

COMING TOGETHER AT THE TABLE: PARTNERING WITH URBAN ALASKA
NATIVE FAMILIES FOR THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL SUCCESS

By

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Abstract

There is abundant research regarding the positive effects of family engagement as a factor in P-12 student success. Partnerships between home and school provide opportunities for students' families and educators to establish common goals and share meaning about the purpose of schooling. Unfortunately, mainstream outreach practices by Western educators have often failed to nurture authentic relationships with Indigenous families. This may be a contributing factor in lower academic success for too many Indigenous students.

Historical educational practices in the U.S. for Indigenous students such as mandated attendance at distant boarding schools and English-only policies have adversely affected their languages and cultures worldwide and left a legacy of negative associations around schooling for many Native peoples. Non-Native educators continue to add to this disconnect with teaching pedagogies and curricula that are not responsive to Indigenous lifeways and values. In addition to inappropriate instructional methods and content, outreach strategies of non-Native educators may add to practices that marginalize Indigenous students and their families and discourage collaboration between home and school.

This mixed-methods study sought to find family outreach strategies implemented by early childhood educators in the Anchorage School District (ASD) that build and nurture more culturally sustaining and relational approaches to building partnerships with Alaska Native families. Such practices are more likely to lead to student success for Native students.

Research methods used were (a) a content analysis of ASD school-home communication fliers, (b) a survey of ASD preschool teachers on their outreach beliefs and practices with Native families, and (c) interviews with families of Alaska Native students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to learn why families of Alaska Native students in the Anchorage School District (ASD) participate less in the direct schooling experiences of their children than other cultural groups (McDowell Group, 2012). Research is clear that family engagement is an important factor in P-12 student success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011; McQuiggan & Megra, 2017; Stacer & Perrucci, 2013). The research for this dissertation examined the potential of increasing partnerships between Alaska Native families and ASD educators to support the school success of Native P-12 students.

Multiple studies have investigated how the use of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012) and curricula can meet the educational needs of Alaska Native students in meaningful and effective ways (Barnhardt, 2005; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Jester, 2017; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Vinlove, 2012). Family engagement has not received the same emphasis as curricula and pedagogy in research on culturally sustaining education as related to school success for Alaska Native students; especially in urban settings like the ASD.

1.1 Study Rationale

In most schools that serve Alaska Native students, the cultures, ways of knowing and values of their families and communities are not represented in the curricula, instructional practices, or outreach to their families. Most public-school educators and policy-makers are non-Native and school decisions such as the choice of educational materials and teaching pedagogies are often determined without considering how to best

serve the educational needs of Alaska Native students nor do they include the values and perspectives of their families and communities.

This imbalance of power undermines academic success for Native students and often creates a disconnect from school for Indigenous family and community members. As a result, students and families may view school agenda and practices as irrelevant to their lived experiences and cultural values (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008).

1.1.1 Concerns for Alaska Native Student Success and Family Engagement in the Anchorage School District

For years, the ASD has struggled to meet the educational needs of Native students. Family engagement as a factor in the academic success of Native students is beginning to receive more attention. A 2012 study on the success of Alaska Native P-12 students attending the ASD found that families of these students were less likely than other cultural groups to be directly engaged in their children's schooling (McDowell Group, 2012).

A 2015 report released by Anchorage Realizing Indigenous Student Excellence (ARISE), a city-wide partnership between the ASD and community organizations committed to quality education for Alaska Native P-12 students, found that most Indigenous students do not experience a sense of belonging in their school environments. The report was in response to answers given by Alaska Native and American Indian (AK/AI) students on the ASD's annual School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS).

ARISE focused attention on two of eight indicators on the SSCS related to school success for ASD students. One indicator asked to what degree students felt connected to

school and the other wanted to know if students believed the adults in their lives had high expectations for their school success. On the indicator for school connectedness, only 19.6% of AK/AI students reported they “strongly agreed” they felt a sense of belonging at school. When asked if the adults in their schools and communities had high expectations for their success had, 67% of AK/AI students responded with “strongly agree.” The results of the survey provided a picture for educators and community members that although AK/AI students generally reported they felt the adults in their lives had high expectations for them, they did not report feeling connected to school.

As a result of the survey findings, ARISE organized a series of initiatives to explore how to better support AK/AI students in the district. These were focused around three areas: (a) Academic achievement, (b) Social-emotional learning, and (c) Cultural identity. One of the initiatives was the formation of a Strategic Action Team (SAT) comprised of Native and non-Native educators and community members to study issues around school engagement of Alaska Native families in the ASD. The group determined that more research was needed on how to address lower school engagement by Native families and how educators can be more culturally sensitive in their outreach to Native families (ARISE, 2015).

The research for this doctoral study was done in response to the need for further investigation in this area. Additionally, limited studies exist on school outreach to urban Alaska Native communities, even as a 2010 census found that 71% of individuals who identify as American Indian and Alaska Native reside in urbanized areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). And although the ASD reports that 8.8% of its student population identify as Alaska Native, it does not include students who identify as mixed race. ASD’s Indian

Education program estimates that if students who identify as mixed race were included in the total numbers of Alaska Native students, the percentage of these students would double to 17.8%. (ASD, 2018).

Indigenous students and students of mixed race make up the largest group of minority students in the ASD which provides a more accurate perspective than allowed by the federal government in reporting school demographics. For these reasons, the researcher chose to investigate how urban Native families whose children attend the ASD, the largest school district in Alaska, perceive the effectiveness of outreach strategies used by their children's teachers.

1.1.2 Disconnect between Worldviews of Urban Native Families and Non-Native Educators in the Anchorage School District

Assumptions non-Native urban educators make about how to best develop effective partnerships with Indigenous families may not be accurate. Many outreach practices implemented by school personnel tend to dictate school-centric agenda to families. Rigid homework policies, requests for classroom volunteers, and one-way communication by educators often do not align with Indigenous values around relational approaches to the home-school connection.

Additionally, many members of the urban Native community have close ties to extended family in rural Alaska. Urban and rural members of a family may depend upon one another in a fluid system where multiple family members live in the same household and share subsistence foods just as in rural Native communities. Educators may believe these lifeways are limited to families living in rural communities unaware these are often deeply held cultural values for urban Natives as well.

Implementing outreach practices with Native families that are more culturally sustaining, relational, and family-centered has the potential of stronger partnerships between families and educators and increased school success for Indigenous schoolchildren. Research is clear that school personnel are a powerful factor in setting a welcoming tone for families and encouraging them as central figures in their children's school success. As a 2005 study by Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta noted, "It is not enough for schools to invite families to be involved, rather they need to help families realize their role and efficacy in influencing their child's education" (p. 312).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Traditional models of family outreach and engagement implemented by many educators remain largely school-centric and educators may not have the knowledge and/or skills to move beyond these strategies (Epstein, 2018). For Native peoples this is especially problematic as Western schooling has historically been tied to systemic assimilation efforts through boarding schools, English-only policies and irrelevant curricula and pedagogy (Adams, 1995; Smith, 2012; Williams, 2009). Because of this, non-Native educators and school leaders need to find appropriate and culturally sustaining ways in which to partner with Alaska Native families.

1.2.1 Broader Definitions of Effective Family-School Engagement

Lopez (2001) noted, "rather than viewing involvement as the enactment of specific scripted school activities ... [educators should] challenge discursive/hegemonic understandings of parent involvement" (p. 416). Non-Native educators should examine the role of schooling in the lives of Alaska Natives. Because of past governmental policies around the education of Indigenous children, Western schooling has left a legacy

of lost Native cultures and languages. Those practices continue to resonate in the present-day disconnect many Native families have with their children's schooling (Williams, 2009).

Family-centric outreach strategies such as potlucks, informal home visits, or frequent phone conversations reporting on student progress may be more responsive to the needs of Native families. These relational approaches are more likely to communicate a desire for equitable partnerships between students' families and their children's teachers, interrupting historical patterns of schooling as a strategy for assimilation in Native lives. On a practical level, relational approaches of outreach to Native families are also more closely aligned with their traditional cultural values. Most Indigenous peoples prioritize connection with others as the centerpiece of their worldviews.

In addition, it is important for educators to acknowledge that the traditional use of the term *parents* doesn't accurately reflect the makeup of today's families, which may or may not include parents. There are as many ways to be engaged as there are families. For many scholars in the field of school-family partnerships, the term *engagement* is preferred and describes a more holistic view of collaborating with families than *involvement*. Ferlazzo (2011) articulated this important distinction:

We need to understand the differences between family *involvement* and family *engagement*. One of the dictionary definitions of *involve* is "to enfold or envelope," whereas one of the meanings of *engage* is "to come together and interlock." Thus, involvement implies doing to; in contrast, engagement implies doing with. (p. 11)

This more expansive and inclusive vision of family-school connection provides more opportunities for family members to be partners in their children's education and challenges assumptions educators may have around limited ideas of what it means for families to be engaged in their children's education.

When families and educators form partnerships, it communicates to students that the adults in their lives care about their school success and value education. Positive, open, and two-way communication between school and home also provide opportunities for teachers and families to share common goals around student growth. Together these partners can more easily assess progress and problem-solve to make sure students are on track educationally.

1.2.2 Mandates for School Outreach to Students' Families

The U.S. Department of Education has long recognized the importance of family engagement as a factor in student achievement. Since 1965, when Title 1 was instituted under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the federal government has required educators and schools to practice some form of family engagement. The 2010 revision of ESEA states:

The importance of strengthening and supporting family engagement both through specific programs designed to involve families and communities through policies that will engage and empower parents ... will ensure that families have the information they need about their children's schools and enhance the ability of teachers and leaders to include families in the education process. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 1)

Although ESEA clearly notes that schools are responsible for effective outreach to families, there continues to be misunderstanding and assumptions around *how* families should be involved with their children's teachers (Ferguson et al., 2008). Expectations that all families engage with their children's teachers in a school-centric manner can be a barrier to quality connections between home and school for many families. Although parents volunteering in the classroom, joining a parent-teacher association, chaperoning field trips or sharing their occupations on career day may come to mind, these are narrow examples of what it means to be an engaged family member.

1.2.3 Preschool Teachers as Models for Effective Family Engagement

Even though most educators recognize that family engagement is integral to student success, they may be reluctant to reach out to all families or may not have the knowledge and training to develop effective partnerships. The exception is often early childhood teachers, especially those who teach preschool. These educators are guided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), whose standards emphasize family engagement (NAEYC, 2010). Because of these professional standards, many early childhood educators receive training around effective family engagement strategies. Another factor is that traditional preschool curricula and pedagogy tends to place more emphasis on partnering with families, social-emotional skills and informality in how teachers are perceived.

In addition, some families of young children, who may feel uncertain of their role in their children's schooling, may feel more comfortable interacting at the preschool level; especially with educators who are skilled at partnering with families. Most

preschool teachers understand that a child's family is his or her first teacher, and at the preschool level, children's families are the most critical influence in their students' lives.

After preschool, emphasis on academics increases sharply and teachers are often seen by students' families as extensions of the school curricula and community. At this transition, families tend to interact less with their children's teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Especially at the middle and high school levels, most families move to more *subtle* and transactional approaches (Jeynes, 2014) of school engagement.

Regardless of how families engage in their children's schooling, educational researchers agree that school-family engagement is critical to student success at all levels and that most educators need to be more intentional in how they connect with families (Epstein, 2018).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study was motivated by research that family engagement is a critical factor in P-12 student success and research on the ASD revealing that many educators are not successfully connecting with the families of Alaska Native students (McDowell Group, 2012). One reason for disengagement by Native families may be a cultural gap that exists between White, middle-class educators and the values and worldviews of Alaska Native students and their families. Non-Native educators may be unaware of the cultural values and social norms of Indigenous families making cross-cultural communication intimidating or confusing for them. Misunderstandings and assumptions by educators can lead to negative experiences for Native students and families and an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with school (Oleska, 2005).

Research exists on how educators of the dominant Western culture implement family involvement practices that may be unknowingly discriminatory and assimilationist in nature (Rosier, 2001). This could stem from the fact that non-Native educators may function from places of unexamined privilege, from ignorance of Native values and the unique cultural and legal status of Alaska Natives, and may harbor paternalistic attitudes around how Native families should participate in schools.

As Kawagley (2006) noted, “Alaska Native people have their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and to each other. The expert educators of the Western world have seldom recognized these ways” (p. 33). This orientation persists in the attitudes and approaches of too many Western educators and policymakers. With clear evidence that Native families are less engaged in their children’s schools, the ASD needs to examine its contribution to the issue to determine how it may marginalize Native families.

In fact, non-Native school personnel may assume Native families need to conform to mainstream societal expectations for their children to be successful in school. Traditional family outreach approaches are often school-centric and generally focused on the needs of educators without considering what families require to support their children’s education. For these reasons, a commitment to and implementation of culturally sustaining family engagement often goes unaddressed (Sebolt, 2018).

When students and families sense they are not seen as unique and whole individuals, both may disconnect from school. This is especially true for many Indigenous students and families who value relational approaches to education. If families are not acknowledged and respected by educators as their children’s most

important teachers, or assured they have expertise and experience to support their children, they may develop negative attitudes about school whether intentional or not. Those attitudes may then be communicated unknowingly to their children impacting opportunities for school success.

Extending oneself as an educator to create authentic partnerships with students' families takes a degree of commitment that goes beyond the walls of the classroom and daily schedule. Classroom teachers alone cannot make these changes. School administrators are responsible for setting policies and practices that ensure culturally sustaining family engagement is a priority. They need to make sure effective outreach is planned in ways that are intentional and consistent across the school community. Research clearly demonstrates that when educators and school personnel build trusting relationships with families and see the potential for partnership, students benefit in the short and long-term (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

1.4 Background of the Researcher

To provide background information on my positionality as a researcher, it is important to note that I am a White, female, middle-class educator. I am a first-generation college graduate who grew up in a rural border community in eastern Washington State near the Colville Nation. Those formative experiences impacted my identity development profoundly. As an educator, I have always been comfortable in the spaces between cultures and sought equity in schooling for all students.

For the past 14 years, I have served as faculty in teacher education at the University of Alaska Anchorage. Prior to that position, I was an early childhood educator, teaching in multiple locations throughout the U.S. In my roles as an early childhood

educator and university faculty, my philosophical stance has been one of learner-centered approaches which involve community engagement, accessing the *funds of knowledge* (Moll, 1992) of students' families, and an overall orientation to teaching and learning that includes ongoing inquiry and experiential learning.

As an early childhood educator, I practiced the Reggio-Emilia approach to education ((Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) which is based on learner-centered strategies that infuse the curriculum with the interests, cultures and strengths of children and their families. Reggio pedagogy promotes strong partnerships with families, and I witnessed the positive impact collaborations with students' families had on my teaching and the learning of my students. This experience also led to my pursuit of a graduate degree in adult education.

As university faculty, I teach several courses that underscore the importance of culturally sustaining family engagement; a family and community partnerships class, a distance rural seminar for educators new-to-Alaska serving rural school districts, and a seminar for student teaching interns. I have traveled and mentored pre-service teachers throughout rural Alaska and have gained a deep appreciation for issues surrounding Western schooling for Native families and communities.

Conversations with Alaska Native students, friends and colleagues have also heightened my awareness of the disconnect many have experienced around Western schooling as Indigenous peoples. As Yup'ik scholar John-Shields (2017) wrote, "Formal Western schooling is standardized. The way of teaching is academic. Learning goals are individualized with the objective of rising to the top so you can be successful on your own" (p. 117). This approach reflects the mostly individualistic and often wholly

academic orientation of Western schooling but reveals a lack of alignment with the Native value of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Relational approaches and authentic connections are a priority in all traditional Indigenous education and particularly relevant to the issue of school partnerships with Native families.

In addition to my professional life, two experiences as a family member have strongly influenced my motivation for this study; the first as a mother and second as a grandmother. As a young mother, I had the experience of guiding one of my preschool sons, who had special needs requiring accommodations, through the often dense and confusing educational bureaucracies of schooling. This provided a limited sense of how Native families may experience schools as places of frustration rather than support. And although I carry much privilege in my position as a White, middle-class educator and do not claim an equivalence to the negative experiences many Native families have around Western schooling, I have much empathy for those who have felt unseen and unheard in efforts to support their children.

The second experience was as a foster grandparent for two young grandchildren. In interactions with their schools, there was an emphasis on parents as primary caregivers. Newsletters home were typically addressed to “Parents or Guardians” which often felt alienating and impersonal. My spouse and I were fully present for our grandchildren even if we were not their parents. The term *guardian* did not begin to cover the depth of commitment and love we had for our grandchildren. Research is clear that families are increasingly headed by grandparents or depend upon members of extended family to co-parent their children (Grant & Ray, 2016). Best practice in family engagement uses the more inclusive term *families* in communications with the homes of

students. This reflects the reality of many contemporary family structures and acknowledges that more children are living in homes where the primary caregivers are extended family members or foster parents.

My spouse and I also found that as foster grandparents there were burdensome expectations to volunteer during school hours or spend an inordinate amount of time helping with homework. These types of school-centric engagement practices assume all families have the time, means and resources to support their children in ways typical of White, middle-class families. The experience of raising grandchildren provided some sense of how Native families, where an extended family structure is more common, may respond to family outreach geared to White, middle-class nuclear families.

In my Interdisciplinary Studies doctoral program, I have taken coursework in the Cross-Cultural Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Northern Studies programs. This has provided a grounding in the history and cultures of Alaska's Indigenous peoples, the effects of colonialism on Alaska Native cultures, languages and lifeways, and how that legacy continues to affect every aspect of the lives of Native peoples in Alaska today, including schooling. The holistic orientation of interdisciplinary study seeks opportunities for cross-discipline collaborations and power-sharing to find relevant solutions to societal problems. This paradigm is closely aligned with Indigenous values which emphasize openness to multiple perspectives and a non-hierarchical approach to problem-solving. That orientation also aligns with my post-positivist stance as a researcher and educator.

1.5 Theoretical Frameworks

The following areas of research provided the foundation for this study: (a) Family engagement as a critical factor in the academic success of P-12 students, (b) Culturally

sustaining educational pedagogies as key in positive school outcomes for Indigenous students (Paris, 2012), (c) The troubling history of Western schooling on Alaska Native peoples and its relevance for school-home partnerships, and (d) Relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) as an epistemological approach for most Indigenous peoples worldwide and the need for non-Native educators to understand this orientation to implement effective outreach to Native families. In the following sections, a brief introduction to each theory is presented with a more comprehensive presentation of these concepts in the literature review found in Chapter 2.

1.5.1 Family Engagement: A Critical Factor in Student Success

Studies on family engagement as a factor in student success are abundant (Epstein, 2018; Davis & Yang, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014; Warren & Mapp, 2011). And although research has established the importance of family engagement, which kinds of participation are most effective has not been clearly established. The most productive ways in which educators can facilitate strong home-school connections are often debated as well; particularly regarding the need for differentiated approaches with the diversity in family cultures and structures. Additionally, studies conducted on marginalized groups often use a deficit perspective to explain reasons these families are less engaged in their children's schooling.

For Alaska Native families, whose values and worldviews may differ from those of the Western, mainstream culture of schooling, engagement in their children's schools is fraught with complexity. Issues range from the historical use of schooling as a means for assimilating Native peoples to Native families' lack of alignment with the goals of

Western education. As Zeichner, Bowman, Guillen, and Napolitan (2016) stated, “teachers need to know about the communities where their students grow and develop, how to develop respectful and trusting connections with students’ families ... and how to make use of this knowledge and relationships in ways that support their students’ learning” (p. 277).

Davis and Yang (2005) provided convincing evidence that quality family-school partnerships are a critical factor in student academic success. Their research found that students whose families are engaged in their schooling, no matter their socio-economic status, have higher attendance, enjoy school more and get along better with other children. The study also underscored the fact that effective school outreach must be intentionally planned. When administrators promote school-wide initiatives around effective collaborations between home and school, students are consistently more successful. In fact, some studies point to an increase of up to 20% in the academic achievement of students whose families are engaged in their children’s schooling (Jeynes, 2011). Clearly, the importance of strong and meaningful partnerships between educators and the families of students is a needed area of focus as it relates to student success.

1.5.2 Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement

Grant and Ray (2016) defined culturally responsive family engagement as “Practices that respect and acknowledge the cultural uniqueness, life experiences, and viewpoints of classroom families and draw on those experiences to enrich and energize the classroom curriculum and teaching activities, leading to respectful partnerships” (p. 492); however, notions of cultural responsiveness in pedagogy, curricula and family outreach practices have been challenged lately for their limited scope.

Research has established that culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies (CSRP; McCarty & Lee, 2014) have the potential to increase school success for Indigenous students. A missing focus of CSRP may be family-school engagement. Although Alaska Natives have increasingly achieved self-determination, education continues to be an area where they have less decision-making power. This dynamic sets up systems of schooling where Native communities and non-Native educators are unable to work as authentic partners in collaborative ways that benefit Native students.

In 2012, educational researcher Paris suggested that rather than merely acknowledging and responding to the cultures of students, educators should actively advocate for the value of a diverse society and work to “sustain” the cultures and languages of their students. This involves a deeper knowledge of the ways of knowing of one’s students involving as Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) stated, teaching *through* a culture, inclusive of its values, rather than teaching *about* a culture.

One of the most salient of Indigenous cultural values is a focus on connection with the surrounding world and others. The next section will discuss the importance of relational approaches to home-school partnerships between Western educators and Alaska Native families.

1.5.3 Relational Accountability: An Indigenous Epistemology

To create culturally meaningful collaborations with Native families, connecting in relational and intentional ways is imperative. Educators who prefer more limited and transactional communication with their students’ families such as newsletters, once-a-year open houses or parent-teacher conferences are not likely to develop the necessary foundation for culturally sustaining partnerships with Native families. As noted by

Koskey, a cultural anthropologist whose work focuses on community-based research with Alaska Native peoples, in a discussion of organizational-community partnerships, “A non-reciprocal relationship will not last because it is not authentic” (CCS/ED 604 class lecture, November 20, 2017).

Too often, non-Native administrators and teachers, who may have a limited knowledge of Native cultures, or understand the negative associations with schooling for many Indigenous peoples, do not appropriately engage them as partners in their children’s schooling. In their 2014 case study of two schools that primarily served Indigenous students, McCarty and Lee found that families were quick to place their trust in Native educators at those schools. The Native teachers were familiar with the cultural value of *relational accountability* (Wilson, 2008) toward members of the community, including their students’ families. Wilson defines relational accountability as approaching interactions with others from the principles of the 3 Rs: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Much potential exists for stronger ties between schools and Alaska Native families by partnering with them in ways that honor and reflect relational accountability. This paradigm guides much of the traditional worldviews of Indigenous peoples where respectful relationships and close networks with others and the natural world are crucial for balanced and healthful living. If non-Native educators are to build authentic and meaningful partnerships with the families of their Native students, they must understand the critical importance of relational accountability to Indigenous peoples. A more expansive discussion of relational accountability is presented in Chapter 2.

1.5.4 History of Western Schooling for Alaska Native Peoples

The devastating history of colonialism and imperialistic practices regarding schooling for Native peoples has been documented by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers alike (Adams, 1995; Barnhardt, 2001; Smith, 2012; Williams, 2009). Indigenous peoples across the United States have a shared history of loss from Western colonization. Pandemics wiped out large numbers of Native communities, they were used as slaves to harvest wildlife for the fur trade industry and were subjected to institutional assimilation in every aspect of their lives (Napoleon, 1996). Indigenous peoples were driven from their ancestral lands, had their traditional means of providing for themselves restricted, societal and family structures displaced, foreign forms of governance imposed, languages and spirituality destroyed and were mandated to replace traditional systems of education with Western schooling (Norton & Manson, 1996).

Schooling was seen as a clear path to assimilation of Native peoples in the 1800 and 1900s in the United States. Adams (1995) wrote in his book, *Education for Extinction*, that boarding schools for Indigenous children were

established for the sole purpose of severing the child's cultural and psychological connection to his native heritage, this unique institution figured prominently in the federal government's desire to find a solution to the "Indian problem," a method of saving Indians by destroying them.
(p. x)

Children fortunate enough to remain near their home communities were sent to segregated missionary schools which were established Alaska-wide after the 1874 Comity Agreement. This was also known as the Jackson Plan, named after Rev. Sheldon

Jackson, who was instrumental in formulating the initiative. Jackson, the Agent of Education for the U.S. Department of the Interior, divided Alaska geographically and provided various religious affiliations territories to develop missionary schools (never mind that this action by the federal government was unconstitutional). The explicit goal was to *civilize* Alaska Native children (Williams, 2009).

Although there were instances where children and communities were encouraged to speak their Native languages, most missionary teachers were intolerant of Indigenous family systems, traditions, spirituality, government, or education. The trauma that resulted from the loss of lifeways and languages continues to resonate in for many Alaska Natives.

Background knowledge of the effects of negative schooling experiences on Native peoples is especially important for educators who are hired from outside of Alaska. Between 2008-2012, 64% of educators teaching in Alaska were hired from outside the state (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Teacher Placement, 2016). Many of these educators may not have learned of the long history of colonization and asymmetrical power relations embedded in Western schooling for Alaska's Indigenous peoples. As Inupiaq historian and educational scholar Paul Ongtooguk (1998) related from his own public-school experience in Alaska,

The curriculum at my high school in Nome was virtually silent about us, our society, and the many issues and challenges we faced as a people caught between two worlds. In fact, educational policy since the turn of the century had been to suppress Native culture and “assimilate” us into the broader society. Everything that was required—everything that had

status—in the curriculum was centered on white people and was remarkably like what might have been found anywhere in the U.S. (p. 1)

Considering this troubling history around Western schooling, for many Alaska Native families, the expectation of school engagement is problematic. As Barnhardt (2001) stated, “many of the factors that currently inhibit success for Alaska Native students ... come from the lingering effects of past schooling policies and practices” (p. 27). Historically, the schooling experience for Alaska Natives has been largely one of institutionalized assimilation (Barnhardt, 2001). Familial and societal disruptions that resulted continue to resonate from one generation to the next. It is a testament to the resilience of Alaska’s Indigenous peoples that many still maintain their traditional worldviews and values and are engaged in collective efforts to revitalize their languages, cultures and sovereignty over their daily lives.

Although overt assimilation practices such as boarding schools and English-only policies are no longer acceptable, Western-biased approaches continue to have negative effects on Alaska Native schoolchildren and their families. Indeed, colonization by schools persists when educators implement inappropriate outreach and pedagogy and curricula that are not culturally sustaining. Such practices continue to add to a school disconnect for too many Native students and their families. Combine these practices with a lack of understanding of Native values around relationship development or communication styles, and opportunities to create positive connections are less likely to happen between educators and families. The next section will examine the lingering effects negative schooling experiences may have on Native families and provide a possible explanation for a continuing disconnect with Western education.

1.5.5 Intergenerational Trauma of Western Schooling for Indigenous Peoples

Intergenerational trauma has contributed to negative consequences for many Alaska Native communities and their youth. Native students drop out of school at rates triple the national average and academic achievement remains lower than for most other student populations (Hirshberg & Hill, 2013). These statistics are understandable considering the loss of Native cultures, languages, and entire lifeways as a result of the assimilative agenda of Western schooling practices.

The legacy of negative Western schooling practices cannot go unrecognized by non-Native educators if positive home-school connections are to be developed. Strategies must be found that encompass all aspects of the educational experience and development of students, not only the academic. McCarty and Lee (2014) discussed how critical it is for non-Native educators to, “emphasize the importance of acknowledging the emotional dimensions inherent in [school] pedagogies. Love, loss, empathy, compassion and pain run throughout ... personal histories [of Native peoples] of linguistic shame and exclusion” (p. 117). The history of schooling for Alaska Natives is one of institutionalized assimilation that left a loss of cultures, languages and lifeways and continues to affect how they experience Western education today.

Fortunately, the ASD is recognizing the effects of trauma on an increasing number of its students and providing awareness training for school staff. Acknowledging the existence of trauma in the student population is a promising first step as district leadership seeks to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills required to support children and youth affected by trauma, past or present. The effects Western schooling had

in contributing to trauma for the Native community is less recognized by district personnel.

The effects of intergenerational trauma through negative schooling experiences also has serious implications for how Native families of school-age children interact with their children's teachers. It would benefit educators to learn ways to communicate and partner with Native families in ways that engender trust and nurture more authentic and caring relationships. A fuller discussion of this factor in the engagement of Native families in their children's schooling and how educators can promote healthier collaborations are explored in Chapter 4 on research findings.

The remaining sections of this chapter presents the questions that guided this study as well as a brief overview of the study's design. A comprehensive discussion of the research methodology is provided in Chapter 3.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were these:

1. How do Alaska Native families of preschool children in an urban setting such as Anchorage experience school outreach and which practices are perceived as culturally sustaining and/or effective?
2. How do preschool teachers in the ASD currently implement outreach to Alaska Native families?
3. How might current outreach practices by ASD preschool teachers serve as models of culturally sustaining family engagement for other educators and would additional training improve outreach for all grade level teachers?

Limited research currently exists on why Alaska Native families in the ASD are less likely than other cultural groups to directly participate in their children's schooling. Neither are there studies that identify if more training for non-Native educators would enable them to build more meaningful and culturally sustaining outreach for Native families.

A mixed-methods approach was used in this study to discover what factors contribute to strong partnerships with Alaska Native families in the ASD. Findings from the research were used to develop theories that will enable non-Native educators to establish more meaningful and culturally sustaining relationship with the families of Alaska Native students.

1.7 Overview of the Research Design

This mixed- methods study included a content analysis of ASD family outreach materials, a survey of ASD preschool teachers, interviews with Alaska Native family members in the ASD, and attendance at several Alaska Native family-school events. Preschool teachers were chosen as participants in this study as they generally interact more directly with the families of their students and receive training in family outreach strategies. Unstructured interviews with eight Alaska Native family members of students attending schools in the ASD were also conducted. In addition, the researcher attended multiple family events for Native families of preschoolers at the Yup'ik Immersion preschool and CINHS as a participant-observer. This provided valuable experience observing outreach focused on culturally sustaining engagement for Native families.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are defined to assist the reader in understanding how each was used throughout the study.

1. *Alaska Native*: The Indigenous peoples of Alaska. Alaska Native peoples comprise much diversity and are usually defined by their language groups which include Iñupiat, Yup'ik, Aleut, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Athabaskan. (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2018)
2. *Culturally sustaining family engagement*: A deep commitment to integrating the lifeways and values of students in school outreach practices and partnerships between home and school. (Paris, 2012)
3. *Educator*: Teachers, school administrators and other school personnel such as paraprofessionals and school specialists.
4. *Family*: The caregivers in a student's home who are considered family, no matter the structure. This could be parents, grandparents, other extended family members or foster parents.
5. *Family-centric outreach*: School outreach practices that are family-centered and advocate for differentiating approaches to connecting with families depending on their needs. (Grant & Ray, 2016)
6. *Family engagement*: Refers to ways in which families participate in their children's schooling whether directly in school environments, through school-directed activities or more indirect family routines and

experiences that add to their children's educational growth. (Epstein, 2018)

7. *Funds of knowledge*: The cultural background, experiences, assets and resources that each family brings to an educational setting. (Moll, 1992; Sebolt, 2018)
8. *Indigenous*: To be original or native to a particular place.
9. *Indigenous research methodologies*: Research strategies that are centered in the epistemologies of Indigenous peoples. These are relationship-based and locate the power and authority of the study at the community level. (Wilson, 2008)
10. *Intergenerational trauma*: Emotional and psychological pain that is passed from the first generation of trauma survivors to subsequent generations through complex responses to trauma. (Brave Heart & De Bruyn, 1998)
11. *Relational accountability*: Values around how to be in relationship with others and the natural world that include respect, reciprocity and responsibility. (Wilson, 2008)
12. *School outreach*: Outreach generally describes educators and schools seeking to connect *with* families. (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014)
13. *School-centric*: School practices, including family engagement that are focused primarily on the needs of the school rather than those of students' families. (Grant & Ray, 2016)

Throughout this study the term *culturally sustaining* is used when referring to family outreach practices that support Native cultures and languages. In addition, the term *family* or *family members*, rather than *parents*, is used whenever possible, to honor the reality that many Alaska Native families include extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Finally, the terms *outreach* and *engagement* may be used interchangeably. Outreach generally describes educators and schools seeking to connect with families, whereas engagement refers to families participating in their children's schooling. Depending on the context, the term engagement may also mean the partnerships that schools and families create with one another.

1.9 Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Only family members whose children had attended preschool programs designed for Alaska Native students were interviewed for this study. The intent was to seek exemplary practices as a model for the ASD, but this could be perceived as a limitation as well.

An assumption of this study was that data on the reasons why Alaska Native families tend to participate less directly in their children's schooling in the ASD could be found through the interview process. Additionally, it was assumed responses to the survey of ASD preschool teachers were answered completely and without fear of appearing biased.

Another limitation was that the researcher only surveyed preschool teachers in the ASD. The researcher's background knowledge as a former early childhood educator and current faculty member in an early childhood teacher preparation program informed this

choice. Experience as an early childhood educator and university faculty likely created unconscious and conscious bias in the belief preschool teachers receive more professional development around effective outreach to families; however, studies validate the researcher's assumption that preschool teachers are more likely to interact with the families of their students (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005).

