary incentive, and the problem has
been that their ordinance didn’t focus on excused absences, but now
they’re supposed to be including excused absences in this system that they
have set up to look at the numbers of days missed total. So we’re excited
about it. And the plan is to get in place for this coming school year.

The other major problem is tardies, and the Tribal leadership said,
“Mesa Public Schools, whatever your tardy policy is, we have to follow
that.” I wish they’d say five tardies—or four or three—equals an absence,
but Mesa really doesn’t have a tardy policy as a district, and I wish the
whole district would do it. Why not? Don’t principals meet together? Don’t they see that without something like that it’s out of our control?

*Virginia:* The truancy ordinance, which was passed by the Tribal government and is implemented by our attendance officers—that’s in place. It was an uphill battle, so to speak. At the very beginning we came to Mesa Public Schools and said this is what our truancy ordinance states and our students have to be in school until the age of 18. However, that conflicted with the state requirements that Mesa follows, so we had to work out the bugs and we had to come to a consensus that was best for them and best for our community students.

Some of the other programs that we’ve established also fall under the school and community relations division. We’ve implemented a reward system for students who made perfect attendance by the quarter. We go quarterly and we look at all of our students’ attendance, and those who have had perfect attendance, no absences and no tardies, are rewarded with a field trip and treated to lunch. And we also have a Great Attendance reward, which is three or less absences or tardies, and those students get to come to our student store and pick out a prize. So we just didn’t want to focus on you gotta be in school. We also wanted to focus and reward children for being in school. We’ve seen improvement since this started.

**Parental Support**

Parental support and involvement is generally considered to exert a positive academic influence on children. Henderson and Mapp (2002), in looking at over 50 studies on school, community, and family impact on student achievement, found a positive correlation between parental involvement and student achievement. Kochanek et al. (2011) stated that a student’s academic success can be, in part, attributed to high parental expectations and a positive learning environment at home.

There has been a wide range of parental support from Salt River parents, and culture plays a significant role. Elaine, who grew up on the Navajo reservation, knew from an early age that getting an education was important. She was told she had to learn how to speak English, and that she would have to go to
school, and her parents and grandparents told her all the things that would happen to her if she did not get an education.

Elaine related that education is still not a priority for the Salt River community, but for her it was. She did not believe that Salt River students have the same motivation she did, and she attributed it to generations of not placing importance on education. Sandra believed part of the problem is due to having a tribe that is centered around a White culture, yet it is not part of the White culture, so they do not know where they belong.

*Sandra:* Elaine was raised up north, knew she was Navajo, had her culture, had her whole support system, and that kept her strong in who she was. And then to have them telling her that she had to go outside and get her education—that was really hard for her to do, yet they still had her do it. But she still knew she was Navajo. Whereas these kids are raised and very few people speak Pima, very few of them have that cultural identity of who they are, and so lots of times they identify with the Mexicans, or with the Blacks as opposed to either wanting to identify with the Whites or even with themselves.

Monica stated that part of the cultural impact is that they have access to drugs, they have gangs, and they are bored at 12. She believed that if the parents are not interjecting their opinions or laying down boundaries for the children then they do not have any, because it is the Tribal way of life versus the White way of life. She stated there have been families that have tried to blend the two, and some have been successful, but it is very, very difficult because they are so close to the city limits.

Ryan also believed that the children from the Tribe have never had true cultural understanding; that they have always mimicked Hispanic and Black
culture, specifically gang culture, never truly having a grasp of their own identity
and their own language.

Ryan: That was part of the reason why our Native American Club was so
important, and why we built a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club—
Scottsdale Boys and Girls Club from the reservation—and then also with
the Tribe’s recreation department, which when we initially started was not
supported by anybody; it was just people willing to go out on a limb and
volunteer.

Building upon that, as we went along, was trying to get those kids
to understand the cultural identity. The first year Jason was here, once
every quarter, we would take the Native American kids into the
auditorium and speak to them. Toward the end of the year we invited the
Tribal president, the vice president, and several council members out to
speak. One of the key statements the Tribal president made to them, and
I’ll never forget it, was “If we continue on our path we will cease to exist
as a people in 20 years,” which I thought was a pretty powerful statement.

In Sandra’s classes, she has seen that the students who succeed now seem
to have the parents behind them. She related she has had more students lately
whose grades have been going up and there are small pockets of students, straight
A students, or close to it, who are always on task. She stated that some families
always have good students, but other families do not, and that it really did come
down to parental involvement.

Monica: My second year here I worked with one of the Salt River boys,
and it didn’t matter whether we worked one-on-one, whether we went
back to basics, it didn’t matter whether I pulled him out of one class or all
six classes, he just wasn’t going to do anything, nor was his family. He
also had cousins and aunts and uncles and sisters and one brother; the
whole family was lost.

Different families also came through, so I would have more
success from Group A and Group B, but not Group C and Group D, or
Family A, Family B so on and so forth. That made a difference, too. But it
came down to Native Americans supporting themselves; and as far as their
academics, the only dramatic and drastic thing that ever mattered, that
ever made a difference in any Native American student’s life is how active
the parents are in their child’s life.
Jason stated that there was a time when it seemed that Salt River students were coming to Stapley and trying to establish it as another zone of Salt River in terms of some of the unproductive social behaviors. He said that when they stepped on the bus they brought those misbehaviors with them and then tried to establish them. Through both behavioral referrals and parental feedback, he believed that a higher number of students are now accepting of Stapley’s behavioral norms and are performing academically versus what it was seven years ago. He also believed that those parents are sending their children to Stapley specifically to avoid some of those poor social behaviors.