Most public preschools in the ASD are located in Title 1 schools and serve a diverse range of students and families. Under Title 1 directives, preschool teachers in the ASD are required to be more intentional in how they plan outreach to families, including home visits and regularly scheduled family events. These types of relational strategies are more aligned with Native values around connection to others. The researcher believes the relational approach to family outreach of preschool teachers could serve as a model for teachers at most grade levels, with appropriate adaptations.

The researcher's positionality as a White, middle-class academic conducting a study on perceptions Alaska Native families have toward Western schooling may have affected answers families provided in the interviews. The researcher made every effort to create a safe and trusting environment for the participants during the interviews and also provided opportunities for their feedback during the coding process to ensure reliability. It remains that a cultural gap exists between the researcher's ways of being and knowing and that of the Alaska Native family members who were interviewed for this study.

Finally, the literature review conducted for this study may also have biased the researcher. The researcher continued to perform additional literature reviews throughout the coding process as themes and theories began to emerge so as not to skew the data findings.

1.10 Summary

Currently, Alaska Native families in the ASD are less likely than other cultural groups to directly participate in their children's schooling. This points to a disconnect for Native students and families that may be exacerbated by a lack of culturally sustaining school outreach in the district. The intention of this study was to reveal outreach practices implemented by ASD preschool teachers as well as determine which strategies Native families identify as effective and culturally sustaining.

More training on how to build meaningful and productive relationships between Alaska Native families and educators could address the present situation of lower involvement by Native families. In addition to the lack of representation of Native worldviews in curricula and pedagogy, this could also provide another link in the current disconnect many Alaska Native students and families experience in their schooling experiences in the ASD.

Chapter 2 provides a fuller review of the literature regarding (a) the importance of effective family outreach to student success, (b) components of culturally sustaining family engagement, (c) how the history of Western schooling for Alaska Natives may contribute to an ongoing disconnect for Native students and families, (d) assumptions non-Native educators may have about Native families that can create barriers to successful home-school collaborations, and (e) promising school outreach practices with Indigenous families that have the potential of leading to more authentic home-school partnerships leading to increased success for Alaska Native P-12 students in the ASD.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review was completed through a cumulative analysis of multiple research topics. Areas included (a) the importance of family engagement to P-12 student success, (b) the history of Western schooling for Alaska Natives as a governmental strategy for assimilation and the lasting effects of those policies, (c) how traditional Western schooling approaches to family outreach may not be effective with Alaska Native families, and (d) an examination of factors that may improve school outreach strategies to Native families and align with their cultural values and lifeways.

Concerns for how the ASD is serving the partnership needs of Native students and their families motivated this study (McDowell Group, 2012). The researcher's goal was to seek information on reasons Alaska Native families, with children attending ASD schools, may participate less in their children's schooling than other cultural groups. This study explores ways the ASD can support Native families in their critical role as equal partners in student success.

2.1 The Importance of Family Engagement to Student Success

Research on family engagement as a factor in student achievement has increased exponentially in the past 30 years and established a clear connection to student success (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Davis & Yang, 2005; Dunst et al., 1988; Epstein, 1999, 2001, 2009, 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Mapp, 2013; Moll, 1992; Warren & Mapp, 2011). In fact, one series of empirical studies conducted over a 20-year period suggested family engagement may increase academic achievement up to 20% for P-12 students (Jeynes, 2011); however, as seminal family

engagement scholar Epstein (2018) noted, “No topic about school improvement has created more rhetoric There is some confusion and disagreement ... about which practices of involvement are important and how to obtain high participation from all families” (p. 6). Though research has concluded that family engagement is an important contributing factor to student success, *which* outreach strategies are most effective for all cultural groups of families remains contested. Epstein cautions that educational scholars and practitioners should be skeptical about family engagement models that offer a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of every family.

In the next section, an introduction to theories that have guided practices in family-school partnerships over the past 30 years is presented. Discussions about the appropriateness of some Western approaches for partnering with Alaska Native families follow.

2.2 Family Systems Theories

Research by scholars in sociology and psychology led to the development of several family systems theories. The most recognized of these are Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1986), Dunst’s Family Empowerment Theory (1988), Coleman’s Social Capital Theory (1994), Moll’s Funds of Knowledge Theory (1992), and Epstein’s Family-School Partnerships Framework (2009). Each family systems theory attempts to articulate factors that influence families’ engagement in their children’s growth and development, including schooling. A brief synopsis of each theory follows to provide a foundational understanding of the underpinnings of research in family engagement as it relates to student success.

2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1986) sought to explain the significance of how children's development is influenced by their families by showing how all families are situated in larger societal systems within multiple contexts. Just as the elements of a mobile are interconnected and one element's movement affects the dynamic of the whole, Bronfenbrenner believed that a family's various contexts directly and indirectly affect the development and growth of their children.

Bronfenbrenner's model consists of concentric circles of influence ranging from the innermost circle, or microsystem, where the child's family, peers, neighbors and school dwell, to the outermost ring which is labeled the macrosystem. The macrosystem includes societal factors such as the child's race, the family's religion, socio-economic status and where they live. This model also considers the broadest influences such as world events, the global economy and effects of media which Bronfenbrenner referred to as the chronosystem. It is a big picture perspective of the many factors that influence the growth and development of children and the interconnectedness of each family within the greater whole.

2.2.2 Dunst's Family Empowerment Theory

Dunst has been recognized as a leader in research on strengthening families for many years. His Family Empowerment Theory (1988) rests on the assumption that educators have a responsibility to support families in attaining the resources, skills, and knowledge to successfully parent their children. He partnered with other scholars in the field to produce convincing findings on the power of positive interventions to support families. A seminal book he co-authored, *Enabling & Empowering Families* (Dunst,

Trivette, & Deal, 1988), has informed family engagement work for the past three decades.

Like Bronfenbrenner, Dunst's model emphasizes the interconnectedness of the family to larger societal influences. In Dunst's theory, the focus is on ways in which to nurture the agency of families and connect them with resources necessary to equip their children for success. These supports include both informal opportunities such as networking with other families to more formal supports such as parent training and home-based interventions by professionals like social workers and educators. This model is an integrated framework where families, schools and other professionals work together to provide wrap-around support for children.

2.2.3 Coleman's Social Capital Theory

Coleman (1994) narrowed Dunst's focus on resources families need to one area: the importance of social networks. He proposed that the social capital children possess strongly influences their ability to navigate the world successfully. These networks of support include a child's family members, neighbors, and other caring adults in his or her life such as educators.

Coleman's theory is based on research that Western society has increasingly moved to an individualistic orientation where the number of social supports for children has decreased significantly. The traditional adage *It takes a village to raise a child* encapsulates the thinking upon which Coleman's theory is constructed. This model focuses on the need for schools to provide additional social supports for students' families who may not have the broad range of societal assets that more privileged families do.

2.2.4 Moll's Funds of Knowledge Theory

Moll et al. (1992) pivoted from Coleman's work on social capital with its deficit perspective to focus on the assets marginalized families do provide their children. These scholars defined funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning" (p. 133). Moll proposed that when educators bring a school-centric approach to working with families, they fail to acknowledge and access the rich sources of expertise and cultural background of their students' home lives. The funds of knowledge theory is a strengths-based approach that sees family-school partnerships as a reciprocal relationship where teachers learn as much from families as families do from teachers.

This theory is most aligned with culturally sustaining ways (Paris, 2012) of bridging students' experiences from home to create meaningful and relevant learning at school. Moll et al. (1992) went beyond general theory development to suggest strategies teachers can use to access families' knowledge and skills to support student success. They recommended that teachers actively investigate the background of the communities they serve to discover the cultural richness that exists. They also suggested that teachers become familiar with the social connections available to students' families through both informal and formal support systems. Moll and colleagues also advocated that educators examine their own deficit notions of what families contribute and strive to integrate families' rich knowledge and cultural expertise into their classroom practices.

2.2.5 Epstein's Family-School Partnerships Framework

Epstein and colleagues from Johns Hopkins developed the Family-School Partnership Framework for establishing effective home-school relationships. Although it

is not an overarching theory, it has been hugely influential in the field of family engagement. In this model, it was determined that six types of family engagement are required for effective home-school connection: (a) *Parenting*: Educators are seen as important to supporting families in their childrearing efforts, (b) *Communication*: Educators establish ongoing and reciprocal channels of communication with families relating to student progress, (c) *Volunteering*: Educators actively recruit family members to work within schools as volunteers, encouraging them to be directly involved in their children's education, (d) *Learning at Home*: Educators communicate to families how they can support their children's learning through school-related activities in the home, (e) *Decision-Making*: Educators are intentional in how families are involved in school decisions, and (f) *Collaborating with the Community*: Educators serve to connect community supports and resources to families as needed (Epstein et al., 2009). Although this framework is most closely associated with educational reform and the specific strategies educators and schools can implement to encourage stronger partnerships with the families of students, in many ways it is more school-centric. This model may not meet the needs of Native families who share a common history of Western schooling that has not always considered their perspectives or honored their lifeways.

In the next section, assumptions that underlie traditional outreach by Western educators are discussed as they relate to effective partnerships with underserved families. An examination of why some of these approaches are especially ineffective with Alaska Native families is explored.

2.3 Assumptions in Traditional School Outreach to Families

As presented earlier, family engagement research in the past 30 years has undergone a continual evolution as it seeks to identify factors that contribute to effective home-school partnerships. In the past, traditional approaches to home-school outreach have often discounted or ignored the funds of knowledge underserved families provide their children. The following example shows how Western-centric approaches often privilege dominant perspectives over those of families with whom they partner.

Kumar (2014) conducted research on family literacy programs that served immigrant and Indigenous families of young children. Through content analysis of family literacy training materials, the underlying assumptions that existed around the superiority of school-based literacy were surfaced. The study examined how directive these programs are in how they work with families and determined that Western literacy materials and training approaches often discount the funds of knowledge and expertise of marginalized families. The study revealed that many family literacy programs promote narrow, Western-centric views.

Family engagement pamphlets, websites and texts were examined for the number of references to school-based literacy practices. Materials examined images that privileged European-American families and used deficit language that described children and families from non-mainstream cultures as *at-risk*. Training materials using images and vocabulary that portrayed effective home literacy primarily as parents reading to their children were common. The study also highlighted the tendency of some Western educators to “proffer deficit notions” of the parenting competence of marginalized

families and “privilege school literacy practices ... leaving little room for parents’ pre-existing literacy practices” (Kumar, 2014, p. 143).

Family members were often encouraged to provide school-like activities in the home rather than using authentic and natural learning experiences such as storytelling, conversation, singing, and so on. Acknowledgement that families had the knowledge and skills to promote literacy in the home in other ways such as talking and singing together were used to a lesser degree. The focus of many materials was on bringing *at-risk* (i.e., a deficit term) children up to speed to increase chances of their academic success in the mainstream culture.

For Indigenous peoples with traditions of oral language, such approaches ignore and undermine their ways of knowing. The subtle but powerful messages found in many family education/training materials often communicate to underserved families that they have neither the knowledge or agency to support their children’s education. These messages often go unrecognized by mainstream educators and have the potential to create lasting harm to families as they search for ways in which to support their children’s school success. Such school-centric approaches to working with families outside the mainstream culture tend to privilege Western approaches and values which may be alienating and discourage engagement in their children’s schooling.

Another example of a well-intentioned but potentially problematic approach is exemplified by a highly recognized family engagement model that was developed by scholars at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Mapp et al., 2014) and is currently being implemented by school districts across the U.S. The model was based on longitudinal research that sought to identify which family outreach practices traditionally

used by school are less effective in promoting student success and which are high impact. The study concluded that strategies which are more relational such as celebrations, potlucks, and informal meetings with families are low impact regarding directly improving student success. The research determined higher impact practices were centered on families and educators setting goals for students together where they sought to be *on the same page* regarding what learning supports were offered (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). The multi-year study was conducted across the U.S. and included culturally and ethnically diverse families; however, Alaska Native families were not represented in the data collected. An *either/or* approach that sets relational goals at one end of a continuum from a focus on student work at the other creates a dichotomy that can minimize a holistic orientation to family-school partnerships.

This is of particular concern in the ASD with its identified issue of lower school engagement by Native families. The Harvard model and its potential for meeting the ASD's goal of increasing engagement by Native families are discussed in more depth in another section. A discussion on the multiple factors that may contribute to a general disconnect with Western schooling for Alaska Native families is next discussed, as well as ways in which non-Native educators might be more culturally relevant in their outreach practices.

Meeting the educational needs of Alaska Native P-12 students in public schools is an ongoing concern for their families and teachers alike. The issue has been studied from multiple angles, but only incremental progress has been made in school achievement indicators such as higher test scores and increased graduation rates for Native students (Hirshberg & Hill, 2013). Non-Native educators may contribute to this school disconnect

when they hold negative assumptions about Native families. For example, a common narrative of non-Native educators is that Native families are less interested in education than other cultural groups (Whitfield, Klug, & Whitney, 2007). This type of deficit explanation places an unbalanced responsibility for positive educational change solely on Native families.

Taylor (1993) described how educators marginalize students and families and shortchange their instruction when they move too quickly to negative and limited explanations of why they may be disengaged with their children's schooling:

In developing educational opportunities for families, it is essential that we begin by learning about their lives so that together we can build meaningful connections between everyday learning and school learning. We need to understand, from the personal and shared perspectives of individual family members, the extraordinary funds of knowledge that they bring to any learning situation. Above all, we need to abandon the prepackaged programs of "experts" and turn instead to the wealth of information that we can gain from educators and researchers who work with families in naturalistic settings. (p. 551)

An assets-based approach to creating home-school collaborations is not only respectful, it is practical. Educators who assume only they hold the knowledge and power to meet the learning needs of their students are not accessing the most important resource available; their students' families.

In fact, school-centric approaches to family outreach are problematic for many families outside of the mainstream culture of Western schooling. Many of these families

find schools as places where their worldviews and values are underrepresented and even unwelcome. Some studies have shown that families from diverse backgrounds often experience schools as places that are *inherently exclusionary* (Lea et al., 2011). Alaska Natives, who have historically experienced educational policies that were assimilationist in nature (Adams, 1995; Barnhardt, 2001; Williams, 2009), and currently struggle with many Western approaches, continue to feel distanced from the goals of mainstream schooling. In addition, norms of family engagement in schools are mostly based on Eurocentric notions that view the practices of White, middle-class parents to set the standard for successful parental involvement for all family groups (Lewis & Forman, 2002). As the research of Brayboy and Castagno (2009) affirmed, Indigenous families want their “children’s learning to ‘do’ school ... not to be an assimilative process” (p. 31).

Another factor that contributes to a distance from Western schooling for many Native students and families is that most preservice and practicing educators in the U.S. are White and middle-class; even as the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds is rapidly increasing. Recent U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2018), statistics show that

of the projected 50.7 million public school students entering prekindergarten through grade 12 in fall 2018, White students will account for 24.1 million. The remaining 26.6 million will be composed of 7.8 million Black students, 14.0 million Hispanic students, 2.6 million Asian students, 0.2 million Pacific Islander students, 0.5 million American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 1.6 million students of Two or more

racess. The percentage of students enrolled in public schools who are White is projected to continue to decline through at least fall 2027 along with the percentage of students who are Black, whereas the percentage of students who are Hispanic Asian, and of Two or more races are projected to increase. (p. 1)

The rapidly evolving makeup of the nation's P-12 student population closely reflects that of the ASD which has one of the most diverse student bodies in the U.S. An important distinction for the ASD is that Alaska Natives comprise 9.4% of the student population; the highest percentage in the nation of an urban school district (ASD, 2018).

The potential of family engagement as a factor in student success for many marginalized groups often goes unrealized. As Epstein (2018) cautioned, "Without partnerships, educators segment students into the school child and the home child, ignoring the whole child" (p. 7). When students' identities are fragmented in this way, the relevance of school to their daily lives and future plans can be confusing. This kind of compartmentalization is particularly problematic when trying to engage Alaska Native students and their families in schooling as they typically prioritize meaningful connection in every aspect of their lives.

Educational policy-makers have tried to integrate effective family engagement in such federal directives as the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESSA); however, these have not resulted in significant change in student achievement; especially for groups such as Alaska Native children. As Mapp and Kuttner (2014) stated,

Mandates are often predicated on a fundamental assumption: that educators and families charged with developing effective partnerships

between home and school already possess requisite skills, knowledge, confidence and belief systems—in other words, the *collective capacity*—to successfully implement and sustain these important home-school relationships. (p. 5)

This aligns with leading family engagement scholar Epstein's (2018) findings that educators and administrators may not be receiving the knowledge and skills needed for effective outreach to all families. Traditional Western schooling approaches to outreach seem largely unprepared to create authentic partnerships with the families of their students of diverse backgrounds.

In the past few years, Epstein has turned her research focus to how universities are preparing pre-service teachers to develop effective partnerships with families. Her studies have found there is limited progress in this area. Her latest study surveyed 160 deans of colleges of education in the U.S. and found that,

responses revealed a dramatic gap between their belief that family and community involvement is a very important topic for future teachers and administrators to master and their honest reports that their graduates were unprepared to conduct effective programs of school, family and community partnerships Most teachers and administrators are inadequately prepared to work effectively with *all* students' families in communities across the country. (Epstein, 2018, p. 3)

Although the demographics of educators in the U.S. is becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse, it remains that most school staff are members of dominant Western systems of culture and education (Grant & Ray, 2016). It follows that most of

those educators share similar backgrounds to the adults they encountered in their own schooling. Additionally, for many of the dominant Western culture who chose education as a profession, school has positive associations. That stance can lead educators to function from places of unexamined privilege and power in how their teaching pedagogies, instructional content and personal values impact marginalized student groups such as Alaska Natives.

For many non-Native school staff, there may be a lack of awareness of Indigenous values and lifeways, as well as Natives' unique cultural and legal status as tribal members. As Kawagley (2006) noted, "Alaska Native people have their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and to each other. The expert educators of the Western world have seldom recognized these ways" (p. 33). In fact, prior to contact with outside influences, Alaska's Indigenous peoples had their own systems of education for over 10,000 years. Alaska's non-Native educators would benefit from learning how Native peoples historically passed on traditional knowledge and skills to their youth.

In the next section, an overview of how Western schooling was once used as a governmental strategy for assimilation of Native peoples is presented. The legacy of such policies may contribute to an ongoing disconnect with Western schooling for many Alaska Native families and is a history of which many non-Native educators teaching in the ASD may be unaware.

2.4 History of Western Schooling for Alaska Natives

Non-Native administrators and teachers, with little or no knowledge of the devastating history of Western schooling for Native peoples, or who do not understand

the resulting negative associations schooling has for many Native families, may not have the skills to create safe and trusting partnerships with them. Worse, outreach strategies ignorant of past asymmetrical power relations between Western educators and Native peoples may unwittingly contribute to disengagement with schooling for many families.

Colonizing schooling practices for Alaska Natives began with Russian contact in the 1700s and later by U.S. missionaries and schoolteachers in the mid-1800s. These were often governmental policies that used schooling to *civilize* Alaska's Indigenous peoples (Williams, 2009). Native Americans across the U.S. experienced these educational initiatives soon after the American Indian Wars ended. After expansion of the American West by settlers, the government initiated an effort to assimilate all Native peoples into the mainstream society through schooling. This was part of a larger effort to remove Native sovereignty and to eradicate their Indigenous languages, cultures, and systems of governance and education.

In his book *Education for Extinction* Adams (1995) described how Merrill Gates, a U.S. government official declared that “the time for fighting the Indian tribes is passed” and what was needed was an “army of Christian school teachers” (p. 27). In 1891, Gates wrote,

That is the army that is going to win the victory. We are going to conquer barbarism, but we are going to do it by getting at the barbarism one by one. We are going to do it by the conquest of the individual man, woman, and child which leads to the truest civilization. We are going to conquer the Indians by a standing army of school-teachers, armed with ideas,

winning victories by industrial training, and by the gospel of love and the gospel of work. (Adams, 1995, p. 27)

These efforts resulted in the creation of reservation and residential schools for American Indian children across the U.S. and many Native schoolchildren were sent to boarding schools far from their home communities. The fate of Alaska Native schoolchildren would follow a similar course after the purchase of the Alaska Territory from Russia in 1867.

Until the Alaska Purchase, Alaska Native communities were somewhat protected from the schooling initiatives visited upon other Native Americans, although Russian Orthodox missionaries set up schools for Native schoolchildren in Southeast Alaska in the 1700s soon after contact; however, when Alaska became a U.S. territory, the federal government enacted a plan to assimilate its Indigenous peoples through schooling. In the early 1880s, Rev. Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian minister and agent for education in Alaska, was granted permission under the Comity Agreement, to divide major geographical regions in the state to establish mission schools by religious denomination.

The Agreement was seen as an efficient way to assimilate Native peoples by requiring they learn English and replace their Indigenous worldviews and practices with Western ones (Williams, 2009). Missionary schools were established across Alaska and in remote areas without schools, Native schoolchildren were sent to boarding schools which were often located thousands of miles from home. Youth were no longer educated in the traditional manner by their families and community members. Children as young as five were sent to schools where English-only requirements in church-sponsored and public schools did immense damage to Indigenous languages and cultures (Adams, 1995;

Barnhardt, 2001; Williams, 2009). With children being schooled and raised in institutions away from their families, they did not experience traditional ways of childrearing or connections to their Indigenous languages and cultures. Native peoples continue to be impacted by the depth and scope of these profound changes to their lifeways.

Although there are stories of positive boarding school experiences, for many Native children who attended, whether within Alaska or outside the state, the narrative is mostly tragic. Most children suffered extended bouts of homesickness. Many children were required to serve as unpaid servants, and all were chastised for speaking their Native languages. Others were subjected to ongoing corporal punishment or emotional and sexual abuse. Forced to live in the close quarters of residential school dormitories, some children contracted chronic eye infections leading to blindness. Many others developed tuberculosis. Hundreds of children died while attending the distant schools and their bodies were never returned to their families. Cemeteries of unmarked graves of Native children exist near former residential schools (Adams, 1995), and other burial sites have been lost to urban sprawl. This is a mostly forgotten chapter in American history and the grief and loss experienced by families that were left behind often goes unacknowledged.

In *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (Jaine, 1993), Pearl Achneepineskum, a First Nations survivor of Canadian boarding schools, recalled her experiences in Ontario from 1956 to 1978. She recounts how her brother froze to death after running away from school, no longer willing to tolerate beatings by school staff. Equally heart-breaking stories are shared by Natives who attended boarding schools in Alaska or such locations as Pennsylvania, Oregon, Oklahoma, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Minnesota,

Wisconsin, California, and other places far from home (Child, 2000). These experiences have had a lasting and profound effect on the schooling and personal histories of many of Alaska's Indigenous peoples and touched every aspect of their lives. This history is often unknown or misunderstood by non-Native educators making it challenging for Indigenous families to form trusting relationships with their children's schools (Klug, 2011). The next section will discuss the lingering effects of the negative experiences many Native peoples in Alaska have had with Western schooling historically, and today.

2.5 Intergenerational Trauma around Western Schooling for Alaska Natives

The history of schooling for Alaska's Indigenous peoples may seem to have little relevance for today's Native students. However painful memories remain for many Native families and are passed from one generation to another, creating a collective consciousness of distrust around Western schooling. And not all these instances occurred in the distant past. Other traumatic experiences happened more recently as a result of racist policies and practices against Indigenous schoolchildren.

In the summer of 2018, the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy on undocumented immigrants to the United States and resulting separation of children from their families created a backlash of protest around the world. Scenes of children being taken from parents and placed in detention facilities prompted some Alaska Native leaders to implore their elected officials to support reversal of the policy. These leaders warned of the long-term emotional and psychological damage the children and families were likely to experience as a result of the trauma from the separations and detentions. In a letter to the Anchorage Daily News, Rosita Kaahani Worl (2018), President of the Sealaska Heritage Institute cautioned,

For me and for many, many other Alaska Natives, this issue is personal and resurrects old wounds. As Alaska Natives, we suffered the kidnapping of our children who were interned in boarding schools under the assimilationist policy of the United States. We as individuals and societies continue to suffer the intergenerational trauma from being separated from our families and raised in boarding schools. When I was six, a missionary kidnapped me in Petersburg and took me to an orphanage in Haines, where I was kept for three years apart from my family. I know firsthand the despair felt by children longing for their loved ones and the terror of being a child alone. I feel my heart breaking all over again.

Other Alaska Native community members wrote to express similar experiences. They described trauma from their early schooling that affected every aspect of their lives and those of their families. Similar stories are abundant, but many survivors of the boarding school experience choose not to speak about it; reluctant to surface painful memories.

Native American author Alexie attended a reservation school in Washington State in the late 1970s and shared an example of lingering school trauma in his autobiography, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* (2017). He recalled an incident he experienced as an adult watching the evening news with his family. A scene appeared on the screen of U.S. prisoners being held and psychologically tortured at the detention facility, Abu Ghraib. As Alexie watched he suddenly became physically ill. He described his unexpected response,

When I first saw those photographs on television, I vomited on our living room carpet. At first, I was confused by my extreme reaction. Any

compassionate person would be distressed by such terrible images. But my reaction felt more personal. (p. 128)

After the incident, Alexie remembered how a second-grade teacher at his school on the Spokane Indian Reservation disciplined students by pushing, pinching and yelling at them. Alexie (2017) recalled that she would make children stand “eagle-armed in front of the classroom with a book in each hand Even now, over four decades later, I can feel the pain in my arms—the memory of pain—and the terror” (p. 128).

Alexie gathered the courage to tell his parents of the abuse and they arranged a conference with the teacher. After the meeting, his mother assured him everything was going to be fine. In fact, his teacher retaliated by increasing the abuse, making his school life one of ongoing dread and anxiety. The experience taught Alexie (2017) that his Native mother and father “were powerless against white schools” (p. 130) and he developed little hope of change. And although this may be an instance of a teacher unfit to work with young children, too many Alaska Natives have memories of ill-treatment, whether intentional or not, by teachers and classmates who did not understand their Indigenous lifeways or values or respect their family cultures. This story confirms what researchers Lewis and Forman (2002) found how school personnel may relate to families of color in their outreach in ways that leave the parents of students feeling silenced and marginalized.

Research done on childhood trauma has exploded in the past 20 years after the findings of the famous Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study. The original ACEs Study was sponsored by Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with 17,000 individuals completing confidential surveys during routine physical exams regarding their childhood

experiences and current health (Felitti et al., 1998). This groundbreaking work found that individuals who had experienced traumatic events in their childhood, whether the loss of a family member, poverty or serious illness, were more prone to physical and emotional health issues throughout their lives, shorter life expectancy and other problems such as learning difficulties and relationship problems. The findings from the ACES study have provided much needed research to validate the experiences many Alaska Natives have around Western schooling—from boarding schools, to English-only practices and racist assimilation efforts, whether intentional or not.

Those who experienced these practices first-hand are now elderly or middle-aged, but their traumatic memories have been passed on to their children and grandchildren. Emotional and spiritual wounding is often passed on unconsciously. The unspoken anxiety can be taken up by offspring through stories told by parents and grandparents. One result of this is often manifested in negative attitudes toward schooling. The toll painful schooling experiences have had on the quality of life for many Native community members and ongoing issues of lower academic achievement by Native schoolchildren are beginning to be tied to intergenerational trauma.

Lakota scholar Brave Heart researches the intergenerational grief and historical trauma of Indigenous peoples in the United States and explains that this trauma can be understood as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma” (Presentation to conference of Native American and Disparities Research Center for Rural & Community Behavioral Health Studies, 2016). Studies have been conducted on the descendants of World War II Holocaust survivors and results found that collective trauma was passed

from generation to generation. Brave Heart compares Indigenous trauma around Western schooling to those experiences. She asserts that acknowledgement of unresolved feelings many Native peoples have around past mistreatment around efforts to assimilate them are critical to revitalization efforts, including schooling. She emphasizes that the goal of such work is to recognize the impact of collective grief while moving toward healing; in other words, to look back without becoming fixated to the point of immobilization.

Some Western educators and policymakers may be reluctant to see intergenerational trauma as an element in Native families' lack of connection with school. They may feel unprepared or uncomfortable confronting this topic or not want to examine the role of Western education when their own associations with schooling have been positive. The fact remains that education is one of the most influential of public institutions. School leaders, as advocates for all children and their families, must confront the need to *suspend the damage* (Tuck, 2009) Western schooling has done to Native communities historically and how its legacy impacts school success today. Efforts to acknowledge intergenerational trauma as a factor in how Native peoples feel distanced from schooling would do much toward creating stronger partnerships between home and school.

Overt assimilative schooling practices no longer exist, but the underrepresentation of Indigenous perspectives in school curriculum, pedagogy and policies continues to marginalize Native students and families. As Indigenous educator and scholar Smith (2012) asserts, "We have often allowed our 'histories' to be told and have then become outsiders Schooling is directly implicated in this process" (p. 34). It is no wonder that many Native families may be reluctant to participate in schooling that has traditionally

been a tool for assimilation into the dominant Western culture and ignorant of and disrespectful to their lifeways and values as peoples.

Too often, a lack of direct engagement in local schools is explained by unsubstantiated assumptions that Alaska Native families don't care about education. Contrary to this explanation, research has found that Native families highly value education but lack of understanding by non-Native educators and negative stereotypes are one of the most difficult challenges they must overcome (Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). Barnhardt (2013) recognized this factor in the challenge so many Native peoples face as they strive to move past historical mistreatment: "One of the most pervasive constraints in fulfilling aspirations is for Indigenous peoples to be recognized as having the qualifications and expertise to be valued partners" (p. 22). This is the work non-Native educators must initiate if the desire to collaborate with Native families is authentic.

The next section will explore how relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), as a deeply held value of most Indigenous peoples, is a concept that is integral to their worldviews. Non-Native educators who are committed to meaningful and productive partnerships with the families of Native students would gain much insight into Indigenous values by understanding the concepts and principles of this way of looking at the world and its relevance to family engagement.

2.6 Relational Accountability: A Key Factor for Indigenous Family Engagement

Traditional education for Indigenous peoples was based on relational connections and a holistic approach to learning. In traditional Indigenous education systems young

people were “supported and allowed ... to be who they were, culturally, educationally, and spiritually” (Carroll & Aruskevich, 2011, p. 13).

Too often, non-Native researchers and educators have separated the cognitive from the social-emotional aspects of learning or have disregarded the critical importance of cultural values in the educational process. When Western schooling approaches fail to meet the learning needs of Indigenous students, default explanations too often point to a lack of interest in education by Native students or their families. This deficit perspective or an unwillingness by educators to examine the complex reasons Native families may have for being less engaged in their children’s schooling, exacerbates situations where a home-school disconnect exists.

In *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* Wilson’s (2008) groundbreaking book on Indigenous research methodologies, he discussed the critical need for researchers to practice relational accountability as they work with Indigenous communities. The concept of relational accountability is paramount to understanding Indigenous ways of relating to others and is based on the “3 Rs of respect, reciprocity and responsibility” (p. 99).

Relational accountability as a deeply held epistemology of Indigenous peoples has generally not been considered by non-Native administrators and teachers as a critical factor in building authentic and reciprocal relationships between schools and Native families. It is imperative to understand how foundational this value is for Native peoples and the relevance to creating meaningful home-school partnerships.

A key distinction between Indigenous and Western perspectives is an orientation toward valuing the whole over segmentation into categories. Indigenous epistemologies

also value the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural as much as what can be quantified. As Wilson (2008) explained, “The notion that empirical evidence is sounder than cultural knowledge permeates western thought Empirical knowledge is still crucial, yet it is not the only way of knowing the world” (p. 58). For non-Native educators whose communications to families are primarily comprised of impersonal reports on academic progress or do not take the time to get to know individual families, the likelihood of building strong collaborations is lessened. As Wilson put it, “If Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens . . . then surely that lens would be relationality” (p. 58).

In his book, Wilson related an exchange he had with an Indigenous colleague who sought to explain the importance of relationality to Native worldviews. Wilson (2008) stated that respect is a “basic law of life” and indicators of living respectfully include “listening intently to others’ ideas” and “not insist(ing) that your idea prevails” (p. 58). This description is a reminder to non-Native educators that a business-like approach to interacting with Indigenous families focused on efficiency and notions of expertise that are one-way, do not align with families’ needs for respect and reciprocity.

Yup’ik scholar and educator John-Shields (2018) discussed the benefits of relating in this way, not only to Indigenous students, but to every student. This could be applied to the families of one’s students as well. She said,

In sharing [Native] values, it connects you with your students as Native and non-Native. Using Native values, then, is helpful in connecting with all students: Because our society is changing so much, and for us to find a common ground with diverse populations, I really believe values are the

way for us to connect with one another and motivate myself to connect with you. (p. 198)

The Native values John-Shields refers to, compassion, generosity, cooperation, awareness of others and adaptability, can easily be seen in the 3 *Rs* Wilson promoted in the principles of relational accountability.

With these values in mind, Wilson formulated six questions for non-Indigenous researchers to ask themselves as they are partnering with Indigenous communities:

- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic I am studying and myself as a researcher?
- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?
- How can I relate respectfully to the other participants in this research so that together we can form stronger relationships with the idea we will share?
- What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?
- Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to other participants?
- What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal? (p. 77)

Although Wilson's focus is on how all researchers conduct investigations within Indigenous communities, these questions could be adapted to school contexts and serve

to guide non-Native educators as they develop culturally sustaining outreach and authentic partnerships with Native families.

The importance of approaching Native families with an understanding of relational accountability is critical for ASD policymakers and personnel who may currently see their roles primarily as delivering curriculum and serving as conduits for school information to families. A disregard for the ways in which Alaska Natives relate to one another and the holistic orientation with which they view education may not be understood by many non-Native educators. Because of this, Native families may feel disenfranchised from decision-making in the schooling of their children when they are not seen as equal partners with educators, or their contributions valued.