*Jason:* I don’t think it was us establishing new norms for them as much as it feels like there was a change in the community itself. There seemed to be an increase of expectations from parents. And maybe it’s just because that large number of academically successful students started to come, but the parents, the leadership in the Salt River Community, and leadership all over in that community, including employees of the tribe, would send their kids here. So it seems like that group that was here for purposes other than academic was replaced, to a certain extent, by the children of employed Salt River Community members, the police department, the social services, Tribal government; we got those kids and some of the others left. So the expectation of that group of parents is much higher. They expect more from us because they expect more from their kids than what the other group expected.

There are individual families that are very strong and you can identify those families because their kids show up with the ability to live in a sovereign nation a mile from school and in a reservation community, and then step into this community and compete successfully with the rest of the students from the community. So those success families, they’ve kind of got it. They cannot continue to do business the way that it has been done over the last five, six, seven decades, and so they figured that out. They haven’t lost their culture. In fact, they probably embedded their culture deeper into their kids because here’s how you successfully compete in an academic environment; and that’s what we are, we are an academic environment with your peers who you’re going to compete with through your life. So learn to value traditional academic success. Do the work because that’s what’s expected in your job. You do the work, turn in your assignments, get your grade, try to improve, try to go against that
rubric of ABCD and be as successful as you can. So that needs to be further embedded.

Those successful families out there need to do trainings and workshops and they need to put their names in print and set themselves aside as “this is has been successful for us; these are things that you should be doing in raising your kids”—like a parent university strategy for “here’s how you handle school.”

Erin believed that a key component of parent involvement is related to current technology and its availability in the Salt River community. She stated that many of the Salt River parents do not have access to Internet, so they are not able to check the Parent Portal for online grades or to see what assignments their student is missing. She says it is important to keep the parents more aware of what is going on, to invest time with the students if they are missing homework, to ensure they are completing it, and then turning it in.

Virginia also thought that parental involvement and support of their students has increased. She believed this is because the Tribe and Stapley have made more of an effort, so it is a combination of both; but if the school does not put forth the effort, it does not work, and that is the key. She stated that the school plays a big role in the success of the students because if they are supporting the kids, the kids are going to want to be there, the parents will cooperate, and the parents will be there.

Gangs and Drugs

Jason: There needs to be a community re-norming of cultural expectations and that means that being in a Crips gang is not a cultural issue because it is not your culture. It needs to be exposed and it’s going to be ugly and there needs to be an acknowledgment that the direction the community has taken is wrong.

The Tribe needs to take the influx of gaming revenue and use it as the mechanism to bring about community change, and the only way to do
that is to re-norm the expectations of the entire community. How do you do this? You do it the same way other cultures have done it. You make it financially rewarding for them. You can live here in this environment with these expectations and with this financial incentive, if you follow these rules. And if you don’t follow these rules, you are out. You need some strong leadership, you need a Tribal Council that will do a strategic plan and that will even change laws within the reservation community to address the issue more vigorously, and you need to start excommunicating the worst influences in your community.

I think one of the worst things that we can do is avoid talking about the racial issues that exist. By not talking about them I think they become embedded and they become increasingly harder to deal with. And so maybe one of the elements that the Native American Ed program can start to deal with is to be more honest and open when they go in and talk with third, fourth, and fifth graders, elementary-wide, about “It’s okay to be a different color. It’s okay to be a different ethnicity. These things are all okay. What’s not okay is to enforce or force your belief systems in an environment.” The gang issue is so heavily embedded in third, fourth, and fifth graders right now that if they’re not willing to take it on at that level, then by the time they get to junior high forget it. And high school—there is no high school, it’s only junior high. If we don’t have them turned by junior high, they’re not going to high school, they’re not going to finish. They’ll bail after eighth grade; and if you look at the elementary schools that are feeder schools for Salt River, there are tremendous gang issues with third, fourth, and fifth right now, and large numbers of identified gang members as fourth and fifth graders.

Sandra stated that there is not enough of a cultural identity, and it is too easy for them to obtain drugs, get alcohol, and join the gangs. Elaine related that they did not know who they are anymore. Sandra agreed that they did not have any identity because they live so close to everything; therefore, their only way to have one is to be part of the gang.

Marilyn understood that there is a negative gang influence for Salt River students, and she believed they were becoming attracted and involved in it at an earlier age. She stated their parents are young enough that their influence has been stronger, so each generation will be strongly affected and more inclusive in
wanting to be a part of it. Part of that, too, are the drugs and alcohol, including fetal alcohol syndrome and its effects on the children, and as a result their decision-making is very poor. It’s the whole environment—how those children are affected from prenatal on.

**Part III—Other Influences**

This section focuses on other factors that impact the students, both in-school and out-of-school. In-school influences include extracurricular and affective activities, friends, certified personnel (i.e., teachers, administrators, and counselors), the perception of time, and behavior. Out-of-school influences include family and home situations, tribal culture, and attitude toward education.

**In-School Influences**

**Arts and sports.** The students from Salt River have always had an affinity for art. Elaine taught art and many of the Native American students took her classes. She felt they were very creative, not only artistically, but also in their writing, as evidenced for her during the school-wide writing prompts.

In addition to art, some of the Salt River students found a home in band, chorus, drama, or orchestra. Elaine supervised at the orchestra concerts for many years and said that usually an entire row of their parents and relatives would come to the concerts. The same thing occurred for sports events, with the whole family settling on the bleachers to sit and watch.

Sandra commented that she had boys working during football or wrestling seasons who stopped when the seasons were over. While that sport was in season the students would do their coursework, or enough of the coursework, during the
time they were on their team. Their behavior was better because they knew that had to deal with the coach—she only had to mention his name as soon as they misbehaved.

**Friendship.** Sandra believed that another non-academic piece is their friends. She saw more of the Salt River students making friends with non-Salt River students who were White and Hispanic; she thought that was good. She also observed students who belonged to the LDS faith have more Anglo friends and were more comfortable with Anglos because of their church association. She saw more interaction with other non-Salt River kids in the past few years than there used to be.

**Inclusion.** Jason commented that inclusion, something that did not seem very deep in terms of *ah-ha* moments, has had a positive impact on Stapley’s Native American students. Things like including students in activities, such as clubs and sports, made them feel like they were part of the student body. The Salt River students could acknowledge differences in behaviors, but not make the differences an excuse not to participate, but rather handling the differences in a positive manner. He believed that more Native American students were participating in sports, activities, and the arts than previously.

Jason also believed that the school’s affective focus with Stapley Survivor has played a significant role in this inclusion. The purpose of Survivor is behavior shaping through teamwork, through acknowledging a smaller community within a larger school environment: “Competition, success through competition, all of
those elements of a culture, cross all cultures, they are things that all people want
to be a part of and all people can connect with.”

The primary component of Survivor is that participation is required, peer-to-peer versus adult-to-student. It is a peer-to-peer teamwork issue, so there is a feeling of inclusiveness that comes out of the Survivor methodology that helps, and it trickles out through the whole year. Jason related it helped, too, that the organizational structure was changed.

At the beginning team sign-ups were left up to students who were friendly or familiar with each other, so students could get their buddies and form a competing team. When that system was in place we saw the Native American students coming together, the skaters coming together, the cheer squad coming together, to form their teams.

When it was reorganized into classroom competitions with color identification, themes, and names, it became a multi-cultural classroom together competing as a team, so that started to break down some of the barriers of getting students to intermingle. It wasn’t expected that they would become best friends and hang out on the weekends, but when they’re at school, they see each other more as peers versus “you’re outsiders into our school community.” This activity helped to break down some of those walls.

Ryan agreed that the lunchtime Survivor competition has done a lot with all students in terms of crossing boundaries. He related that the Native American students are not sticking within the Native American group, per se. They still do, but many more of the Native American students are taking risks by crossing boundaries and getting exposure to new experiences.

Marilyn also believed that inclusion played a part in the choice of Salt River parents and students to attend Stapley. Another consideration was that the community students were bused since it was not their home school, so it was a different comfort level. She felt, however, that they liked that challenge:
The community itself likes to see their kids and the parents choose for their students to attend Mesa Public Schools. So it’s a parent choice where they want, or encourage, their child to go to school because they have a community school with open doors, open arms, that is more than willing to accept their kids back into the community. But parents and students choose to come to Mesa Public Schools. And so that within itself is a big voice.

**Behavior.** The behavioral and the academic go hand in hand. Monica related she truly believed that when the students are behaviorally sound, if they are not getting in trouble and they believe in themselves, their academics improve. As behavior improved she saw academic increases, sometimes in just one curriculum area, sometimes all across the board. So behaviorally, if the students are making good choices, then their academics are going to follow. Behaviorally, if they are under control, then academically they can and will reach success because they can see it.

She stated that the goal was to get the students to understand that if they made better behavioral choices not only would their behavioral goals be reached, but also their academic goals would be obtained; that the two of them go hand in hand. If students were behaviorally sound, then academics improved, even if they had a 504 or an IEP.

She also clarified that it is not always the gang infiltration that causes the behaviors. Sometimes it is just life for them; what is going on at home, what is going on with their friends; what is going on with their parents—in a very literal sense of understanding “you are to be seen and not heard.”

*Monica:* Then you get a kid who’s been very, very quiet and been in a class of 25 or 35, now they get to junior high and they’re just going, “Oh
my gosh, I don’t understand anything.” So they become a behavior problem just to get someone to notice them. So that’s huge.

Jason stated that although the focus is on Salt River students, he believed that the won’t, don’t, and can’t students are reflective of the entire junior high population. There is a big difference between the “I won’t do this no matter what you do,” and the “I can’t do this,” or the “I don’t want to do this.” After the students who “won’t do it no matter what” have been determined, separation can be created through scheduling, through appropriate teacher placement, through followup with home calls. It is important to create some separation between those pockets because the won’ts have a bad influence on the can’ts.

Jason believed that it is no different with the Salt River students. The won’t students need to be treated differently. There is a difference as to how they perceive their instructional environment. The can’ts and the don’ts are the fence sitters: they can be changed, they can be influenced positively; whereas, the won’ts are not yet ready to accept their instructional environment. The school does not close the door on them, but they are not ready to accept instruction, or recognize the reality that they have to produce a measurable product. Jason admitted that he has yet to meet a student that does not like to demonstrate they know something that they can perform in some way.