In the ASD, where most teachers are White, Euro-American, and middle-class they may not “share the view that schools must be able to accommodate, respect and value ... a high level of community-based education” (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 110). For this reason, a need exists for the ASD to examine its family-engagement practices with a *critical decolonizing stance* (McCarty & Lee, 2014) to determine how they can meet the holistic learning needs of Native students and their families. The next section considers global approaches to meeting the needs of families of Indigenous students.

Studies which centered on Māori families in New Zealand, First Nations families in Canada, and school engagement by Native Hawaiian families provided a grounded understanding of what works for other Indigenous populations (Kanu, 2007; Mutch, & Collins, 2012; Yamauchi, Lau-Smith & Luning, 2008) and could be adapted to create more effective outreach to Alaska Native families in the ASD.

A 2008 study (Yamauchi et al., 2008) of reasons Native Hawaiian families chose language immersion (*Kaiapuni*) schools for their children found families believed two of the most important benefits of being involved in their children's schools were "(a) the development of their children's Indigenous values and (b) family and community bonding" (p. 39). That study found that Native Hawaiian families were "involved in ways that were different than other groups described in the literature" (p. 42) and appreciated teachers and school administrators who were available to them. One Native Hawaiian mother asserted that she did not want her children's schools to feel "like public schools" where the focus was on one-way communication and an overall environment that was impersonal, competitive, and institutional.

Like what motivated Native Hawaiian families, Mutch and Collins (2012) discovered that for Māori families in New Zealand schools, "it was not just what the school *did* but the spirit in which it was done that led to successful engagement (p. 177). These scholars determined there were six factors that were crucial to establishing quality engagement with Māori families: (a) knowledgeable school leadership; (b) relational approaches with families; (c) an inclusive school culture; (d) equitable partnerships with families; (e) ample opportunities for community networking; and (f) open, two-way communication between families and educators. Mutch and Collins (2012) concluded that partnering with Māori families required a comprehensive enactment of the six principles which included, "the valuing of respectful communication and engagement, prioritizing engagement as part of the schools' strategic vision and goals, promoting collaborative and consultative approach to leadership, and providing opportunities for others to take on leadership roles" (p. 178).

In an earlier study, Mutch and Collins (2008) found that families of Māori public-school students also valued educators who were present for them and willing to walk alongside as allies. The families especially appreciated school personnel who promoted and practiced shared leadership with them. They discovered the Māori family members were

strongly influenced by the extent to which school personnel ... believe in and value partnerships that share responsibility for children's learning and well-being. Developing common understanding and expectations of the benefits of engagement and the challenge involved is integral to successful partnerships. (p. 14)

In another study of public schools serving Māori communities, Kanu (2007) found that students and families were less concerned about the cultures or ethnicities of their teachers as they were about their teachers having an informed understanding of who they were and what they cared about. The research discovered that much of the success of Aboriginal students rested on having educators who advocated for them and their families. Both students and families responded to educators and school leaders who, “were sensitive and caring, who were knowledgeable about Aboriginal issues ... and pedagogical strategies (or willing to acquire such knowledge) and valued them sufficiently to integrate them into their curricula on a consistent basis” (p. 37). The study found that as important as culturally appropriate and relevant instruction is, it is not enough to meet the overall needs of students and their family members. Kanu discovered, microlevel classroom variables such as a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy alone cannot provide a functional and effective agenda in

reversing achievement trends in Aboriginal students Implications for policy and practice, therefore, include the need to explore the relationship between micro- and macrolevel variables affecting schooling and the realization that meaningful and lasting intervention requires a systematic, holistic, and comprehensive approach. (p. 38)

Global examples of what Indigenous families want in partnerships with their children's teachers reveal a common thread and could serve as guides for how the ASD implements outreach to Native families.

The next section presents background information on how theories evolved around the importance of developing and delivering education to diverse student populations that meet their needs for relevant schooling that integrate their cultures, values and ways of knowing. These theories hold much potential for more effectively creating home-school partnerships with Alaska Native families in ways that meet their needs and those of their children.

2.7 Culturally Sustaining and Revitalizing Family-School Engagement

In 1995, educational researcher Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy as an answer to the disconnect with schooling many African-American students experienced, describing "how teachers might systematically include student culture in the classroom as authorized or official knowledge" (p. 483). Since Ladson-Billings work, research around how to best respond to the cultural needs of an increasingly diverse student population in the United States has increased substantially and new theories are continually evolving.

The theory of Culturally Sustaining and Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSRP; Paris & Alim, 2014) is the most recent theory for providing students from Indigenous backgrounds educational experiences that integrate their cultures, languages, and values into the daily life of the classroom. This work extended research originally conducted by Paris (2012) around culturally sustaining pedagogy but was specifically developed to address the language and cultural revitalization efforts of Indigenous communities. Although it appears that a missing element of CSRP may be a focus on increasing school engagement by Indigenous families as a means of self-determination in the education of their children, it does offer promise and potential for challenging inequitable power relations between schools and local communities.

The three main principles of CSRP are (a) confronting power relations of Western schooling that are unbalanced, (b) recognizing the need to *reclaim and revitalize* Indigenous language and cultures that Western imperialism disrupted, and (c) focusing school accountability in ways that are community-based (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 2). The theoretical approach and underlying principles of CSRP are very much aligned with Wilson's (2008) relational accountability. Similar themes of respect, reciprocity and responsibility are found in CSRP that are contained within the conceptual framework of relational accountability. The expectation that relationships between stakeholders in the educational setting is examined for equity is foundational as is the idea that all parties involved feel accountable and responsible for maintaining a partnership that is mutually beneficial and sustains the value systems of the other. Finally, CSRP and relational accountability both address the need for all parties involved to recognize the importance of the local community and to hold firm to the ethics of *do no harm* wherever possible.

There are examples of schools where Native families are feeling empowered to be more directly involved in their children's schooling (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Generally, those schools are comprised of predominantly Indigenous students and are staffed by Indigenous educators who hold the same value systems and cultural identities as their students and the students' families. In their 2014 case study of two schools that primarily served Indigenous students, McCarty and Lee found that families were quick to place their trust in Native educators at those schools.

The Native teachers practiced relational accountability toward members of the community, including their students' families. When families feel understood, home-school partnerships are formed in ways that are more likely to be productive and benefit students. And although the McCarty and Lee (2014) study was conducted in schools that served Native students exclusively, there are multiple examples of culturally sustaining family engagement approaches the ASD could adapt.

The Alaska Cultural Standards for Culturally Responsive Education (1998) were a ground-breaking turn in describing indicators of culturally responsive educators, schools and communities. The Standards were the first in the nation to articulate what it means to integrate the ways of knowing into the curricula and teaching pedagogies of educators, and their significance and contributions to the field are discussed in the next section.

Over 20 years ago, Alaskan educational researchers Barnhardt and Kawagley worked with Indigenous educators and community members to find ways educators and communities might meet the needs of Indigenous students in public schools. Their work resulted in the creation of the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN) and the Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators.

In 1998 when the Standards were developed, Alaska Native educators and other stakeholders sought to communicate their values for connection to the land, sea, animals and each other to educators serving their communities. The Standards expressed the values and hopes Alaska Natives had for their children's schooling experiences and provided clear guidelines for how schools could develop culturally relevant learning based on local knowledge. The Standards are recognized nationally as the first educational standards to address culture and language as a critical area of school achievement efforts and ways in which educators and policy-makers can guide schools in implementing culturally sustaining and revitalizing practices (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

The Standards also provide criteria on how educators and schools can develop collaborative partnerships with families of Native students to establish mutual expectations. Educators are encouraged to partner in respectful and meaningful ways with the families of their students. Here are the five main Standards for Educators around culturally responsive education developed in 1998:

1. Culturally responsive educators incorporate local ways of knowing and teaching in their work.
2. Culturally responsive educators use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of their students.
3. Culturally responsive educators participate in community events and activities in appropriate and supportive ways.
4. Culturally responsive educators work closely with families to achieve a high level of complimentary expectations between home and school.

5. Culturally responsive educators realize the full educational potential of each student and provide challenges necessary to achieve that potential. (Alaska Cultural Standards for Educators, 1998, pp. 9-12)

Although the creators of the Standards did not specifically have relational accountability in mind when they developed them, an examination of the Standards reveals the 3 *Rs* of respect, responsibility and reciprocity are the underlying principles. Throughout the standards the elements of relational accountability are evident. Although the Standards are recognized throughout the nation as exemplars for ways in which educators can more effectively and meaningfully provide culturally sustaining learning experiences for students and their families, in Alaska they are mostly seen as irrelevant to the work done in urban school districts.

This perspective is a missed opportunity for urban educators, especially in the ASD where a significant percentage of its student population is Alaska Native. Although a rural-urban divide exists throughout the U.S., in Alaska, a state that is geographically immense, but closely interrelated in its human networks, the connections Native peoples have to their traditional subsistence values and lifeways are held deeply. The fluidity in which many Alaska Natives move between the city and distant villages is common where an extended family structure often crosses boundaries between rural and urban. Families depend heavily upon one another where a subsistence lifestyle is a value that goes beyond simply feeding one's family and community. It is a profound way of connecting to place and of supporting family members physically, emotionally and culturally.

As Barnhardt (2011) described, the goal of the Standards was to ensure that “educators and community members are directed toward preparing culturally

knowledgeable students who are well grounded in the cultural heritage and traditions of their community” (p. xvi). These standards are seen nation-wide as culturally responsive and respectful ways for educators, schools and communities to build strong partnerships that nurture P-12 student success.

The introduction to the Standards state, “Though the emphasis is on rural schools serving Native communities, many of the standards are applicable to all students and communities” (Barnhardt, 2011, p. 2). The Standards provide indicators to guide schools in “fostering strong connection between what students experience in school and their lives outside of school” (p. 3). Suggestions such as on-going participation of Elders, school facilities that are family and community friendly, schools that host community events that bring families together, opportunities for students to be who they are as members of a cultural group, and schools that provide ample training for educators so they can support Native students and families.

All of these suggest sound principles for ways in which schools and educators can become culturally respectful and responsive to the needs of Native students and their families. They are a proven educational reform strategy that has been implemented in schools in rural Alaska that serve Native students and communities. In fact, the Standards provided a framework for several rural schools that as Barnhardt (2011) explained,

produced an increase in student achievement scores, a decrease in dropout rate ... over a period of 10 years The cumulative effect of utilizing the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools to promote increased connections between what student experience in school and what they

experience outside school appears to have a significant impact on their academic performance. (p. xvii)

The Standards offer a look through the lens of what is important to Native communities across Alaska and are an invaluable resource for non-Native, urban educators as they seek to meet the needs of their Alaska Native students and families.

The next section will present family engagement frameworks and specific examples of effective school outreach with elements that hold the potential for increasing involvement of Native families.

2.8 Examining Existing Family Engagement Frameworks for Culturally Sustaining Components

Two of the most recognized frameworks for family-school partnerships were created by leading researchers in the field of family engagement; Epstein from Johns Hopkins University and Mapp from Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Epstein and colleagues (2009) situated the key factors of successful partnerships between families and educators into spheres of influence which overlap. At Johns Hopkin's Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, Epstein and colleagues developed the Family-School Partnership Framework which identified six types of family engagement required for effective home-school collaborations.

The Framework's key components of effective family-school partnerships are (a) *Parenting*: Where schools assist families in their efforts to parent their children; (b) *Communication*: Where educators communicate in ongoing and effective ways to families about the progress of their children; (c) *Volunteering*: Where schools organize volunteers to support students, providing multiple opportunities for families to be directly

involved; (d) *Learning at Home*: Where educators ensure families are involved in their children's homework as well as decisions related to schoolwork; (e) *Decision-Making*: Where families are included in school decisions; and (f) *Collaborating with the Community*: Where schools coordinate services and resources from the community to support families (Epstein et al., 2009).

Although the Family-School Partnership Framework is helpful in identifying the key elements of effective collaborations between home and school, the overall perspective reflects a traditionally school-centric approach to family outreach. This orientation may be less suitable for families of diverse cultural backgrounds who often have negative associations around schooling, such as Alaska Natives.

Another family engagement model that is receiving much attention nation-wide is Harvard's School of Education Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships which was developed by Mapp and colleagues (2013). This framework offers a less school-centric approach and recognizes the need for both families *and* schools to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for cross-cultural partnerships.

The Dual-Capacity Building Framework was developed in 2013 based on a national survey of families' satisfaction with their children's schools. The research looked at family attendance sheets from school events, family feedback forms, and district school climate surveys. The resulting framework reflected the need to develop capacity in knowledge and skills for both families and educators. This approach recognized the responsibility administrators have to intentionally create infrastructures that build family-educators partnerships embedded in all school programs.

The Dual-Capacity Framework recognized that “without attention to training and capacity-building, well-intentioned partnership efforts fall flat. Rather than promoting equal partnerships between parents and schools at a systemic level, these initiatives default to one-way communication and random acts of engagement” (Mapp, 2014, p. 6). The Framework’s approach focused on developing a “collective capacity” (p. 11) of families and school staff to engage in partnerships that directly benefit students. It also extended the concept of parent involvement for educators past viewing school outreach as “specific scripted school activities” that are generic and one-size-fits-all and encourages educators to challenge “discursive/hegemonic understandings of parent involvement” (Lopez, 2001, p. 416).

The framework moved beyond the goal of motivating families to attend school events, volunteer in classrooms or simply improve families’ satisfaction with their children’s schooling experiences. Although these are each worthy in themselves, researchers and educators are increasingly focused on implementing interventions that *directly* affect the school performance of students in positive ways.

Areas of focus in the Framework have been labeled as the 4 Cs of effective family-school partnerships: (a) *Capabilities*: The skills and knowledge each partner possesses to create a successful working relationship; (b) *Connections*: The ways in which families and educators support one another, as well as how families create networks of support with other families; (c) *Cognition*: The values and beliefs families have around the importance of school involvement in addition to those educators have around the need to form meaningful partnerships with families; (d) *Confidence*: The self-

efficacy families and educators bring to the home-school partnership where each believes their input is valued and implemented (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014).

In their work, Harvard researchers developed the concept of Family-School Compacts (2018). These are agreements that families and educators create jointly with goal setting for student achievement as the centerpiece of the work done collaboratively. The plans are intentionally created, school-wide and aligned with the school calendar. Educators are trained in ways to be more culturally competent in their communication to students' homes. Regular, personalized communication to families is encouraged by school leaders as well as interactive homework. Materials sent home by school staff are crafted to be more culturally sensitive and home visits are an integral element of creating more connected relationships between families and educators.

Although the family engagement frameworks developed by Epstein at Johns Hopkins and Mapp and colleagues at Harvard have contributed significantly to how schools can more effectively partner with families to increase student success, it is important to note the perspectives of Alaska Native families were not included in the research that guided development of those models. It is critical not to generalize the findings of these studies regarding Native families as it further marginalizes and ignores the unique historical and present experiences they have regarding Western schooling as well as their cultural values and lifeways.

The ASD is currently considering the Harvard model in new initiatives to improve their family outreach policies and practices. A closer examination of how the model aligns with Alaska Native values for relational accountability is needed if the district

hopes to bridge the gap that exists in a home-school connection for too many Native families.

One notable exception to outreach models that have not included the perspectives of Native families is the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (PFCEF). The framework was developed in 2011 under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services by the Office of Head Start. Since 1965, when Head Start was created to advocate for underserved preschool children and their families, it has led the way in developing developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula and pedagogies. The PFCEF is the first of its kind for Head Start families, was research-based, and developed in partnership with Head Start programs, families, researchers and the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. The focus of the framework is on partnerships between preschool families and educators that bolster the school readiness of young children and provides an organizational guide for implementing the Head Start Performance Standards.

The overall mission of the PFCEF (2011) is to provide “Parent and family engagement activities grounded in positive, ongoing, and goal-oriented relationships with families” (p. 1). Outcomes of the PFCEF are listed below:

1. *Family Well-Being*: Parents and families are safe, healthy, and have increased financial security.
2. *Positive Parent-Child Relationships*: Beginning with transitions to parenthood, parents, and families develop warm relationships that nurture their child’s learning and development.

4. *Families as Lifelong Educators*: Parents and families observe, guide, promote, and participate in the everyday learning of their children at home, school, and in their communities.
5. *Families as Learners*: Parents and families advance their own learning interests through education, training and other experiences that support their parenting, careers, and life goals.
6. *Family Engagement in Transitions*: Parents and families support and advocate for their child's learning and development as they transition to new learning environments, including Early Head Start (EHS) to HS, EHS/HS to other early learning environments, and HS to kindergarten through elementary school.
7. *Family Connections to Peers and Community*: Parents and families form connections with peers and mentors in formal or informal social networks that are supportive and/or educational and that enhance social well-being and community life.
8. *Families as Advocates and Leaders*: Parents and families participate in leadership development, decision making, program policy development, or in community and state organizing activities to improve children's development and learning. (p. 5)

Table 1 below illustrates the elements, stakeholders and goals of the framework.

Table 1

Head Start’s Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework: Positive and Goal-Oriented Relationships

Programs	Program Impact Areas	Family Engagement Outcomes	Child Outcomes
Program Leadership	Environment	Family Well-Being	Children Ready for School
Continuous Program Improvement	Family Partnerships	Positive Parent-Child Relationships	Children sustaining growth and development through 3 rd grade
Professional Development	Teaching/Learning	Community Partnerships	
		Families as Lifelong Educators	
		Family Engagement during Transitions	
		Family Connections to Peers and Community	
		Families as Advocates and Leaders	

Note. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community, 2011, p. 6.

One component of family engagement that Head Start has implemented consistently since its inception is home visits by educators. Research on the effectiveness of this family-centered approach clearly indicates its power for meaningful home-school partnerships. When educators literally meet families where they are, the potential for them to access families’ funds of knowledge and build trust are high. Head Start’s PFCEF holds the potential to serve as a model not only for preschool teachers in the ASD, but for educators of older students and their families as well.

2.8.1 The Power of Home Visits to Connect with Families

One particularly effective strategy that was consistently mentioned in the literature was visitations by educators to students’ homes. Home visits are currently being

implemented by preschool teachers in ASD's Title 1 schools and a survey of ASD preschool teachers conducted for this study confirmed how meaningful partnerships were created with Native families through this outreach practice. The results of the ASD survey are discussed in Chapter 3, but much research exists on the effectiveness of home visits in creating closer connections between home and school.

Family engagement scholars Grant and Ray (2016), pointed out that even though research has determined that families and schools working together to set learning goals for students is a high impact practice, achieving that level of collaboration is not realistic if trusting and reciprocal relationships have not been formed. For teachers hoping to create more meaningful partnerships with Native families, few strategies are more effective than home visits to students' homes. Henke (2011) discovered that most teachers found the trust they built with families through home visits made it easier for them to have challenging conversations about negative student behaviors with their family members.

The Family Engagement Partnership Student Outcome Evaluation, a study conducted by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, linked improvements in the performance of Washington D.C. public elementary school students with Flamboyant Foundation's Family Engagement Partnership (FEP). The study covered 12 D.C. public elementary schools and more than 4,000 students in the 2013-2014 school year. The study found that home visits resulted in 24% fewer absences than similar students whose families did not receive a visit (Flamboyant Foundation, 2018). The value of creating genuine partnerships between students' families and educators through home visits cannot be underestimated.

Homeworks, a program in St. Louis, Missouri is dedicated to more effective family-school partnerships through the power of home visitations by educators. The program surveyed families and teachers and found that 95% of educators felt that home visits improved the motivation and attitudes of their students. The majority (91%) of teachers felt that home visits strengthened their compassion for and understanding of the families, and 65% of those teachers believed that home visits were responsible for students' improved academic performance. In addition to home visits, regular potluck family dinners are a component of the program. By an overwhelming majority of 97%, families who attended those events reported feeling more welcome and connected by their children's schools and teachers. This data is in contrast to the findings of Harvard's research which found that family potlucks and other informal events had less impact on the school engagement of families and student success.

These findings have relevance for Alaska Native families who place much value on relational ways in which to connect with others, including their children's teachers and other school staff. Home visits reflected the 3 Rs of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). They were respectful, reciprocal and responsible, all highly esteemed principles of building meaningful relationships for Indigenous peoples. Home visits that are well conducted by sensitive, caring and culturally competent educators benefit schools as much as families of students. Two-way communication and understanding are increased, often leading to better school outcomes for students; however, well-planned protocols and training are critical to ensure schools implement home visits that are culturally respectful and empower families as they facilitate their children's school success.

Criteria for school leaders to consider if they plan on using home visits as an element of their family outreach are

- Make sure that at least half of faculty are interested
- Participation in the home visitation program should remain voluntary
- Educators and other school staff should be compensated for the additional work and time involved
- All school staff who participate should complete appropriate training
- The tone of the visits must be informal and relationship-focused
- Home visitors should have *hopes and dreams* conversations with families to share goals, values and visions for their child's success in school and beyond
- Home visitors should establish clear expectations to create trust with families. (Homeworks.org, 2018)

Klass (2003) wrote a guidebook for educators and other professionals on how to implement culturally respectful and effective home visits. Key themes that emerged on the impact of home visitations programs were (a) Families felt the home visitor genuinely respected and cared about their child and family, (b) Families believed the home visitor listened to their concerns in an active manner, (c) Home visitors did not judge their parenting skills or abilities to support their children's school success and most importantly, and (d) The home visitor was warm and relational; families felt they were relating to a friend and colleague rather than a service professional. These guidelines increase the likelihood that educators create equitable partnerships with families where

they feel respected as the primary and most important decision-makers in their children's lives.

An important principle for educators to remember when conducting home visits is to frame the identity of their student in the holistic way the family sees their child. The title of *student* is only one of the multiple ways in which a family knows the child. This broader view also aligns with Indigenous epistemologies where the whole is prioritized over the components. This is why the *hope and dreams* (Homeworks, 2018) conversations between families and educators are so vital during a home visit. That dialog communicates to families an educator's recognition that their child is much more than just a student and definitions of success go beyond the classroom. Ginsberg (2015) whose recent research focuses on support for immigrant students in urban settings discusses the importance of *shadowing* those students and participating in home visits. She suggests a protocol for having the important *hopes and dreams* conversations with families and embracing the role of "learner rather than giver of information" (Ginsberg, 2015, p. 30). during the home visit. Here are some of the reflective questions she has developed to get family members talking about their values and vision for their children's future:

- What aspects of school has your child enjoyed thus far?
- What do you see as your child's greatest strengths or skills? Can you tell me about a time when you saw your child demonstrating those skills?
- What are some of the skills, talents, and interests that your family has developed over time?

- At the end of the year, what do you hope your child says about his/her experience in school? What's the story you hope he/she will tell?
- How and when would you like me to be in touch this year? What would you like me to communicate about?
- What gives your family strength? (p. 30)

Ginsberg related that educators who used this format gained a significant appreciation for their students' home lives and formed deeper connections with their families. Insights gained from the home visits directly impacted their classroom practices improving their students' motivation and connection to school. As Ginsberg noted, educators gain immeasurably from the home visit experiences as they become, "stewards of deep and respectful learning ... who are hopeful and critically curious learners themselves" (p. 30). The next discussion focuses on how the presence of family members in schools, rather than school staff in homes, has the potential to empower parents and positively affect the school performance of students; especially students of color.

2.8.2 Family Members: Mentors in School Settings

Another family engagement program that has particular significance for adaptation to ASD's context was developed in a small urban school district experiencing an increase in the diversity of its student population (Fillion-Wilson, & Gray-Yull, 2016). Many of the students in the program were enrolled in Title 1 schools and the district developed a Parent Mentor Program in response to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requiring family engagement.

The goal of the Parent Mentor Program was to increase the connection families of middle and high school students of color felt with schools and to enlist family support

within classrooms. In this program, parent mentors worked in classrooms for two hours once a week during the first year of its implementation. Educators were asked to participate in the program and work closely with the parent mentors as well. By the third year of the program, parent mentors increased time spent in classrooms to twice weekly and families of the students of color had become more involved in decision-making at their children's school. An important component of the program were ongoing Community Café sessions with parent mentors and students' family members to nurture trusting relationships and gain feedback on effectiveness of the program.

In initial surveys of the families of students, most parents felt their children were marginalized by school systems, regardless of their socio-economic status. As the project progressed, this perception evolved to a more positive perception. White teachers participating in the program reported feeling "enthusiastic" about the progress at the conclusion of the first year. As time went on, the parent mentors and families were increasingly seen as making positive contributions to student success and the environment in the school.

The formation of the Parent Mentor Program was grounded in the belief that change must come from shared leadership with the families most affected by school policies. A wrap-around approach was enlisted by the parent mentors to create a sense of partnership between the school and families. For example, students were greeted by the parent mentors as they entered classrooms to establish a sense of belonging. Parent mentors also worked closely with teachers to learn which students needed extra support. Family members of students were routinely contacted by the parent mentors to relay positive news and to build trusting, two-way relationships.

A study of the program revealed that “dominant models of parent involvement are based on behavioral norms and values of white, middle-class families, particularly values of individualism” (Fillion-Wilson & Gray-Yull, 2016, p. 172). A determining factor in the effectiveness of the Parent Mentor Program was that family members determined how they engaged with their children’s schools. This empowerment challenged the deficit narrative that White educators too often use to explain an absence of school engagement by families often marginalized by Western education practices.

The study provided evidence that many families of color often feel marginalized by their children’s school systems and their value for equitable partnerships with schools unacknowledged. This may also be an underlying factor in a lower level of engagement by Alaska Native families in the ASD.

In the next section, the benefits of accessing the funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) of Native families are discussed as a strategy to increase trust between home and school and tap into the wealth of experience families bring to the schooling experience. The section will also present why it is important for non-Native educators to recognize the resilience of Native peoples in the face of continual challenges to their lifeways, languages and values. This acknowledgement is a powerful way to *suspend the damage* (Tuck, 2009) done by Western schooling in the past and move toward empowering Native communities in the education of their children.

2.9 Using a Strengths-Based Lens to Create Partnerships with Native Families

A critical aspect of the revitalization efforts and healing of Indigenous cultures from colonization is moving from perceptions by non-Natives of social dysfunction in Native communities. For the past 20 years or so, Indigenous communities have sought to

turn public attention away from social problems and acknowledge recovery efforts. As Smith (2012) pointed out these are not, “about psychological and individualized failure but about colonization or lack of collective self-determination” (p. 154). Unfortunately, too many Western educators continue to focus on high drop-out rates, the lower school achievement of too many Native students and the perceived disconnect of Indigenous families from schooling.

Long before Western contact, Alaska’s Indigenous peoples had sophisticated systems for educating their youth. These systems were developed and honed over thousands of years. They created a resilience that included an intimate awareness of the environment, keen observational skills, innovative problem-solving and a highly developed approach to sharing knowledge that was passed on generationally (Ongtooguk, 2011). Because of colonization, Indigenous knowledge systems and lifeways have mostly been marginalized by the dominant Western culture. Power structures of imperialism ignored Indigenous knowledge in the quest to replace it with their own. As a result, ignorance of the dynamic and complex balance of Indigenous relationships with one another and the environment often go unrecognized by the dominant Western society.

In attempts to *fix* the dysfunction created by Western colonization, the predominant approach by non-Native policy-makers has been to focus on what they believe is lacking in the Native community. This deficit lens can lead Western educators to assumptions about Native families’ lack of involvement in Western schooling. In a 1994 Alaska Natives Commission report on ways in which the Indigenous community might increase self-determination, Alberts (1994) described the paternalistic approach of many non-Natives:

Looking back on the recent history of Alaska, it appears that many of the problems of today are related to the attitude of the non-Native caregivers who came to the state in great numbers to “save” the Native people.

With some exceptions, these outsiders were thoroughly convinced—as is typical of members of most dominant societies—about the superiority and rightness of their own culture. Due in part to ignorance and cultural nearsightedness, they believed that replacing the Native culture with their own was beneficial and, therefore, justified.

Before the newcomers came to Alaska, the Native people were not in need of salvation. For many centuries their cultural traditions and their knowledge had provided them with the skills to survive successfully in their own environment. The disintegration started when the non-Native culture, totally foreign to the natural environment of Alaska, caused great disruption between the land and the Native people.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand the anger and frustration of Alaska Native people. Natives cannot help but observe that with the arrival of every new service and each new non-Native provider comes more damage to the Native way of life and to the pride and independence of the people. (p. 1)

This attitude persists in non-Native educators who resist acknowledging the expertise and competence families of their students bring to their relationships with schools. A 2016 study on activism in schools by typically underrepresented families cited

that, “much of the normative parent involvement literature rests on the assumption that marginalized parents of color must be taught White, middle-class norms of conduct to engage in the school system” (Fillion-Wilson & Gray-Yull, 2016, p. 165). Some research in this area focuses on activism by families of students marginalized by public schools as a potential for restorative justice. Too many White, middle-class educators see the families of students of color from a paternalistic perspective describing them as *at-risk*, *vulnerable*, or lacking in agency and resilience. This approach assumes these families need the “facilitative leadership of helping professionals” (p. 173) to gain the skills to be successful in raising their children. This perspective influences policies and practices around school engagement which can be experienced as disrespectful and dehumanizing by families. When families are seen as equal partners in the education of their children, positive outcomes in school performance may be more likely.

Scholars who are concerned with social justice generally advocate for applying a critical lens to educational reform. Although equity in education is desirable, there are political realities to consider. Most educators in the ASD are White, Euro-American so it is important to approach this multi-layered situation through a strengths-based framework and recognize the positive efforts the ASD is making in supporting Indigenous students and families. Building on what the district already does, authentic relationships with Alaska Native families can be developed that recognize their value systems, esteem for education and assets they bring to the local community.

What follows is a presentation of current family outreach practices by the ASD. Most are traditional Western-based and school-centered strategies that are generally not aligned with Native values around relational accountability, whereas other approaches are

striving to become more intentional in outreach to families. There are examples of ASD schools working hard to create home-school partnerships with Native families that are respectful, reciprocal and responsible with a mutual goal of student success.

2.9.1 Examining Family Outreach and Engagement Practices in the Anchorage

School District

A 2010 study by Faircloth and Tippeconnic found that the highest percentage of Indigenous public education students in the nation are enrolled in Alaska school districts. Anchorage is the largest of these districts and with so many Alaska Natives living there it is often referred to as Alaska's "largest village." As evidence, almost 10% of the student population in the ASD identify as Alaska Native (Anchorage School District, 2018).

Despite initiatives to provide Indigenous students with culturally sustaining and revitalizing (McCarty & Lee, 2014) curricula and teaching pedagogies, the ASD continues to have challenges meeting the educational needs of Alaska Native students and their families. Research conducted in the district found that school engagement of Indigenous families was an area of concern by both non-Native and Native district educators (McDowell Group, 2012).

Non-Native educators in general education classrooms may be unaware of the critical importance of culturally sustaining practices, whether in the curricula, instructional strategies or in forming partnerships with families. Teachers may also be overwhelmed with the requirements of mandated curricula or the need to differentiate instruction for an increasing number of diverse students in their classrooms. What often results is a shifting of the responsibility to meet the educational needs of Native students and their families to supplemental programs such as after-school tutoring or cultural

enrichment programs provided by the district's Indian Education department. When Native students and families experience this kind of segregation, they are less likely to see general education classroom teachers as understanding or responsive to their needs and less motivated to partner with general education schools and teachers.

A 2001 survey of Native families across Alaska by the McDowell group found that even though more Alaska Natives are relocating from rural communities to urban areas such as Anchorage, urban schools are not making accommodations for this reality. The report concluded that compared to urban Native community members, rural Native students and families felt “a greater sense of welcome in their children's schools, of confidence in the education system, of equal treatment with non-Natives, and involvement with their schools” (p. 26).

Survey results also found that 41% of rural Alaska Native respondents believed their children's schools prepared them well for high school compared to only 24% of urban Native respondents. In addition, 50% of Native family members living in urban Alaska reported their children's schools favor non-Native students. This compared to 35% of Native family members reporting from rural areas. Clearly an issue exists in urban schools around creating school environments where Native families feel recognized and welcome; a prerequisite to developing quality partnerships between home and school.

Although a welcoming school environment may seem like a pleasant goal but not critical to student success, a meta-analysis of over 50 studies conducted by Fan & Chen (2001) to determine what factors encouraged students' families to become involved in

their children's schools revealed the most important quality families sought was a welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

In the ASD, there are schools that are focusing more on the important element of a welcoming environment to encourage more home-school connection. Those schools are employing intentional strategies, policies and practices as they move toward more effective partnerships with Alaska Native families. These are outreach approaches that hold the potential of interrupting negative associations around schooling for Indigenous students and families in the ASD. Most of the schools that fit that description are under the ASD's Title 1 program with the family engagement directives from the ESSA.

The preponderance of evidence of the importance of family engagement to student success is motivating Title 1 schools to focus efforts on improving how they communicate with families and create opportunities for collaboration. A missing element of these efforts may be adapting outreach to the specific needs of Alaska Native families in ways that recognize their cultural values and ways of relating to other.

The ASD Title 1 program recently researched a national family-engagement framework developed by the Flamboyant Foundation to address the need for improvement in connecting with Indigenous families. On the home page of the Foundation's website the following explanation is provided of the importance of effective school-family relationships.