It is important to be able to acknowledge the fact that some students are not going to perform at the desired level, which does not mean that they are not learning, not achieving, and not able to demonstrate. Jason thought it was the difference between students who refused to turn in all of their homework and
failed and students who refused to do their homework but could still get an A on a final exam. Jason felt those students who received an A on a final exam but did not do their homework should be passed because they still acquired the knowledge; they were just not supporting the need to measure it in a particular way.

**Out-of-School Influences**

*Home and family.* Elaine, who grew up on the Navajo reservation, knows that family structure is very different in the Native American tribes. She related it was not uncommon to go stay with grandma or an aunt if you got in trouble, and that people live with other people all the time; that was because everybody is “home and family” together.

*Elaine:* My aunts are my mothers, like my uncles are my fathers, too. It’s a huge extended family—you can go live with anybody and they wouldn’t mind. I hit my brother over the head with a bottle one time and split his head open, and I ran away, and I ran over to my grandma’s home. Her and I, dad’s side, have the same clan. I went to stay with her for almost two weeks and finally she just said one day, in Navajo because she didn’t know how to speak English, “I don’t know what you did but whatever it was, you must have done something really bad because you’ve been here for almost two weeks now. Don’t you think you need to go home?” And I know it happens a lot out here; the kids, they can go from one relative to another, which makes it hard for school to try to get a hold of someone.

Sandra related that in the school she worked at prior to Stapley they would go over some of the differences, some of the problems that the Salt River students experienced that would not be typical of the Anglo community. Sometimes it was the home situation, where the grandma was raising the kids as opposed to a solid family, or some of the cultural differences. The idea was to give the staff a glimpse into what some of the kids go through, some of the reasons and some of
the problems that they dealt with. “Why don’t they get the work in on time?”

“Why did they keep the work in their folder and not turn it in?” “Why is time not an issue?” “Why do some of the kids not make eye contact?” Sandra related that students coming from a more traditional family believe that it shows disrespect to look an adult in the eyes.

*Sandra:* A lot of the kids have things they don’t want to talk about. I mean, if I had a court date coming up or if I had a parent in jail, I wouldn’t want to do my work either, because who cares about history? Geez, a bunch of dead people. So you know, what’s the importance of this?

I had a girl tell me one time that they were afraid to move off—they lived in housing on the reservation, and her parents were afraid to move off and get an apartment or something, because it was almost like a child leaving home. You know, on the res, they’ve got the housing, and what they pay is very minimal. So a lot of the people look at off-the-res as someplace they shop, yet it’s still an alien world. It’s harder out here. We have to take care of ourselves more, you know. We can depend on staying here. And I thought that was really interesting because it’s pretty dangerous over there sometimes at night—it can be really pretty bad. But they would stay there as opposed to going someplace where it might be safer just because it’s more comfortable to them.

Sandra said that another thing that goes on with the Salt River Community is that because it is such a small community everybody knows everybody’s business. So a lot of times when there are problems, nobody wants to talk about the problems because then somebody else knows their business. Or there might be a family feud, so they keep to themselves, do not discuss it, and often lack resources to deal with the problem. Also, it is possible family members do not know about the problems, so it limits what can be done about the problem and who can deal with it.

Monica also worked with some of the Salt River students who lived in town. She cited the unstable family life of one girl who alternately lived on the
reservation and in town. She started off in town when she was in seventh grade, moved back to the reservation when she was in eighth grade, and then back into town during the tenth and eleventh grades. She was then again kicked out of the house, but ultimately moved back to town. In another scenario, a brother and sister floated back and forth depending on what was going on with their support network at home; could they afford it on the Tribe, or could they keep that home? So sometimes they had to move, but sometimes they moved by choice.

*Erin:* A lot of these kids come from very impoverished situations and when they’re in class, they’re not really concerned with algebra formulas; they’re more concerned with “Am I going to have food to eat when I go home?” “Am I going to have the same home to go home to?” Or even, “If I get off the bus, am I going to be jumped by a gang member?” So it seems like a fight or flight scenario for a lot of these students; they’re checking out cognitively when they’re at school because they’re more concerned with what’s going on at home. They spend a majority of their day and time at home, not at school. So it’s kind of hard to separate the two. You can sit with them in counseling sessions and say, “Well when you’re at school, you’re here to learn,” but they’re thinking, “You don’t know my life. You don’t know what I’m going to have to go through when I get home today.”

One thing that I think that everyone needs to understand is that poverty is not a form of neglect. You can’t help what family you were born into. And yes, there are resources out here, but if the parent doesn’t have the transportation to access those resources, then it’s pretty much a pointless venture. No one wins in that situation.

**The concept of time.** Ryan believed that the majority of the Salt River students do better in the classes where the teachers are flexible, because time has everything to do with Native American culture. Time is not really of essence; it is not really important within kids who are very traditional; and Stapley does have traditional kids who are involved with what they feel is important: drumming and dancing, rodeo, team roping, athletics, and traditional participation where they
have the coming-of-age ceremonies. But it is still the idea that time is not really of essence.

Ryan thought it really was just the mindset; that school culture is all about timelines and “this is when it’s due” because “that’s when it’s due”; that is where the gray area comes into play. There is the needed accountability, but those teachers who are a little bit more flexible are the teachers who connect and have more success with the Salt River students.