Flamboyant (2018) defined *effective family engagement* as the partnership between educators and families that improves student outcomes. Specifically, effective family engagement

- ensures families have the school partner and information they need to bolster student success,
- is founded on a trusting relationship between families and educators,
- Creates a balance of power in the relationship between educators and families,
- requires educators to examine their assumptions about families,
- pays attention to how issues of systemic inequity affect student success, and
- is focused on outcomes and results.

This understanding of family engagement, as well as an assets-based approach that acknowledges families as experts in their child’s learning and development, is essential to engaging all families. Research by the Flamboyan Foundation (2018) examined the most commonly implemented family engagement practices to find which most directly contributed to increased student success. They developed a continuum that articulates which practices are most impactful and which are connected to lower levels of student success. Studies revealed that relational strategies such as potlucks and family night celebrations are less effective than one-on-one family-educator meetings focused on mutual goal setting for student improvement. Table 2 below shows what the Flamboyan researchers believe are low and high impact practices in family-school partnerships:

Table 2

Continuum of Low- to High-Impact Family Engagement Practices

Lower Impact	Medium Impact	Higher Impact
Potlucks	Parent-teacher meetings	Ongoing personalized communication
Celebrations	Interactive homework	Home visits
Performances	Parent training events	Families observing children's classrooms
Resource rooms		Weekly data-sharing
Back-to-school nights		Folders
		Family support on learning

Note. Source: Flamboyant Foundation, 2018.

A significant limitation of the findings of the study were that no Alaska Native families or educators were surveyed. The continuum does not recognize the importance of relationality to Indigenous value systems. In addition, the continuum is arranged and interpreted in a linear manner that does not reflect the holistic nature and emphasis on balance that is central to Native ways of knowing. As Kawagley (2006) stated, “It is apparent that there is a significant contrast between the Western educational system and Native worldviews” (p. 33). If this reality is not acknowledged by the policy-makers in the ASD, the disconnect Native families experience with general education is likely to continue.

In addition to the family engagement models developed by the Flamboyant Foundation, the ASD has also been exploring research and models developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education by Mapp and colleagues (2014). Harvard’s Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships was discussed in an earlier section. Although these are well-researched models by some of the nation’s leading scholars in family engagement, neither included data from Alaska Native families. With

an ongoing concern of how the ASD is meeting the needs of Native students and their families, current initiatives around family engagement need to be closely examined if they are to move the needle on how engaged Native families are in their children's schooling.

2.9.2 Title VI Indian Education Family Outreach: A Model for the Anchorage School District

In Title 1 schools, with a high percentage of Native students, the ASD's Title VI Indian Education program is often tasked with finding ways to meet the needs of Alaska Native families. In efforts to create safe, welcoming and culturally relevant support to Native students and families, Title VI provides a wide variety of academic and other programs to supplement instruction in general education classrooms. For example, one school invited families to listen to an Alaska Native children's book author while enjoying refreshments at an evening family event. Another school hosted a Yup'ik dance group after school once a week and invited families to join their children. These family engagement strategies included the elements of relational accountability; respect, reciprocity and responsibility (Wilson, 2008).

Opportunities like these have the potential of creating partnerships with families that nurture the growth of Native students in ways that are more holistic and build the capacity for healing the disconnect that currently exists. Many of these programs are led by Native educators and paraprofessionals who share similar backgrounds and cultural values to the students who participate.

The ASD Title VI programs follows principles around quality outreach to Indigenous families practiced by similar Indian Education programs across the nation.

One such program is located in the Omaha School District and serves Choctaw students and their families. Coordinators of the program, as well as Native and non-Native school staff have come to understand there are keys to implementing effective family engagement with Native families. They have found that to create high-quality, meaningful family learning experiences they need to not only appeal to families but also “hold their hearts.”

To accomplish this the district sponsors monthly family-child events that include culturally relevant activities such as dancing, craft nights and potlucks. District-wide events are also held that encourage community fellowship as well as opportunities to celebrate Native traditions around seasonal activities (McWilliams, Maldonado-Mancebo, Szczepaniak, & Jones, 2011). All these strategies mirror how the ASD’s Title VI program is implementing family outreach to support the district’s Native students and their families.

Although the ASD’s Title VI programs are consistently rated by Native families as culturally responsive to their children’s needs (McDowell Group, 2012) most challenges Native students and their families experience occur in general education classrooms. Western family engagement models such as those being promoted by the Flamboyant Foundation and Harvard’s Dual-Capacity Framework, whereas well-researched do not seem to have included the perspectives of Alaska Native families and may not be closely aligned with the principles of relational accountability that are so critical to Alaska Native families’ cultural values and lifeways. The ASD must find ways to adapt these models to address the current disconnect from schooling that exists for too many Native students and families. If progress is to be made, culturally sustaining

outreach to Native families cannot be relegated solely to the ASD's Title VI programs. All educators and school leaders in the ASD need training to increase their awareness of the needs of Alaska Native students and their families.

In fact, most of the time, families just need to be recognized and heard. Non-Native educators are often eager to explain their agenda to families and do much of the talking. Listening is a skill that is often undervalued in Western society. As mentioned in the book, *Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education* (2013), by Mercurieff and Roderick. The authors noted that the title was chosen “as a plea to the privileged people of the dominant Western culture to still their own voices for a change, and to listen to the voices they may never have heard before” (p. iv). The simple act of non-Native educators listening to Native families' concerns would do much to create trust and is an act of humility, a deep value of many Native peoples. Dave Isay, one the founder of Storycorps, a project that has interviewed thousands of Americans to learn their stories and celebrate the lives of ordinary people shared the motivation for this endeavor,

if we take the time to listen, we'll find wisdom, wonder, and poetry in the lives and stories of the people all around us ... we all want to know our lives mattered and we won't ever be forgotten Listening is an act of love. (Isay, 2008, p. 1)

2.10 Summary

This literature review provides a brief overview of the complex issues involved in family-school engagement by Alaska Native families. Five topics were explored: (a) family engagement as a needed focus of culturally sustaining and revitalizing practices,

(b) intergenerational trauma as a factor in the reluctance of Native families to engage in schools, (c) relational accountability as a culturally aligned framework for nurturing effective school-engagement with Native families, (d) ways that non-Native educators traditionally develop and implement family engagement programs and those approaches may be alienating to Native families, and (e) the potential of assets-based approaches to increase family-school engagement with Native families in the ASD, leading to more effective partnerships with families and higher student success among Native P-12 students.

In the following chapters, the methodology of the study, research findings and recommendations for further investigation are presented. Chapter 3 contains the researcher's theoretical framework and methods of conducting the study. In Chapters 4 and 5, findings from a content analysis of ASD family outreach materials are discussed, along with information gathered from a survey of ASD preschool teachers, and interviews with Alaska Native families whose children attend schools in the ASD. Chapter 6 contains recommendations for ASD initiatives and suggestions for further study.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The primary goal of this study was to investigate how Alaska Native families experience partnership with the ASD in the schooling of their children. A secondary goal was to determine if preschool teachers in the ASD might serve as role models of effective outreach to Native families for other grade level teachers and if ASD teachers might benefit from additional training in this area. Studies show that many educators have very little professional development regarding effective family outreach practices (Epstein, 2018; Klass, 2003; Mapp, 2014) and this may be a factor in lower school involvement by Native families across the district.

In Chapter 1 the importance of culturally sustaining outreach to Native families by school personnel was discussed and that an apparent gap exists in how the ASD is meeting this need (McDowell, 2012). Chapter 2 presented literature that confirmed the critical role that family engagement plays in student success and reasons Alaska Native families may be less likely than other cultural groups to directly participate in their children's schooling. With these issues in mind, the research questions that guided this study were

1. How do Alaska Native families of preschool children in an urban setting such as Anchorage experience outreach by their children's schools and which practices are perceived as culturally sustaining and/or effective?
2. How do preschool teachers in the ASD currently implement outreach to Alaska Native families?

3. How might current outreach practices by ASD preschool teachers serve as models of culturally sustaining family engagement for other educators and would additional training improve outreach for teachers at every grade level?

These questions were used to determine how Alaska Native families describe indicators of equitable partnerships with their children's teachers and schools. They also guided development of ideas and strategies on how schools might create more culturally sustaining relationships with Native families, leading to increased school success for their children.

3.1 Methodological Theoretical Foundations and Justification

Although this was a mixed-methods study, it was primarily qualitative. A qualitative research tradition best fit this study's goal of discovering and describing how Alaska Native families experience outreach by the ASD. Qualitative researchers seek to understand how individuals engage in an experience, interact with other individuals going through the same experience and make meaning of the experience. As Merriam (2002) wrote, "A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructionism thus underlies ... [any] basic interpretive qualitative study" (p. 37). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) described how qualitative research "crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters" (p. 2) while using multiple means of collecting data. As an interdisciplinary doctoral student studying educational practices and policies, these definitions became the basis for my choice to use the naturalistic and inductive inquiry of qualitative research.

An Indigenous research lens of critical theory also informed the study (Grande, 2004; Tuck, 2009). The field of critical theory examines assumptions held by the dominant culture for hegemony; especially regarding how groups outside of that culture may be marginalized by how those assumptions inform policy and practice. This study examined power structures in Western schooling which may perpetuate negative positioning of Indigenous families and affect the academic success of their children. A focus on social justice sought to reveal if the Indigenous value of relationality is honored and integrated into family engagement policies and practices, specifically in the ASD.

To balance the use of critical theory, an appreciative inquiry stance (Cooperider & Srivastva, 1987; Shuayb et al., 2009) also undergirded the study. The researcher sought to identify positive potential in the ASD's existing outreach practices to Native families, avoiding the stereotypes that often arise with a deficit orientation (Shuayb et al., 2009). The intent was to recognize the contributions the ASD is making toward *suspending the damage* (Tuck, 2009) assimilative schooling practices have done to Indigenous peoples. This approach focused on identifying effective outreach practices the ASD has implemented in its goal to support Alaska Native students and their families.

The specific qualitative research tradition that informed this study was grounded theory. Grounded theory was first developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and expanded in subsequent years (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). As described by Patton (2016), grounded theory's emphasis is "on inductive strategies of theory development in contrast to theory generated by logical deduction" (p. 109). Grounded theory

move[s] from one inductive inference to another by selectively collecting data, comparing and contrasting this material in the quest for patterns or

regularities, seeking out more data to support or qualify these emerging clusters, and then gradually drawing inferences from the links between other new data segments and the cumulative set of conceptualizations.

(Miles et al., 2014, p. 10)

Grounded theory investigates the *processes* that occur in a phenomenon. Creswell (1998) explained that this approach to inquiry seeks to “generate or discover a theory...of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation” (p. 56). The phenomenon studied by this study was evidence that Alaska Native families are less likely than most other cultural groups in the ASD to directly participate in with their children’s schooling (McDowell, 2012).

A significant benefit to using grounded theory is the flexibility of its design; however, it is seen as “sufficiently rigorous to serve as ... a framework for academic dissertations precisely because of the emphasis on data-based theory; and, finally, in part because it unabashedly admonishes the researcher to strive for objectivity” (Patton, 2016, p. 109). As this research methodology originated in social science research, it was a good fit for this study, which involved examining the policies and practices of family outreach in ASD schools.

Grounded theory methodologies provide a research protocol focused on the researcher’s (a) responsibility to set aside initial assumptions for theories to emerge from the data, (b) dedication to a systematic process of data analysis, (c) sensitivity to when categories during data analysis have become saturated and theories are clearly emerging, and (d) awareness that the goal is to generate a theory that addresses an identified

phenomenon. The causes, conditions, and consequences of the phenomenon are components of the theory (Creswell, 1998).

As this study was concerned with exploring the experiences of Alaska Native families as partners with the ASD in their children's schooling, the researcher also sought Indigenous approaches to data collection. Indigenous research methodologies (Grande, 2004; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) are more recent qualitative paradigms which propose that researchers have an ethical responsibility to create equitable relationships with the Indigenous communities with whom they partner. Heron (1996) stated that this kind of research is a cooperative inquiry process and is, "person-centered . . . , which does research *with* people, not *on* them or *about* them. It breaks down the old paradigm separation between the roles of researcher and subject" (p. 19). In addition, a focus on the practical was emphasized in this project. Indigenous methodologies propose that research should be useful in ways that directly affect the lived experiences of the local community.

Relational accountability as an orientation to Indigenous research was also a focus of this project (Wilson, 2008). As a non-Native researcher, I sought to remain conscious of past hegemonic approaches by Western researchers that have exploited and marginalized Indigenous perspectives and peoples (Smith, 2012). Relational accountability uses the guiding principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility as an ethical compass in developing trustworthy relationships with study participants. This approach encourages researchers to ask themselves the following questions when conducting studies with Indigenous communities:

- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic I am studying and myself as a researcher?
- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?
- How can I relate respectfully to the other participants in this research so that together we can form stronger relationships with the idea we will share?
- What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?
- Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to other participants?
- What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal? (Wilson, 2008, p. 77)

This relational approach guided data collection throughout the study. For example, interviews were structured in an informal way with a relaxed, open-ended and conversational tone. Several of the interviews took place in the homes of the families with their children present. To ensure the researcher honored the participants' perspectives and to provide validity of findings, member checks were conducted with the families in a group setting and one-on-one.

One of the member checks was done at the CINHS to provide a welcoming and safe space with which families were familiar. In both the interviews and member checks, families were assured their children were welcome. At all times, the researcher strived to

communicate respect for families' needs, the importance of their voices and desire to elevate their concerns. The researcher also assured families that findings from the study would be shared with them and with ASD leadership. Having established the broader philosophical foundations for the study, I next discuss the methods used for gathering, managing, and analyzing the data.

Although the primary data gathering strategy of grounded theory methodology is interviews, a mixed-methods approach was also implemented in this study to provide multiple perspectives on the research topic. This approach was chosen as a way of ensuring validity and reliability in the research findings. As Patton (2016) stated,

The core meaning of mixed methods social inquiry is to invite multiple mental models into the same inquiry space for purposes of respectful conversation, dialogue, and learning from one another, toward a collective generation of better understanding the phenomena being studied Mixed methods social inquiry involved a plurality of philosophical paradigms, theoretical assumptions, methodological traditions, data-gathering and analysis techniques, and personalized understandings and value commitments. (p. 317)

The next section presents how data was gathered and managed and provides more detail on how data was analyzed for recurring patterns and themes.

3.2 Data Collection Groups

In qualitative research the investigator is the primary *instrument* for data collection (Miles et al., 2014). Although a human being has built-in bias, he or she is also able to interpret deeper and broader levels of meaning from a context than a purely

quantitative research methodology might. Creswell (2007) noted that there are several types of data collection used in qualitative research although all data can be categorized as “observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials” (p. 129). The qualitative data analyzed in this study was gathered through observations, interviews, and open-ended survey items. The inclusion of a content analysis of ASD family outreach materials and the survey to preschool teachers in the district made this a mixed-methods study. The following sections describe the sources from which the data were gathered and an overview of how the survey and interview participants were selected.

3.3 Location of the Study

The ASD is the largest urban school district in Alaska with an overall Native student population of around 10%; the majority group of students of color (ASD, 2018). Studies have shown that lower school engagement by Native families in the ASD is an ongoing concern and points to the need for increased focus on how the district can effectively meet Native families’ needs for responsive outreach by schools.

Although Alaska Native families in the ASD have the support of programs such as the Title VI, Indian Education program for such services as after-school tutoring, family cultural nights and other offerings, general education teachers may not have the expertise to create effective partnerships with Native families in ways that support their children. This study sought to discover how Native families experience outreach by general educators in the ASD and how more direct participation in schooling by Native families might be facilitated by the district. Additionally, as this study sought best practices in culturally sustaining outreach to Native families, the researcher deliberately chose to interview family members whose children had attended preschools for Native

children such as the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School (ANCCS) and programs offered by CINHS.

3.4 Data Collection Sources

Data was collected in five ways in this mixed-methods study: (a) through content analysis of ASD outreach materials to families; (b) with a survey of ASD preschool teachers; (c) using unstructured interviews with eight family members of Alaska Native students attending the ASD; (d) acting as a participant-observer in three school events for families of Alaska Native preschoolers attending the CINHS and Yup'ik Immersion Preschool; and (e) maintaining a reflection journal entries throughout the research process. A discussion of each data collection method follows.

3.4.1 Content Analysis

One channel of outreach to families in the ASD is through informational fliers and pamphlets. A question that guided this portion of the data collection and analysis was, “Does this communication channel encourage school engagement for families of Alaska Native students?” This study examined ways these forms of communication may or may not be sending positive messages to Native families regarding their competence to be fully participating partners in their children’s schooling. By analyzing written communication materials distributed by the ASD, the goal was to understand how educators conceptualize engagement of families. Critical content analysis of these materials was used to determine if families’ funds of knowledge were seen as respected as equal partners with ASD educators or if the contributions of families were portrayed as secondary to Western schooling practices and learning goals.

After collecting 26 family outreach fliers from across the district, both from general education programs and the ASD's Indian Education program, materials were examined for frequency of terms used regarding family engagement. Those terms were then entered into Unique Client Identifier Network (UCINET), a network analysis software program that creates visual representations of the frequency of occurring terms or phrases. Results of the network analysis are discussed in Chapter 4 on findings of this study.

3.4.2 Survey of Anchorage School District Preschool Teachers

Preschool teachers in the ASD were chosen to survey because early childhood educators are generally expected to encourage partnerships with families of their students through intentional and ongoing strategies. Preschool is a critical transition time for children as they broaden their spheres of influence from the family and other caring adults as caregivers to the more formal system of schooling. Preschool teachers need to interact closely with families as partners to ensure the move is a positive one and set a foundation for future school success.

Preschool teachers serve the families of their students in multiple roles as communicators, resource persons and advocates (Grant & Ray, 2016). They are generally more likely to receive professional development on appropriate and effective family outreach than educators at other grade levels. Research shows that direct participation of many family members in their children's schooling tends to decrease after the preschool and early elementary years (Jeynes, 2011). Although the ways in which educators partner with families of older students evolves, the foundational knowledge and skills preschool

teachers hold around effective outreach to families has the potential to inform all educators.

For this study, I collaborated with the director of Preschool Programs in the ASD. The director had previously requested I present a workshop to preschool teachers across the district on culturally responsive outreach to families of their students. As a follow-up to this professional development, the director wanted to learn if ASD preschool teachers felt they needed additional knowledge and skills around supporting Native families as a specific cultural group. This collaboration with the director provided an opportunity to share relevant data with the ASD while informing research for this study; a win-win situation.

3.4.3 Interviews with Alaska Native Families

Family members of Alaska Native students in the ASD were recruited in several ways. As stated earlier, families of preschoolers who attended programs which focused on the needs of Native children were requested. The goal was to discover ways those schools addressed culturally sustaining outreach in comparison to strategies implemented by neighborhood schools in the ASD, as studies show neighborhood schools are not meeting the needs of Alaska Native families (McDowell, 2012).

A former student of mine in UAA's School of Education, who was heavily involved in the formation of the ANCCS, suggested several potential participants. These were fellow preschool family members and acquaintances and quite engaged in their children's schooling. Half of the family members who chose to be involved in the study participated as a result of my former student's circle of friends.

I also contacted several graduates of UAA's School of Education who were teaching preschool in the ASD. From them I requested names of Native family members who might be interested in participating in the study and was able to find one family through this channel. Additionally, two former students are Native family members of children attending preschool in the ASD and were eager to participate in the study. Finally, a colleague in UAA's School of Education is the non-Native adoptive mother of four Alaska Native children who attend schools in the ASD and agreed to share her experiences.

Two of the interviews were done in the homes of families with their children present. One interview was done at a local coffee shop. Two interviews were done in preschool classrooms; one at the ANCCS where the family's child attended and the other in the classroom of an Alaska Native teacher who is also the mother of preschool children.

During the interviews there were times when I would deviate from the original protocol to follow a topic of interest that emerged in a participant's response to question. Interviews with the participants were relaxed and conversational. Two factors contributed to this. The first was that participants who were referred by a fellow preschool parent had established long-term and trusting relationships with the other families over time. The benefit of an insider of the group of Alaska Native families referring me cannot be overstated.

The other factor was that most interviews were conducted in settings in which the participants were familiar such as their homes or the Native schools where their children attended. With the researcher entering the participants' space, a more balanced and

equitable collaborative relationship was created. The most rewarding and meaningful interviews were those held in participants' homes with an opportunity to meet children and extended family members. This provided a sense of how families lived and what was important to them.

All the families were provided consent forms and notified of the researcher's goals. Most of the interviews lasted an hour although two interviews, which were held in the homes of the participants, lasted one and a half to two hours. The interviewer sought to provide a relaxed and informal tone in each interview and was sensitive to a pace that was accommodating the needs of the participants. The interviews were conducted from May to July 2018.

An iPad was used to record the interviews using a software program called Griffin iTalk. The sound recording was of high quality and was easily transferred to a computer where the interviews were securely stored. Interviews with the eight interview participants resulted in eight hours of recordings and 170 pages of transcriptions. I transcribed the shortest interview myself, but the remainder of the interviews were transcribed through a transcription service called Landmark. Complete transcriptions of the individual interviews were emailed to the corresponding participants with the originals stored on a secured computer.

3.4.4 Field Notes from Participant Observation at Family-School Events and Research Journal

The researcher's field notes and reflection journals were an additional source of data. Field notes were mostly comprised of memos written to me immediately following Native family events attended at the CINHS and interviews with participants (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). I also kept an on-going research journal as impressions and hunches about emerging categories of meaning. The field notes and research journal provided multiple sources of *corroborating evidence* giving me the opportunity to watch evidence of consistent patterns emerge throughout the duration of the study (Creswell, 1998).

3.5 Development of the Data Collection Tools

The data collection tools developed for this mixed-methods study were an open-ended survey sent to ASD preschool teachers and an unstructured interview protocol to guide conversations with the Alaska Native family members who participated in this study. The following sections will provide details on how these instruments were developed for this study.

3.5.1 Development of the Survey

The open-ended survey administered to ASD preschool teachers was constructed using Qualtrics, a survey instrument available to university and school district employees. The survey was developed based on a thorough literature review that examined concepts around culturally sustaining family outreach practices and potential reasons Alaska Native families participate less directly participate in their children's schooling than other cultural groups. The research questions for this study also informed the development of the survey items.

The survey asked ASD preschool teachers to describe their outreach to the families of their Alaska Native students. It consisted of fifteen questions of which eight had a five- point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Under this section of the survey were prompts such as, "I feel confident in the effectiveness of my outreach to Alaska Native families" or "I want to know more about

the cultural values of Alaska Natives.” Four of the items on the survey were demographic questions such as “How many Alaska Native students do you have in your class this year?” or “What is your ethnicity?”

Finally, three of the questions were open-ended which provided the rich narrative for which I was hoping: (a) Share outreach strategies they found effective with Alaska Native families, (b) Areas of professional development they identified to improve their knowledge and skills around outreach to Native families, and (c) Other considerations about creating effective partnerships with Native families they wanted to share with the researcher. The complete survey is located at the end of this study in Appendix A.

3.5.2 Survey Validity and Reliability

Before submitting the survey to the director of Preschool Programs in the ASD to distribute to preschool teachers, I received feedback from my research advisor and made revisions. In addition to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process required by the university, the school district also required I submit a research proposal to their Department of Research to ensure its appropriateness. The perspectives of multiple stakeholders and experienced researchers ensured the survey was reliable and valid in what it sought to measure and the manner in which it was presented. Copies of the IRB proposals are located at the end of this study under Appendix B.

A drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card was offered as an incentive to participate. The survey was open for 30 days, and 32 of 38 ASD preschool teachers participated. As soon as the survey was closed, the director of Preschool Programs shared the results with me. This data collection process was a collaborative effort between me as university

faculty and the director, an administrator for the ASD. Results of the survey are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.5.3 Development of the Interview Protocol

The protocol developed for interviews with Native families consisted of twelve prompts based on my research questions and an overall structure developed for Indigenous participants that honors a holistic perspective (Madden, 2014). This incorporated the traditional Medicine Wheel concept used by many Indigenous cultures, the principles of which consider how the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual factors of an experience add to its totality.

The importance of relationality accountability (Wilson, 2008) was also an important consideration in how the questions were formulated. Questions sought to discover whether families believed their children's school environments were welcoming and whether their children's teachers were respectful, reciprocal, and responsible in how they partnered with them.

As with the survey, the interview protocol was vetted by my research advisor before submission to the university IRB. Revisions were made based on feedback both from my Chair and the IRB examiner. The complete interview protocol is located at the end of this study under Appendix C.

3.6 Changes and Adaptations to the Data Collection Process

I initially approached the ASD's Director of Indian Education programs to recruit Alaska Native family members for the study. I had also hoped to enlist the support of the Director in surveying members of its advisory council to gauge their perceptions of how effectively the ASD was implementing outreach to Alaska Native families. The director

told me she did not feel comfortable recruiting participants in her role as an administrator in the district. This setback turned out to be fortunate as I redirected my focus to preschool teachers in the district and the families with whom they partnered.

This adjustment to my plan was a result of an invitation to present a workshop on culturally sustaining family engagement to preschool teachers across the ASD. The invitation came from the ASD's Director of Preschool Programs. After my presentation, the Director requested feedback from the attendees of the workshop, which was a break-out session of a day-long in-service opportunity for preschool teachers, district-wide. She was eager to determine what the teachers gained from the workshop and their suggestions for future professional development. Preschool teachers, who are generally more focused on outreach to families than other grade levels, provided an appropriate sample group which provided knowledgeable perceptions around how to implement effective outreach to Native families.

3.7 Sequencing and Process of Gathering and Analyzing Data

Miles et al. (2014) recommended that analysis occur at the same time as data collection. They suggested that waiting until all data is gathered to begin the analysis process results in two barriers to a sound study. First it narrows the chance to collect new data to “fill in the gaps or test new hypotheses that emerge during analysis” (p. 70) and second, it makes formulating new hypotheses less likely as the researcher becomes attached to assumptions. Additionally, when the researcher waits until all data is gathered to begin analysis the task can be overwhelming. This can make the study cumbersome to the researcher and compromise its quality.

For this study, I conducted the content analysis of ASD outreach/communication fliers in the spring of 2017 while taking a network analysis class. At this point, my research focus was becoming clear and I had decided to do a mixed-methods study. The content analysis was a good place to begin collecting quantitative data.

In the fall of 2017, I began attending school events for Native families as a participant-observer. I attended one event at the CINHS Yup'ik Immersion Preschool located at the Alaska Native Heritage Center and two other events at the CINHS in the spring of 2018. These events provided deeper understanding of how outreach was structured by Native educators and how the Alaska Native families who participated responded. Researcher field notes and journal entries from these experiences initiated the qualitative phase of data collection.

The preschool teacher survey was developed spring of 2018 after I was asked to present a workshop on culturally responsive family engagement for an ASD professional development opportunity for preschool teachers across the district. This process included vetting with my graduate advisor, the University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB, and the ASD Department of Research. Results from the survey became available May of 2018.

The first interview I conducted with an Alaska Native family was held near the end of the 2017-2018 school year. I continued to conduct interviews throughout the summer of 2018, completing the last one in July. As each interview was completed, I sent the audio file to a transcription service and as I received the transcripts, I began first cycle coding which was done by hand.

When first cycle coding was complete, I contacted each family I interviewed requesting they join me for a group member check. All but two of the family members

were able to attend. The family members who were not present met with me one-on-one. In the fall of 2018, I began the second cycle coding of the interview data as well as the narrative sections of the survey of ASD preschool teachers. In the next section, I describe how I analyzed the data through the first and second cycle coding processes as well as how a frequency count of coded categories was established using data analysis software.

3.8 Data Analysis

As this was a grounded theory study, the goal was data analysis that would lead to the development of a theory describing why Alaska Native families are less likely than other cultural groups to directly participate in their children's schooling. Creswell (1998) first described the data analysis process as a *zigzag* approach where the researcher goes into the field to gather information, analyzes it, goes back into the field, analyzes the data again, and so on (p. 57).

According to Creswell, the systematic analysis of data for a grounded theory study follows a consistent format that begins with an open coding process where the researcher forms initial categories; next an axial coding process is implemented where the data is organized in more sophisticated ways as the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon deepens; and finally, selective coding where the researcher identifies the *story* he or she wants to tell about the topic studied. At this phase of data analysis, the researcher's hypotheses are presented.

Miles et al. (2014) recommended a general data analysis process that follows an iterative course of action. They described this as beginning with data condensation by developing categories of meaning through first cycle coding, followed by an organized display of data findings, and then using a second cycle of coding to draw conclusions

from the analytical process (p. 12). It is emphasized that each of these processes overlaps with the other as the story of the study evolves and is revealed. They also advised qualitative researchers, whose methods are in a “more fluid and more humanistic position” (p. 14), to document their processes clearly and to use member checks to ensure validity. In the following sections I describe each step of how I came to conclusions I drew from the data analysis process.

3.8.1 First Cycle Coding

After sifting through pages of interview transcripts and field notes, the following description of qualitative data analysis by Marshall and Rossman (1999) struck me as particularly affirming, “Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process” (p. 150). Marshall and Rossman asserted that qualitative researchers must be comfortable with the unstructured way the processes of collecting data, analyzing data, and writing the results are intermingled.

As a novice researcher, I sought the guidance of my dissertation committee chair, an experienced qualitative researcher, on how to best analyze and organize the data. I also referred to coursework in my doctoral program and researched ways to systematically sort through the data. Data analysis techniques ranged from very technical approaches that seemed to mirror quantitative methods to those that were very intuitive. I chose to focus on a balanced approach that Patton (2016) described the *radical middle*.

The decision to stick to a middle ground satisfied my goal for a systematic approach to data analysis while leaving room for *naturalistic inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated

Tightly structured, highly organized data-gathering and data-analyzing schemes often filter out the unusual, the serendipitous—the puzzle that if attended to and pursued would provide a recasting of the entire research endeavor. Thus, a balance must be struck between efficiency considerations and design flexibility. (p. 151)

As I coded each interview looking for categories of meaning, I revisited the actual interview experience and another layer of insight emerged. I would stop and jot down impressions or insights that I hadn't gained during the interviews. Next, I wrote summative impressions of each participant's interview such as perceived reluctance to answer certain questions or enthusiasm regarding a specific topic, and so on. Writing these profiles solidified and strengthened my interpretations of what meaning the families gained from their experiences partnering with ASD educators. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) noted, putting ideas into print assists the interpretive process in qualitative research. These activities comprised the "initial sorting out process" (Creswell, 1998, p. 140) of the data.

Much in the way a darkroom photographer watches an image appear as the photographic paper is immersed in a bath of developing fluid, a cohesive image of each family's experience began to emerge. As I dipped into the transcripts for details, as well as returning to the literature review, a clearer picture evolved. The list of initial codes and sub-codes I derived from this process undertook several iterations as I discovered categories and patterns in the data and became more confident of emerging themes. This is a procedure recommended by Creswell (1998) to get a broad overview of the data as the researcher begins to synthesize the bits of information into a complete picture.

Through this process, I developed a fuller understanding of the categories and patterns in the data and modified labels. I implemented what Miles et al. (2014) described as “a series of cumulative coding cycles and reflective analytic memoing to develop major categories for theory generation” (p. 8).

When I had a manageable list of primary codes and sub codes, I referenced studies discovered in the literature review that related to each code. This was done at the suggestion of my dissertation advisor and I found the process extremely helpful as I sought to develop theories about why Alaska Native families tend to participate less directly in their children’s schooling. This is the process qualitative researchers guided by grounded theory consciously pursue (Patton, 2016).

Table 3 illustrates how I initially organized the primary and secondary categories found in the interviews and aligned them with current studies according to culturally sustaining practices around family outreach and engagement.

Table 3

Primary and Secondary Categories from First Cycle Coding and Alignment with Research Base

Primary Category	Secondary Categories
<i>Indigenous Value for Family/Community</i> (Kawagley, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008)	<i>Relying on Family Support rather than Schools</i> (Kawagley, 2006) <i>Importance of School “Family”</i> (Ferguson et al., 2008)
<i>Relational Accountability (Respectful, Reciprocal, & Responsible Connections with Others)</i> (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Wilson, 2008)	<i>Welcoming School Environment</i> (Ferguson, et al., 2008) <i>Listening/Humility/Respect of Educators</i> (Topkok, 2011) <i>Feeling Marginalized by Schools</i> (Lea, 2011; Williams, 2009) <i>Ongoing, Positive Communication from Educators</i> (Epstein, 2018) <i>Value of Home Visits by Educators</i> (Ginsberg, 2015)
<i>Accessing Families’ Funds of Knowledge</i> (Jester, 2017; Kawagley, 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Vinlove, 2017)	<i>Subsistence as Native Value/Way of Life</i> (Jester, 2017; Kawagley, 2006; Vinlove, 2017) <i>Native Languages in Schools</i> (Coulter & Jimenez, 2017; John-Shields, 2018; Smith, 2012)
<i>Indigenous Value for Holistic Education</i> (Barnhardt, 2001; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Coulter & Jimenez, 2017; Kawagley, 2006; Paris, 2012)	<i>Importance of School Choice for Families</i> (Gardner, 1991) <i>Native Cultures/Values in School</i> (Barnhardt, 2013; Kawagley, 2006) <i>Rural-Urban Cultural Divide in Schools</i> (Barnhardt, 2013; Kawagley, 2006) <i>Western Schooling Models of Efficiency &/Standardization</i> (Barnhardt, 2013; Gardner, 1991; John-Shields, 2018; Kawagley, 2006)
<i>Educators as Allies of Native Students & Families</i> (Vinlove, 2017)	<i>Cross-Cultural Understanding by Educators</i> (Kawagley, 2006) <i>Educators’ High Expectations for Student Success</i> (Ferguson et al., 2008) <i>Role of School Leadership</i> (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2013) <i>Anchorage School District Models of Excellence/Appreciative Inquiry</i> (Shuayb et al., 2009)

As seen in Table 3, the following primary categories emerged in the interview data during the first cycle of analysis: (a) *Indigenous Value for Family and Community*, (b) *Importance of Relational Accountability*, (c) *Accessing Families' Funds of Knowledge*, (d) *Indigenous Value for Holistic Education*, and (e) *Educator Advocacy for Native Students and Families*. These categories overlap in many ways, which was one of the challenges of creating distinct labels for data sets.