Sandra referred to this concept of time as “res time,” which is a “whenever, whatever” kind of attitude. She related it was common for the Salt River students to show up late, so the issue became one of time. Is it necessary to start on time? But is it also necessary to deal with the late arrivals? Because of the concept of time, it is common for the students to develop a perception of time that when it comes to work, they will get it done whenever.

**Educational considerations.** Sandra related that it was not uncommon for the students to do just enough in school to get by; that it seemed to be acceptable to them and their parents to just get by, so education tended to not have the highest priority. She thought, however, that the casinos were making a positive change on the reservation with the money that was coming into the Tribe, as the students were seeing that there were good jobs. There were more opportunities opening up for employment in the casinos and in the hotels. She believed it would be helpful to have somebody from one of the casinos or other employers come and explain to the students, “If you want a job, this is what you’re going to have to be able to do to have that job.”
Monica explained if she had a student with whom she had already gone over the basics, but the student still needed additional help, she was able to get more resources that were accessible through the Salt River Tribe. Besides working with the students at school, she also worked with them in their homes. The guardians, parents, or grandparents, whoever was part of the support network that the student had, made Monica feel she was welcomed. However, it came down to Native Americans supporting themselves.

Monica also stated that the Salt River Tribe has phenomenal resources, but Mesa Public Schools was able to give them more because of the time that was spent with the students. She said it seemed as if a lot of students that she worked with had parents who were either out or gone; and even if they worked and were supportive, the kids would always go home, not to an empty house, but “Oh, my mom’s working,” or “Oh, my auntie’s working.” Sometimes the student was in a group home situation, so it was dependent on the kid to bear the weight, the responsibility, and accountability for his or her own education.

*Jason:* There has to be a mindset on valuing traditional academic success as a valuable segment of growing up in this community. There has not been any value placed on “I’m going to do my homework everyday. I’m going to perform at school. I’m not going to get in trouble at school. I’m going to participate in clubs and in activities. I’m going to enjoy school and become a valuable member of the school community.”

Ryan explained that in the last three years that one thing that has been helpful within the Tribe has been having a certified counselor, Erin, in the education department who acts as a liaison between Stapley and the Tribe. He explained that Erin has acted as a primary contact for parents, so when the school
had issues with a student Ryan could contact her. Erin who is of Navajo and African American heritage grew up in Window Rock; and although she is from a different tribe she has an understanding of reservation life. But of greater importance has been her consistency in following through on anything that she was supposed to do.

Ryan related that the other person who has become very supportive is Virginia, who oversees the attendance officers for Salt River and also oversees the education department. She is an excellent resource, and when working with the superintendent on the reservation, she provides consistency when working with Salt River students at Stapley.

Erin grew up on the Navajo reservation, surrounded by very educated people. Her mother, aunts, and uncles always placed a strong emphasis on education and academic excellence, so she never had a choice to not go to school. Her mother always made it a point to push her to be better. She felt that many of the Salt River students she worked with did not have that “push” at home, and that in a lot of ways they lacked the necessary motivators that help to become successful individuals.

*Erin:* The connection that I made growing up was definitely my family members. My grandmother never had the opportunity to go to school because she was the oldest of eight and she had to help raise them, and my grandfather went to school up to the eighth grade then had to help with the family livestock. It was for these reasons my grandparents place a high precedence on education.

Erin likes to work on goal-setting with students. In doing so, she tells them a little bit about herself and what her expectations are of them. Something she
experiences every year that makes her sad is when she does goal-setting with students, especially junior high and high school students. She asks the students “What do you want to be when you grow up—when you’re an adult, what do you want to do?” and a lot of them say, “Nothing, I just want to stay home. I don’t ever want to work. My mom doesn’t work, she stays home, she doesn’t have a job, she has six kids. I’m going to do the same thing.”

Erin would like to help them break that cycle by having them know that they can be better than their surroundings, they can do better and can reach higher than their parents did. Offering support to them early on is something that she lives by on a daily basis.

*Erin:* When I share a little about my upbringing on my reservation they become more relaxed in knowing that I know exactly what situations they encounter on a daily basis before they arrive at school. Native Americans and almost any race tends to stick together in certain situations and it seems that when the students I work with know that I am Navajo, they feel I will understand them more; our commonality of being Native American forms that personal connection between the students and me.

Ryan reflected that when Stapley first opened the entire staff went out to tour the Salt River community. That has not happened in years, but it is necessary for the teachers to be exposed to reservation life, and to understand that this reservation is like no other reservations around here because it is an urban reservation; it is not Navajo, Apache, Hopi, any of the rural reservations, so there is a different mentality.

*Marilyn:* It would be a good idea to take your staff out into the community and have them take a short tour of where their students come from. They’re coming from a different community into a different environment and their income is nowhere near what that population has. And so for them, for people to say it’s going to cause problems, I think, try it and
develop that relationship. It’s just going to help, I think, build that relationship.

Virginia agreed that it would be helpful if the Stapley staff went into the community and met with parents. She thought parents would really take to that and be more open because the staff would be making an effort to come into the community instead of parents always going to the school. It would mean so much to the parents when school staff came into their area, even if it was just to see, or just to be visible.