After completing the first cycle coding and gaining a sense of the families' values for education and experiences partnering with the ASD, I organized a member check to validate initial findings. Conducting member checks with Indigenous study participants is especially critical to ensure their perspectives and worldviews are accurately represented and not altered through researcher bias—especially if the researcher is of the Western dominant culture. The next section discusses how the Native families involved in this project provided a group member check during the research process which provided reliability and validity for the first coding cycle findings.

3.8.2 Group Member Check with Native Families

A member check was conducted with the families in a group setting and one-on-one after the first cycle coding of interviews to check for validity of the researcher's initial findings. I asked each family member to meet at a time convenient for an hour at the CINHS. The location was an intentional choice to ensure the families felt relaxed and comfortable in a familiar setting. Children were welcome to attend, and an evening meal of pizza was provided. As an expression of gratitude for the families' time, a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card was included in the evening.

Each family member was given my written summary of their interview along with the initial categories of meaning I had found. They were also provided a worksheet to correct any of my findings and add information I had missed. This added small refinements to the categories, added emphasis in areas I had not gained during the interview, and provided additional layers of data. In this way, an evolving understanding of how Alaska Native families experienced outreach by their children's teachers and schools was formulated. The next section will discuss the role that using a software data analysis program played in determining the final themes established in the findings.

3.8.3 Frequency Count of Categories using Software Data Analysis Program

After the first cycle of coding and the member check, I uploaded the interview transcripts into the data analysis software, *Atlas.ti*, at the suggestion of my dissertation Committee Chair. The primary benefit I gained from using the software was getting a frequency count for each category I had established from the interview data. This was extremely useful in determining which categories were consistent across the interviews and were worthy of pursuing. A detailed description of the findings from using the data analysis software is discussed in Part 2 of the findings in Chapter 5.

For the second cycle of coding, I finished coding the data by hand. Regarding the issue of coding data by hand or using a data analysis software program Patton (2016) wrote,

In considering to use software to assist in analysis, keep in mind that this is partly a matter of individual style ... and personal preference. Computer analysis is not necessary and can interfere with the analytic process for ... some self-described "concrete" types [who] like to get a physical feel for

the data, which isn't possible with a computer. (p. 530).

The following section describes how the second coding cycle was completed. Themes that resulted led to development of a framework for creating culturally sustaining outreach to family members of Alaska Native students and are described in detail in the chapter on findings.

3.8.4 Second Cycle Coding

For the second cycle coding, I reread all data collected: survey results, interview transcripts, field notes, and feedback gathered from the member check of interview participants. Using the categories that emerged through the first cycle data analysis, I used a VAB coding system that searches for the values, attitudes, and beliefs found in qualitative data. As explained by Miles et al. (2014),

This is the application of three different types of related codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview. A *value* (V) is the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea. An *attitude* (A) is the way we think and feel about oneself, another person, thing, or idea. A *belief* (B) is part of a system that includes values and attitudes, plus personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world. Values coding is appropriate for studies that explore cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences. (p. 75)

I also added two descriptive codes. These allowed me to sort data that didn't seem to fit neatly into the VAB codes I had found. I called these codes "Relationships" and

“Settings.” The Relationships code referred to interactions between Native family members and their children’s teachers and schools or experiences the family members had as children attending public schools. It also referred to how the preschool teachers I surveyed viewed their partnerships with Alaska Native families. The settings code was where I placed references to school-based or home-based learning activities and the perception that schooling for Alaska Natives needs to be approached differently in an urban setting than in rural schools. Figure 1 illustrates the second cycle coding process.

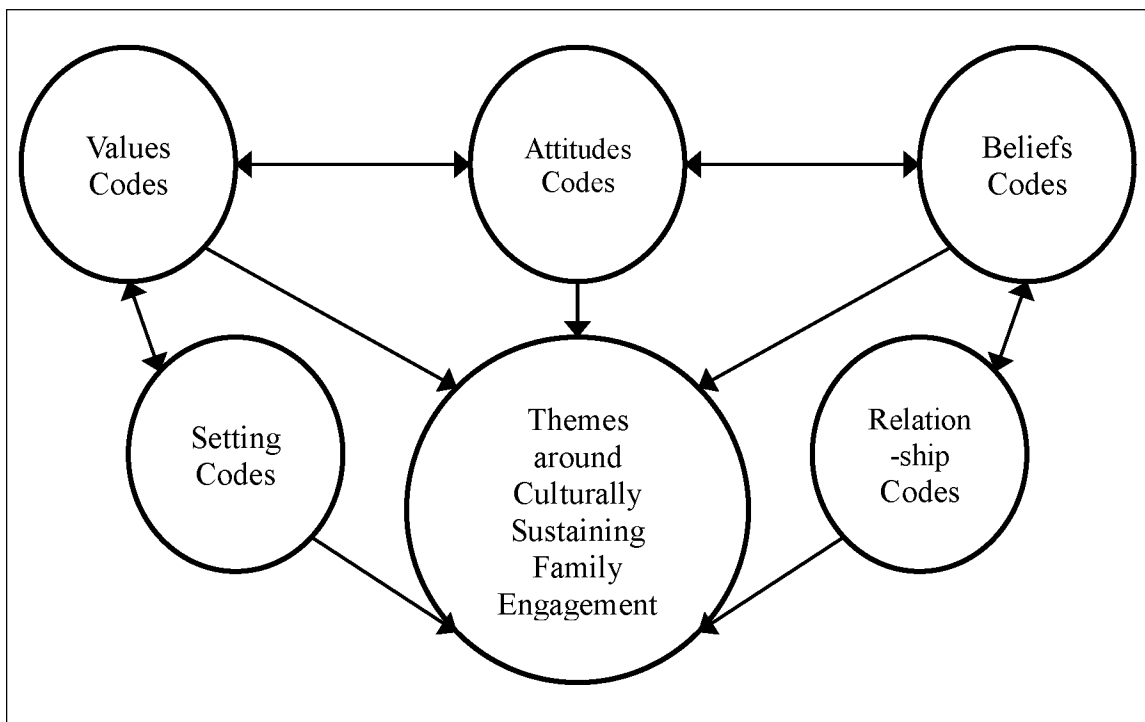


Figure 1. Iterative process used to refine categories and develop themes through the second cycle coding process.

After this coding process, as well as examining the category frequency count, I arrived at six primary themes. These themes describe the interrelated components of outreach Native families described as supportive: (a) *Importance of Family and Community*, (b) *Educator Advocacy*, (c) *Challenges of Transition from Rural to Urban Schools*, (d) *Holistic View of Education*, (e) *Strong Home-School Connection*, and (f)

Subsistence as a Native Core Value. Evidence of the themes gathered from the data are presented in greater detail in the findings of Chapter 5. Development of a framework for Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement Framework was created through examining how the themes connected and is also discussed in Chapter 5.

Throughout the data analysis process, I continually reviewed my research questions looking at ways they correlated to the emerging categories/themes and if adjustments were needed. In qualitative studies the research questions may need to be revised throughout the study to better reflect developing findings. As Creswell (1998) wrote, “Our questions change during the process of research to reflect increased understanding of the problem” (p. 19). I found this to be true as I revised the questions multiple times to more accurately reflect the intent and goals of the study. The following sections discuss ethical considerations of the study, how they were addressed, and a brief review of the data analysis process used to arrive at the study findings.

3.8.5 Ethical Concerns

Throughout this inquiry, the central focus was on how the Native families experienced outreach by the ASD and their suggestions for more effective practices. Interview quotes are included throughout the findings sections as direct evidence of their perspectives. In the same manner, quotes from the open-ended surveys of ASD preschool teachers were used to describe how they saw their role as advocates for Alaska Native families and their perceived needs for more professional development in cross-cultural outreach.

As primary investigator of this study, I tried to present data and findings with the integrity and rigor of established qualitative research methods of inquiry. To assure the

anonymity of study participants, specific locations of where their children attended school are not used in this document nor is other identifying information included. All participants were notified prior to signing consent forms (Appendix A) that interviews would be recorded and transcribed. It was also agreed that at any time the participants did not want the discussion documented, the recorder would be turned off and the conversation would remain confidential.

At all times I strived to adhere to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) definition of *fairness* in qualitative research by sharing findings with the participants and making sure that as much as possible, each participant was given full representation in the study. Transcripts of participant interviews were shared only with the individual interviewed.

In addition, the principles of relational accountability to the Indigenous community as respect for, reciprocity with, and responsibility to the Alaska Native families who participated in this study were followed as closely as possible (Wilson, 2008). At all times, I sought to understand and honor the perspectives of the families who participated in the study, while acknowledging my own cultural lens as someone outside of the Native community.

The multiple ways in which I sought to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were addressed previously regarding validity and reliability. Eisner (1991) described the qualitative researcher as compiling bits and pieces of evidence to formulate a compelling whole. The presented evidence should be persuasive enough for the investigator and the reader to come to an agreement on the meaning of the research findings.

Creswell (1998) stated that many qualitative researchers seek to address validity issues when they “search for and find qualitative equivalents that parallel traditional quantitative approaches to validity” (p. 197). Confirmability and credibility issues for this study were addressed through the following techniques: prolonged engagement in the field, multiple data sources, establishment of researcher bias, member checks, rich and thick description of research findings, and inclusion of quotes from study participants. These are all presented for the reader’s examination.

Prolonged engagement in the field, where I acted as a participant-observer at three Native family events, and one to two -hour informal interviews with the eight Alaska Native family members, gave me a deeper understanding of the ways in which Native families prefer to be directly engaged in their children’s schooling.

Using various forms of collected data including ASD family communication fliers, interview transcripts, reflection journals, and field notes provided me with multiple sources of information from which to compare emerging and consistent themes. With this qualitative process, the researcher seeks to shed light on a theme from diverse perspectives (Creswell, 1998).

3.9 Summary

Naturalistic inquiry methods employed by qualitative researchers challenge the traditional image of validity as static and established. Richardson (1994) used the metaphor of a crystal to describe qualitative validity. She noted,

Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of “validity” [we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves]; and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. (p. 522)

Findings of the data analysis are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, the reader will find results of the content analysis of ASD family outreach materials and the ASD preschool teacher survey. Quotes from the preschool teachers will reveal how they see their role their role in supporting Alaska Native families.

In Chapter 5, a presentation of how the Alaska Native family members who participated in the study expressed their ideas about culturally sustaining family-school partnerships is presented. The words of the Native family members who participated in this study will provide clear evidence of how they have experienced outreach by the ASD and their recommendations for future improvements by the district.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Findings: Part 1

This chapter presents findings from the analysis of ASD family outreach materials as well as the survey to ASD preschool teachers. The findings will provide evidence of answering the research questions, *How do preschool teachers in the ASD currently implement outreach to Alaska Native families?* and *How might current outreach practices by ASD preschool teachers serve as models of culturally sustaining family engagement for other educators in the district and do they require additional training?*

4.1 Analysis of Anchorage School District Family Outreach Materials for Culturally Responsive Content

The first area of outreach to be examined in this study was how the ASD implements communication to families through materials such as fliers, newsletters, and other print communication. Because of the subtle but influential messages informational fliers send, the content analysis sought to uncover assumptions general outreach efforts by the ASD may be communicating to Alaska Native families about effective family engagement to increase student success.

Communication between home and school provides opportunities for families and teachers to establish common goals for students. This is important because families and educators can vary to a great extent in how they perceive the purpose of school. These kinds of communication materials tend to reflect the values and priorities of an organization. I was concerned that if the outreach materials sent messages to families using a deficit perspective, it could be a contributing factor in the apparent disconnect that exists for Alaska Native families in how they experience the schooling of their

children. This can prove especially problematic when predominantly non-Native educators seek to communicate school goals to Native families.

A sampling of ASD family outreach materials was examined to determine what messages may be communicated to Native families through vocabulary, phrases and images used. The goal was to understand how effective engagement by families is conceptualized across the ASD and if families' funds of knowledge and skills in preparing their children for school were seen as secondary to Western schooling practices and learning goals. The network analysis software used in the content analysis revealed patterns by showing the consistency with which certain key terms, phrases and images appeared in ASD communication materials.

The significance of messages communicated by the ASD's outreach materials is explored further in the next section. The fliers, pamphlets and newsletters provided clues as to the types of family partnerships the ASD may deem important and serve as a window into understanding the apparent disconnect between the goals of schooling for Native families and the priorities of the ASD. The process of the analysis and significance of the findings is explained in detail in the following section.

4.2 The Data Collection Process

Twenty-six family outreach fliers were collected from elementary schools around the ASD. Five of these fliers were from the ASD's Indian Education department. General family outreach materials were coded for the frequency of terms used in comparison to family outreach materials created by the ASD's Indian Education department, which specifically serves Alaska Native students and their families. Close examination revealed

that each flier represented the worldview of the school or program from which it originated.

Reviewing the literature on culturally responsive family engagement provided a theoretical foundation for examining the fliers for worldviews or bias. With this lens, I began coding the fliers, looking for key words and concepts in each; either searching for the perspective of a school-centric view of family engagement or the Indigenous view of a more reciprocal and holistic approach to engaging families of students. Key terms such as *community*, *culture*, and *home* were found in the Indian Education fliers and mostly missing in the general ASD communication.

After circling key words and phrases in the fliers, I created a spreadsheet, labeled each flier and entered key words or phrases found in each one. I noted whether the flier was a general ASD communication or from Indian Education, assigning each a number. Both sets of fliers were coded for frequency of how often words like *parents*, *families*, *culture*, *literacy*, *home*, and *community* were used.

Images were also coded such as children reading, or as in the Indian Education materials, families engaging in subsistence activities or listening to an Elder. Photographs that highlighted more school-centered activities, such as children reading, were more likely found in the general ASD fliers. Images of community events, Elders, and children actively engaged in activities less school-based were more likely found in the Indian Education fliers. Table 4 illustrates the frequency with which terms occurred within each set of fliers:

Table 4

Frequency of Family Engagement Terms Found in Anchorage School District

Outreach Materials

	Frequency of Term or Image Per Flier	
	<i>General District</i> Family Outreach Materials (<i>N</i> = 21)	<i>Indian Education</i> Family Outreach Materials (<i>N</i> = 5)
Parents	1.54	1.00
Family	0.81	2.75
Literacy	0.43	0.50
Assessments	0.41	0.50
Parent Training	0.43	0.75
Community	0.11	1.75
Culture	0	3.50
Advocacy	0.19	1.25
Social-emotional learning	0.05	1.50
Resources	0.05	0.50
Academics/Student Success	0.08	3.00
Partnership	0.05	1.00
Home	0.14	0

The first analysis provided evidence of several areas of difference between the ASD’s general family outreach materials and those developed by the Indian Education program. The most dramatic were in the frequency of the terms *families*, *community*, *culture*, *advocacy*, *social-emotional learning*, *student success*, and *partnership*. These terms were used much more in the Indian Education materials than the general ASD information. I now discuss what was revealed when the spreadsheet of the frequency of terms was entered into UCI, a software analysis program.

I first uploaded the word frequency spreadsheet to the UCINET network software analysis program to discover the graphic representation that would result from the software’s algorithm. The goal was to look for patterns in the resulting image that would

provide clues of how the communication of general ASD fliers and those of the Indian Education fliers may differ, be similar or overlap. Social Network Analysis (SNA) works on the premise that social ties in a network differ depending on circumstances or value systems and that structures of networks evolve according to their function (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). This is what I was hoping to discover in the visual representation of the ASD general education fliers' messages and the Indian Education fliers.

The first image of the system was created by running a centrality measure through the UCINET software. Centrality is the network analysis principle of identifying who or what in a system is most influential. By running the centrality measure, I wanted to determine which words and fliers were used most often and seemed to carry the most weight in the communication channel to ASD families. Figure 2 demonstrates the results from running the centrality measure.

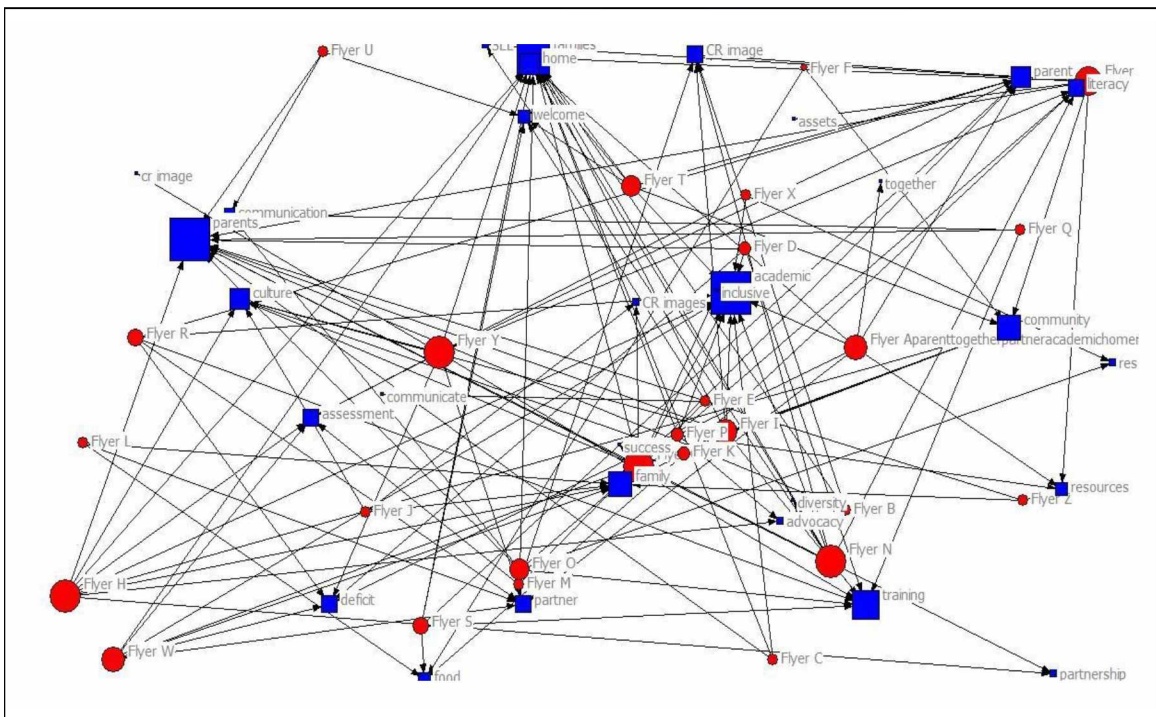


Figure 2. Representation of centrality measure generated using network analysis software.

The information I gathered from this image basically confirmed what was discovered through the first analysis I conducted. The two largest blue squares represent the code words, *parents* and *academic*. The largest red circles, representing Flyer H and Flyer Y, contained the greatest number of code words. Although the frequency with which words like *parents* and *academics* seems to communicate a clear message about the ASD's beliefs around family engagement—namely, parents are important to their children's school success and need to get involved, I was hoping for a deeper level of understanding.

I hoped a clear visual representation of betweenness, bridging and bonding, concepts all stemming from SNA research (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011) would emerge as I manipulated the nodes of the network I had created. Betweenness refers to the distance between nodes, signifying a close connection. Bridging refers to a node that forms a connection and fills a structural hole to another node, creating the strength of a weak tie. Bonding is the idea that similar people, actors or things tend to be attracted to one another and stick together. This is related to the concept of *homophily*, the idea that people with commonalities tend to interact with one another. Homophily can lead to reluctance in actors of the system to venture outside of comfort zones and form relationships with those who do not share their worldview (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). This concept has significance for White, middle-class educators in the ASD who may be unaware of the impact of their assumptions around effective outreach to Native families.

Figure 3 is the final network visualization I created. It confirms some of the hunches I had formed around the differences between the ASD's general education

outreach materials and those of the Indian Education program, but also revealed patterns I hadn't expected. These are discussed in the following section.

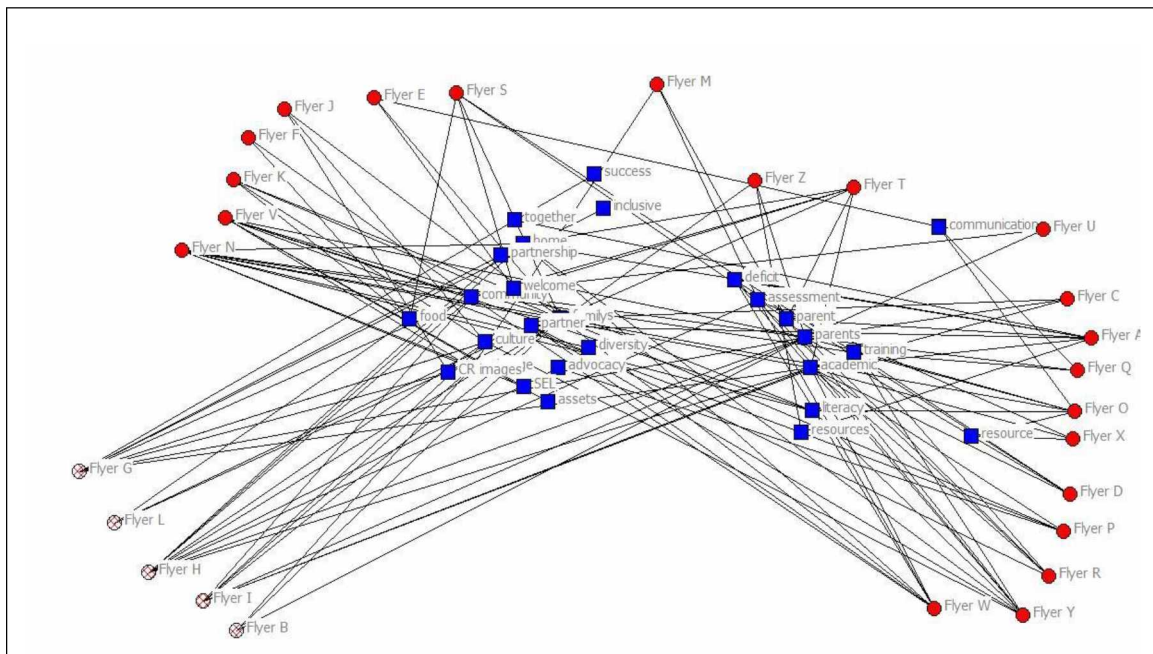


Figure 3. Representation of terms frequency used in Anchorage School District family outreach materials using UCI network analysis software. *Key:* Flyers U, C, A, Q, O, X, D, R, Y = General Anchorage School District/School-centric; Flyers N, V, K, F, J, E, S, M, Z, T, P, W = General Anchorage School District/Outliers; Flyers G, L, H, I, B = Indian education.

4.3 Findings of Content Analysis Using Unique Client Identifier Network Software

Bias is inevitable as a researcher and must be clearly acknowledged throughout one's study. My bias going into the content analysis was that the Indian Education fliers would have a more relational approach of outreach to Native families and that the general ASD fliers would focus primarily on academic success. My hypothesis was the ASD general education fliers would connect to the school-centric language around family engagement and that the Indian Education fliers would connect to more relational language, reflecting Alaska Native values around connectivity with others.

As I untangled the ties in the network visual representations and looked for patterns, I found a different story emerging. The network evolved into two main groups and two subgroups; the larger group was comprised of 13 ASD general education fliers and the other group was made up of the five Indian Education fliers. One of the subgroups contained two fliers that appeared as outliers. The ties of that subgroup were mostly split between the school-centric code words and more culturally responsive language. Another subgroup of six fliers contained mostly culturally responsive language that I assumed only the Indian Education fliers would use.

Another discovery was that the five Indian Education fliers' ties were connected to both relational language and school-centric language. This was evidence that the Indian Education fliers were messaging values of community and family as well as academic success for their children. The Indian Education fliers were consistently balanced between the two worlds of home/community and school.

Finally, it was clear that none of the Indian Education fliers' ties connected to the school-centric term, *literacy* although many of the Indian Education fliers connected to the term *academic*. Most of the Indian Education fliers also connected to language around social-emotional learning. This seemed to signal a broader view of what it means to be successful in school by the Indian Education fliers.

The two subgroups of ASD general education fliers seemed to serve as bridging elements in the network between the school-centric and culturally responsive family engagement language. These outliers from the original ASD general education group filled the structural holes that would have resulted had they not used more family-friendly

and culturally responsive language. The fliers seemed to conform to the *strength of weak ties* principle from social network theory (Granovetter, 1983).

The strength of weak ties theory describes how certain individuals or groups within an organization serve to provide multiple perspectives on its mission. Too often key decision-makers within an organization become so attached to its goals and policies they are unable to consider alternate viewpoints. In the case of the ASD, as with any large organization, policy-makers form strong ties with their colleagues who mostly share their own values and perspectives. Lacking the benefit of alternate worldviews, such as those held by the Native community, the risk of messaging that reaches a broader audience decreases. It appears this may be the case in how the majority of ASD general education outreach materials may be missing the mark in their communication to Native families regarding including a more relational approach to balance the school-centric language used.

In the section that follows, I briefly discuss research on the two most commonly used communication styles utilized by schools and educators. These primarily fall into two categories; one style is comprised of business-like, transactional exchanges and the second is more relational and informal in nature. Next, I present an overview of communication practices that support more relational partnerships between schools and students' families. Finally, I describe the process undertaken in this study to conduct the content analysis of the ASD family outreach materials, as well as findings from the analysis using a software program.

4.3.1 Research on Communication Styles of Family Outreach

Communication between educators and families is generally categorized in two types (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Primary, informal forms are relational exchanges such as family conferences, pick-up and drop-off two-way conversations, notes and phone calls home, school events, and classroom volunteering. Incidental, or more formal forms tend to be transactional and informational such as newsletters, websites, fliers, and so on. In examining communication networks found in organizations such as schools, Borgatti and Halgin (2011) offered similar descriptions of channels of communication. They categorized two basic forms of communication or social ties defining them as *state* or *event* transactions.

According to Borgatti and Halgin (2011), social ties based on kinship and affective factors fall under the state category. These are generally more aligned with the relational manner in which many Indigenous peoples form social ties. Social ties based on events are defined as interactive and transactional. These might fall under an efficiency model such as group emails or information found on a website; common means by which school-family communications are implemented. Informational fliers distributed by school districts seek to reach as many families as possible. This type of communication to students' families often fall in the *interactive* type of social tie.

Often, an efficiency model drives school-family communication, as educators seek to reach as many family members of their students as possible. Differing communication styles of Western school personnel and Native communities may be on opposite ends of a spectrum that ranges from transactional to relational. Analyzing the ASD's outreach materials was seen as a way to surface those differences. The goal was to

provide evidence to district leadership of the impact of messages communicated to families through this mode of outreach.

The next section briefly examines how the ASD family outreach materials analyzed in this study acknowledged the cultural values of the Native families it serves and in what ways the materials aligned with components of the Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement Framework.

4.3.2 Anchorage School District Communication Materials Alignment with Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement

In consideration of the structure of many Native families, responsive educators have become more aware of the descriptors they use in communication to their students' family members. Increasingly the term *parents* is seen as less inclusive than *families* or *family members*. A family may be headed by grandparents or other extended family members rather than a biological parent. Wise educators realize the importance of recognizing multiple family structures in their communication and outreach to their student's homes.

Key phrases such as *school readiness* and *academic success* in many of the fliers pointed to a one-sided approach to the home-school connection and an orientation to seeing families as unable to support their children's learning. Research is clear that when educators view families from a deficit lens and in need of school-based interventions for their children to experience school success, it can have a marginalizing effect on families. Knowledgeable educators strive to use language in their interactions and communications with families that is inclusive and consider the families' needs; not just the agenda of the school. Educators who are culturally competent value shared leadership in partnerships

with families that include their perspectives and encourage them to participate in an equitable process of decision-making to support student success.

Acknowledging that although pamphlets and fliers are a limited strategy for outreach and primarily informational, they do send messages to families that communicate the ASD's values and mission. Because of this, it appears that Indian Education's outreach materials are most closely aligned with principles of culturally sustaining family engagement. Indigenous values of community and family and a holistic orientation to education are present throughout the materials. This balanced approach recognizes the importance of the Native families' priorities while maintaining the educational goals for the ASD.

In the next section, survey data findings gathered from preschool teachers in the ASD are presented. The data was examined for the teachers' current practices around culturally sustaining outreach to Native families, their beliefs around the importance of education to Native families, and their identified needs around additional professional development in culturally sustaining family outreach.

4.4 Survey Participant Demographics

Preschools in the ASD primarily serve children from families of lower SES or children with special needs. The exception is a preschool located at King Tech High, a secondary school that focuses on preparing students for careers in technical fields. The preschool program there is staffed by high school teachers who serve in a dual role; teaching preschoolers while working with high school students interested in the field of early childhood education. Table 5 shows where preschools are located in the ASD and the demographics of the families they serve.

Table 5

Anchorage School District Preschool Locations and Populations Served

ASD Elementary School	Title I Preschool	Special Education Preschool	Migrant Education Preschool	Kids' Corps Inc. Head Start
Airport Heights				✓
Abbott Loop		✓		
ANCCS	✓			
Bowman		✓		
Campbell		✓		
Chester Valley	✓			
Creekside		✓		✓
Denali			✓	
Eagle River		✓		
Fairview	✓	✓		
Fire Lake		✓		
Girdwood		✓		
Gladys Wood				✓
Kasuun		✓		
King Tech				
Lake Hood		✓		
Lake Otis	✓			
Mountain View	✓	✓		
Northwood		✓		
North Star	✓	✓		
Nunaka Valley		✓		
Ocean View		✓		
Ptarmigan		✓		
Ravenwood		✓		
Russian Jack	✓	✓		
Taku		✓		
Ursa Major		✓		
William Tyson	✓			
Williwaw	✓	✓		
Willowcrest				
Wonder Park		✓	✓	
Northwood		✓		

Note. Source: Anchorage School District website, 2018.

Nearly all (32 of 38) ASD preschool teachers participated in this study's survey. As can be determined by the table, those educators are teaching in Title 1 schools, Migrant Education programs or in preschools that serve children with special needs. Of the 32 preschool teachers who took the survey, only 2 reported having no Alaska Native students in their class. The remaining 30 teachers who participated in the survey reported they served a total of 113 Alaska Native students. As the enrollment number for preschoolers across the ASD during the 2018-2019 school year was 1,030 (Personal communication, ASD Preschool Director, December 11, 2018), 9.1% of the total number of preschoolers in the ASD are Alaska Native, approximately the same number of the total Alaska Native student population in the district.

The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of teachers who took the survey were as follows: 3.03% were Alaska Native or American Indian, 3.03% were Hispanic, 6.06% identified as Mixed Heritage, 81.82% were Caucasian/White, and 6.06% identified as Other. Years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 36 years with 8 teachers reporting 5 or fewer years of experience in the classroom.

4.5 Survey Quantitative Data

On a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* the survey of ASD preschool teachers revealed that 47% strongly agreed that Native families place a high value on the education of their children and 37% agreed. Teachers also reported that they consider the cultural values and communication styles of Native families in how they structure outreach to them. Most (61%) reported they strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel comfortable communicating with Native families" whereas 51% agreed with the statement, "I want to know more about Alaska

Native cultural values.” To the statement, “I want to know more about the history of schooling for Alaska Natives and how it may affect student success today,” 42% strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 18% somewhat agreed, and 3% did not agree. Most teachers wanted to learn more about how to build stronger partnerships with Native families with 48% reporting they strongly agreed, 48% agreed, and 3% somewhat agreed.

The next section presents responses the preschool teachers provided in the open-ended survey items. These reveal how the teachers viewed their own knowledge and skills around culturally sustaining outreach to Native families. Recommendations on how to improve their own effectiveness in creating meaningful home-school partnerships were also provided by the teachers. Areas where teachers would like more professional development from the ASD are discussed as well.

4.6 Survey Narrative Data

Data gathered through the open-ended items of the survey were coded for patterns in how the preschool teachers defined and implemented culturally sustaining outreach to the families of their Native students. The following sections categorize the preschool teachers’ narrative responses on the survey according to the primary themes discovered in the data analysis. The 47 narrative responses were also uploaded to the software data analysis program, *Atlas.ti*, for a frequency count of the coded responses. Table 6 compares the frequency count of the coded responses for each theme found.

Table 6

Frequency Thematic Codes Found in Narrative Section of Preschool Teacher Survey

Theme	Frequency in Total Responses
Strong Relationships with Families	27%
Intentional Outreach Practices	17%
Teacher as Advocate/Ally	19%
Positive Dispositions of Educator	13%
Integrating Families' Funds of Knowledge	13%
Shared Definition of School Success with Families	8%
Need for Professional Development on Effective Outreach to Native Families	27%

A detailed look at the narrative responses of the preschool teachers under each coded theme is presented under the following sections.