**More personal reflections.** When Monica told Salt River students that she understood exactly where they were coming from, they would look at her and say, “No, you don’t.” She would talk to them on their level and explain what they were living in and then also explain to them what they could have; then they would learn words like *sabotage*, because they were sabotaging themselves.

If she had a trick, it had to be time, time not listening to boring teachers. Sometimes, it was missing that class once a week. She had to be very diverse in her choices in what a reward was and what a goal was, so it has required her to be really choosy with her wording in defining a choice from a goal.

Ryan thought that Stapley has built a strong relationship with the Salt River community. The vice president’s children and the former police chief’s children of the Tribe have attended school at Stapley. For a lot of reasons, a lot of Tribal leadership members choose to send their kids to Stapley rather than their own charter school. Stapley students are about academically ahead of what is
going on at Salt River, so parents are recognizing that the academic advantage is really important.

Parents also understand that gang activity on Stapley’s campus has essentially been eliminated. There may be one or two gang-active incidents that occur every year, but the students do not participate in gang activity on campus, even though they may be actively involved on the reservation. Stapley is a safe place, a good place, and people really care. And even students who are not passing classes academically because of not turning in homework or projects, they still perform; they are still sitting in class; they are still engaged. A lot of Salt River students are successful on the AIMS because the parents push them. So they are synthesizing the information, even though they are not necessarily going home and doing the work.

Ryan explained it has been administrative practice to sit down and dialogue about 20 to 30 minutes with parents about their expectations of their students who transfer into or are new to Stapley. Ryan firmly believed that it was critical to invest the time up front because it paid dividends later.

Ryan related about the mindset that still happens; that some people will say, “Why are you catering?” or “Why are you doing all these special things for them?” or “Why do you treat them differently?” Ryan does not view meeting with the parents as treating the Salt River students differently because he would do the same thing for any student. If the kids need help, and if meeting with the parents has to be done to put students on equal footing with everybody else, then that is what has to be done. It is also about getting the staff to see the bigger picture; that
it is just good teaching; that it is not about anything else. He related that it is still a challenge, but now that people understand what the school is about he is hopeful the trend of meeting with the parents will continue.

Ryan believed that almost everyone is now on the same page; that time is actually taken for the students from Salt River, whether it is through behavioral interventions, one-on-one discussions, or tutoring. What they are starting to understand is that education really is the key to their future, if they want it. And the other key, too, is that more Salt River students are participating in athletics, and that has made a major difference because they are crossing boundaries. In the last couple of years Salt River students who are supposed to go to Westwood High School have been accepted under open enrollment terms at Mountain View High School because of its academic prowess.

There’s also the fact that the Salt River Education Department is working in conjunction with Stapley. But that whole academic improvement piece is because everybody is on board with the education department, the Tribal leadership, our administration, and our teachers.

Marilyn believed that there was not an easy answer to get them to pass all their classes because the pattern goes back to their elementary school days. The year 2011-12 is the first year that the incoming kindergarteners are going to be targeted and tracked; and if students do not have their testing scores up to par by third grade they are not going to pass. And then the question is, “If they do not pass what is going to be done?”
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to discover the elements that led to increased student achievement among students from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community who attend Stapley Jr. High. Areas identified by those interviewed that had a positive impact on the Salt River students’ academic improvement included connections, caring, trust, communication, tutoring, and administrative support.

Areas that pose a challenge to student success were also identified, including attendance, parental support, lack of cultural identity, and gang influence and drugs. Additional areas of reflection were categorized as in-school or out-of-school influences, which provided a more in-depth understanding of the overall educational picture of Salt River students.

Positive Impact

One of the most compelling reflections focused on the fact that teachers who were flexible yet demanding had better success with regard to improving student academic achievement. Geneva Gay (2000) called these teachers “warm demanders,” teachers who invested time and energy in creating supportive classroom climates through building positive relationships, using verbal and non-verbal cues to communicate, and demanding high levels of academic achievement.

Ryan believed that students do better in classes where the teacher is more flexible and connected with them on a one-to-one level, and that the Salt River
students respond to teachers who know that they care about them, who have 
structure and high expectations. Ryan summarized it this way:

The teacher who is very black and white is not successful with our kids 
because our kids are going to challenge you just in the fact that they know 
you’re not here other than just to provide information, and that’s not what 
teaching’s about. And those are teachers who always struggle with our 
Native kids.

Monica felt that the teachers who take the time to get to know the students 
on a personal level contribute to improved academics, behavior, and attendance. 
She also believed that humor and sarcasm are important components of 
connecting with the Salt River students.

Virginia believed that Stapley has made a good start toward building trust 
and forming connections with Salt River students and parents. She thought that 
Stapley was a very good example to the other Mesa schools and would like to see 
their efforts shared with other Mesa schools—the end result of belief, trust, and 
effort. It takes a few key people in each of those schools, particularly someone 
who is going to be the spearhead, who pushes it through and says, “This is 
important.” And it starts from the top.

**Challenges**

Attendance, both tardies and absences, has been a serious problem 
throughout the years. In the fall of 2011, the Salt River Tribal Council passed a 
new attendance ordinance for students attending any of the schools within the 
Mesa Unified School District, but this occurred after the interviews for this 
research were completed. Attendance has improved since the beginning of the 
2011-2012 school year by approximately 9%. This percentage is based on a

Parental support is another challenge, and is manifested in different ways. Erin cited the fact that many Salt River parents do not have access to the Internet, so they are not able to check student grades online to see what assignments have not been completed. She knows it is important to keep the parents more aware of what is going on.