4.6.1 Importance of Creating Relational Accountability with Indigenous Families

Relational accountability according to Wilson (2008) is commitment to including the 3 Rs in interactions with others to include respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. This principle is a deeply held value for many Indigenous peoples and one that educators would benefit from understanding and implementing in their outreach to families of their Native students. The importance of establishing and nurturing caring, authentic relationships with Native families occurred in 27% of the responses.

This understanding was reflected in many of the responses of participants to the survey. For example, on the item, “What strategies do you use to create strong partnerships with Alaska Native families?” there were responses that included traditional kinds of outreach such as open houses, monthly newsletters, and parent-teacher conferences, but many went beyond those to more authentic and reciprocal relationships with families.

One of the most powerful forms of outreach mentioned by the teachers were regular visits to the home of students' families. One third of the teachers recommended home visits for building strong and trusting partnerships with families. As expressed by one educator,

The most effective strategy to get to know the families has been Home Visits. I have been in each students' home, and the positive impact of those interactions have been priceless when it comes to the relationships with the students and the families.

Another teacher wrote, "Home visits also help to build a bigger relationship than just *school* and give me a chance to demonstrate my respect and appreciation for what is being provided for the children in their home." Comments such as this align with the research on Indigenous value systems that prioritize relationality over more impersonal transactions with others. Both teachers seem to have a sound understanding and ownership of the Indigenous concept of relational accountability and home visits are an outreach strategy that clearly aligns with that principle.

Unfortunately, not all preschool teachers in the ASD can conduct home visits. One teacher explained that, "In the past- home visits were very effective, but our district no longer supports those or gives us time for home visits with the special education preschooler families." As explained in the literature review, implementing a home visit program involves a level of commitment to time, personnel, and resources that many school leaders are unwilling or unable to support.

In cases where teachers are not able or willing to participate in home visits, there are other effective ways of building and nurturing meaningful relationships between

families and educators. Although they may not be as significant in establishing a trusting bond with families, teachers must remain realistic and flexible in what they are able to accomplish. Other strategies that teachers reported as supporting closer connections with families included

- Sharing photos of students involved in classroom activities with families through group texts
- Daily, informal conversations with families during drop-off or pick-up times
- Creating spaces in the classroom where families are acknowledged such as a bulletin board with photos of families with their children
- Regularly scheduled phone calls to homes that are positive in nature
- Making clear to family members they are welcome in the classroom and can stay as long as they like
- Accommodating families' schedules and child-care needs by being flexible in terms of meeting times. Assuring families they are welcome to bring younger children or extended family to conferences, etc.
- Frequent, hand-written notes home that communicate how much a teacher enjoys a family's child or what is being learned in the classroom

One teacher summed up her approach to developing strong partnerships with the families of her Native students in this way:

Early in the year, I send many photos from class of the students to their families with a narrative about what I am seeing and what they are

learning to demonstrate my awareness of their child and my belief that they are succeeding in my classroom. I also try to engage in conversation, regarding school and outside life, whenever parents/aunts/uncles/grandparents drop off or pick up their students. By developing this more casual relationship, there is more of a foundation when more challenging conversations need to happen. Home visits also help to build a bigger relationship than just *school* and give me a chance to demonstrate my respect and appreciation for what is being provided for the children in their home.

It is clear this educator places building meaningful partnerships with families as a high priority in her daily practice and goes the extra mile to ensure those connections are secure and maintained. That kind of intentionality as a critical component of culturally sustaining family engagement is discussed next.

4.6.2 Importance of Intentionality in Family Outreach

Research in effective family engagement makes clear that it is imperative educators have well-articulated outreach strategies to families and intentional plans for implementing it throughout their practices (Epstein, 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). The importance of intentionality in planning and implementing outreach to Native families occurred in 17% of the responses.

Many of the responses of the preschool teachers provided evidence that partnering with their students' families is a priority, but one teacher, herself an Alaska Native, provided a compelling example of how to integrate thoughtful and intentional outreach in

one's teaching. This educator shared how she wove communication and relationship-building with families into the daily life of her classroom with the following comment:

Open communication with phone calls, *Remind* App, email, and chatting during drop off and pick-up. I invite families to stay as long as they wish, pop in anytime, some in early for pick-up and join the class. I send home information on how to engage their children in learning at home in children's backpacks, via the *Remind* App, and in person. I have pictures of many different types of families in the classroom. I have objects, stories, and games from many cultures, and share stories of my own Alaska Native family and our lifestyle—we hunt and gather to make traditional foods. I understand many of my students' family members may have had adverse experiences in school and try to alleviate any perceived or shared concerns by being friendly, welcoming, and willing to just listen.

This teacher's family outreach provides evidence that she incorporates relational accountability, plans and implements her outreach with intentionality, sees herself as an equal partner with families and ally to them, accesses the funds of knowledge of families, exhibits the dispositions of a culturally competent individual and professional, and is focused on partnerships to support student success.

Teachers such as this who identify as Alaska Native provide an insider's perspective on the cultural values and ways of life of Native students and families. These professionals are a critical source of information and expertise valuable to the ASD in understanding how to plan and provide more appropriate and culturally sustaining partnerships with Native families.

4.6.3 Educator: An Ally to Native Families

Teachers who see themselves as allies and authentic partners to the families of their students are more likely to create strong and trusting relationships with them. These are educators who are family-centered in their approach to outreach and value families' expertise. Without the holistic knowledge of a student that only a family member can provide, educators are not able to differentiate instruction in ways that meet the learning needs of each child. The belief that one of the most important roles of an educator is to serve as an ally and advocate of families was seen in 19% of the responses.

In this regard, one teacher described how she believed the perspectives and voices of Native families are often marginalized by dominant Western systems of schooling. She wrote,

We want Alaska Native families to partner with us (and) we need to show these families how we can partner with them and their agenda. I feel that they have not been heard for long enough.

When educators take the time to listen to family members' suggestions and concerns it communicates a genuine desire to form an equitable partnership with them. Ways that teachers shared they do this were

- Learn more about families' culture(s)
- Keeping multiple modes of communication open
- Asking how I can help and support them
- Informal conversation in classroom

- Including them in the classroom, asking them to share their customs and knowledge. Taking time to get to know them via home visits and conferences
- Kindness and support
- Listen and be understanding
- I have found success in just being positive
- Feeling comfortable to take the time to wait for a response has helped a lot.

One of the most important ways educators communicate their commitment to walking alongside families as equal partners is to include families' experiences and expertise in the daily life of the classroom. The next section discusses how teachers who participated in the survey addressed this critical aspect of the home-school connection.

4.6.4 Integrating Families' Funds of Knowledge in Home-School Partnerships

Including the cultural values, experiences, and expertise of families indicates a dedication to recognizing the fundamental contributions families have to learning within and outside of the classroom. Integrating the funds of knowledge of the Native families into the daily life of the classroom and instruction was a belief that 13% of the preschool teachers discussed in their responses.

A comment by a teacher who identified as non-Native provided evidence of this understanding. She articulated her belief in the importance of including the cultural values and knowledge of Native families in her classroom by stating,

I have found that a lot of Alaska Native Families have a desire to ensure that their heritage doesn't die and their community is very tight and

important to them. Giving families opportunities to pass on their traditions without much cost involved and giving flexibility [send recording of storytelling for class if they can't come due to work, or teacher meets up after school hours to do this] *Learning* to some Alaska Native people is not done in a classroom but is a way of life.

These comments point to an educator who understands the holistic orientation that many Native communities have regarding education. As Kawagley, (2006) noted, “the holistic approach to teaching and learning of the Native people represents a significant difference in perspective from the incremental and componential ways of Western education” (p. 97).

Other teachers mentioned how daily acts of respect for the cultures and lifeways of their Native students’ families make a difference. A teacher wrote that she was intentional about learning the Indigenous names of family members by writing them down and learning how to pronounce them. Another discussed how she encouraged Native families to bring in traditional foods when she hosted a family event like a potluck.

Interestingly, 8% of the responses in this category specifically mentioned the importance of including Native foods at potlucks and family nights. Those responses noted that including meals or having potluck dinners at their family events created a sense of community and honored the value of sharing for their Native families. One teacher reported how important it was to try foods harvested through subsistence such as whale that Native families brought to school after a harvest. In fact, several teachers expressed how critical it is for them to be intentional in communicating to the families of

Native students their interest in Native cultures including subsistence foods, languages, and their family experiences. One teacher, realizing the role of Elders in Native cultures as the culture bearers of the community wrote, “I would love to do more cultural outreach getting elders involved within the school community.”

The awareness these teachers exhibit, and accompanying outreach, goes a long way toward communicating to Native families the educators’ value for learning about what matters to them. Warm curiosity, kindness, and compassion for students’ families are personal qualities of culturally competent individuals and are usually evident in their professional lives as educators. In my interviews with Native family members who participated in this study, it was clear the qualities or dispositions of their children’s teachers were a critical factor in encouraging them to be engaged in school. The next section explores this factor as shared in the survey responses of the preschool teachers.

4.6.5 Educator Dispositions: A Factor in Effective Outreach

The importance of listening in patient and empathetic ways was mentioned in 13% of the written responses in the narrative section. “Active listening is key,” wrote one teacher and another discussed the importance of allowing a longer wait time in conversations with Native family members to account for a more relaxed pace in communication styles than most non-Native teachers are accustomed to.

The tone of relationships was another theme as the teachers described the importance of relaxed and informal interactions with Native family members. This approach necessitates the willingness of educators to loosen attachments to being the expert in the room and share power with the families of their students. As one teacher noted,

Flexibility in every area possible—food or meal gatherings—the honoring and respect of their heritage, culture, and history—empathizing with family members ... allowing the families to share in ways that they want can contribute to partnership and only giving context rather than *to do* lists.

This teacher recognized the importance of meeting Native families where they are, avoiding a directive and authoritarian approach and providing outreach that meets their individual needs. Family-centric practices such as this are powerful antidotes to traditional approaches of Western schooling that sought to assimilate Native families.

Only one teacher shared awareness of how the negative schooling experiences of some Native family members may have affected their desire to partner with non-Native educators. She wrote, “I understand many of my students’ family members may have had adverse experiences in school and try to alleviate any perceived or shared concerns by being friendly, welcoming, and willing to just listen.”

Comments by this teacher provide evidence of her dedication to creating respectful and positive schooling experiences for the Native families she serves. She also mentioned the importance of being an active listener and willingness to put aside the role of advisor and adopt the stance of colleague to families. These are the dispositions of a genuinely caring and empathetic educator who surely connects in meaningful ways with the families of her Native students.

One educator used her own experiences as a member of a minority group to express empathy for Native students and families who may have moved from rural

communities and find the complexities of life in the city and large schools overwhelming. She shared,

I am a blonde, green-eyed teacher, but I was raised in the village as a minority. I know how hard it can be. I have lived it. Not living in the village but moving into town and being in ASD. Coming out of the village was so difficult I don't want my students to be treated the way I was. I work with my students and my families to teach and educate [them about these issues].

As discussed in the previous chapter, many Native families have strong ties to rural Alaska, and this is not always recognized by urban educators in the ASD. Many teachers are hired from outside the state and may not be aware of this important factor in how Native students and their families approach the large school settings of the ASD. Even some teachers who grew up in the State as non-Natives, may not have had opportunities to travel in rural Alaska where many Native communities are located. Without those experiences it is difficult for non-Native educators to understand the depth of connection many Indigenous families have to extended family who continue to live in rural communities and to subsistence lifeways.

Evidence that preschool teachers who took the survey share families' goal of student success, was also present in comments shared. The following section will discuss this element as it unifies and motivates families and educators to form strong partnerships.

4.6.6 A Focus on Student Success

As shown in the section on quantitative results of the survey, the majority, or 84% of the preschool teachers, agreed that Native families value education. The purposes of schooling may not always be clearly communicated between families and educators and this is important as the study found that Native family members tend to view education as more holistic than many non-Native school staff; however, as most preschool teachers are closely attuned to the needs of the whole child and plan learning experiences to address each developmental domain, whether intellectual, physical, social, or emotional, their goals for student success are more likely to align with those of the Indigenous families they serve. The importance of establishing shared definitions of student success with Native families was present in only 8% of the responses. Whether the teachers assumed that they and Native families did share similar ideas around what constituted school success for their children was not clear.

As was previously noted by an insightful teacher who participated in the survey, “*Learning* to some Alaska Native peoples is not done in a classroom but is a way of life.” Ways teachers expressed how they focus on the success of their students as they partner with families were

- Text or e-mail to regularly communicate and send photos of what their students are doing in the classroom with me to enhance their learning experience
- Introducing them to Unite for Literacy and the books translated in their home language

- Giving families materials and modeling their use for practice at home: books, scissors, alphabet knowledge games, social emotional tools and strategies
- [Ask] how can I tie in your heritage with this lesson and if possible, what ways could you help ... give choices but with some open-ended options [e.g., storytelling, show and tell type thing with something from ancestors, bring in cultural foods]

Studies are clear that the focus on student success by families and educators is what drives strong home-school partnerships and makes the most significant impact on achievement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). This was reflected in the Indian Education materials examined in the content analysis and has been validated throughout research on family engagement.

The next section discusses how ASD administrators might recognize the positive contributions caring and competent teachers, such as those featured above, are making toward encouraging more positive partnerships with Native families. It also provides evidence the teachers stated a need for more professional development on creating strong partnerships with Native families.

4.7 Building on the Positive: Professional Development to Strengthen Existing Outreach

Teachers indicated that more professional development around cross-cultural communication, trauma-informed practices and the history of Western schooling for Alaska Natives would improve their outreach and partnerships with Indigenous families. The importance of learning more about Alaska Native cultures, the history of Western

schooling for Native peoples, and how to plan and implement more effective outreach strategies was seen in 27% of the responses.

As the majority of educators in the ASD are Caucasian, cross-cultural communication skills in relating to Native family members is clearly important. As noted earlier, even though 61% of the teachers strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel comfortable communicating with the families of my Native students,” 96% of the teachers reported wanting to learn how to be more effective in how they relate to and collaborate with Native families. As one teacher wrote,

We know that the way in which people communicate varies from culture to culture. Although there are many, many cultures within the broad term Alaska Natives, perhaps through research, we could find some commonalities between some of the bigger tribes [e.g., Yup’ik, Athabascan, Aleut, Inupiaq] in how they best communicate and receive communication to have stronger partnerships. [For example,] the speed in which a teacher talks, the wait time that a teacher gives parents to answer questions, respond, or give an opinion. the tone of voice, eye contact etc.

Other responses included a range of attitudes about the importance of learning how to communicate cross-culturally. One educator mentioned how beneficial previous experiences in rural Alaska were to developing a deeper understanding of Native values and lifeways and she uses that with her urban Native families. She wrote,

I was fortunate enough to be a part of multiple trainings that gave me experience in rural Alaska. I participated in the Rose Urban Rural exchange in Klukwan, a science training in Akiak and iTrec, which took

us to Nome. These experiences were extremely valuable and would be of great benefit to other teachers new to Alaska or unfamiliar with rural Alaska.

This teacher had a level of comfort with Native cultures and connected easily with the families of her Native students.

On the other hand, one teacher seemed defensive regarding adapting her communication style cross-culturally. She responded, “Communication only works if it is two ways. We as educators can make every effort, if it is not reciprocated, that is out of our control. Families need to have an understanding of this importance as well.” This attitude did seem to be an outlier. Most teachers expressed a genuine desire to learn more about the cultures, experiences, and communication preferences of the families of their Native students.

4.8 Conclusions

The narrative responses of the preschool teachers provided a rich understanding of how they are partnering with Native families to benefit students. Descriptions of their outreach practices reflected positive attitudes and firm beliefs around how to create effective partnerships with the families of their Native students.

Responses showed the teachers strive to be welcoming and respectful in their interactions with Native families; these are key to addressing the Indigenous value of relational accountability. They also strive to integrate the richness of Native families’ funds of knowledge. Many are dedicated to planning outreach intentionally and include it in their daily practice as educators, a commitment that ensures families are authentic partners in their children’s schooling. It is also clear most teachers are genuinely caring,

empathetic, and respectful to Native families; individual and professional dispositions that engender meaningful relationships with families.

This chapter began with results of the content analysis of ASD outreach materials which determined that the Indian Education program is doing a more effective job of being culturally responsive and sustaining in its communication to Native families than general district messaging. Data gathered from the survey to ASD preschool teachers displayed evidence of the *pockets of excellence* that exist within classrooms. Teachers who participated in the survey were examples of the difference dedicated and intentional outreach can make in the lives of their students and students' families. These teachers could serve as models of culturally sustaining family engagement to colleagues at all grade levels.

In Chapter 5, findings from interviews with eight Alaska Native family are presented as well as the researcher's field notes from attendance at several family events. The chapter also provides a culturally sustaining family engagement framework, determined through analysis of data from the study as well as findings from the literature review.

Chapter 5

Presentation of Findings: Part 2

This chapter presents data from interviews with eight Alaska Native family members regarding their experiences around partnerships with educators in the ASD and CINHS programs. Findings from the interviews are presented as evidence of answering the research question, “How do Alaska Native families of preschool children in an urban setting such as Anchorage experience school outreach and which practices are seen as culturally sustaining and/or effective?”

Prior to presentation of the findings, a family engagement framework is provided to illustrate potential components of culturally sustaining partnerships with Native families in the ASD. The framework was developed by the researcher after conducting the literature review and analyzing data from interviews with the Native families who participated in this study. Member checks with the family members interviewed for this study provided additional data.

In addition to the framework, demographics of the interview participants is presented along with a discussion of how families chose where to enroll their children in the ASD. This provides the reader with an understanding of options open to Native families in the district, as well as limitations they may face as they seek quality education for their children.

5.1 A Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement Framework

Data from the interviews was analyzed to determine how Native families defined the most important aspects of outreach from the schools that serve their children. According to the data, the families valued partnerships with educators who recognized

their need for (a) *Family and Community Support*, (b) *Educators as Allies*, (c) *Positive Transitions from Rural to Urban Schools*, (d) *Holistic Approaches to Education*, (e) *Strong Home-School Connections*, and (f) *Recognition of Subsistence as a Native Core Value*.

According to the literature review on effective family engagement and on Indigenous value systems, potential indicators of high impact partnerships between educators and Alaska Native families include school outreach practices that are (a) *Relationally Accountable*, (b) *Intentional and Ongoing*, (c) *Value Mutually Defined Measures of Student Success*, (d) *Use Strengths-based Approaches*, (e) *Integrate Families' Funds of Knowledge*, and (f) *View Families as Equal Partners*. Table 7 illustrates how themes from the analysis of interview data compare to the findings of literature review on culturally sustaining school outreach to Indigenous families.

Table 7

Comparing Interview Themes to Literature Review Themes on Elements of High-Impact Family Outreach Practices to Indigenous Families

Interview Themes	Literature Review Themes
<i>Importance of Family and Community</i>	<i>Equitable Partnerships between Families and Educators</i> (Fillion-Wilson & Gray-Yull, 2016; Kanu, 2007)
<i>Educators as Allies</i>	<i>Need for Strengths-Based Approaches from Educators</i> (Yull et al., 2014)
<i>Need for Positive Transitions from Rural to Urban School Settings</i>	<i>Intentional and Ongoing Outreach by Schools</i> (Epstein, 2018)
<i>Strong Home-School Connection</i>	<i>Relational Accountability as Indigenous Value</i> (John-Shields, 2018; Wilson, 2008)
<i>Holistic View of Education</i>	<i>Mutually Defined Measures of Student Success</i> (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014; McCarty & Lee, 2014)
<i>Subsistence as Native Core Value</i>	<i>Families' Funds of Knowledge in School Partnerships</i> (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Moll, 1992)

The researcher combined findings from the interviews with those from the literature review to develop an overarching framework of the primary components of culturally sustaining outreach to Alaska Native families. Each informed understanding of how the families who participated in this study experienced outreach in the ASD and other preschool programs their children attended. Families also provided recommendations on ways educators and schools might improve outreach practices. Figure 4 illustrates how both sets of findings overlap to provide potential indicators of effective outreach to Alaska Native families in the ASD.



Figure 4. Primary components of culturally sustaining outreach as determined through literature review and interviews of Alaska Native families.

The next section discusses the intentionality with which families who participated in this study chose appropriate schools for their children in the ASD.

5.2 School Choice: A Factor in Family Satisfaction and Student Success

Distinct differences existed in how the Native families experienced outreach by their children’s teachers and schools depending on whether their children attended

programs focused on serving Native families or not and which grade level their child had attained. All the families had enrolled their preschool children in either the ANCCS or CINHS; some after initially enrolling their child in a neighborhood school.

Reasons for these choices included a higher ratio of Alaska Native teachers, culturally relevant curricula, a smaller school community, the welcoming atmosphere provided by school personnel, a home-like environment that included cultural artifacts, and the fact that the programs were available free of charge. Each family made a thoroughly considered choice of where to place their preschool children which often included a commitment to transporting them to and from school and agreements to donate time and resources to the schools. Table 8 gives an overview of their cultural backgrounds and relationships to their children.

Table 8

Demographics of Interview Participants

Participant	Family Role	Occupation	Cultural Background	From Rural Alaska
1	Mother	Preschool Teacher	Inupiaq/Caucasian	Yes
2	Mother	Stay-at-home mother	Yup'ik	Yes
3	Father	Construction worker	Yup'ik	Yes
4	Mother	Elementary School Teacher	Yup'ik/Caucasian	Yes
5	Adoptive mother	University professor	Caucasian	No
6	Mother	Full-time university student	Inupiaq/Filipino	No
7	Father	Computer programmer	Caucasian	No
8	Mother	Full-time university student	Yup'ik/Caucasian	No

It should be noted that all the families in this study included two parents in the household and many had the support of extended family members as well. This may have been a factor in the decision to choose a preschool program or charter school that required families provide transportation and a commitment to volunteer time and resources. Single parent families with limited support often have challenges juggling multiple responsibilities, making it more difficult to offer their children similar schooling options. In addition, grandparents are increasingly raising grandchildren and face barriers to school options due to fixed incomes and age-related issues. The researcher planned to interview family members that represented both single parent households and those of grandparents raising grandchildren but was unable to find willing participants. The next section discusses how categories of meaning were determined from the interview data followed by the frequency count for each theme.

5.3 Emergent Themes in the Interview Data

Transcriptions of interviews with each of the Alaska Native family members who participated in this study were analyzed using first and second cycle coding processes (Miles et al., 2014). Hand coding by the researcher was done along with the use of the software data analysis program *Atlas.ti* to conduct frequency counts of primary themes found in interviews. The section that follows presents the frequency with which coded responses occurred throughout the interview data and provides the reader with a sense of what Alaska Native families valued in their interactions with the educators and schools that serve their children.

5.3.1 Category Frequency in Interview Responses

Categories that occurred most frequently in response to interview questions around culturally sustaining family outreach were (a) *Importance of Family and Community*, (b) *Educators as Allies to Families*, (c) *Need for Positive Transitions from Rural to Urban School Settings*, (d) *Holistic View of Education*, (e) *Importance of a Strong Home-School Connection*, and (f) *Subsistence as a Native Core Value*. Table 9 shows how often the frequency of coded responses from each category occurred in the interview data.

Table 9

Frequency Thematic Codes Found in Interviews

Theme	Frequency in Total Responses
Importance of Family and Community	39%
Need for Educators as Allies	26%
Challenging Transitions from Rural to Urban Schools	20%
Holistic Views of Education	18%
Need for Strong Home-School Connection	26%
Subsistence as a Core Native Value	30%

Each of these primary codes combined related sub-categories in the total frequency count. For example, in the *Importance of Family and Community* theme, families' value for education and commitment to communicating this to their children was considered a secondary but related category. Families' value for their Indigenous identity was also included, as well as the importance of support from extended family. The *Importance of Family and Community* theme occurred in 39% of the total coded responses from the interviews.

Educators as Allies for school success was also a recurring theme and occurred in 26% of the coded responses. This included the influence of teachers who built strong, two-way relationships with families through respectful, positive, and frequent communication with families; of teachers who had high expectations for their children's success; and of teachers who were committed to integrating the families' funds of knowledge and cultures in their classroom instruction. Descriptions of teachers who were knowledgeable about differences in cross-cultural communication styles were also mentioned throughout the interviews. Family members also discussed their appreciation for non-Native educators who listen fully and respectfully, are aware of the importance of non-verbal communication, and who use longer wait times before responding when in conversation.

As seen in Table 8, half the family members were originally from rural Alaska. Most of the members who relocated to Anchorage did so as children. Transferring to large, urban schools were experiences the family members from rural Alaska often described in terms of culture shock and disorientation. This led to creation of the category, *Need for Positive Transition from Rural to Urban Schools*. Family members who had the experience of relocating from a rural school to Anchorage, spoke of negative assumptions and comments made by teachers and classmates about being Alaska Native or of feeling invisible or misunderstood. Responses in this category encompassed 20% of all those coded.

Acclimating to larger urban schools, with the more impersonal environments and unfamiliar school cultures was difficult for all who had transferred from rural Alaska. For several families, their children had experienced similar transitions from rural to urban

schools as their parents relocated to Anchorage. Families who chose to enroll their preschool children in Native programs after relocating from rural communities reported that the welcoming environments, smaller settings, and inclusion of familiar elements of rural life such as potlucks and Native teachers provided a more seamless transition to urban schools.

Each family described the importance of schooling that encompassed a balanced approach, leading to the category, *Holistic Views of Education*. This category encompassed 18% of the coded responses reflecting the families' goal for educational experiences that included their Native cultures, values, and for some, their Native languages. Family members valued school experiences for their children that placed as much emphasis on being *good people* as on building academic knowledge and skills. Bringing Elders into classrooms as resource persons and culture bearers was a suggestion from several of the participants. They saw Elders sharing Native values and norms of behavior as being of great importance to the development of their children.

Criteria the families sought in their children's schools included a welcoming, family-like environment, smaller class sizes, inclusion of Native cultures and languages in the curriculum, and expectations from teachers for high academic performance from students. In addition, most family members shared their belief that character education should be a part of their children's schooling. They expressed a desire for a balanced approach to the development of their children, with as much emphasis on social-emotional skills as on academics.

Families also expressed their desire to have stronger connections to their children's schools and teachers with 26% of the coded responses falling under this

category. This category was titled, *Strong Home-School Connections*. Several family members mentioned the power of home visits in building trusting and respectful partnerships with their children's teachers. Other ways teachers developed a firm bridge from school to home were events such as family potlucks, student performances, and direct invitations to participate in classroom activities.

Finally, the category of *Subsistence as a Native Core Value* was a thread running throughout the interviews. This category showed up in 30% of the coded responses and was mentioned by family members who had moved from rural Alaska as well as those who were born and raised in Anchorage or another urban area such as Fairbanks. Multiple comments in this category expressed how deeply families held subsistence as a traditional Native value. It was clear that subsistence carried importance beyond the practical implications of providing for one's family. Subsistence was described as a beloved manifestation of close ties to their Native communities, their Indigenous lands, and traditional ways of life. The remaining sections of this chapter provide detailed evidence of how themes emerged from the interview data as well as the significance of the study's findings for increasing participation in home-school partnerships by Native families. Each theme contributes to a framework of effective outreach to the families of urban Native students in Anchorage, Alaska.

5.3.2 Importance of Family and Community Connections to Alaska Natives

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) asserted that one key difference between Western and Indigenous worldviews are the individualistic or collectivistic value systems held by each. Western societies tend to elevate the accomplishments of individuals and encourage competition whereas collectivistic cultures are more apt to value success of the group and

emphasize such qualities as cooperation. Although individuals are influenced by a complexity of factors, many members of Native families and communities lean in the direction of a collectivistic worldview. Individuals are seen in relation to the role they serve in their families and communities and how they contribute to the benefit of the whole.

Yup'ik scholar Kawagley (2006) documented Indigenous ways of knowing and described the critical importance of relationality and community to Native peoples. Kawagley emphasized that without understanding this element of Indigenous epistemologies, bridging the cultural gap between Native and Western approaches is not possible. Kawagley (2006) pointed out that the Yupiaq term for relatives is the same as that for “viscera” with its “connotations of deeply interconnected feelings” (p. 10).

With an awareness of how profoundly Native peoples view their identities as members of their families and communities, non-Native educators would be better equipped to create more authentic and culturally meaningful school outreach. Reverence for ancestors and ancient traditions of connection are also an integral element of Indigenous worldviews. As noted by Rasmus et al. (2019), passing on traditional values from one generation to another was “collective, relational, cyclical ..., and involve(d) the social networks of ancestors to descendants [It] could only be understood in relationship to others in the circle of family and community” (p. 48).

Throughout the interviews there was evidence of deep connections that many Native individuals have across their extended families and communities. For example, several interview participants described fluid structures to their families where

grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins often lived in the same home at one time or another. As explained by one Native mother,

I grew up with four brothers and was the only [biological] daughter that my parents had [until] they adopted my cousin when her mom passed away when I was in seventh grade In my senior year, my parents adopted a little girl who was Siberian Yupik A little bit after a while I was going to college, my parents became legal guardians for another Alaskan Native girl.

Interview participants also mentioned the close ties they have with extended family in rural communities and reiterated how family is not limited to members of one's biological family. One mother stated, "There is a broad view of families at the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School, because families are not necessarily people you're related to." Another mother described how growing up in Anchorage, she and her single mother spent every weekend at the homes of extended family members across the city.

The importance of close connection to extended family for many Alaska Natives has direct implications for non-Native educators wanting to establish meaningful communication with the families of their Native students. They cannot assume a student's family is comprised of a traditional nuclear family with a mother, father, and siblings, operating as a single functioning unit. For school outreach to be culturally respectful of all families, biases about the makeup of a student's family must be examined. One family member, a non-Native adoptive mother of a Native child, shared her perspective as an educator. She stated,

We [non-Native educators] make assumptions about Native families because strategies that work with our Caucasian parents don't necessarily work with our Native parents, then we make assumptions about those parents, that they just don't want to be involved, that they don't care about education.

This insight pointed to how misunderstandings may occur between non-Native educators and Native families when the differences in worldviews and cultural values aren't considered or allowed for by non-Native school personnel. As noted by cross-cultural education scholar Ginsberg, (2015), "It is possible to diminish the potential and needs of others at our most subconscious levels and in our most implicit ways without any awareness that we are doing so" (p. 17). Conversely, when schools and teachers make a conscious effort to learn about the structures and values of their students' families, it goes a long way toward being genuine advocates of both students and families. The next section presents how families viewed the importance of advocacy from schools and teachers in the support of the school success of their children.

5.3.3 Educators: Allies of Native Families

Although it is imperative that educators have the pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life, these competencies alone are not enough to support the totality of student success. As stated by Banks et al. (2005),

Teachers' attitudes and expectations, as well as their knowledge of how to incorporate cultures, experiences, and needs of their students into their

teaching, significantly influence what students learn and the quality of their learning opportunities. (p. 243)

Therefore, teachers must be aware of the values and norms of their students' families so they understand the cultural *boundary crossing* (Davidson & Phelan, 1999) most Native students and families must continually navigate between home and school.

An educator characteristic described as crucial across the interviews was a positive orientation toward the families and their children. They valued teachers who had a strengths-based perspective of how their expertise and cultural values contributed to the academic and developmental progress of their children. These teachers possessed “the inclination to take responsibility for children’s learning ... and seek new approaches to teaching that allow greater success with students” (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 388), including appreciating contributions families’ assets have to student success.

This educator disposition is especially important in cross-cultural learning environments where educators may not possess experience and backgrounds similar to their students. In today’s diverse classrooms, it is important that educators be committed to leaving their cultural comfort zones to learn about the worldviews and beliefs of their students’ families.

Comments by one of the mothers interviewed reflected her appreciation for teachers who made her feel like a valued member of the home-school partnership. This mother was reserved throughout the interview but when asked what advice she would give teachers on ways to be more supportive to Native families she said firmly, “How a teacher treats you really matters. The teachers put an impact on how you like school [for both students and family members].” She went on to describe how she and her husband

had placed their kindergarten daughter in a neighborhood school, but at the end of the year decided to transfer her to the ANCCS for first grade. She reported that the decision was made because they felt their daughter and family were marginalized at the neighborhood school. They felt invisible and unheard. At ANCCS she said,

They welcome you. They respect you and your culture and background.

They do cultural activities. Some of the teachers here are Native. The classmates, my daughters know them, family-wise. I feel like at this school teachers pay more attention. They help her more. The interaction is better.

This mother believed that having more Native teachers at the charter school was a benefit as they understood Native families' cultural values; however, at the time of the interview, a younger daughter was attending the preschool program at the charter school and the teacher was non-Native. The non-Native teacher drew praise from the mother for her willingness to reach out to their family through ongoing communication, home visits, and her overall warm and welcoming presence.

Another Native mother, a preschool teacher who taught at a Title 1 school, described how she admired one of her non-Native colleagues for her outreach practices to diverse families. This mother hoped to emulate her colleague as she saw how families respected her and requested their children be placed in her classroom. The mother shared ways this popular teacher partnered with families and made sure they knew what was happening daily with their children. She said,

I hear a lot of parents request that teacher, because of how much they are on a personal level with her and how much she keeps their families just—

how important she makes them feel by telling them, “Your kid had a really hard day with us today. We really worked on it” and when they're not here at school [she asks the parents], “Why is your kid not here?” Just seeing her keeping it on a personal level with her families, I could tell that she is a wanted teacher, because families have that connection.