Time also has to be invested in sitting with the students to check if they are missing homework, completing their assignments, and then turning the assignments in. All Stapley students go into a computer lab with their homeroom class approximately every three weeks, and they are supposed to take home a printout of their grades for parent signature. When Erin asks Salt River parents if they are aware of the printouts, most of the time they are not, so she is not sure if the students are taking them home. She suggested that sending regular progress reports to parents by mail is also important.

Another parental support issue involves meetings where the parents seem to acquiesce to whatever is being proposed. Erin cited an IEP meeting as an example, and stated that it is not uncommon for parents to agree with the recommendations simply for the sake of no confrontation, even though they do not necessarily agree with what is being said or presented to them. They agree with the recommendations because they are not confrontational people. They want to get it over with and then move on from the situation. If the teachers were
aware of this reality, it is possible there could be more positive outcomes and a more fluid line of communication between the community and the school.  

Virginia thought parental involvement with regard to being supportive of their students has increased because the Tribe and Stapley have increased their efforts; however, if the school does not put forth the effort, it does not work, and that is the key. That is why she believes the school plays a big role in the success of the students, because if they are supporting kids, the kids will want to be there; consequently, the parents will cooperate and be there.  

Gang culture on the Salt River reservation is another challenge for the Tribe and the schools. Jason believed that the gang culture needs to be exposed and re-normed, and there needs to be an acknowledgment that the direction the community has taken is wrong. They need to use the influx of revenue over the last two decades as the mechanism to bring about community change, and the only way to do that is to re-norm the expectations of the entire community.  

Jason related that the Salt River community needs to make it financially rewarding, the same way other cultures have. Live here in this environment with these expectations and with this financial incentive, but follow the rules. If you do not follow the rules, you are out. Strong leadership and a strategic plan are necessary, as is the need to change laws within the reservation community to address the issues more vigorously, and, finally, excommunicating the worst influences in the community.
Implications

The implications for practice within a school are limited by the fact that teachers will bear the primary responsibility for ensuring that connections are made with the Native American students. A significant facet of this interaction is dependent on the teacher’s personality and teaching style. Staff development needs to include training in culturally significant issues in the lives of the Salt River students, and would rely primarily upon the Salt River Education Department personnel to provide the focus and degree of depth of the training.

It is difficult to have a realistic perspective unless one has been to the Salt River community and seen firsthand the poverty and living situations of many families. Additional staff training should include visits to the Salt River community to meet with parents and students, and could be formal or informal depending on the focus of the meeting. In order for these visits and meetings to be effective, parents will need to commit to attend and be willing to share their questions and concerns. In turn, the staff will need to be receptive and welcoming, demonstrating that they do care about the Salt River students.

This will need to be a joint effort between the school and the Salt River Education Department, and it cannot be a one-time occurrence. Regular visits will be necessary in order to demonstrate a commitment and willingness to follow through for both groups.

District involvement should include providing transportation for the staff. Developing policy specific to these issues would not be necessary because these
connections are forged between people based on personalities, learning and
teaching styles, and a shared sense of purpose.

**Future Research**

The professionals who were interviewed gave voice to those areas that are in need of further intervention. Virginia, Erin, and Marilyn have specific thoughts as to what interventions are still needed in order to maintain or raise the academic achievement of the Salt River students, and none of them are related to classroom concerns.

Marilyn stated that meaningful communication will continue to be important with all the stakeholders, but especially with the students. For example, she suggested inviting all of the community kids, or even all Native kids, to a beginning-of-the-year meeting to demonstrate the working relationship between home and school. It would be important to include the Salt River counselors and the Salt River Education Department attendance officers, as well as the Tribal president.

Virginia and Marilyn agreed that Stapley staff should go into the community and tour the area in which their students live. They believed it would demonstrate to the parents that they are more interested in their children than just a face in class, and that it would help to build the home and school relationship.

Erin would like to see a cultural sensitivity class being introduced to the staff members at Stapley and the other schools in Mesa that have a high number of Salt River students because working with Native Americans is a very different dynamic: “Life on the Reservation is very different than life in the city; it’s like
night and day. I believe it’s important for educators to understand these differences.”

She also thought it would help if the teachers were more aware of reservation life, of the culture and history of the Salt River Tribe, and how things are done differently on the reservation. The way one speaks with children and interacts with them is different in the Salt River Native American culture compared to the mainstream, and it is important for the staff to understand these differences, get to know who they are teaching, and get to know who they are dealing with on a deeper level than just a face in the classroom. She believed that if the teachers were more aware of the cultural differences there would be a more positive outcome and a more fluid line of communication between the community and the school.

Erin related that it saddens her when she sees that many of the people in positions of power in the community are not Salt River Community members. She suggested they could be very capable of being leaders; that teaching them how to be leaders was something very necessary and very important. She felt that leadership among the Salt River community members was overlooked; consequently, students become so comfortable being subservient they do not know how to take over and become leaders.

Marilyn related the students need to be recognized culturally and tribally throughout the whole educational system. She also stated that it was necessary to review the data and share it with the Salt River Education Department in terms of what could be changed based on the data.
Marilyn also thought it was important to look at the Salt River support system and the Mesa Public School Native American Education Program so that improvements can continue to be made that are in the best interests of the students. The challenge is to see where they are and figure out what could be focused on in the elementary grades to help or reinforce achievement. Another possibility would be to make the staff aware of an area of focus as students move into junior high. Finally, Marilyn thought it was important that parents from the community sit on the School Improvement Advisory Council (SIAC); that it is a voice within itself:

Most Native parents are not comfortable coming to SIAC to speak in front of others who have everything that they could imagine at their home and we’re struggling here to survive. Establishing a Salt River Parent Committee would be a good way to hear those voices, because to truly address the needs of the students, that’s the direction we should go. Sometimes you do have to go out of your way for a different population, especially to break the cultural barrier.

This study was limited in its scope, and additional research is indicated in order to more completely understand this issue. The following suggestions are not intended to fully address the problem, but can serve as a starting point for more in-depth understanding.

1. All of the research participants discussed, in varying amounts of detail, the necessity of having teachers who genuinely care for their students and take an interest in them that extends beyond the classroom. Suggested research would be to do a much more detailed analysis of these care factors and why they are so important with regard to the Salt River students.
2. Because of its proximity to a major metropolitan area, the Salt River community is considered to be an urban reservation. Suggested research would be to compare academic achievement between urban and rural reservations, and to focus on the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect student achievement.

3. Parental involvement and support were deemed to be critical elements for the academic achievement of Salt River students. It would be interesting to see further research done that isolates these elements and delves into the relationship between students and parents, and school and parents.

4. The gang and drug culture on the Salt River reservation affects families and the community negatively. Further research should focus on this culture and how it affects the students and schools, as well as the community.

5. Attendance rates have improved since the Salt River Tribe enacted its new truancy ordinance in the fall of 2011. Suggested research should look specifically at the truancy ordinance, and the attendance rates at all schools with Salt River students in an effort to ascertain what has been effective.

6. This study was limited to the perceptions of a tutor, teachers, and administrators from Stapley Jr. High, an administrator from the Mesa Public Schools Native American Education Program, and two educational professionals from the Salt River Education Department. Additional research should focus on the perceptions of any or all of the following:
(a) Salt River students who attend Stapley Jr. High; (b) parents of Salt River students; (c) Salt River Education Department staff; and (d) the Salt River Superintendent of Schools.

**Summary**

The goal of this study was to ascertain instructional and non-instructional factors that impacted academic achievement by students from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. Factors contributing to student success were caring, trust, communication, tutoring, and administrative support. Challenges to student achievement were attendance, parental support, and gangs and drugs. Other influences were identified as in-school, which were arts and sports, friendship, inclusion, and behavior; and out-of-school influences, which were home and family, the concept of time, and educational considerations.

Suggestions and insightful information were provided by the research participants, all of who worked with Salt River students on a daily basis. The information was intended to provide a better understanding of what works with the students, as well as suggestions for developing better rapport and work ethics among the students.

Further research has been suggested in the areas of caring, urban versus rural reservations, parental involvement, gang and drug culture, and attendance rates. These factors were all found to have a significant impact on academic achievement, both positive and negative.
REFERENCES


Mesa Public Schools. (n.d.). [MPS Cultural Kit on Native Americans]. Mesa, AZ: Mesa Public Schools, Creative Arts Department.


APPENDIX A

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF SALT RIVER STUDENTS
AT STAPLEY JUNIOR HIGH
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF SALT RIVER STUDENTS  
AT STAPLEY JUNIOR HIGH

Summer 2011

Dear ,

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Nicholas Appleton in the Department of Educational Leadership and Innovation at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to discover what has contributed to the improvement in academic achievement among Stapley Junior High students from the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community since 2004.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a recorded interview that will include your observations about methods and/or instruction that led to improved academic achievement among the Salt River students at Stapley Jr. High. A follow-up interview may be needed depending on the information gathered during the initial interviews. The interview will last no longer than one hour and will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location. The follow-up interview, if needed, will take no more than 30 minutes. The questions will be provided to you before the interview. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

The information I collect from you will be combined with information from others to highlight those methods or insights that contributed to increased student achievement for the Salt River students. Although there is no benefit to you, possible benefits of this research could help other schools in the district that are striving to help similar student populations. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. All recordings will be kept in Dr. Appleton’s office for two years and will then be smashed.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at (480) 727-6433 (Dr. Nicholas Appleton) or (480) 472-2827 (Sidney Williams). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you
can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. What do you think has contributed to improved academic performance by the Salt River students at Stapley?

2. In what ways has the Salt River community (parents, leadership) contributed to the improvement in academic achievement?

3. In what ways has the Stapley Jr. High administration contributed to Salt River students’ academic improvement?

4. In what ways have one-on-one tutoring and classroom teaching methods contributed to Salt River students’ academic improvement?

5. What non-academic factors have contributed to the improvement in academic achievement by the Salt River students?

6. What do you think are the most relevant concepts and concerns that need to be focused on in order to maintain continued academic improvement for the Salt River students?
APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL
To: Nicholas Appleton
   EU
From: Mark Roosa, Chair
   Soc Beh IRB
Date: 05/03/2011
Committee Action: Exemption Granted
IRB Action Date: 05/03/2011
IRB Protocol #: 1102000091
Study Title: Academic achievement of salt River students at Stapley Jr. High

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(1).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.