This mother also noted that the principal at her school set the example for staff and faculty by welcoming families through intentional outreach. He was committed to including their cultures and languages in the life of the school as much as possible. For example, during school-wide morning announcements, this administrator would share words and phrases from home languages spoken by students. This encouraged an awareness of the diversity of backgrounds in the student population and surrounding community. The role of school leader in creating an inclusive school environment and expectation of welcoming families was mentioned in several interviews.

One mother said she believed schools and teachers could have a powerful and lasting impact on the confidence and school success of Native students when they advocated for them. She asserted,

We've heard from some of the high schools in Anchorage School District saying they can tell which kids have been to the Alaska Native Cultural Charter school because they carry themselves differently than—you know, they speak out in class more. They're not just trying to be invisible.

This same parent described how her children had benefitted from attending ANCCS. She said teachers there had called her almost weekly. She always knew when her children were missing an assignment or had done particularly well on a project. She

also mentioned the home-like environment of the school with its smaller student population and close-knit community. The school held monthly potlucks and encouraged the students to “learn as much as they could” about their Native cultures.

One mother and father of three school-age children had enrolled each child in the CINHS program when the children were preschoolers. The director of the CINHS program had recommended I interview this family as they were very involved in their children’s education and had strong opinions about the importance of solid partnerships between families and schools. This couple had been high school sweethearts and teen parents and overcome many obstacles to be at a place in their lives where they felt proud of the job they were doing to provide for their family and the success their children were having in school.

In a testimony to the power of teacher advocacy and connection, the father described how the school personnel at CINHS had been instrumental in encouraging he and his wife to persevere during some of the challenging times of raising children and trying to get ahead as very young parents. He shared,

I’m trying to get this college degree, or I’m trying to get a higher paying job. Every time we were able to check something like that off, the teachers were like cheerleaders for us. They were like, “Good job, and that’s so exciting!” My wife, especially, ’cause I’m not as outgoing, but she has a lot of good friends that she’s made over there that get—that their faces light up when they see us at school, or we see them in the mall or wherever we run into them. They are advocates; the staff and the teachers.

Another example came from the non-Native adoptive mother. Her preschooler had special needs and the child's teacher had made a significant impact on her progress.

The mother shared,

My daughter's teacher was amazing. She was wonderful. She was very supportive. She really took the time to work on—she understood trauma... my adopted daughter was just straight out of foster care. She'd just been removed from her family and was living with us, so her teacher really understood how to support her in a school setting It was really a wonderful fit and our daughter made extraordinary growth because at three and a half she wasn't speaking, and so she made such huge gains.

This mother went on to describe how the teachers at the ANCCS were so adept at listening and being supportive, that even though the school did not offer special education services for her daughter, she said, “the general education teachers were just taking on that role to where the special education support was not even necessary at that point.” In the next section, further evidence is presented regarding the critical role that educators and schools play in encouraging and supporting families' sense of connection and belonging. Specifically, the importance of non-Native educators understanding the challenges that Alaska Native families who have relocated from rural communities to urban settings like Anchorage are discussed as well as the impact this transition can have on their family lives and the progress their children make in school.

5.3.4 Transitions from Rural to Urban School Settings

As noted in the literature review, the U.S. Census (2010) reported that most Native American, American Indian, and Alaska Natives live in urban areas. Even so,

many Alaska Native families continue to have strong ties to rural communities where extended family members may reside. Half of the family members interviewed for this study had experienced relocating from a rural village as a child or had moved from rural to urban Alaska communities with their own children.

The challenge of acclimating to the increased pace of life in the city, distance from supportive relatives, and suddenly being a minority with all the implications was overwhelming for many of the family members who had relocated. In addition, ASD has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in the United States (ASD, 2018). Adjusting to the culture shock of large and unfamiliar school environments caused much discomfort for families and their children.

An underlying message given by families was that adjustment to city life might have been more seamless had teachers possessed the knowledge and skills to support their initiations to urban schools. As one of the Native mothers summed up the experience of moving from a rural village to Anchorage, “It's a whole change of a lifestyle; 100%.”

Below are comments made by other family members who shared similar experiences to entering a large urban school environment:

- I was so scared ‘cause it was so big and there were all kinds of people. It was a big, big culture shock.
- It was like I needed to start a new life somehow. I had to relearn some things that I didn’t know and adjust to it. Still kind of learning. Hard to get used to it.

- It is different here than the village school; even if (my children) are going to ANCCS. They do some culture activities here, but not like how we grew up. It is limited.
- You hear about the schools where the majority of the students are White and middle-class and their academic achievement is high. Well, they're not moving from school to school, they're not moving back and forth between rural Alaska and Anchorage.

One Native mother, herself an educator, described the experience her elementary school-aged children had when the family relocated to Anchorage from a rural village. First impressions of the neighborhood school where her children were expected to attend were not positive. She said,

When we first moved here my kids were in fourth grade and first grade and when it was time to register for school we went and visited our neighborhood school and we got our registration stuff there and my girls were like, "The school is so big." They didn't like how big it was and I had heard about the charter school (ANCCS), so I asked them if they wanted to go see that school. We did and they were in the middle of renovating ... and they had stuff everywhere. It was a junk pile We looked around and they're like, "I wanna go to school here." I mean, they hadn't even finished putting the walls up. There was so much junk but just 'cause it was so small, they liked it. I think that was the main thing was how small it was.

Professional development for ASD non-Native educators could provide more understanding of how common this experience is for Native families and students. This would add to their ability to support both students and families during those challenging transitions.

For successful home-school partnerships, it is imperative that families and educators are clear of their expectations of one another. Definitions of student success may vary from one culture to another so developing mutual understanding between home and school is critical. In the next section, differences in how Western educators tend to view the purpose of schooling compared to an Indigenous view of education is discussed.

5.3.5 The Purpose of Education: Views from Native Families

As presented in the literature review, the history of schooling for Alaska Natives has not always been positive. The introduction of Western education to Alaska's Indigenous peoples was originally a strategy for assimilation. When children were not separated from their families and sent to distant boarding schools, they were placed in local facilities that were separate from White children and forbidden to speak their Native languages (Williams, 2009). The primary goal of those early systems of education for Alaska's Indigenous children and youth was to train them to provide services to the territorial government, not to contribute to their own families and communities (Kawagley, 2006). The results of such damaging educational practices produced lasting effects that continue to resonate today. For too many Alaska Native students and their families, school is a place with negative connotations where their lifeways are not acknowledged or respected. Kawagley (2006) stated,

There is significant contrast between Western educational systems and Native worldviews. The former is formulated to study and analyze objectively learned facts to predict and assert control over the forces of nature. But Alaska Native people have their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and each other. (p. 33)

Kawagley (2006) further explained how Western schooling differs from traditional Indigenous ways of educating youth. He wrote, “Native people ... have traditionally acquired their knowledge of the world around them through direct experience in the natural environment, whereby particulars come to be understood in relation to the whole” (p. 75). This holistic approach to education was found throughout the data for this study; initially in the content analysis of family outreach materials distributed by the ASD’s Indian Education programs and most significantly from the words of the Native families interviewed.

Each family described priorities around preparing their children to be well-rounded. They wanted academic success for their children but as importantly wanted them to become responsible and caring members of their families and communities. One mother and father described how their kindergarten child, who while attending a neighborhood school, began to speak less Yup’ik at home and often felt invisible at school. This contributed to their decision to transfer her to the Native charter school the next year. The father reminisced how in his upbringing in a rural Native village, there was a balance between academics and values education. He said that Elders were regular visitors to his school and were valued for sharing life lessons with youth. The Elders

would, “Talk about what to do or how to be or what to expect later on in life. How to act. Talk about how to be a better person.”

A school environment that is less institutional and more like home was a theme throughout the interviews as well. Family members and their children preferred a more informal atmosphere where school personnel knew them by name. They described a physical environment that reflected life in rural communities with displays of Native artifacts and posters that reminded children of their traditional Native values and portraits of Elders, for example. A mother shared that to her family, the Native charter school felt like a community. She noted,

Attending the charter school has been—it feels like home, like we’re home in the village. Even though we’re in the city, we’re surrounded by things that are in the village. It has always felt like home, that feeling we get from school with the teachers, how long some of the teachers have been there; how close I am to some of them.

A comment made by the non-Native adoptive mother, herself an educator, described how Native families may disengage with schools when the curricula were based on examples and concepts that were irrelevant to their worldviews and daily lives. She explained,

This whole (ASD) curriculum—they’re constantly wanting families to come in and learn how to do the Go Math! trainings and help their kids with their homework and stuff like that, and it was just so out of context that families just didn’t engage. It’s like why [as a Native parent] would I go and learn how to teach a curriculum that doesn’t make sense? [But]

things like Math in a Cultural Context—it was like [Native families] would get really excited about because it was all about building fish wheels and things like this that were relevant. I think sometimes the curriculum is really challenging. And then the outreach methods that they use for parents, like PTAs and stuff like that, isn't really relevant, but like at Alaska Native Cultural Charter School, a potlatch was really relevant.

In the member check session with the Native families, when asked, “What do you need from your children’s schools?” two responses were “Well- rounded teaching” and “Have the Elders visit schools and speak to the students. Teach more about our Native values and cultures. Offer Native dance classes.” These families valued education for their children that included a balance between Western academics and their traditional Native values.

One mother related her own experience as a Native student attending a large high school in Anchorage and the difference one of her non-Native teachers made in her success as a student. She said that her high school teacher

knew your name. He knew what motivated you. He knew what you needed emotionally. I think it was just that instant—that connection, that human connection he could make as an educator. He could still educate while maintaining that social-emotional piece that high schoolers needed.

The mother felt acquisition of content knowledge alone was not enough for her children to successfully navigate their futures. She emphasized that a primary motivation for enrolling her children in the ANCCS was its balance between academics and values-based education. She said, “that is a big reason why I got involved with the charter

school, because the values [they teach] internally set kids up for a lifetime of success.” In the next section, the interview theme *Need for Strong Home-School Connections* is presented. Evidence is provided the families valued equitable partnerships with educators who recognized their expertise and contributions to their children’s education.

5.3.6 Native Families’ Need for Stronger Home-School Connections

Weiss et al. (2009) researched the role of *complementary learning* regarding how families contribute to their children’s education outside of school. The concept of complementary learning recognized, “family involvement efforts in non-school ... settings ... build cross-context reinforcement and commitment of family involvement and create longer-term family involvement pathways supporting learning and school success across a child’s school career” (p. 23).

Home visits were seen as one of the most powerful strategies for recognizing how families contribute to complementary learning. The act of teachers entering students’ homes gave families the assurance they were fully competent in supporting their children’s learning and development. The value of meeting families in their home environments was also cited as a sure way to form lasting connections by preschool teachers surveyed for this study. Through home visits, teachers witnessed firsthand the impact families had on student learning.

One Native mother, herself a preschool teacher, implemented home visits routinely. She described the positive effect home visits had on relationships with her students’ families,

The home visit is definitely a connection for the parents to know I respect their homes. I respect who they are— and I want to know who they are. I

think that helped this year just go more smoothly with everything and just having that connection with the families. I could talk to them about anything in the class. Yeah, the trust was—I feel like it was a lot.

Several family members expressed similar feelings about home visits. For example, one mother who grew up in a rural Alaska village, shared her memories of non-Native teachers who made a positive impression and had gained the trust students' families. She said, "Just being involved with the community was a big thing, taking part ..., going to people's houses to go eat and stuff like that, visiting the kids." She said that families appreciated teachers who were more informal in their interactions and willing to treat them as equal partners in their children's schooling.

One mother had worked as a family liaison at one time for ASD's Indian Education program. She spoke about the effects that home visits could have on building a solid connection with families when she shared, "We [Indian Education personnel] did home visits a lot Instead of bringing families into schools constantly for things, going out into the community, going out into the homes was really beneficial."

The theme of meeting families where they were was consistent in how families described the value for home visits. Educators taking time out of their busy schedules to get to know them on a more familiar level meant a lot to the families. They viewed the home visits as a gesture of genuine respect and interest in who they were and what mattered to them.

As discussed in the literature review, instituting a home visit program in schools is not always easy. Time and resources are always in short supply for school leaders and teachers. One mother recognized this while emphasizing that to make a difference in how

Native families engage in their children's schools, extra effort by school personnel is critical. This was her message to non-Native administrators and educators:

I think they need to understand that they have to go above and beyond what is expected of them with their contract. If they are going to work just within their contracted hours—because I think that's where I see teacher shortfalls—you're not gonna be a successful teacher [with Native families] that way.

This mother's goal was to become a teacher and eventually a school administrator. She was convinced that a key to increasing academic success for Native students was through engagement of their families in more meaningful ways.

In the next section, the meaning subsistence played in the lives of the Native families is discussed. This theme was consistent throughout the interview data, regardless if families continued to practice a subsistence lifestyle as urban Natives. Families expressed a desire for deeper understanding from school personnel of the significance of subsistence to their worldviews. More awareness by non-Native educators of the honor in which subsistence is held had the potential for creating stronger connections between home and school.

5.3.7 Subsistence: A Core Native Value

As Native Hawaiian Senator Daniel Inouye expressed at the National Forum on the Future of Alaska Natives, (1999),

If you aren't familiar with the ways of Native people, you might not know that subsistence is more than just simple sustenance—it is a way of life Subsistence is so much a part of the fabric of Native existence, that

without it, there would be no culture, no tradition, perhaps no community, and certainly no means of giving expression to the spiritual aspects of Native life.

Subsistence for many Alaska Natives encompasses values that include a profound connection to the natural environment and one another. Qualities such as generosity, humility, and cooperation are elements of a subsistence mindset; recognition of the critical importance of mutual dependence in a society. Relational accountability reflects this epistemology with its focus on respectful, reciprocal, and responsible interactions with members of one's family and community (Wilson, 2008). For non-Native educators, who may be more oriented to an individualistic worldview, this worldview and accompanying values may seem counterproductive for success in the highly competitive environments found in many Western classrooms.

Though most of the families interviewed had lived in Anchorage for years, each described subsistence as something beyond just a family or cultural value. Subsistence seemed to represent the essence of their identities as Native peoples; the foundation of their spirituality. One of the fathers who moved to Anchorage from a rural village for employment 20 years ago reflected,

I gave up so much to work here. I grew up fishing a lot. When I moved for training, it was a shock When I go out hunting or fishing it's like I am back to my ... comfort zone. My children, they have to learn to subsist. That's what we do every summer. We go down every summer to Seward or the Kasilof to fish and pick some beach greens.

A mother expressed her family's commitment to a subsistence lifestyle while living in an urban environment like Anchorage. She related,

One thing I miss about not being home is I don't have berries in my freezer. [My children] don't get to have their berries. The berries here are different than home. We got some caribou from my brother this last fall or spring. My husband wants to go *ugruk* [seal] hunting in Kotzebue. We're hoping that I'll get to go berry picking this summer. In the fall my husband wants to go home and go moose hunting. It's a lot different here because you have to drive so far. It's a lot harder to do here.

When this mother was asked if she and her husband would introduce their two young sons to their subsistence lifestyle, she noted, "Absolutely." She went on to say that her son's teachers in the ASD would just "have to accept" if the boys missed any school while they went hunting with their father "because it's a big thing in our house."

This was a telling affirmation considering the mother was also a teacher in the school district. Her family's values around subsistence were so rooted in their Native identity she was willing to have her children and family risk going against ASD attendance policies to ensure they practiced their traditional lifeways and passed them on to their children.

Family members who grew up practicing subsistence in rural Alaska described how their teachers knew they would miss school during hunting season. In fact, some schools had subsistence leave for students, and a couple of the family members expressed their desire for the same policy in the ASD for Native families who wanted that option.

One mother shared how her father was given subsistence leave from his position as an employee at a Native corporation. She recalled,

In Nome, the Native corporations give their employees subsistence leave. Literally subsistence leave, so they can go. They give it to them at certain times of the year when it's important, like hunting season for moose. They [also] get time during berry-picking season.

Two of the mothers, whose non-Native spouses did not fish or hunt, so valued sharing subsistence practices with their children that they went on their own with friends or family members. In one instance, just being outdoors with extended family was the primary motivation. One mother who grew up in Anchorage, did not enjoy traditional Native foods, nor cared if her children enjoyed them; however, she and her husband deeply valued sharing meals with friends and family in their home on a regular basis. Sharing and generosity are inherent principles of subsistence and this was apparent in their worldview.

In fact, the importance of gathering with family and friends to share food and build community was an underlying theme throughout the interviews. Family members whose children attended the ANCCS mentioned their appreciation for the potlucks that school often hosted. The CINHS also included potlucks regularly as an integral element of family events. Eating meals together was seen by families as an effective strategy for schools to bring them together to discuss student progress whether at an open house or a PTA meeting.

Sharing food as a community builder was mentioned by one of the mothers when she noted that the structure of PTA meetings at the charter school took an *upside-down*

approach to the agenda seen in most public schools. The primary focus at ANCCS where her children attended was on socializing with other families while enjoying a potluck meal together; the informational aspect of the meeting was of secondary importance. PTA meetings in Western school settings are often focused on an efficiency model where the primary objective is to take care of business. The differences in the two approaches reflects the values and worldviews of each culture and is indicative of the need for more awareness by non-Native educators who hope to reach the Native families of their students.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented findings from interviews with eight Alaska Native family members whose children attended preschool programs through CINHS and the ASD. Primary themes that emerged through analysis of the interviews were (a) *Importance of family and community to the participants*, (b) *The need for educators to serve as family allies*, (c) *Holistic views of education*, (d) *A desire to have strong home-school connections*, (e) *The challenge of transitioning from rural to urban schools*, and (f) *Hopes that non-Native educators would recognize the importance of subsistence to Native identity*.

Two contextually relevant themes emerged that point to the need for the ASD to tailor its outreach to urban Native families for effective partnerships. One was how difficult it was for many families to move from rural to urban Alaska and enter the ASD. The other was the families' profound value for subsistence, even while residing in Anchorage where they were not always able to practice a subsistence lifestyle.

With families identifying these issues as critical to how they and their children experienced schooling in the ASD, this information could assist school leaders and teachers in planning and implementing more targeted outreach to the families of their Native students. A differentiated approach to outreach for Native families holds the potential of motivating them to participate more directly in their children's schooling, leading to increased school success for Alaska Native K-12 students in the ASD.

In Chapter 6, ways the ASD might build upon its existing success in creating meaningful partnerships with Native families are discussed. Recommendations for professional development to improve outreach to Native families are presented as well. Finally, the author describes limitations of the study and suggests recommendations for future research in how to create and grow more culturally sustaining outreach to Alaska Native urban families in ways that nurture student progress in all areas.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having shared research findings in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter presents conclusions about the current state of outreach to Alaska Native families whose children attend the ASD and recommendations on ways in which the district might increase the quality of its family engagement practices to them. Recommendations are based on findings from this study, as well as the literature review, on best practices in family outreach. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

Research findings were derived from (a) A content analysis of ASD family outreach materials; (b) An ASD preschool teacher survey conducted through this research project; and (c) Interviews with eight Native family members who participated in this study. Recommendations on policies and practices the ASD could adopt to address each finding follow later in this chapter. These include suggestions for improving the district's messaging to Native families; areas for professional development to strengthen educators' knowledge and skills around effective outreach to Native families; and most importantly, recommendations based on responses from the Native families.

Ways in which the study findings relate to the literature are first presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion on limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

6.1 The Status of Culturally Sustaining Outreach to Alaska Native Families in the Anchorage School District

6.1.1 Effectiveness of Anchorage School District's Outreach to Native Families in Relation to the Literature

Literature on culturally sustaining school outreach to urban Alaska Native families is limited. Much of the research is focused on what works for White, middle-class families and does not address the needs of those who are often marginalized by Western systems of schooling, such as Alaska Native families. Studies by leading family engagement scholars (Epstein, 2018; Jeynes, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014), have done much to identify components of school outreach that lead to more meaningful engagement by and with families of the majority population; however, fewer studies have indicated what motivates urban Native families to become more directly engaged in their children's schooling. Studies involving Māori families in New Zealand, First Nations families in Canada, and Native Hawaiian families provided some parallels to issues facing Alaska Native families and hold the potential for adapting outreach practices to their needs (Kanu, 2007; Mutch & Collins, 2008; Yamauchi et al., 2008).

Literature focused on educational justice for marginalized students and their families (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Kugler, 2011, 2014; Yull et al., 2014) was more directly relevant to this study which found mainstream, school-centric approaches of increasing the engagement of minority families have tended to use deficit models. This issue was confirmed in the content analysis of the ASD family outreach materials conducted for this project.

Much of the family engagement literature falls short in recognizing that, for Indigenous families whose worldviews may not align with those of Western educators, mainstream outreach practices can be ineffective. Because of this, Alaska Native families may have very different definitions of school success than the educators who serve their children (Kawagley, 2006).

The literature review also provided background on the devastating history of Western schooling in the lives of Alaska Natives and the loss of lifeways and languages (Barnhardt, 2001; Williams, 2009). This issue was mentioned by a few preschool teachers who participated in the survey conducted for this study but was not spoken of by the families who were interviewed. They may have been reluctant to bring up a sensitive topic or had not experienced the most painful consequences of Western schooling such as separation from their family while attending boarding school or loss of Native languages, as their grandparents may have.

Finally, research on the centrality of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) to Indigenous worldviews informed much of this study. This approach constitutes an overarching set of principles to guide interactions with others that includes respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. For Alaska Native families, whose ways of life are intricately tied to their families and communities, to subsistence and connections to remote, rural communities understanding this mindset is critical to creating meaningful home-school partnerships with them. The next section reviews how messaging in outreach and informational materials in the ASD may subtly discourage Native families from participating in their children's schooling experiences. Recommendations on ways to improve the ASD's communication to Native families follows the discussion.

6.1.2 Messaging to Alaska Native Families in Anchorage School District Outreach

Materials

Results of a content analysis of general family outreach materials gathered from across the school district found many privilege Western values and definitions of student success. The content analysis compared informational fliers and other outreach materials developed by the Indian Education program to those of general education programs throughout the school district and found a significant difference in the messaging.

The Indian Education materials had a more holistic orientation which struck a balance between promoting an agenda around academic achievement and recognizing Native families' need for more relational approaches to connecting with families. Images from the general education materials primarily featured children and families from the dominant cultural group and less inclusive language. Vocabulary such as *community*, *culture*, and *home*, which reflect the values of Alaska Native families, were mostly missing in the general ASD communications. School-centric views of family engagement were often promoted rather than relational and reciprocal approaches. Most of the outreach materials featured graphics that showed children reading or in other academic oriented activities. Images of community events or family members actively engaged in home-based educational activities were less likely. School-centric outreach practices that work for typical White, middle-class, urban families, seldom apply to Native families.

Table 10 specifies *Recommendation 1*.

Table 10

Recommendation 1

Based on findings from the content analysis, as well as responses on the preschool teacher survey, ASD school personnel need more knowledge and skills on how to create culturally sensitive outreach materials for Native families. The content analysis revealed the Indian Education program has the expertise in this area. Workshops should be offered by the program to non-Native school personnel on how to create outreach materials that are more family-friendly and less school-centric. For example, addressing communication home to “Family of _____” rather than “Parent or Guardian of _____” to be more inclusive of extended members of the family living under the same roof is an easy way to be family-friendly. Striking a balance between an academic focus and validating the cultural assets of Native families is another necessary change. Small but meaningful steps such as these would communicate the ASD’s concern for Native families and their specific needs.

The next section discusses additional ways Native leaders, educators, and family members could act as mentors to non-Native school personnel in the ASD and model ways in which to be more culturally sustaining in family outreach practices.

6.1.3 Pockets of Excellence in the Anchorage School District Outreach Practices to Native Families

One of the mothers interviewed for this study, herself an educator and former employee of the ASD’s Indian Education program, shared her perspective about the effectiveness and quality of outreach to Native families in the district. She explained how her own children benefitted from having the advocacy of Native family liaisons and youth development specialists in their schools. She also shared that the availability of professional development was not the issue; rather it was ASD leaders’ willingness to take advantage of those opportunities. She said,

We had lots of communication and family involvement from the Indian Education staff at the school—the counselors and the tutors. It was the

same thing for the Polynesian students. They had representation there. Those programs are doing it. The [non-Native] school leaders should humble themselves and say, “You know what? These people are doing it better than we are, and we need to learn from them” and understand that they don’t have the expertise in that area. They were not asked a lot about sharing their knowledge. Some [schools] do take advantage of their expertise, and there’s those pockets of excellence where they have principals who are, “I don’t know what I’m doing here. Can you help?”

The potential of Native teachers and family members as role models and guides for non-Native administrators and teachers is mostly a missed opportunity in the ASD. Speaking to this issue, an ASD preschool teacher who participated in the survey noted, “I think effective training would include conversations with Alaska Native families regarding what schools have done that is helpful and respectful. I like the idea of learning *from* Alaska Native families instead of *about* them.” *Recommendation 2* on ways the ASD could increase the awareness level of non-Native school personnel is contained in Table 11.

Table 11

Recommendation 2

All ASD administrators should receive awareness training from the Indian Education program on the need for culturally sensitive and intentional outreach to Native families. First and foremost, this should include conversations with Alaska Native family members. Trainings would also benefit from including teachers and school leaders from the Alaska Native Cultural School and other programs in the ASD with success in this area.

The next section includes excerpts from the narrative portion of the preschool teacher survey to demonstrate that additional *pockets of excellence* exist in the ASD's outreach efforts to Native families and recommends ways to build upon that success.

6.1.4 Anchorage School District Preschool Teachers' Outreach to Native Families

In response to the survey prompt, "Strategies I have used to create strong partnerships with Alaska Native families are . . .," the preschool teachers' comments generally centered around the themes: (a) open, two-way communication; (b) home visits; (c) developing informal relationships with family members; and (d) integrating Native cultures into their curriculum and classroom environments. A few teachers shared a keen awareness of how important the *way* in which they interacted with families supported stronger home-school partnerships. These teachers understood their attitudes strongly impacted family engagement. Here is how they expressed a commitment to more relational approaches to outreach with the families of Native students:

- I offer kindness and support
- I demonstrate my awareness of their child and belief that they are succeeding. I also try to engage in conversation regarding school and outside life whenever parents/aunts/uncles/grandparents drop off or pick up [children]
- Active listening is key
- Being positive
- Listening and being understanding.

Although it would be ideal if every educator possessed these qualities, at times these dispositions must be nurtured through experiences that lead to increased empathy and

understanding; especially of cultures outside of one's own. One preschool teacher explained the origins of her motivation to create more effective outreach to Native families with,

I was fortunate enough to be a part of multiple trainings that gave me experience in rural Alaska. I participated in the Rose Urban Rural exchange in Klukwan, a science training in Akiak and iTrec, which took us to Nome.

This kind of experience can be especially transforming for anyone who has not encountered an immersion into another culture and way of life. It is difficult to substitute the intensity of such an opportunity to learn directly from Alaska Native culture bearers in authentic settings; however, more non-Native school personnel require support in their awareness and understanding of the profound differences between Western and Indigenous worldviews if they are to serve students and families more effectively. If teachers are not able to experience life in rural Alaska firsthand, creative options could be explored such as videos or simulations to provide a sense of what their Native students and families value.

In addition, it would be valuable if non-Native teachers and school leaders with a proven track record of successful outreach to Native families were enlisted in this effort to act as role models for less experienced colleagues. Native and non-Native educators working together would send a strong message of the importance of collaboration to Native families and the broader community. Table 12 contains *Recommendation 3*.

Table 12

Recommendation 3

Although the ASD may not have the resources to provide travel to rural communities or cultural camps to its school personnel, its Indian Education program is connected with a network of community leaders interested in supporting Native student success. One organization is ARISE, Anchorage Realizing Indigenous Student Excellence, which is sponsored by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council. It is a valuable advocate for Native students and families and could be enlisted to help disseminate information and deliver training around multiple topics related to understanding Alaska Native cultures and lifeways. Other community resources such as Native scholars at the Alaska Museum, First Alaskans Institute, Alaska Native Cultural Heritage Center, and universities could also be valuable partners in expanding the district's capacity for serving Alaska Native families through increased knowledge and skills. Additionally, non-Native school leaders and educators should partner in these efforts to form a coalition of support for Native families.

The conversation now turns to areas where preschool teachers who participated in the study identified as gaps in their professional development around culturally sustaining outreach to Native families.

6.1.5 Identified Professional Development Needs of Preschool Teachers

In response to the prompt, “What areas of professional development in culturally responsive family engagement would you like to see offered in the ASD?” the teachers expressed a need for more information about Alaska Native history and culture as well as ways to implement more effective cross-cultural communication and outreach. Here is a sampling of the requests:

- I would like to learn how Alaska Native [families] feel about education. Unfortunately, the trainings that have been offered lately only talked about what the ‘White’ people have done to Natives. I didn’t feel they addressed strategies on how to build relationships and work with families.

- I need concrete information about resources in the area with contact numbers, brochures and well-made documentaries to watch at staff meetings or in-service days. Also, guest speakers from the community.
- I think effective training would include conversations with Alaska Native families regarding what schools have done that is helpful and respectful.
- What to say to co-workers when they are [hopefully] accidentally or unknowingly sending culturally inappropriate messages (i.e. celebrating Columbus as a “Great Man” or at Thanksgiving having students make Indian headbands and Pilgrim outfits). I understand many were raised with those as positive symbols, however, it can be a subtle feeling of oppression to people aware of the Indigenous side of the story.
- The history of Native education.
- Ideas to communicate to more reserved families. Knowledge of their social customs, education ideas, and their priorities.
- How to encourage families to visit the classroom to share their cultures.
- Time, time, time. [To plan high-quality outreach.]
- How to incorporate more culture in the classroom.
- Trauma-informed practices.

In addition to these requests, several teachers also suggested that members of the Alaska Native community represent themselves in these conversations lest assumptions by non-

Native educators contribute to further misunderstandings. *Recommendation 4* is displayed in Table 13.

Table 13

Recommendation 4

Results of the preschool teacher survey have been shared with the ASD's director of preschool programs. Survey results will also be provided to the director of Indian Education, who meets routinely with principals in the district, and to other ASD administrators directly connected to supporting Native students such as the director of Migrant Education. District leadership needs to know what knowledge and skills teachers have identified as lacking in their professional development. Without this information, ASD teachers and administrators will continue to marginalize Native students and their families minimizing the potential for school success.

Evidence the ASD needs to examine its *one-size-fits-all* approach is presented in the proceeding sections. Each section discusses a theme that emerged from interviews with the families, followed by recommendations for responding to those expressed needs.

6.2 Listening to the Voices of Alaska Native Families

6.2.1 Importance of Family and Community

For the families who participated in this study, the theme that occurred most frequently was the *Importance of Family and Community*. More than a third (39%) of the coded interview responses focused on the centrality of family to their lives. A member check with the families provided another opportunity for them to emphasize how highly they valued connections to loved ones and how the concept of family extends beyond the walls of their homes.

Recommendations families had for integrating a greater sense of home and community in their children's schools included having school personnel promote an overall tone of warmth and hospitality that moves beyond merely tolerating families at

required activities. The ANCCS and the CINHS were programs the families most often mentioned as examples of school environments where they felt a sense of inclusion. One mother described what made her feel at ease at her children’s school. She said,

Attending the charter school has been—it feels like home, like we’re home in the village. Even though we’re in the city, we’re surrounded by things that are in the village. It has always felt like home, that feeling we get from school with the teachers, how long some of the teachers have been there; how close I am to some of them. My second daughter, her teacher and I are pretty good friends, so I think it has helped with her education.

To understand and meet the needs of Native students, non-Native educators must recognize students as closely intertwined members of extended families and communities. School personnel must examine outreach practices that are school-centric and discourage Native families from being involved. *Recommendation 5* on simple ways the ASD could easily implement outreach practices more responsive to the needs of Native families is outlined in Table 14.

Table 14

Recommendation 5

Ideally, the ASD would restructure its parent-teacher conferences to more closely align with the relational ways in which Native families prefer to interact. An “upside-down” approach that would feature an informal setting, a potluck dinner, and brief discussions with families would be preferable. Small accommodations such as welcoming children and extended family members at parent-teacher conferences or while volunteering in classrooms would also encourage more participation. For conferences, older students could be enlisted to play games or read to young children while teachers and family members discuss student work. Creating spaces in classrooms to feature the photos of students’ family members or areas in the school where families can gather, have coffee and connect with one another would be additional strategies that recognize how integral family and relational connections are.

The next theme that emerged in the families' responses was the centrality of subsistence in how they defined themselves as Indigenous peoples and members of their families and communities. This was true for families who had relocated to Anchorage from rural Alaska as well as for those raised in an urban environment.

6.2.2 Subsistence: A Core Native Value

This theme occurred in 30% of the total coded interview responses; the second most frequently occurring category. It was clear from the families' descriptions of what subsistence meant to them that it was critically important to their identities as Alaska Native peoples. One of the fathers described how he was accustomed to spending time engaged in subsistence activities with his family as a child and wanted his three children to experience that same connection to the land, sea, and animals. He explained,

They can't be sitting around. They gotta do stuff on their own. They have to learn to subsist We teach them how to eat traditional foods like seal. We feed them while they are growing up. Like our parents and grandparents did to us.

This father described how important it was to be aware of the natural environment and how he felt most "at peace" outdoors. He said that subsistence was much more than providing food for one's family and community; much more than harvesting animals. He continued,

Yeah, it is more than just getting the food. You have to be there at the right time. You have to be where the birds or fish are when they gather, at a certain place out in the wilderness, you have to *know*.

His wife followed with, “I wish schools allowed a (subsistence) excuse, at least a couple times a year.” The wistfulness in their expressions conveyed how much they missed being in the outdoors with extended family members and their communities, gathering traditional foods and sharing with one another.

Another mother, herself a teacher, was very animated when she talked about her family’s subsistence way of life. She explained that as a young child her family was very involved in subsistence and she and her husband had a strong desire to pass that on to their children. She said,

[As a child] I learned how to make seal oil, but we never dried fish. It was used to trade. I grew up skin sewing with sealskin. Berry picking was a big thing, always berry picking. All of us had to pick. When I was younger—we each had our own bucket, and we had to fill our bucket before we could play, and as I got older the bucket got bigger. We have family who makes the seal meat, black meat, and dry fish, and we'd do trades, or they'd just give us some. We ate Eskimo food all the time. Loved it. We had friends in Nome. My mom had a friend in Nome who's from Emmonak, and so we'd eat Eskimo food with her. It was probably every other week we'd go to her house and eat Eskimo food. We're trying to introduce it to them [our kids]. My little one does not mind when I dip my finger in seal oil and put it in his mouth. He's, like, “It's good.”

She went on to say that when their children were old enough to teach subsistence, she had no qualms about taking them out of school. She said,

I think we'll start off with fishing. You do a lot of fishing first, and that's in the summer. Then, I think during—yeah, they're gonna have to get out of school. I'm trying to think. September's moose hunting season. That's just something that teachers are going to have to accept, because it's a big thing in our house. We eat a lot of it. We have a special freezer downstairs, a standup freezer, that has all of our subsistence food in it. All of it. Black meat, seal oil.

These were common sentiments among the family members. Even as urban residents, with grocery stores such as Costco readily available, it was important that they practice ancient traditions around gathering food and sharing it with their extended family and Native community. *Recommendation 6* appears in Table 15.

Table 15

Recommendation 6

Many of the family members spoke about subsistence in deeply personal and spiritual terms. Just as the religious practices of the ASD's diverse student population are recognized, so should the significance of subsistence be acknowledged for Native families. Subsistence leave would be a much-appreciated policy, communicating a deeper level of respect for the urban Native families who want to practice traditional values and pass them on to their children. Awareness of the importance of subsistence needs to be a component of professional development offered by Indian Education. This often goes unrecognized as important for urban Native families.

The following discussion centers on ways non-Native school leaders and educators who understand the importance of forming authentic relationships with families promote connection to school. Strategies culturally competent school personnel can contribute to humanizing large, urban school environments is presented in the recommendations.

6.2.3 School Leaders and Educators: Allies of Native Families

The critical role of leadership in establishing culture around family outreach.

Although the families often mentioned Native teachers as most open to sharing power in decisions about their children's schooling, there were also non-Native school leaders and teachers the family members praised. One primary characteristic that distinguished those school personnel was an eagerness to learn from the families. Those educators were viewed as allies by the families and their willingness to be fully present for them as partners was highly valued.

One mother, herself a teacher in the ASD saw the principal at her Title 1 school as just such an ally. She was proud of his commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive school community and how he used most staff meetings to talk about how to better serve families in the local neighborhood. This administrator appeared to resist the status quo of school-centric outreach some administrators continue to practice such as a focus on one-way communication to families, PTA meetings, and the annual open house; practices that tend to privilege White, middle-class families who are already familiar and comfortable in school settings. This is how the mother described ways this principal encouraged more family engagement:

On Fridays, the parent cafe is always at the end of the school day, and we always have some kind of food items and encourage families to bring something from their culture. We also have home visits at the beginning of the year. They give us 90 minutes at the beginning of the year, just to get to know the family. After school starts, we do a 20-minute to a half an hour visit with the families. It's a meet and greet at school [where] they get

to come see the classroom. That's where we ask small questions about their culture and their home language We talk about the curriculum we're going to use and show them this is a portfolio we're going to have. Just talk about them volunteering in the class [or] if they had any fun things they want to do.

Another mother, whose children attended the ANCCS and formerly worked as a teacher there, explained the critical difference a culturally aware and dedicated administrator makes. She said that a former principal at ANNCS shared leadership with teachers and families to embed family engagement in the school culture. This mother explained,

That was actually a big part of our school's development, wanting families to be comfortable. That was something that we always worked on as a staff. When we had potlucks, that was a big thing. Especially the last couple years we've had culture week at our school and we've had people, or we had actual Native artisans coming to our school and teach our kids. One class that we taught every year was Native food prep. We've had people donate seals and stuff like that showing the kids how to take care of a seal.

Table 16 contains *Recommendation 7*.

Table 16

Recommendation 7

The ASD conducts a School Climate and Connectedness Survey for students each year and should include a similar survey for Alaska Native families. This survey could identify specific ways in which the district could more effectively meet the needs of Native families. As research is clear that a welcoming environment is critical to families feeling comfortable participating in their children’s schools (Ferguson, et al., 2008), it would be worthwhile to provide hospitality training for staff such as the administrative assistants in the front office. Addressing physical environments to make them less institutional would also contribute to friendlier spaces. Alaska Native artwork, posters of traditional values, photos of families engaged in subsistence activities, and other ways of recognizing the lifeways of Native families would communicate a message of inclusion.

The next section underscores the foundational impact that classroom teachers have in creating inclusive environments and meaningful relationships with their students’ families.

Teachers as front-line allies of Native families. Responses from the families consistently affirmed how critical the relational factor was in how motivated they were to participate in their children’s schooling and partner with teachers. One mother who taught preschool in the ASD shared her experience as a Native child in a non-Native school system. She explained,

I’m not a person to ask for help from a teacher, and I didn’t like to. I always went to my dad with, ‘Dad, I need help with this, writing this paper. I need help with this math’ and so it’s [still] hard for me—I’m not a person to ask for help. For those teachers that were there for a long time, and already knew my family and stuff, it made it more personal. I felt a little better asking them.

Alaska Native students and family members, as members of marginalized cultures, have too often been portrayed by educational researchers and school personnel as underprepared for school success. One mother expressed frustration with school staff who acted from a deficit lens, with the negative assumptions that accompany that perspective. She felt certain teachers were uninterested in her children's strengths or what their family had to contribute to her children's school success. She said, "[There are] teachers who you never hear from unless your child's in trouble or whatever."

For Native families who too often experience and witness unexamined assumptions about their cultures and see their children continually described as *at-risk*, it is encouraging when school personnel possess strengths-based attitudes and approaches.

Recommendation 8 is shown in Table 17.

Table 17

Recommendation 8

Preschool teachers who participated in the survey expressed a desire that professional development around Alaska's Indigenous peoples be led by members of the Native community. However, non-Native school leaders and teachers who have been recognized for effective outreach could partner with Native colleagues to facilitate training. This could increase efforts in cross-cultural collaboration district-wide and communicate to all district personnel the importance of working together to address existing gaps. Currently, this work exists in silos within the ASD and is too often the responsibility of the Indian Education program.

Next, recommendations families had for creating a stronger connection between home and school to support their children's school success are presented.

6.2.4 Strong Home-School Connections

Although there were exceptions, most of the family members saw the ANCCS, programs sponsored by ASD's Indian Education, or Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), as the most effective for meeting their children's overall developmental needs.

For family members with older children who had transferred from ANCCS or transitioned from preschool programs offered by CITC, there were concerns that interactions at neighborhood schools were more business-like and transactional. One mother whose daughter had enrolled in a neighborhood school described the parent-teacher conferences and how impersonal it was to her. She explained how students' families were invited to their children's classroom and given portfolios of their school work. Students were assigned a number and their academic scores and class ranking projected on the whiteboard. If family members had questions regarding their children's progress, they were to contact the teacher for a separate conference. The teacher did not meet individually with families unless there were identified problems. The format had recently become a district-wide policy where the focus was primarily reporting students' academic progress. The mother explained her reaction,

Yeah, it was like the efficiency model. Everybody gets told the same thing. The number of your child is in your folder and there's a graph that has everybody's results. Yeah, I get it but at the same time, it also feels like it takes away from having that one-on-one.

There was a sense of resignation as the mother described the process. Interaction was not encouraged with the teacher or with other families. The lack of connection was disappointing for this family member. Efficiency models, as the mother described, do not

allow either educators or families the time or space required to do the work of establishing authentic relationships and build a bridge between home and school.

One mother pointed out that for White, middle-class families who are familiar and comfortable in Western school systems, impersonal approaches may be the expectation. She explained that non- Native family members who are accustomed to Western practices or have not experienced discrimination or marginalization, are also more likely to be directly involved in schools. Native families, who value a collective approach to educating children, and may be less comfortable in schools, may prefer more informal and relationship-based connections to school. This mother had at one time worked with the ASD's Indian Education program and shared how Native teachers at the ANCCS, as well as Native family liaison personnel placed across the district in neighborhood schools, created strong connections to families. She said,

The teachers were very communicative, they were constantly talking to families They made sure families were represented because I think a lot of times, in schools, our PTAs and stuff like that are made up of middle-class white parents, and so the teachers made sure that our Native parents understood and were expressly invited and intentionally invited and told about why it was—why we needed them—why we needed their opinions and their voices. That was really important because I think you could just—you could just send out a note to middle-class, White parents, and they'll sign up: "Oh, yeah, I'll volunteer to do this."

Another element of outreach practiced by Native educators and family liaisons was home visits to students' families. This same mother discussed the value of the

visitation programs explaining, “We did home visits a lot—home visits and community visits. Instead of bringing families into schools constantly for things, going out into the community, going out into the homes was what was really beneficial.” As schools are increasingly focused on institutional models of education, it is not surprising that Native families’ participation in schooling lags behind that of other cultural groups. See Table 18 for *Recommendation 9*.

Table 18

Recommendation 9

Awareness training of the critical importance of relational approaches to connecting with Native families, as well as the holistic manner in which they define school success should be embedded in professional development for ASD school personnel. Additionally, research on the benefits of home visits in creating strong home-school connections should be presented to district policy-makers and administrators. Home visits were consistently mentioned in the conversations with families as one of the most powerful means for building trust with teachers as they were literally being met where they were.

The next theme that emerged was the challenge many Native students and families experience when they relocate from rural communities, with small student populations and a slower pace, to the ASD. Educators who have no knowledge of the remoteness of Alaska’s rural communities and how disorienting the move can be for students and families, may not realize the kind of support needed for this adjustment.

6.2.5 Support for the Transition from Rural to Urban Schools

About half of the families shared poignant stories of difficult transitions from home villages to the culturally foreign environment of Anchorage and the ASD. To support in this transition, the ASD’s Migrant Education program serves students ages 3-21 and their families. The ASD (2019) states that, “The Migrant Education Program

identifies eligible children and provides educational and support services to encourage students to participate effectively in school. We assist migrant students to reach challenging academic standards and graduate with a high school diploma.” Migrant Education offers programs for preschool, summer enrichment, transition from middle to high school, and secondary services such as “school advocacy assistance” for families who need help contacting various community organizations as well as resources within the ASD. Families are required fill out an application to receive Migrant Education services for their children and themselves.

Although these are important and helpful supports, the messaging from the school district centers primarily on academic achievement, with little mention of partnering with families. In addition, families must initiate contact with the school district, communicating that families must further extend themselves during an already stressful period in their lives. If ASD school leaders and classroom teachers were made aware of the difficulties so many transferring rural students and their families experience, small but meaningful changes in policy and practice could significantly lessen students’ and families’ discomfort and anxiety. A singular focus on academic achievement by the ASD could be off-putting to Native families and lessen their motivation to be directly involved in their children’s schooling.

Recommendation 10 for ways to ease the transition many Native families’ experiences when they move from rural communities to the urban environment and schools of Anchorage is contained in Table 19.

Table 19

Recommendation 10

Thoughtful gestures of hospitality, intentionally planned, such as partnering an incoming Native student with a classroom buddy; giving families tours of the school and introducing them to school personnel; providing a welcome packet of local resources and introductions to other Native families, hosting informal potlucks to provide opportunities for incoming families to meet other Native families would go a long way towards making transitions more positive and supportive.

The next section addresses how families experienced the Western schooling agenda of the ASD. Families described priorities for an education that meets all domains of their children's growth and how this was rarely realized in ASD neighborhood schools.

6.2.6 Holistic Approach to Education

The final theme of the interview responses was the families' desire their children experience schooling aligned with their holistic views of education. Although families wanted their children to achieve academically, they also placed priority on learning traditional Native values around how to be a healthy, well-balanced people. They emphasize the importance that children learn to be respectful, hard-working, cooperative, and generous to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities.

At a 2018 multicultural education conference in Juneau, Alaska, scholar and keynote speaker Hammond told the audience that creating culturally sustaining learning environments for marginalized children and families is best undertaken with a Both/And approach. This is holistic orientation to schooling promotes *both* the identities, values and cultures of students *and* a focus on academic rigor (Sealaska Conference, August 2, 2018). This same approach was consistently mentioned as a priority by the Native families.

A few family members shared they were motivated to choose the ANCCS for their children because they wanted them schooled in a manner that supported their character development in addition to their academic progress. One mother reported, “That is a big reason why I got involved with the charter school, because the values [they learn] internally set kids up for a lifetime of success.” When this mother was asked what made the ANCCS so attractive to Native families, she said,

I think some of it has to do with—they have a fairly high number of teachers who are Alaska Native or teachers who have had a lot of experience working with Alaska Native people, and they understand those unspoken cues and just ways they need to make that socioemotional connection to their kids; to get their educational needs met. Teachers need to meet the kids where they are in their hearts to free up their personal strife and personal issues to reach them educationally.

Throughout the interviews, families shared aspirations their children learn the traditional values of their Native heritage; values that had been passed from generation to generation. In addition to directly teaching traditional Native values such as respect, cooperation, generosity, hard-work, awareness of one’s surroundings, and connection to the natural world, the families valued their children learning in ways that were relevant and honored the rich cultural knowledge of Alaska’s Indigenous peoples.

A well-researched issue in schooling for Alaska Native students is the lack of alignment between Indigenous knowledge and ways of life and the restrictive and mandated curricula that many schools implement (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2000; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Jester, 2017; Paris & Alum, 2014; Vinlove, 2017). A mother,

herself a teacher, described the typical curricula and pedagogies in Western classrooms this way,

It doesn't have anything to do with our lives. If it doesn't have anything to do with my life, honestly, it's not gonna be something that I'm gonna be interested in If the kids didn't care they weren't gonna pay attention.

They weren't going to put any effort if it didn't have any relevance in their life. I think that was the same feeling that I had when I was growing up.

The mother went on to give an example of a Native teacher at ANCCS who modeled culturally sustaining instruction. This teacher did not see culture as a supplement to the regular curriculum; to her it *was* the curriculum. She often brought in seal and other subsistence foods to teach students how to process the animals in traditional ways and as a basis for teaching values such as respect for the natural world.

Another mother who was raised in Anchorage with extended family in rural Alaska, shared how proud she was when her mother and grandfather performed Native dance in her siblings' classrooms when she was a child. Her family was from King Island, famous for its traditional Native dancing, and her grandfather was a well-respected ivory carver. She shared,

My mom and my grandpa participated in some stuff for my sisters. He would come into the classroom when they were doing Alaskan Native studies, and he would drum, and she would dance. I thought it was pretty cool. Like, "Yeah, that's my mom, and that's my grandpa." She's always offered to come into the classroom.

In contrast, another Native mother described an experience where a non-Native teacher was resistant to having her spend time in her son's classroom. She described how her son was having challenges at school and she had offered to come into the classroom to assist him. The teacher told her it would be a distraction and asked her not come in. This sent a clear message the teacher believed only she had the expertise to properly support the child's learning.

One mother, herself a teacher, pointed out that the intentional inclusion of Native knowledge in more visible ways in Alaskan schools would benefit *all* students, regardless of their cultural background. She wanted more awareness of Native knowledge, cultures and values in Alaskan schools. She said,

This is Alaska. Alaska Native *is* Alaskan. If it was [studied] more in-depth in every school, if it was part of the curriculum ..., or just to have it included more. Not to say other cultures aren't as important, but—we are in Alaska.

Other family members stated that engaging, holistic approaches to schooling do not shortchange academic success. To illustrate this, a non-Native father and Native mother, who were very engaged in their children's education, monitored their school work closely. They explained their philosophy for a well-rounded education,

We have very high expectations for our children, (but)we keep it fun. We tell them, "Okay, let's finish this and go to the park. Okay, let's finish this, and then we'll go to the museum. Okay, let's finish this, so we can go—" It's not just drill and kill. It's let's get out there and experience it. We do

the fun stuff, too. I took a day of leave tomorrow, and I'm gonna try and take 'em out and do a little hike.

In summary, each family was heavily invested in their children's school experiences. Each family wanted a say in decisions made concerning their children's learning. Token efforts that minimally include the presence of Native cultures, values, and funds of knowledge will only further marginalize the Native community. For Alaska Native families this is especially important as historically, schooling for Alaska Native children was an effort to "facilitate the shift away from their languages and lifeways and to separate them from the influence of their parents" (Kawagley, 2006, p. 33). The ASD must take seriously the work of examining its current attitudes and practices which currently only compound Native families' feelings of disrespect and isolation.

Alaska Native families should be empowered to have an equal say in their how their children are educated. With school-centric approaches to outreach and paternalistic perspectives that neglect the aspirations Native families have for the overall healthy development of their children, it is no wonder they tend to be less engaged in their children's schooling. Family priorities around more holistic and humane schooling for their children must be recognized and accommodations made. Increased intentionality in how a Native presence is included in neighborhood schools should be a renewed commitment across the district. Accessing the expertise and resources of the Indian Education program is another. Finally, taking the time to listen, respect, and address the aspirations Native families have for their children would be a significant move in the direction toward more culturally sustaining partnerships. Recommendations for ways in

which to increase the potential for authentic collaboration between home and school follow.

The overarching theme of the families' responses was the need to be recognized as equal partners in their children's education. They wanted to be respected and valued for what they had to offer their children's schooling. The benefits could be an increased level of school participation as a result of being recognized and respected for their valuable contributions to their children and community. Table 20 contains suggestions for addressing areas families identified as lacking in general outreach by the ASD.

Table 20

*Initiatives to Address Identified Needs of Alaska Native Families for Effective School**Partnerships*

Goal	Facilitators	Delivery Method	Resources
<i>Non-Native School Personnel</i>			
<i>Identified Need: Holistic Approach to Education</i>			
Create culturally relevant outreach materials to families	ASD's Indian Education personnel	Mini-workshops delivered during in-service days	ASD Indian Education staff time
Native culture-bearers speaker panel	ASD administrators and staff	School demonstrations or as guest speakers for in-service opportunities or class discussions	Compensation for panel members when services needed
Record stories of Native Elders and families			ASD staff or outside organization to record stories
<i>Identified Need: Educators as Allies</i>			
Train-the-trainer model for effective outreach strategies to Native families	Native and non-Native school personnel as co-facilitators (ASD preschool teachers)	Inservice days and intensives at the Anchorage School District Summer Academy	Compensation for facilitators Instructional materials
<i>Native Families</i>			
<i>Identified Need: Educators as Allies</i>			
School Climate and Connectedness Survey to Alaska Native families	ASD administrators and staff Indian Education Program	ASD website, email, texts	Compensation for facilitators to create and distribute survey and collect results
<i>Identified Need: Importance of Family and Community</i>			
Networking and support opportunities for Native families	ASD administrators Indian Education Program Native culture bearers	Craft nights Native dancing demonstrations Potlucks and student performances	Compensation for facilitators and craftsmen/culture bearers Materials for crafts
<i>Identified Need: Supported Transitions from Rural to Anchorage School District Schools</i>			
Ease adjustment and cultural disorientation for students and families	Migrant Education Indian Education Principals and teachers	Family networking opportunities Host families/Class buddy programs	Compensation for school personnel to host family events Funds for refreshments
<i>Native Family and Community Members</i>			
<i>Identified Need: Holistic Approach to Education</i>			
Form Native family advisory boards at neighborhood schools	ASD Indian Education personnel and building principals	Monthly potlucks focused on ways to integrate traditional values in school	ASD Indian Education staff time
<i>Anchorage School District Administrators and Policymakers</i>			
<i>Identified Need: Recognition of Subsistence as Core Native Value</i>			
Communicate ASD's value for Native lifeways and beliefs	ASD administrators and policy-makers	Implement subsistence leave policies for families and students	

Note. ASD = Anchorage School District.

The suggestions listed above all focus on outreach to Native families that consider their needs and challenge school-centric approaches to current practices in the ASD. Most involve little from the district's budget but do require a significant increase in commitment from the ASD's leadership. Within Table 21 is *Recommendation 11*.

Table 21

Recommendation 11

Home visits, surveys or phone calls to families at the beginning of each school year by classroom teachers could determine aspirations families have for their children's education. Asking families what experiences and skills they have to offer students sends the message they have expertise to share. Intentional invitations to family members to co-teach lessons or suggest resources would make the connection between home and school more meaningful and dynamic. Providing "maker-spaces" in schools where Native craftspeople could teach traditional skills would promote stronger connections between home and school. Hosting informal evening events that included a potluck meal and student performances would draw in more families and provide teachers and principals a sense of what is needed for authentic partnerships. Providing spaces for afterschool programs such as Native dancing or traditional values discussion groups led by Elders for older students.

The next sections discuss limitations of the study and suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with final thoughts about the significance of the study.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Only Native families whose children attended preschools at the ANCCS and programs offered by CITC were interviewed for this study. Although this was a deliberate choice, it could be seen as a limitation of the study. The intent was to focus on outreach practices to Alaska Native families that could serve as exemplars for the rest of the district. Additionally, because of the small sample size of interview participants all findings may not be generalizable to the broader Alaska Native community.

Another limitation was that each of the participants represented a two-parent family. Single parent families, with limited support from other adults, may have challenges juggling multiple responsibilities as the primary caregiver to their children. This could make it more difficult for them to participate in their children's schooling to the same degree as two-parent families. Neither were grandparents, who are increasingly raising school-aged grandchildren, represented in the study. Grandparents often face challenges due to fixed incomes and age-related issues, making it challenging to directly participate in their grandchildren's schooling. The researcher intended to interview heads of households representing both family structures but was unable to find willing participants.

Finally, because of the researcher's positionality as a White, middle-class educator, families may have responded to interview questions in ways they may not have otherwise. Additionally, although the researcher strived to ensure the families' voices and perspectives were clearly represented her own position may have affected presentation of research findings.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

As stated earlier, most of the research on effective outreach to families is geared toward White, middle-class families; much less is available around best practices with Alaska Native families whom have historically been marginalized by systems of Western schooling.

In addition, research exists on the need for more relevant curricula and pedagogies for Native students; especially those attending schools in rural areas. More studies are needed on ways to increase the participation of Alaska Native families in

urban schools. Research in this area would increase non-Native educational leaders and policy-makers' understanding of ways to better support Alaska Native families, with the potential of increasing student success.

Finally, as the researcher chose to focus on outreach that *is* meeting the needs of Native families, issues that exist in outreach implemented by Title 1 and neighborhood schools were not specifically identified. Future research on a broader population of Alaska Native families whose children attend neighborhood schools in the ASD is recommended.

6.5 Conclusion

This study sought to determine how Alaska Native families experience outreach by the ASD as studies suggest they participate less than other cultural groups in their children's schooling. It was also interested in the potential of preschool teachers acting as mentors and role models to colleagues at other grade levels as they generally have more knowledge and skills in this area.

Findings from the study showed that, outside of the ANCCS, programs offered by CITC and the ASD's Indian Education program, there is limited success in the ASD meeting the partnership needs of Native families. Although the families interviewed noted there were individual administrators and teachers who modeled best practices in their outreach, the fact remains that systemic and consistent policies around making culturally sustaining family outreach a part of ASD's culture are not currently in place.

Only ANCCS and CITC preschool programs were referred to as "our" schools by the families. Native families whose children attend neighborhood, or Title One schools may not have an investment in or feelings of ownership in those schools. Because of this,

they may be less inclined to become engaged in their children's education and feel disempowered in ways that have a historical precedent in schooling for Alaska Native communities.

ASD's paucity of quality partnerships with Native families could be a lack of understanding of what Native families need or a culture of resistance to examining the status quo of outreach practices which mostly targets White, middle-class families. Regardless, even ASD preschool teachers, who generally have the most training among educators on how to plan and implement effective outreach to families, identified areas of need in their professional development around how to partner with Native families.

Without the specific knowledge and skills necessary to reach Native families, it is unlikely the district's goal to increase the families' direct participation in their children's schooling will be realized. A clearer understanding of what those needs are by non-Native school personnel could serve as a framework for starting the important work of bridging the gap that now exists.

The ASD's data on the low degree of engagement by Alaska Native families is clear, as are statistics tracking continued stagnation in the academic achievement of Native students. With over 30 years of research showing the positive impact of quality family engagement on student success, it is imperative that ASD's leadership address this disconnect.

For too long, the issue of Native families directly participating less in their children's schooling than other cultural groups in the ASD has been misunderstood. Negative assumptions they are unconcerned with their children's success abound. On the

contrary, Native families care deeply, but they have not been heard or taken seriously by school administrators. In fact, they may have resigned themselves to the current situation.

This chapter ends with a challenge to ASD's leadership to prioritize the needs of Alaska Native students and their families. For too long general outreach practices to Native families in the ASD have gone unexamined and continue to create barriers to success for Alaska Native students. As one mother interviewed for this study expressed, "We have such high hopes for our children. Our lives didn't always go the way that we wanted ... but we don't want any obstacles for our children."

It is time to listen and learn from the Alaska Native community. It is time to reach out and ask what is needed to heal past injustices and implement changes that sustain Native cultural values and ways of life. It is time to invite Native families to take a place at the table as full partners in their children's education.

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Appendix A

Survey of Culturally Responsive Outreach to Alaska Native Families

Survey of Culturally Responsive Outreach to Alaska Native Families

Dear ASD Preschool Teacher,

As you know, family engagement is an important factor in a student’s school success. By taking this survey, you provide valuable data on effective outreach strategies ASD preschool teachers are using with Alaska Native families. *This survey is completely voluntary and anonymous.* It should take about 10 minutes to complete.

****At the end of the survey, you may voluntarily submit your email to enter a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. ****

Please call Karen Roth, UAA faculty, if you have questions or concerns. My email address is klroth@alaska.edu and phone number is 786-1928. Thank you for your participation!

Section 1: Your Alaska Native students and their families

1. I have _____ students who identify as Alaska Native in my class this year.

2. I know the family members in the household of my Alaska Native students.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree

Section 2: Building effective partnerships with Alaska Native families

1. I believe education is an important value to Alaska Native families.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree
2. It is my responsibility as an educator to provide information to Alaska Native families of ways to support their children’s school success at home.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree
3. I feel comfortable communicating with the families of my Alaska Native families.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree
4. Strategies I have used to create strong partnerships with Alaska Native families are:

Section 3: Professional growth and development

1. I am confident my communication to the families of Alaska Native students creates strong partnerships.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree
2. I want to know more about Alaska Native cultural values.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree
3. I want to know more about how the history of schooling for Alaska Natives may affect student success today.
 Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree

4. I want to learn how to build stronger partnerships with the families of my Alaska Native students.

Strongly agree Agree Somewhat Agree Do not agree Strongly Disagree

Please share additional comments you have about effective outreach to Alaska Native families. _____

Section 4: Personal information

1. What is your ethnic identity?

- Alaska Native/American Indian _____
- Pacific Islander _____
- Asian _____
- African American _____
- Hispanic _____
- Caucasian/White _____
- Mixed heritage _____
- Other _____

2. How long have you been teaching? _____

3. Do you teach in a Title One school? Yes _____ No _____

4. What areas of professional development in culturally responsive family engagement would be helpful to you?

Again, thank you for participating in this study. Your input is critical to understanding more about how ASD preschool teachers are connecting with Alaska Native families and if there is a desire for more information on how to support them.

****To enter your name in a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card please provide it here:** _____

Please contact me if you have questions or concerns.

Karen Roth

UAA, Early Childhood Program

786-1928

klroth@alaska.edu

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board-approved Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Examining the Anchorage School District's Outreach Practices to Alaska Native Families

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to meet with me.

I am a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). I am interested in how Alaska Native families view the way their preschooler's teachers communicate with them.

There are no right or wrong answers. It is okay to share honestly how you feel. I will make sure your privacy is protected and remove your name from written materials.

Description of the Study:

I want to learn ways ASD preschool teachers are reaching out to Alaska Native families. Because you have had a child attending preschool in the ASD, you are being asked your opinions. Please read this form carefully and know it is okay to ask questions before you decide to be in the study.

If you choose to be interviewed, I will ask how your child's preschool teacher has made your family feel included and welcome at school. I will also ask for ways teachers might do a better job.

This will take about 45 minutes. Later, I may ask if you want to share your ideas with other Alaska Native family members. There will only be a few families at the meeting and it will take about 45 minutes. It is always your choice to interview or not to interview. Your privacy will be protected at all times. If you agree to come to a group meeting, other family members may recognize you. Again, it is always your choice whether or not to participate.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no known risks to being interviewed. Some people do not like being interviewed; so be sure it is okay with you. Your ideas may help ASD preschool teachers do a better job of making Alaska Native families feel welcome and included at school. This study may also help other Alaska Native families who want to share their feelings about school. If you want to look at the plan for this study, I am happy to get you a copy.

Privacy: The results of this study will be shared with my professors at UAF and with ASD preschool teachers. I will not share your name with anyone and will protect your identity. This signed form will be stored in a locked office on campus. I am the only person who will listen to the recording. I will write down the ideas I need, and then erase

the recordings. You may have copies for your own use. Your name will not be used in reports, presentations, or publications.

Voluntary Participation:

It is your choice whether or not to take part in the study. You can change your mind and stop at any time. You can ask to be taken off the study. Either way, this will not affect your child(ren) who attend the ASD.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions, please ask me now. If you have questions later, you may email or phone me. My email is klroth@alaska.edu and phone number is 907-786-1928. My faculty supervisor is Dr. Amy Vinlove at UAF. You can email her at alvinlove@alaska.edu or reach her office at 907-474-7701.

The UAF Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a group that examines research projects involving people. This review is done to protect the rights and welfare of people involved the research. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the UAF Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or [1-866-876-7800](tel:1-866-876-7800) (toll-free outside the Fairbanks area) or uaf-irb@alaska.edu.

Consent:

I understand my rights and how this study will work. My questions have been answered and I agree to be in this study. I am 18 years old or older. I was given a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant & Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent (Karen Roth) & Date

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Research study: Examining the Anchorage School District's Partnering Practices with Alaska Native Families of Preschoolers

University of Alaska Fairbanks
Interviewer: Karen Roth, INDS PhD candidate

Part 1.

Introduction

Hello. I am Karen Roth, a doctoral candidate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in the Interdisciplinary Studies program with an emphasis on Indigenous Education. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to meet. I would like to learn about your experiences in the Anchorage School District (ASD) as a family member of an Alaska Native preschoolers.

My research is interested in how Alaska Native families of preschool students have experienced relationship building and communication by the ASD.

There are no right or wrong answers. I want you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and feel. Your answers will be held in confidence and any identifying information about you will be removed in written materials.

Recording Instructions

I will be using a tape recorder to make sure I don't miss anything you tell me. Please feel free at any time to ask me to stop the recorder, or if you want to stop the interview. I may also take notes as you speak if I think of something else I want to ask you as we go along.

Consent Form Instructions

Before we get started, please take a moment to read this form to make sure you know what this research is about and that you agree to participate.

Part 2

Questions based on the 4 quadrants of the Medicine Wheel* approach to Indigenous interviews; Mental (knowing), Spiritual (honoring), Physical (doing), and Emotional (understanding) (Madden, 2014).

Q1: Can you share a little about your background (family, where you were raised, etc.)?

Q2: What were your experiences as a public -school student?

Q3: Please tell me about your family's past and current experiences with public school.

Q4: Please tell me about teachers who were not supportive or didn't understand your needs as a student.

Q5: Please tell me about teachers who *were* supportive of your needs as a student.

Q6: In what ways has your family and community felt included in your child's schooling?

Q7: How was/is your family's culture and language honored by your teachers and schools?

Q8: How has your child's or grandchild's school experience differed from yours?

Q9: What would you like to tell school administrators and educators in the ASD about your experiences as a family member of an Alaska Native student?

Q10: What do you feel non-Native administrators and teachers in the ASD need to know about your culture's values to make schooling more successful for your preschooler?

Q11: Is there anything else you would like me to know?

*Madden, B. (2014). Coming full circle: White, euro-canadian teachers' positioning, understanding, doing, honoring, and knowing in school-based Aboriginal education. *In education: Exploring connective educational landscapes*. Vol. 20, No. 1.

Interviewer's Extension Questions

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about that?

What do you mean when you say....?

Do you mind telling me how that made you feel?

Conclusion

Well, that is all the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like me to understand about your story or your family's story?

I will listen to the recording and write down any questions that come up. If I have questions, do you mind if I call to ask you what I missed?

I will also listen to the recording and transcribe (type up what I hear) everything we talked about. I will be sure to send you a copy of the transcripts. I will not share it with anyone and will keep your comments confidential.

Thanks again for your time today. I enjoyed meeting with you and hearing your story and ideas.

Part 3.

Interviewer Reflection

After the interviewee leaves the room, take a couple of minutes to record impressions and observations about the interview.

Date and time of interview:

Describe the interviewee's general attitude during interview:

Please describe anything of note you want to remember: