

BARRIERS TO AHTNA ATHABASCANS BECOMING PUBLIC SCHOOL

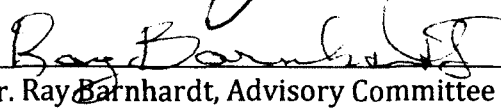
EDUCATORS


BY

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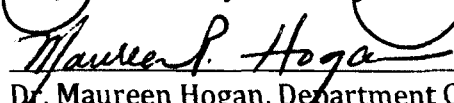
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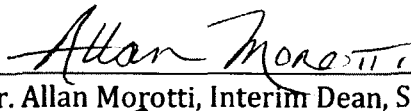
  
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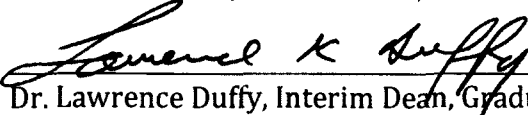
  
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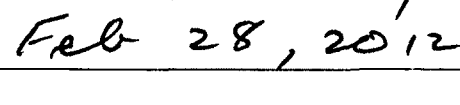
  
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**BARRIERS TO AHTNA ATHABASCANS  
BECOMING PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS  
A  
DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty  
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks**

**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILSOPHY**

**By**

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**Fairbanks, Alaska**

**May 2012**

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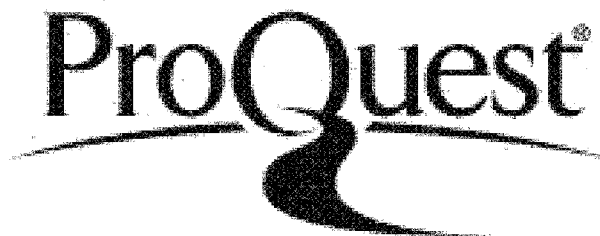


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### Abstract

Using a mixed-method phenomenological approach, this cross-cultural study utilizes a non-formalized survey and interviews. Data was gathered and presented in a manner consistent with Ahtna cultural norms and values. Survey data set was analyzed by statistical description. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically through axial coding. The review of literature and data gathered from Ahtna Athabascan participants identified barriers common to other minorities groups evidenced in Ahtna-specific ways. Through a thematic analysis, the data showed barriers, consequences, benefits, and solutions to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. Through this study, Ahtna Athabascans expressed an overwhelming desire to see more Ahtna Athabascans teachers in public schools. Among the policy and practical implications identified in the study are the need to improve the quality of K-12 educational experiences for Ahtna youth and improved guidance counseling services. The analysis of the data set provides pathways for future Ahtna-specific research and Ahtna-specific solutions for increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers in local public schools.

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Though success was not guaranteed when I started this project, there was never a doubt Dad would be proud. His pride will always be my honor.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Ages ago, as Ahtna children played around the family fishing camp, parents and elders told them stories to teach safety and respect for life-sustaining resources. Educating their youth was essential for survival. There remain methods in Ahtna culture for educating their children in a subsistence lifestyle. One primary strategy was story telling. For example, stories of mythical animals, nature, and the environment taught youngsters the balance necessary to honor and respect their subsistence lifestyle. Stories were educational and passed knowledge from one Ahtna generation to the next.

It is clearly evident that Ahtna people have recognized the importance of education long before western traditions of schooling entered their lifestyles. For centuries, Ahtna people have survived along the Copper River in Alaska by using stories and experience to teach their youngsters how to face the elements and harness natural resources necessary for survival (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Education did not develop in Ahtna culture as a luxury for the well-to-do; it was always indispensable for life itself. Without a thoughtful and effective system for training and educating their children, Ahtna culture would not have survived the harsh northern climate nor the abrasive influx of western influences.

Modern Ahtna life, as for other Alaska Natives, is shaped by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Ahtna Incorporated was created on June 23, 1972 to serve people of Ahtna descent. The company's mission and vision statements are as follows:



Mission: Ahtna, Inc., an Alaska Native Corporation, is a global company providing exceptional construction and integrated services to both government and private sector clients.

Vision: Ahtna, Inc., with a strong sense of cultural pride and identity, will enhance the overall well being of our shareholders through the wise stewardship of our natural resources, sustained growth, and economic development for future generations. (Ahtna Incorporated, 2010, p. 2)

The company had operating revenue of \$243 million in 2010 and from 15 operation subsidiaries (Ahtna Incorporated, 2010). The company provides some jobs in the Copper River Valley and Anchorage for Ahtna shareholders. Ahtna Incorporated provides a context for much of current Ahtna programs and activities. The 2010 Annual Report begins by acknowledging this context.

Ahtna, Incorporated dedicates this Annual Report to the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, an unprecedented and historical event that forever changed our way of life, and still continues to shape the future of our people. (Ahtna Incorporated, 2010, p. i)

This is most evident in Ahtna Incorporated's establishment and support of the Ahtna Heritage Foundation.

The Ahtna Regional Corporation, Ahtna Incorporated, has a main office in Glennallen Alaska, with satellite and subsidiary offices in Anchorage and other locations within the United States. The Ahtna Regional Corporation operates in over eight countries on five continents. Ahtna Incorporated employs 2104 workers throughout the

world, with 397 employees in Alaska. According to the 2010 Annual Report, Ahtna Incorporated has “approximately 1,600 shareholders, of which the majority reside within the Copper River Region” (Ahtna Incorporated, 2010, p. 7).

### **Researcher’s Background**

The researcher for this study first visited Ahtna territory in June of 1992. After several summers of summer camps and enjoying the Alaska lifestyle, the researcher spent the winter of 1995-1996 working as an instructional aide in the Copper River School District. During that time, the opportunity of living within the Ahtna culture became a vision of serving, which led to a year of graduate school. Obtaining the necessary certification to become an Alaska public school teacher in the Ahtna region became the means for living the vision.

In 1997-1998, the researcher was privileged with a contract to teach at Gakona Elementary School, which at the time served several Alaska Native students, primarily from the villages of Gulkana and Gakona. The experience of working with parents and students from Ahtna villages shaped the researcher’s professional and personal life up until the present time. Relationships with Ahtna families eventually led to the researcher’s adoption into the Ewan family Udzisyu Caribou Clan. Knowing Ahtna people personally and being formally adopted into an Ahtna clan at a potlatch is inherently emotional and personal.

As the researcher developed as an educator and formed strong relationship bonds with Ahtna families, the importance of education ownership formed into a passion for more Ahtna educators in the local public school system. As the students from the

researcher's first class in Gakona School graduated and left for college, the desire to see some return as educators in local schools grew slowly into the impetus for this particular study. The experience of relating to and personally knowing Ahtna individuals resulted in familiarity with lived-experiences in a variety of areas, including their choosing or not choosing a career in education.

### **Topic Background**

Education for Ahtna youth in the late 20th century up to the current time is delivered with a blend of traditional learning and modern western public education. Traditional Ahtna territory encompasses the Copper River School District, the primary source of public education for this area. The school district was formed as a Rural Educational Attendance Area in 1976 by the Alaska Legislature. The school district has the responsibility, as a public school system, to educate all youth within the boundaries of the school district, including Ahtna youth.

Teachers from many places in the United States and Alaska have immigrated to the Copper River Valley to teach in the Copper River School District. As far as can be determined, in the history of the Copper River School District, only one Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native teacher has been contracted and taught as a certified teacher. While hundreds of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students have been enrolled in the Copper River School District and the previous state operated school system, only a few have felt the security of having someone from their own culture serve as their primary certified public school teacher.

Even though the number of certified teachers has been minimal, many Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives have worked in the school system as secretaries, cooks, custodians, and teaching assistants. These former employees of the local school system, some of which were interviewed for this study, were an important part of many students' success in school.

This study was formulated to explore the barriers that have kept Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives from becoming public school educators. As native people navigate the pervasive western culture using their own traditional culture as a compass, the education of their youth has become a priority for determining the route they travel to preserve their past and future heritage. This investigation explores an important part of their journey into western education traditions.

An interdisciplinary approach to the study acknowledges the complexity of a cross-cultural study. Ahtna culture has a significant knowledge base and experience in many disciplines. This study draws upon their understanding of culture, education, history, and governance.

The history of western educational failure—especially in educating disadvantaged youth—paralleled by the history of successful education system of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives for centuries, leads to an important perspective on the current study. A component of the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans Alaska Natives becoming public school educators is that after many generations of traditional Ahtna education, many youth have not enjoyed equitable benefits of the current public school system.

They have not sufficiently progressed through K-12 in a manner enabling them obtain higher degrees needed to gain certification as public school teachers.

Other than language study, research into specific education and other social policies in the Ahtna region is strikingly minimal (Barnhardt, 1982). Ainsworth, John, and John (2002) note the small pool of Ahtna-specific research. Kari (1990) has done admirable and extensive language studies for the Ahtna people that have contributed to a resurgence of determination to preserve the traditional culture. Ahtna Elders have generously participated in several language and oral history projects.

The limited amount of Ahtna-specific research and the questions that come from the intersection of modern and traditional Ahtna history has become a funnel into this exploratory study of the barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives from becoming educators in their local public schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The graduation rate and overall achievement for Alaska Native students lags behind other sub-groups in Alaska's Education Report card (Alaska Department of Education, 2011). Though performing better than the state average for Alaska Native students, Ahtna students attending local public schools in the Copper River School District still have a lower performance than the Caucasian subgroup.

In formulating the problem statement, the researcher has attempted to avoid what Smith (1999) refers to as framing research "in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues (p. 92). Part of the challenge to

provide a quality and relevant education for Ahtna youth is the lack of Alaska Native teachers (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010) who are better able to understand native ways of learning and to establish bridges between schools and communities in which they are located. Differences in learning styles, content emphasis, and learning environment preferences may all be addressed more effectively with indigenous teachers. The cultural and educational goals necessary for Ahtna youth to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be addressed by an increasing number of certified Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native teachers.

### **Research Question**

The over-arching question of the present study is this: With such a strong tradition of education in their culture, what keeps Ahtna people from choosing to become educators in local public schools? The potential for improved achievement for Ahtna students by increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native teachers in the local public schools raises several questions that must precede targeted teacher recruitment initiatives. The questions have been asked and the body of knowledge on this topic has benefited from many scholarly research and programmatic efforts. For example, the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (2011) maintains a repository of information on past and current Alaska Native education and cultural issues. Their website links to other groups and forums for improving Alaska Native education and cultural preservation.

In the introduction to *Alaska Native Education: Views from Within*, the author instructs researchers and practitioners on the foundation for asking the appropriate

questions for improving Alaska Native education in public schools. With pinpoint precision he guides us from the difficulties of the 20th century to a place we can visualize the 21st century challenges for improving Alaska Native student achievement:

No longer can these differences be cast in simplistic either/or terms, implying some kind of easily definable dichotomy between those who support subsistence versus cash economies, or traditional versus modern technologies, or anecdotal versus scientific evidence, or indigenous versus western curricula. These lines have been blurred with the realities that native cultures are not static, and western institutional structures are no longer dominant. Instead, we now have a much more fluid and dynamic situation in which once-competing views of the world are having to seek reconciliation through new structures and frameworks that foster coexistence rather than domination and exploitation, one over the other.

(Barnhardt, 2010, p. xviii)

The ultimate demonstration of “coexistence rather than domination” in the Copper River Valley would be to increase the number of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native public school educators. This study is designed to understand the lived-experience of some Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives of not choosing to become a public school educator in local schools. From this understanding, future research can focus on understanding those specific barriers and assisting the public school system and Ahtna Athabascans in removing them.

## **Purpose**

The specific purpose of this mixed-method study is to explore the lived-experience of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives who choose not to become public school educators in their local schools. In addition to Ahtna people, other Alaska Native cultures have wrestled with the need to become part of the controlling force in local public schools. Yupiaq Alaska Natives have been working toward a more indigenous school system for many years, as noted in the following passage:

If the Yupiaq people are to really exercise the option of educational control it will require that the schools become Yupiaq staffed, Yupiaq administered, and Yupiaq in practice. Outsiders have to realize that outsiders' control, and the resulting forms of curricula and teaching, are not well synchronized to native consciousness. (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 91)

The idea of gaining educational control of the local public schools for Ahtna youth is integrally connected to having more Ahtna educators in the local public schools. The concept of educational control is clearly stated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which insists that "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions, providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (as cited in Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 354). Ahtna Athabascans not only have the evidence of a strong tradition of educating their youth, but they also have the right to become part of their educational systems. The more general purpose of this study



is to explore the barriers that have kept them from exercising those rights as public school educators.

The exploration of the barriers that have prevented Ahtna people from becoming public school educators also indirectly purposes to improve the public school experience for Ahtna youth. For Alaska Native youth, attending public school can be like standing by a canyon with vertical walls on both sides. It is a place where both the traditional way of life and the western world seen through media have eroded into perceived hopeless irrelevancy. Ahtna students want to thrive on both sides of the canyon, but the bridge that public education promised has still not been built for many of them (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). Exploring the barriers that have kept Ahtna Athabascans from being public school educators is responsive to Ahtna youth who feel as if they do not belong.

Studies in other contexts support the purpose of improving the sense of connectedness and trust between minority youth and the public school system. Dee points this out by stating, “Experimental evidence suggests that teachers, in interacting with students, are more favorably disposed toward those who share their racial or ethnic background” (Dee, 2004, p. 55). Thus, more Ahtna teachers in the public school system could provide a much more favorable experience for Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students.

Dee (2004) also points out that in addition to making the public education experience more favorable for minority youth, more indigenous teachers may result in a more favorable educational experience for all stakeholders, including the teachers themselves. This author notes that specifically, “the racial interactions between teachers

and students could influence student performance in several ways. For example, pupils may trust and respect someone with whom they share a salient characteristic, making learning come more easily” (Dee, 2004, p. 53). More respectfulness and more learning translate into more success for students, teachers, and parents. Exploring the barriers that have kept the number of Ahtna teachers disproportionately low may eventually lead to research that will create a more positive public school experience in the Ahtna region.

The goal of public education is student achievement. The purpose of research that explores the barriers to Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives becoming public school educators is ultimately aimed toward improved Ahtna student achievement. This connection between indigenous teachers and indigenous student achievement is also articulated in Dee’s (2004) statement, “Likewise, a teacher of the same race may serve as a more effective role model, boosting students’ confidence and enthusiasm for learning” (p. 54). He goes on to say that having a teacher from your own culture is even more influential than overall teacher quality: “These results clearly indicate that the unobserved aspects of teacher quality cannot explain the sizable achievement gains associated with students’ being assigned to teachers who share their race” (Dee, 2004, p. 58).

Ahtna teachers may have higher expectations and standards for Ahtna students, and communicate those expectations in a culturally acceptable way, resulting in higher student achievement, according to Dee. The purpose of exploring the barriers that have prevented Ahtna Athabascans from becoming public school educators is to leverage the possibilities for improved achievement and public school experience for Ahtna youth.

### **Importance of the Study**

The importance of studying the lived-experiences of Ahtna Athabascans that have chosen not to become educators is in direct proportion to the importance of the children of rural Alaska. Alaska Native history and culture are rich and add to the fabric of our society in a manner that makes the tapestry stronger and more attractive. Improving the educational experience and outcomes of Alaska Native youth is not a temporary priority, but an endeavor with long-lasting consequences.

For many decades, well-intentioned and not-so-well-intentioned educators have worked to incorporate more indigenous people and culture into local public schools in rural Alaska. Researchers point out the importance of a deep and meaningful effort in this regard:

While there has been some limited representation of local cultural elements in the schools (e.g., basket making, sled building, songs and dances), it has been at a fairly superficial level with only token consideration given to the significance of those elements as integral parts of a larger complex adaptive cultural system that continues to imbue people's lives with purpose and meaning outside the school setting. (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 204)

Understanding the lived-experience of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives' not choosing to become public school educators may lead to more indigenous teachers which, as the above quote states, integrates native culture and western educational practices in a manner that could "imbue people's lives with purpose and meaning outside the school setting" (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 204). This study is not only important for

improving educational outcomes, but it can also be a means for improving life beyond K-12 education.

In addition to the importance of educational and life experiences, this study could significantly assist in cultural preservation. More Ahtna teachers could help pass down cultural traditions and ways of knowing that are dear to the Ahtna people (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). Teachers from other cultures certainly add value to the educational experience, but indigenous teachers carry the culture into the school with them. The culture becomes “live and in person” as students are learning.

Even as the culture is preserved, students struggle with the relevancy of both western ways of knowing and traditional practices and ways of knowing. The influx of media brings a constant pressure between the reality of place of culture and the utopia of fictional settings on television. Teachers in school are at the crossroads of culture, school, and the world depicted on television and the internet. A non-indigenous teacher is by nature addressing these challenges cross-culturally (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). Yet Ahtna teachers are best equipped to teach Ahtna culture in ways that honor the traditional values. This effort of cultural inclusion is important because studies show that native children respond much more positively to schooling experiences that include cultural knowledge (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

Previous efforts designed to increase the number of indigenous teachers have shown positive results. This study’s importance is highlighted by past efforts and studies. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2010), while explaining the history of education for Alaska Natives, make note of past influx of native teachers. They state the influx “opened the

doors for the beginning of two-way interaction between the schools and the native communities they served” (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 204). The positive impacts of the past laid a foundation of importance for this and other current research.

Along with the past, the future creates an importance for researching the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators, particularly for the following reason:

By not teaching the Yupiaq youngsters their own language and way of doing things, the classroom teachers are telling them that their language, knowledge, and skills are of little importance. The students begin to think of themselves as being less than other people. After all, they are expected to learn through a language other than their own, to learn values that are in conflict with their own, and to learn a “better” way of seeing and doing things. They are taught the “American dream” which, in their case, is largely unattainable without leaving behind who they are. (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 81)

More Ahtna teachers, by teaching, can demonstrate a clear path to the future based upon traditional values and ways of knowing.

As this study ultimately looks to the future through the past, it points to an improved quality of life uncomplicated by conflicts of western public education, as the following passage depicts:

Unlike the western observers’ tendency to freeze indigenous cultural systems in time, as though they exist in some kind of idealized static state destined never to change, native people themselves, as a matter of cultural survival, have been

quick to adapt new technologies and to grasp the “new world order.” While retaining a keen sense of place in rootedness to the land they occupy, they have not hesitated to take advantage of new opportunities to improve their quality of life and efficiency of their lifestyle. This is done, however, within their own framework of values, priorities, and worldviews, so that the development trajectory they choose is not always the same as what outsiders might anticipate or even recognize. (Barnhardt, 2010, p. xix)

Ahtna Athabascans working as public school educators will help lead the school system toward an Ahtna-determined trajectory.

Researching the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans Alaska Natives becoming public school educators is important due to the need for improved educational experiences, school relevancy, cultural preservation, and quality of life. The exploration into the attitudes and lived-experiences of Ahtna people choosing not to become educators is designed to be important for the Ahtna people.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In a cross-cultural study, where the research and the participants are from different cultures, the framework for research must exhibit an awareness of the difference so that reliable data might be gathered and meaningful analysis conducted. Exploring the barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascans from becoming public school educators is a study conducted cross-culturally. The topic and participants are Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. The researcher is Caucasian.

This study uses a mixed-method approach, with a strong qualitative emphasis. Survey data from a non-formalized sample is used for descriptive analysis of Ahtna attitudes toward educational experiences. The descriptive statistics provide context for the phenomenological qualitative portion of the mixed-methods study. Creswell (2007) explains that “we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored” (p. 39). In this case, the problem is the barriers that have created a disproportionately low number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers in local public schools.

Both the quantitative approach and qualitative methods must be sensitive to the Ahtna culture’s ways of knowing. Approaching the research without respect would not produce reliable data. More research exists for Athabascans and especially for Alaska Natives in general; however, Ahtna-specific research is very limited. Though the other studies available for Alaska Natives and other Indian groups is insightful, it is not Ahtna-specific. The conclusions of previous studies may or may not be entirely applicable to the Ahtna situation. Creswell (2007) explains this in the following passage:

We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples where existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem. Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences. (p. 40)

Ahtna is a unique and strong culture within a larger group of Alaska Native cultures. It warrants a mixed-method study that focuses on its unique challenges and works toward the solutions that are unique to the Ahtna situation. The quantitative approach enhances the qualitative approach, which together lead to a deeper understanding of the lived-experience of Ahtna Athabascans.

As the purpose and importance of the study gives motivation to understand the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators, the research process must be designed with Ahtna people informing the procedures. Preceding research informs the methods for current cross-cultural studies.

In May 1994 the Alaska Natives Commission, a federal and state task force that had been established 2 years earlier to conduct a comprehensive review of programs and policies impacting native people, released a report articulating the need for all future efforts addressing Alaska Native issues to be initiated and implemented from within the native community (Alaska Natives Commission, 1996). The purpose and importance of the study come from within the Ahtna culture and enliven the general procedures.

Both the survey data and the qualitative approach address validity concerns due to the researcher's public position and long-standing relationship with the Ahtna community. An understanding of the lived-experience of Ahtna Athabascans not choosing to become public school educators can only be obtained by listening to Ahtna people tell their stories. An outside framework of statistical analysis would not lead to deep understanding, nor would a cold impersonal qualitative approach. What is necessary for culture-specific research to include is that "We conduct qualitative research



when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between the researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). A framework of Ahtna people empowered to tell stories of their lived-experience provides the reliable data necessary to explore the barriers to Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives becoming public school educators.

This study is a dialogue, not a lecture. Its conclusions come from conversations with Ahtna people regarding the best methods of research, their lived-experiences, and opinions regarding the conclusions drawn. The quantitative data from the survey acts as a discussion starter. It initiates the conversation with Ahtna people regarding the specific topic of this study. This type of study, specific to Ahtna issues, is rare. The project’s framework is sensitive to making the culture comfortable with this type of inquiry while also being relevant to addresses Ahtna concerns regarding the education of their children. The mixed-methods approach is in keeping with understanding from within (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Creswell, 2007).

### **Limitations**

Ultimately, the conclusions drawn from this study are from the researcher. The conclusions are cross-cultural. The conclusions, though valid and developed through a scholarly process, represent the perspective from which they were recorded. One researcher explains, “When we go to the field to collect data, we need to approach the task with care for the participants and sites and to be reflexive about our role and how it shapes what we see, hear, and write” (Creswell, 2007, p. 231). As Creswell says, the

researcher and his or her conclusions must be sensitive to how relationships and positions with the local education system impact the study. Though designed to be meaningful and impactful, the study's conclusions are one researcher's interpretation. Again, "Ultimately, our writing is an interpretation by us of events, people, and activities, and it is only our interpretation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 231).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions will help the reader understand how specific terms are used in the context of the present study:

- **Ahtna:** A sub-group of Athabascan Alaska Natives living along the Copper River watershed in east Alaska.
- **Indigenous:** Produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment (indigenous, n.d.). The term *minority* is used along with *indigenous* and *native* to illustrate the applicability of the literature to the recruitment of Alaska Natives in rural Alaska, including Ahtna Athabascans.
- **Phenomenology / hermeneutic phenomenology:** A type of study describing meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals. Hermeneutics involves analysis of texts for meanings, including transcripts of descriptions of human experience. (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990).
- **Public school educator:** A certified teacher or school-level (on site) administrator in an Alaska public school.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

An interdisciplinary study, by nature, must include a review of literature that reflects the multiple disciplines encompassed in the study. Further, a cross-cultural study also crosses disciplines such as history and social sciences. Seeking to understand an Alaskan Native culture's intersection with a modern western institution is both cross-culture and interdisciplinary.

Understanding why Ahtna Athabascan Alaskan Natives have not chosen careers as public education teachers requires a review of literature that addresses culture, historical and modern Alaskan public education, and teacher recruitment. The existing literature on each discipline area is largely general and not specific to Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. Literature specific to Alaska Natives contextualizes Ahtna-focused issues. Literature focused on other larger minority groups is valuable and gives limited but meaningful application to an Ahtna specific study. This review of literature seeks to combine information on Ahtna history and culture with a significant review of literature regarding teacher recruitment. Taken together, the literature review informs the subsequent data analysis.

### **Overview**

A review of Alaska Native culture and its traditional view of the world gives perspective on the uniqueness of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. The native understanding of knowledge, history, and culture is in contrast to western traditions and manners of viewing the world.

A survey of the history of education in Alaska and its implementation among Alaska Natives is important for understanding current attitudes. Alaska's experiences in education are relatively recent compared to other areas of the United States and certainly Europe. Current education policies have developed from the struggle for statehood and the challenges of providing equal education opportunities in remote rural areas cross culturally.

Teacher recruitment is a worldwide phenomenon. As the responsibilities of public education have expanded, so has the need and strategies for recruiting educators. Many articles have been written and studies conducted on effective teacher recruitment. The task of recruiting teachers in Alaska is an effort that requires an understanding of economics, culture, and the elements necessary to bring stability to small rural schools.

The outline for this review of the literature covers each of the areas mentioned above: culture and history, educational history, policy, and teacher recruitment. The review gives attention to the available literature regarding Ahtna history while also reviewing scholarly literature on teacher recruitment and thus provides a solid foundation for analyzing the data gathered in this study.

### **Ahtna History and Culture**

The Ahtna people have survived without European or Asian contact for centuries (Kari, 1990). Within the relatively brief history of the United States, and within the more recent history of Alaska's place within the American story, the Ahtna people's contact with western tradition and structures has been very recent. The Ahtna people are one of the last distinct people groups in North America to be flooded with Eurocentric

influences. Not until the 1890s have westerners penetrated Ahtna territory in significant numbers (Schuldt, 2009; Smelcer, 1997).

Ahtna people have and continue to reside along the Copper River watershed in Eastern Alaska. The story of centuries of existence in this rough yet unique territory is forever treasured in the mountains, hills, creeks, rivers, bluffs, and forests (Smelcer, 1997). The many Ahtna names, ending in the *'na* sound, meaning water, give lasting honor to the importance water played in their history (Dalke & Holloway, 2000; Kari, 1990).

The Copper River is known for its rich provision of salmon. The Ahtna people survived throughout the year on the salmon provided in abundance during the summer months (Ainsworth et al., 2002). By the time winter was in its harshest state, the Ahtna people could suffer from hunger until the salmon once again provided nutrients and strength for surviving Alaska's climate (Ainsworth et al., 2002). Many other resources existed in Ahtna territory. Large game such as caribou and moose were supplemented with rabbits and other small animals (Schuldt, 2009). Berries and other vegetation were used by Ahtna people to survive the months in between salmon runs. The Ahtna people "made use of virtually all accessible land in the language area of approximately 31,000 square miles" (Kari, 1990, p. 20).

Growing up in Ahtna territory was a quick process. The need to participate in the collective triumph of survival meant children were deliberately taught the skills necessary to harness the resources of the Copper River and its surrounding environment. Children were forced to mature quickly (Ainsworth et al., 2002).

Along with rich traditional stories, much of our knowledge of early Ahtna history is revealed through language study (Kari, 1990). Related to the Athabaskan languages, Ahtna is unique and separate. One writer confirms, “Ahtna is a distinct language, not mutually intelligible with any other Athabaskan language” (Kari, 1990, p. 20). The Ahtna lexicon is filled with hundreds of place names and other words that demonstrate the culture’s integration with the land and its resources, according to Kari.

In addition to revealing Ahtna early history in the Copper River Valley, the Ahtna language illustrates the significance of the recent contact with western society relative to most other people groups in the world. For example, “There are 107 loanwords recorded in Ahtna. This small number of borrowed words reflects the relative isolation of the Ahtna prior to the beginning of the 20th century” (Kari, 1990, p. 628).

Though ships from Asia and the west had cruised Alaska’s coasts and contacted various Alaska Natives, most Ahtna people realized little or no impact from these foreigners (Ainsworth et al., 2002). One collection of Ahtna stories emphasizes the recent impact of contact, prefaced by this statement: “In some ways, the things that have so negatively affected other American Indian tribes in the United States are only in the past 50 years or less beginning to irrevocably affect ours” (Smelcer, 1997, p. 6). The arrival of the road system in the mid-1940s brought significant changes to Ahtna life as people settled into permanent villages located along the road’s route (Kari, 1990). This led to increased pressures from outside and more dialectic homogeny among the various individual Ahtna families (Ainsworth et al., 2002; Kari, 1990).

Most Ahtna people continued to live with little or no western or Asian contact until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the epidemics that wiped out over 60% of the Alaska Native population in the early part of the 20th century, most native people continue to live a traditional self-sufficient lifestyle with only limited contact with fur traders and missionaries (Napoleon, 1991). The oldest of the native elders today grew up in a traditional cultural environment and still retain the knowledge and high language that they acquired during their early childhood years (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 203).

For the Ahtna people, this early contact was prompted by westerners discovering the rich mineral resources of the Copper River watershed. Though the geology of the coastal mountains and glacier-fed Copper River kept speculators at bay longer than other parts of Alaska, the lure of gold and copper eventually opened the gates to Ahtna territory (Ainsworth et al., 2002). Although Russians may have contacted Ahtna people along the Copper River in the late 1700s, the first recorded trek was by a Russian miner, Dmitriy Tarkhanov (Kari, 1990).

The most well-known and documented early contact with Ahtna people and land was the exploration of Lt. Henry Allen in the 1880s. The journey up the Copper River and into interior Alaska is the first known American journey into Ahtna territory (Kari, 1990). Allen's journals of his contact with Ahtna people illustrate their subsistence lifestyle and the Ahtna's relative isolation from western influence compared to other natives he encountered on his journey (Schuldt, 2009).

The notoriety of the rich Ahtna territory began to attract the attention of traders around the world. From western settlements in Southeast Alaska, interest grew in the

economic value of Ahtna's resources. Baron Baranov in Sitka began to gather tangible evidence of the treasures hidden in the Copper River area (Ainsworth et al., 2002).

As miners began speculating for gold and copper, the resulting impact began touching Ahtna life with increasing frequency and consequence. The lack of contact with traders that Lt. Allen noted began to give way to local trading posts and influx of western manufactured goods and processed food (Ainsworth et al., 2002).

Lt. Allen's expedition into Ahtna territory was dependent on Ahtna guides and villages to provide direction and food (Schuldt, 2009). When westerners began to install their own infrastructure for mineral extraction, the relationship with Ahtna people began to transform. Like the Yup'ik and other Alaska Natives, Ahtna people became dependent on western goods while the westerners became less dependent on Ahtna services (Alexie & Domnick, 2010, p. 267).

Even today, Ahtna villages have elders that recall their first contact with a westerner (Ainsworth et al., 2002). The researcher has personally listened to the Ahtna Traditional Chief, Ben Neeley, recount the first time he saw a Caucasian across the Gulkana River. The late contact with western tradition continues to be worked out within Ahtna culture as its history of survival continues.

The traditional Ahtna lifestyle has changed with western influence. As noted for the Yupiaq people, the western influence changed Ahtna who "did not seek changing" (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 80). Though the way of life changed, Ahtna people continue to preserve their traditional values.



As Ahtna culture continues today, Elders have been the traditional source for values and guidance for the Ahtna people. The respect elders give to tradition and natural resources is considered the standard for each generation (Dalke & Holloway, 2000).

These authors describe this tradition as follows:

Athabascan culture and tradition has always held the environment as an important priority. Our lives have been tied, traditionally, to the land. There are few rules for treating the land and the ecosystems. These rules have been passed down from generation to generation, as far back as Tribal memory serves: “Take only what is needed. Do not waste. Treat animals with respect” (Dalke & Holloway, 2000, p. 16)

The potlatch is a center point of Ahtna tradition. One author notes, “The potlatch is the most significant ceremony in Athabascan culture. It demonstrates social organization, traditional belief, manages change, and establishes unity” (Ainsworth et al., 2002, p. 57). Modern potlatches are closely tied to the traditional practice, including dancing and songs sung by elders.

The Ahtna people continue to preserve their traditions as they live a uniquely Ahtna Athabascan lifestyle in rural Alaska. Ahtna curriculum guide states emphatically the importance of Ahtna values: “We know that if these traditions and others are followed then the land will continue to provide for us, the water will be good, and the village will experience good fortune” (Dalke & Holloway, 2000, p. 6).

Relationship with elders is a primary conduit for transmission of Ahtna values. Youth are expected to relate to elder’s with increasing respect and appreciation as they

mature (Dalke & Holloway, 2000). As with many American Indian groups, Ahtna elders expect observation and experiential learning from the community (Kasten, 2010). Youth are expected to consult elders as they learn from subsistence and cultural responsibilities. For example, students are encouraged to “check with a local expert/elder what the different types of clouds may mean for local activities (play, hunting, fishing, travel, animal migrations, and any subsistence activities)” (Dalke & Holloway, 2000, p. 39).

As exemplified by the Yupiaq, Elder Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley illustrates the continued emphasis on indigenous means for transmitting values from one generation to the next, stating that “The people in general were sufficiently content with their lifestyle that they did not readily accept Eurocentric education and religions when the first envoys of the dominant society set foot in their land” (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 80).

Ahtna culture continues to value relationship over western traditions of communication. They are most comfortable allowing elders to impart values even while adapting to western society. The preservation of values is again stated clearly in the Ahtna curriculum guide as follows: “There are very strong beliefs associated with what is done and what is not done that are included when teaching or sharing information. We expect for these ‘codes’ to be included in this discussion with an Elder” (Dalke & Holloway, 2000, p. 58).

As Ahtna history and culture persevered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Ahtna people intersected with modern western society. This intersection has largely taken place in the public school system where the western tradition of content tries to dominate the Ahtna tradition of relationship. Though speaking specifically about Inupiaq and Yup’ik Alaska

Natives, Ahgeak MacLean articulates well the backdrop for an overview of educational history in Alaska in the following passage:

Western societal systems and norms, however well-intentioned, have undermined and displaced the traditional societal systems that supported our people for thousands of years. The disruptive effects of rapid social and cultural change have wreaked havoc on Alaska Native families and communities. This is reflected in a depressing array of social problems including a high suicide rate among young Alaska Natives, a high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome, breakdown of the extended family and clan system, loss of children to the welfare system, loss of language, lack of transmission of cultural knowledge and values, apathy, depression, low academic achievement and high dropout rate, transitional problems between village and cities, and the dilemma of integrating traditional and nontraditional economic systems (subsistence versus cash-based lifestyle). (MacLean, 2010, p. 55)

### **History of Education in Alaska**

The history of Alaska Native education is recent compared to western education traditions that date back to the Roman civilization and before. The broad historical details of Alaska Native Education are relevant to understanding the modern public education system in Ahtna territory. Though Ahtna contact with western systems of education are more recent, the impact of Russian and American education policies on other Alaska Natives created pathways that led to modern educational policies in Ahtna territory.

The educational systems of western civilization first touched Alaska in 1784 on the island of Kodiak (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). This Russian settlement introduced western schools by way of the Russian fur trade and explorers. The motives appear to be self-serving as the Russians needed interpreters and other human resources from within the native communities along the coast (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). The introduction of western systems of education into the lives of Alaska Natives came with Eurocentric economic ambitions, the trademark of most exploration.

As American influence increased and the fur trade began to level off, missionaries began to involve themselves in the education of Alaska Natives based on various other non-economic motives. By 1877 a Presbyterian missionary had established a school, creating the initial American influence on Alaska Native education (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). The manner in which American styles of education were introduced and served led some natives to resent the self-serving nature of some missionaries (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

As the American education system became more established, a “dual system” began to emerge in which traditional Alaska Native knowledge and instruction existed totally separate from the public education system (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). In speaking of the impact on Inupiat Eskimos, Leona Okakok describes how the dual system developed:

Parents, recognizing the inevitable encroachment of the western way of life upon Inupiat land and culture, reluctantly released their young into the hands of schoolteachers, who assured them that this was best for their child. We respected

the judgment of these newcomers to the area—teachers and ministers—because they were authorities on the new way of life. (Okakok, 2010, p. 101)

The training and teaching of youth, which had been a cultural tradition for centuries, was suddenly handed over to non-indigenous practitioners in the struggle to adapt to their rapidly changing world. The joint efforts of the American government and private school providers resulted in a speedy increase in the numbers of schools and centralized systems (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). Eventually, the Reverend Sheldon Jackson was appointed to supervise the American public education system in Alaska as the new General Agent of Education in Alaska (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996).

With many insensitive policies and policy makers, the many well-intentioned missionaries, teachers, and other educators were not able to improve the educational process for Alaska Natives. The struggle to provide a basic education led to the United States Congress establishing more structure, such as incorporating towns and segregating Whites and Alaska Natives within the educational process (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). This enhanced the dual system of education eventually resulting in an official government policy of segregation in Alaska. One result is described thus:

Thus, resentment by White settlers against missionary controlled schools and fear that an inferior education was the norm in integrated schools gave rise to a new government policy in 1905 that resulted in a dual system of education. (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996, p. 6)

This willful and deceitful lack of recognition for cultural differences entrenched the dual system of expectations (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). The Territorial Department of

Education was unsuccessful in mediating this disparity for the 1,874 native students enrolled in its schools by 1934 (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996).

The education system across the vast Territory of Alaska was increasingly American in nature and focused on preparation for college and the western lifestyle (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). With little or no institutional acknowledgement for traditional Alaska Native content and methods of teaching, native students struggled to thrive in the dual system. Sometimes with tragic results, “Indian children were forced to leave their homes and attend schools far away. This removed them from the seasonal cycle of activities, their language, and cultural training” (Ainsworth et al., 2002, p. 34).

As Alaska matured and was voted into the American republic, the Alaska Constitution included specific provisions for public education, including the following:

The legislature shall by general law establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state, and may provide for other public educational institutions. Schools and institutions so established shall be free from sectarian control. No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institutions. (Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency, 2011, § 7.1)

The public system grew through trials and tribulations, including the landmark Molly Hooch lawsuit, to eventually establish schools in most rural communities throughout the state (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). Many of today’s elder’s “are the first generation to have experienced significant exposure to schooling” (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 203).

With the arrival of statehood, the solidification of previous insensitive policies hardened into western establishments of governing. Leaders, including the Superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska had been making proclamations against culturally relevant education policies (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). As a result, “a philosophy of education that lacks sensitivity to cultural differences in the patrimony of indigenous cultures instituted in the 1870s was to prevail in many native classrooms well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996, p. 9). Programs and policies designed for western populations were implemented with the expectation that what worked for the rest of America would work for Alaska Natives (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

Well intentioned and genuine educators met with some limited successes during Alaska’s territorial period. Native culture was introduced into school programs, including traditional dancing (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). The Meriam Report, a study requested by the United States Senate, provided political weight to the need for a more culturally appropriate public education for Alaska Natives and American Indians. Various educational leaders began to emphasize and lead efforts to improve cultural sensitivity in schools. Around the middle of the century, World War II diverted attention to protecting the United States and liberating Europe (Darnell & Hoëm, 1996). Indian Education began to again become unintentional and prescribed based on western traditions. The little progress that was made did not last.

While this broader picture of Alaska Native education unfolded, many of the policies and practices also influenced the educational opportunities for Ahtna youth. It is worth restating the obvious fact that education has been practiced successfully in Alaska

Native cultures for generations. To have survived in the arctic, each generation prepared the next for subsistence and building a network of culture and community.

Elders were a primary conduit for learning. They were the receptacles for history, culture, and skills that were to be passed along to the young (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). The patterns of nature and community were communicated without hindrance through family as they experienced life together in tightly knit relationships (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

The Ahtna word translated *teach* is defined as “I will teach you verbally” and “teach skill” (Kari, 1990, p. 606). This is indicative of the Ahtna manner for instruction. The *Teaching Our Many Grandchildren* Ahtna curriculum directs this type of pedagogy, as noted in the following passage: “Observation is a powerful tool traditionally used in teaching children how to be self-sufficient and resourceful. Whenever possible, make time for the lessons to be located in a setting most fitted for the sharing to take place” (Dalke & Holloway, 2000, p. 6). This non-western approach to education, that proved highly effective in past generations, is described by today’s elders as follows:

Youngsters were expected to interest themselves in learning by watching adults work and then trying out the task by themselves “in the woods.” Children were not always specifically taught the way they are now, but they were all expected to learn by the observation-trial method. Time and again elders answer the question, “Who taught you to do this?” by saying “Nobody!” This is because they learned by watching and figuring out a task without constant supervision. (Ainsworth et al., 2002, p. 26)



Ahtna people, as with many other Alaska Natives, learn through experience, listening, and observation rather than western models of theory and Socratic methods (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

Stories are a significant part of Ahtna education traditions. Riddles, stories, and songs were all used to communicate truths about the world and expectations for community life (Ainsworth et al., 2002; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Smelcer, 1997). Riddles were one of the many ways of training the mind to patience, observation, and cleverness. Riddles and traditional stories were part of traditional education. This education enlivened cold, dark months when men still hunted nearly every day, but the people survived primarily on the food they had stored (Ainsworth et al., 2002, p. 17).

In addition to stories, actual experience was considered indispensable in the educational process. Children had subsistence jobs for the benefit of the entire family. Very early children were expected to join adults in their tasks, such as carrying water, maintaining heat in the winter, and preparing food (Ainsworth et al., 2002).

The introduction of western traditions of education began to enter Ahtna territory through missionary teachers (Ainsworth et al., 2002). As early missionaries introduced reading and other new subjects, a boarding school at present day Victory Bible Camp also began educating Ahtna youth away from traditional places and practices. Bureau of Indian Affairs ran two schools in Ahtna territory, Copper Center School and Chitina School. Both were turned over to the State of Alaska in the 1950s. Eventually the State Operated Schools were established in Ahtna territory, eventually becoming the Copper River School District Rural Educational Attendance Area on July 1, 1976.

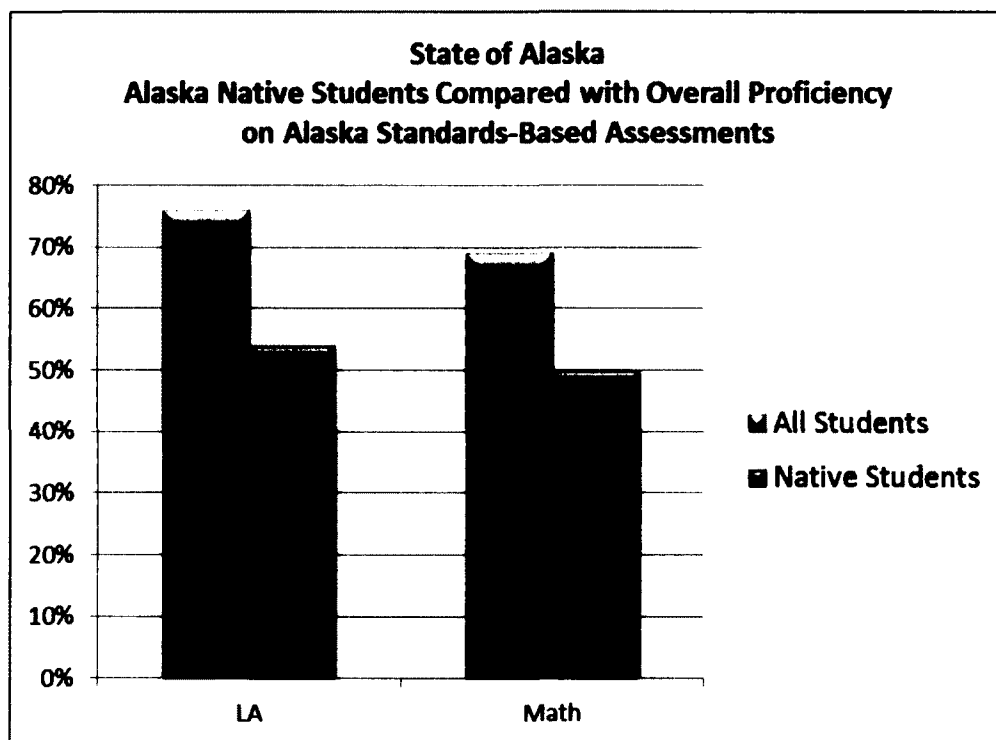
As with the Ahtna-specific history of injected western education policies and problems, the present-day issues and future outlook also share some common characteristics with Alaska Native education in general. The generations of experiential and home-based learning has been overwhelmed in a relatively quick period of time by the western policies governing education. The entire cycle of traditional life has been affected by public schooling.

The primary source of learning that came from home and experience has been interrupted. Hunting trips and the subsistence lifestyle are now in conflict with school attendance laws and schedules (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). This passage eloquently summarizes the impact of the recent history of native education:

We did not always have these problems of the meaning and purpose and approach to education. Before the erection of schoolhouses and the introduction of professional teachers to whom western civilization entrusts the minds of their children, education was growing up in a village. Education was done in the home with the father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, brother and sister, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends. Education was also given by the weather, the sea, the fish, the animals, and the land. Children at a very early age came to terms with the elements. We did not have to worry about relating education to life, because learning came naturally as a part of living. Education was the process of living from the land, of subsisting, and surviving. (Davidson & Napoleon, 2010, pp. 241-242)

### **Current Failure of Integration of Ahtna Traditions With U.S. Education Model**

The impact of this history has evidenced itself presently in high dropout rates, suicides, and learning difficulties (Kasten, 2010). Alaska Natives largely value education but do not expect success in today's schools (Chu & Culbertson, 1982). The ramifications of low expectations and frustrations are tragically evident in individuals and collectively. The current state of education for most Alaska Native students is disappointing. The graduation rate and overall student achievement lags behind other sub-groups in Alaska's Education Report card (Alaska Department of Education, 2011).

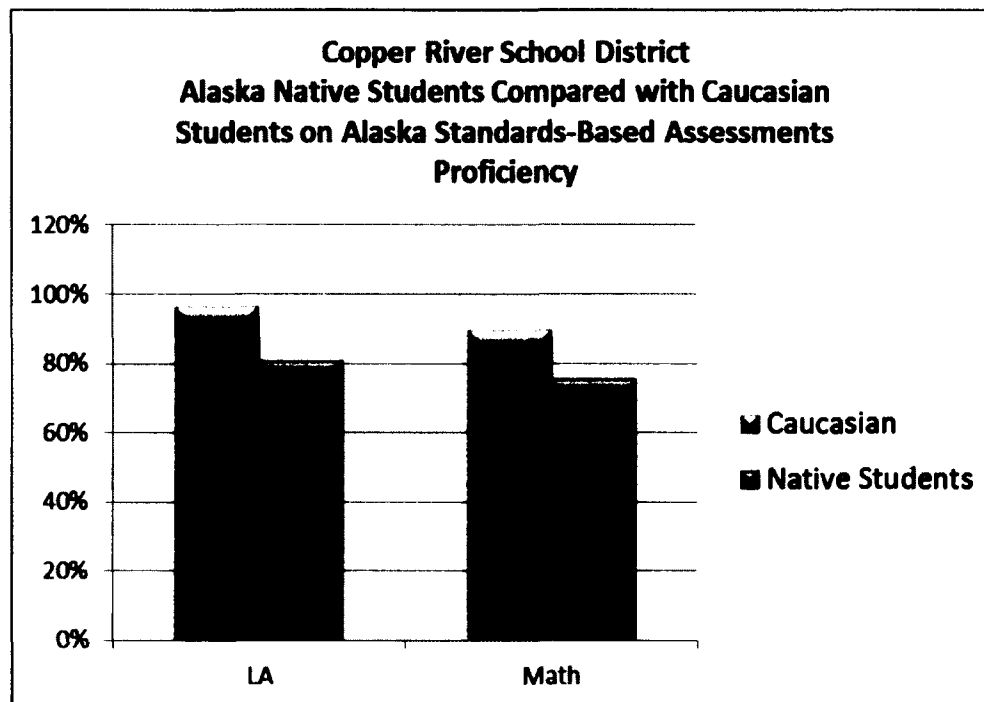


*Figure 1.* Performance on 2011 Alaska standards-based assessments.

See Figure 1. For Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students, the situation is similar.

Though performing better than the state average for Alaska Native students, Ahtna

students attending local public schools in the Copper River School District still have a lower performance than the Caucasian subgroup. See Figure 2.



*Figure 2.* Performance on 2011 Copper River School District standards-based assessments.

In a Report of the Education Task Force presented by University of Alaska at Anchorage (2004) reported that “school-age Alaska Native children, like Native American children throughout the United States, are bored, burned out, unhappy, and worried” (§ 2d). The problems of educating youth of all ages is intensified for young Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students due to the cross-cultural aspect of public education in their local schools. The students must daily navigate moving from familial ties of a traditional Ahtna subsistence lifestyle to western public education, both of which are needed to prepare them to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy.

The challenge of engaging Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students in public education is met with only one Ahtna public school teacher in the local Copper River area. Part of the challenge to provide a quality and relevant education for Ahtna youth is the lack of Alaska Native teachers (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). Non-natives have been attempting to address the specific needs for Alaska Native students. This is especially true for Ahtna students, as even the educators who have sacrificed the most and worked with the best of motives have largely approached the challenges under the premise that they understood what was best for native education (University of Alaska at Anchorage, 2004).

The Report to the Education Task Force Alaska Natives Commission/Alaska Federation of Natives also points out the contrast of western and native education traditions in that traditional native learning emphasizes quiet observation as opposed to the questioning and active participation expected by American-trained educators (University of Alaska at Anchorage, 2004). As previously stated, this is particularly apparent in the Ahtna culture and is even evident in the Ahtna language. *Ndahwdghaldiiz* and *Pkolden* are the traditional Ahtna words for *teach* (Kari, 1990). Their meanings, “I will teach you verbally” and “teach skill to,” seem to represent a calm instructional delivery designed for the learner to observe and listen rather than the traditional western Socratic style of teaching (Kari, 1990, p. 606). The aforementioned report articulates the problematic nature of the challenges, such as are described in the following passage:

Another reason cited for Alaska Native students’ lack of academic success is a dearth of native teachers. Native teachers, it is believed, are better able to

understand native ways of learning and to establish bridges between schools and communities in which they are located. Native ways of learning are different than traditional western ways of learning. Much of this is attributable to the high value placed on cooperation by native culture as opposed to the high value placed on individualism by western culture. (University of Alaska at Anchorage, 2004, § IIA2e)

The disproportionately low number of Alaska Native teachers contributes to the overall challenges of mixing western and traditional education. Differences in learning styles, content emphasis, and learning environment preferences may all be addressed more effectively with indigenous teachers. The cultural and educational goals necessary for Ahtna youth to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be addressed by an increasing number of certified Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native teachers. The Report to the Education Task Force Alaska Natives Commission goes on to state emphatically that “the cultural differences between students and teachers in Alaska’s rural schools are exacerbated by a lack of native teachers and administrators” (University of Alaska at Anchorage, 2004, § 2e).

### **Alaska Native Concerns in Education**

The struggle for ownership of their youth’s education has been shaping modern Alaska Native lives, including Ahtna, since public education was introduced in Alaska in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The intensity and organization of the struggle has grown since the 1960s as related in the following passage:

From the late 1960s and up to the present, native people have been working diligently to change education so that it accommodates their languages, worldviews, culture, and technology. This is a slow healing process for the villages. Our educational mission is to produce human beings at home in their place, their environment, their worldview. This is slowly being brought to fruition through the efforts of the native people themselves, with support from others of like thinking. (Kawagley, 2010b, p. xiv)

As this author states, the process is progressive and healing. As educational reform takes place slowly in rural Alaska, so does the healing from past experiences that have led to the current injuries. It is also important to note that the changes are being accomplished “through the efforts of native people themselves” (Kawagley, 2010b, p. xiv)

Initiatives to rebuild the education system into a culturally minded endeavor have been a topic of statewide conversation for decades. The specific benefits to Ahtna Athabascans have been from programs and studies conducted at Alaska’s Universities and Alaska Native groups generalized for Alaska Natives. The quest for redefining the educational mission by the Ahtna culture is a reflection of the larger Alaska Native picture.

The Alaska Natives Commission (1996) has conducted research that contextualizes the need for education reform for all of Alaska Natives in a report addressing the educational problems and needs of Alaska Natives. It states that 21% of Alaska’s K-12 students are Alaska Natives. However, “22 of Alaska’s 54 school districts have student populations of 75% or more Alaska Natives....In some school districts up to

30% of native children in elementary school are below grade level” (§II.A.1). In 20 school districts (19 of which had 60% to 98% Alaska Native students), students scored “on average below the 22nd percentile in either reading, mathematics, or language arts at the 4th, 6th, or 8th grade”, and “only about 67% of Alaska Native students complete high school” (§II.A.1). Alaska Natives who do complete high school score dramatically lower (about 40% lower) than Caucasian Alaskans on the American College Test (ACT). Among the various factors contributing to student failure, the report cites poverty and the cultural and linguistic differences between students and school personnel.

Working to develop effectiveness in the western public education system has continued seamlessly into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The picture today shows the need for continued progress. The 2010-2011 Alaska Report Card to the Public reported 30,433 students as American Indian or Alaska Native, or 23% of the total student population (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2011). The statewide dropout rate for all 7th to 12th grade students was 4.7%. American Indian/Alaska Native students represented 41.2% of the 2,779 total dropouts in 7th to 12th grade during the 2010-2011 school year. Only 4.4% of the 8,725 teachers in Alaska in 2009-2010 were reported as being Alaska Native (Hill, 2009). Fifty-three of the 391 Alaska Native teachers were in the Anchorage School District, and 11 out of 53 school districts in Alaska reported having no Alaska Native teachers on staff during the 2009-2010 school year, as stated by Hill.

In January of 2012, 34% of the student population in the Copper River School District was enrolled as Alaska Native or American Indian students. One Ahtna



Athabascan Alaska Native certified teacher is currently contracted with the Copper River School District (Gearhart, 2012). Out of all 53 school districts in Alaska, the Copper River School District ranked third for overall student achievement (Copper River School District, 2012). As of January 2012, the district had 41 certified employees, including administrators and 46 classified employees. The total student enrollment in January of 2012 was 497 students. There are five operating schools within the Copper River School District: Slana School (K-12), Glennallen Elementary School (K-6), Glennallen Junior Senior High School (7-12), Copper Center School (K-5), and Kenny Lake School (K-12). Slana School has the highest percentage of Alaska Native students at 49%. The lowest percentage is 12% at the Copper River School District Correspondence School (Copper River School District, 2012).

The data set clearly shows that Alaska Native students are not being educated in public schools by their own people. The number of Alaska Native teachers is disproportionately low. The same holds true, even to a greater degree, for Ahtna students and teachers. Very few Ahtna students have enjoyed the comfort, confidence, and pride of having an Ahtna teacher in public school. This result is in stark contrast to the high priority Alaska Natives, including Ahtna Alaska Natives, place on education. Ahtna Alaska Natives are teachers in their culture, spending resources, time, and energy to teach their traditions and values. For some reason, those same teachers have chosen not to become public school educators.

Other Alaska Native groups have understood this data and responded with various efforts to increase the number of indigenous teachers. For example, the North Slope

Borough determined to address cultural education in public schools by training indigenous Inupiat teachers (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010). This initiative demonstrates that Alaska Natives have recognized and sought to overcome the barriers to more indigenous teachers. This is true today and in the past.

Though some may conclude that Alaska Natives have only recently engaged a system of education, history does not record the same conclusion, as shown in the following quote:

During their hunting trips into the tundra or on the ocean in the winter, they must have precise knowledge of the snow and ice conditions, so over many years of experience and observation they have classified snow and ice with terms having very specific meanings. For example, there are at least 37 Yupiat terms for ice, having to do with seasons, weather conditions, solar energy transformations, currents, and rapid changes in wind direction and velocity. To the Yupiaq people, it is a matter of survival. This knowledge is passed down from generation to generation by example, by showing, and by telling with stories to reinforce the importance of knowing about the varying conditions. This comprises the rational side of the Yupiaq people. (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 89)

Alaska Natives have long had a system for educating their children. It is apparent that Alaska Natives had owned the educational process for their youth for centuries. A system of education, based on ways of knowing very different than modern western education policies, has sustained Alaska Natives through the harsh northern climates and harsher progress of adapting to modern western culture. The current barriers to

indigenous public school teachers are not due to the absence of education in their traditional culture.

Internally, throughout history, Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives have had a successful education system. Externally, since the influx of western people and policies, Alaska Natives, including Ahtna Athabascans, have suffered repeated failures within the education systems that immigrated into their villages. The impact of this influx has been recorded as follows:

The long history of failure of external efforts to manage the lives and needs of native people made it clear that outside interventions were not the solution to the problems, and that native communities themselves would have to shoulder a major share of the responsibility for carving out a new future. At the same time, existing government policies and programs would need to relinquish control and provide latitude and support for native people to address the issues in their own way, including the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010, p. 206)

The history of imposition from external education policies, without the input and application from and by Alaska Native people is clear. It has been clear for some time that addressing the educational needs of Alaska Native students should be accomplished by their own indigenous educators. This is equally true for Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives.

Though the disappointments are huge, the Ahtna culture remains strong and full of life. Many Ahtna people are suggesting ideas and becoming engaged in educational

solutions. The Ahtna Heritage Foundation staff has skillfully addressed many of the detriments to the education process, including recruiting language teachers. Ahtna parents are attending Indian Education Committee meetings and addressing policy issues that conflict with subsistence patterns and cultural priorities. The future of educating Ahtna youth is promising. Ahtna Heritage and other tribal organizations are joining other Alaska Natives in emphasizing the value of local culture in the public school system (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010).

### **Teacher Recruitment**

Literature focused on teacher recruitment is abundant. Narrowing the focus to recruiting Alaska Natives into the teaching profession significantly reduces the available literature. Using research from a broader perspective, including American Indian and other minorities illuminates the general concerns related to recruiting indigenous teachers, including Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. In some studies, the recruitment of indigenous populations for teaching is studied as a means of addressing the need to replace retiring teachers. The United States is not the only country looking ahead to the challenges of recruiting large numbers of teachers to replace the large number of retirees (Watt & Richardson, 2008). Recruiting teachers transcends national boundaries and ethnicities.

As more and more teachers are needed, quality, as well as quantity, concern officials, particularly those in need of diversifying their teaching staffs. Unfortunately, “The diversity of the teaching population has decreased in the last 20 years even as other milestones of diversity have been reached, such as an African American President”

(Torres, Santos, Peck, & Cortes, 2004, p. 3). This is startling given that the United States had a very intense focus on integrating public schools in the 1950s. During this tumultuous period, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision deliberately addressed educational equality for minority students, particularly for African Americans (Brown Foundation, n.d.). The same deliberate approach, however, was not applied to teaching staffs of public schools (Torres et al., 2004, p. 13). The diversity of staff in public schools does not mirror the ethnicity of student populations (Torres et al., 2004). Futrell (1999) noted that “3 million teachers, counselors, and administrators work in our K-12 schools” adding that only 5% of that number are from racially diverse groups (p. 30). The disproportionality of minority adults in America to minority students is significant, reaching a 26.5% to 14.1% ratio respectively for African Americans and Hispanics combined (Peterson & Nadler, 2009).

For Alaska Natives, the problem is even more profound, seeing that “by 2001, there were 475 native teachers, 6% of Alaska’s teacher population” (Dinero, 2004, p. 405). Rather than improving, these statistics show a decline in the number of Alaska Native teachers. In 2009-2010, there were only 391 Alaska Native teachers, or 4.4% of the teaching force (Hill, 2009).

Diversity among Alaska’s teachers is a concern in villages across the state (Dinero, 2004). Hiring not only qualified teachers but indigenous teachers is a challenge. Rural Alaska faces unique recruiting challenges that effect small communities each year as teachers come and go in small schools (Monk, 2007; Simmons, 2005).

Addressing the recruitment challenges for minority populations was the focus of the review of literature on teacher recruitment. The literature selected approached Alaska Native teacher recruitment from the broader perspective of minority teacher recruitment with some studies focused on American Indians and Alaska Natives combined. In many of the studies, the term *minority* includes Alaska Natives. Statements in the literature emerged around several themes, including barriers to minority teacher recruitment, consequences of the lack of minority teacher recruitment, benefits of minority teacher recruitment, and solutions for recruiting minority teachers. Each of these four themes will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Barriers to Minority Teacher Recruitment**

Barriers to recruiting minorities into the K-12 public school teaching profession are clustered around statements related to previous school experience, college attendance, lack of financial resources, lack of guidance, teacher certification processes, lack of cultural responsiveness, and perceptions. The literature shows the various combinations of these barriers and how they have hindered minorities from careers in public education, as described in the following passage:

We know that the number of minority group people who are prepared for and interested in teaching as a career is limited. As we reflect on this review, it is evident that many barriers will ensure that these numbers remain low. Barriers to teacher certification include negative perceptions of the profession, inequities in testing and admission into teacher education, and the incongruence of minority group preservice teachers' experiences with traditional teacher education

curriculums. Once minority group members have their credentials, they face discrimination in employment practices, culturally discontinuous school climates, and taboos about raising issues of racism, lack of promotion opportunities, and failure of others to recognize their leadership skills. (Quiocho & Rios, 2000, p. 522)

**Negative K-12 experiences.** The impact of previous K-12 experiences on native students has a significant impact on recruitment for public school educators among the native community (Christman, Guillory, Fairbanks, & González, 2008; Pavel, Banks, & Pavel, 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Vogel & Rude, 2010). Many native students have had difficult K-12 educational experiences as evidenced by research and student achievement results (Pavel et al., 2002). Whatever the causes, subpar educational experiences, particularly in high school, result in higher dropout rates and lack of prerequisites for college entrance (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Torres et al., 2004). The low rate of high school completion among minorities, including Alaska Natives, is cited as the reason for low percentages of indigenous teachers in multiple studies (Torres et al., 2004).

The causes for the difficulty are circular in that the lack of cultural infusion into the curriculum by native teachers makes it difficult to recruit more indigenous teachers. The lack of cultural responsiveness is also cited as a reason for challenges in K-12 educational experiences (Pewewardy, 2002). The high number of native students classified as special education is another indication of the difficult school experiences that become a barrier to pursuing a career in education (Vogel & Rude, 2010).

A Brown University study on minority teacher recruitment noted the lack of research specific to the impact of high school on teacher recruitment (Torres et al., 2004). Another study noted lack of agreement between natives and non-natives regarding what needs to change within the K-12 system to achieve greater success for indigenous students (Dinero, 2004). The literature is clear that K-12 educational experiences for minorities are a factor in teacher recruitment. Another barrier identified in the literature is college attendance, which can be a financial, academic, and cultural issue (Aragon, 2002; Christman et al., 2008; Freed & Samson, 2004; Pavel et al., 2002; Pewewardy, 2002; Weeks, 2001). These are described in the following paragraphs.

**Cost.** In addition to the other challenges associated with college attendance, the cost associated with becoming a teacher is a barrier (Futrell, 1999). The limited resources of minorities, including those living in rural Alaska, inhibit even the idea of college attendance.

**Lack of mentoring and guidance.** Related to college attendance is the lack of specific guidance and support for minority students prior to and during their college experience. Researchers highlight the relevance of this issue by quoting an Alaskan Native: “As was true for many other Alaska Natives at that time, school officials never mentioned college as a possibility for me and even discouraged me when I broached the subject myself” (Ongtooguk, 2010, p. 237). In other studies related to minorities in general, the authors note the knowledge necessary to navigate the financial and application requirements for admission to college is seemingly out of reach (Kao & Tienda, 1998). These authors note that the lack of information about college and



admissions procedures may also drive some ambivalence toward academic performance, which leads to the topic of lack of preparation.

**Lack of academic preparation.** This negative vision of opportunity that begins in K-12 experiences becomes a barrier to college attendance and thus teacher recruitment. After all, if youth believe they cannot go to college or if they believe they are guaranteed a full scholarship, why worry about grades (Kao & Tienda, 1998, p. 379).

Multiple studies note the low numbers of college graduates among minority students, including Alaska Natives (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Freed & Samson, 2004; Monk, 2007; Weeks, 2001). It is also mentioned that there are very few, if any studies, focused on minority students attending small community colleges (Torres et al., 2004). As a requirement for teacher certification, the lack of college completion is a significant barrier to recruiting indigenous teachers.

Though only briefly mentioned in one study, the policies related to the teacher certification process were noted as being a barrier to recruiting minority teachers (Torres et al., 2004). Policies related to subject specific certification and the lack of minority input in policy development are specifically expressed as barriers (Torres et al., 2004).

**Cultural isolation.** As one author points out, college attendance often separates prospective teachers from their support systems, as described here:

And so, the conundrum: To staff Alaska's schools with more native teachers who are grounded in western knowledge and native tradition, prospective native teachers frequently must leave their villages to get their college degrees. But this

separates them from village life and the sources of tradition that help make them especially valuable as teachers. (Weeks, 2001, p. 75)

As college teacher preparatory programs struggle to meet policies from local, state, and federal agencies, they must also address the cultural needs of minority teachers (Pavel et al., 2002). The curriculum of teacher preparation programs in most colleges neglects the specific needs of minority students (Barnhardt, 1999; Christman et al., 2008; Torres et al., 2004). The lack of diversity among faculty members is also noted as a barrier to recruitment and training (Torres et al., 2004, p. 87). Due to this cultural isolation, the lack of connection to their home culture creates a dichotomy in teacher education programs that proves unattractive. Some researchers call this “cultural discontinuity” in curriculum for K-12 and post-secondary students (Christman et al., 2008, p. 55). The Brown University study on minority teacher recruitment has determined that the lack of responsive curriculum results in marginalized recruits. In the opinion of these researchers, “this lack of attention in curriculum to the needs of minority students might also create an environment in which minority teacher candidates themselves feel marginalized” (Torres et al., 2004, p. 46).

For all minority groups, but especially for Alaska Natives, culture is the pathway that connects each of the other barriers presented for teacher recruitment. As has been noted, native groups had their own educational systems long before the introduction of western policies and practices. These systems were designed to meet the needs of the cultures in which they were developed (Pewewardy, 2002). The literature presents challenges related to cultural ways of knowing, social justice, policies, and curriculum

and teaching practices. Even so, the deepest meanings of how a culture views western educational practices, including teacher recruitment are only fully understood from within (Adams, Adam, & Opbroek, 2005, p. 75).

This cultural divide is often most apparent in the curriculum delivered to students (Dinero, 2004; Freed & Samson, 2004; Rose, 2009). Curriculum in most schools becomes a barrier in the K-12 experience, college, and the professional environment for indigenous teacher recruits. For K-12 students, this begins a clash of cultures that eventually can become a barrier to teacher recruitment (Christman et al., 2008, p. 55). Additionally, the teaching strategies used in K-12 and post-secondary classrooms is not tailored to native learning customs (Pewewardy, 2002).

The teachers delivering the instruction to students also become a factor in teacher recruitment. The majority of classrooms, including college classrooms, lack cultural literacy and fail to acknowledge the consequences of not implementing culturally relevant strategies and content (Penland, 2010, p. 434; Pewewardy, 2002; Quioco & Rios, 2000). Teacher preparation programs are responsible for not providing adequate training necessary for teachers to create culturally sensitive classrooms (Pewewardy, 2002, p. 35). This lack of effective instruction connects to the literature regarding barriers to teacher recruitment from negative school experiences.

Elaborating on the impact of teachers, the literature also notes the difficulty of providing effective teacher preparation programs for native teacher recruits: "It is a complex undertaking to develop native teacher preparation programs that meet the diverse cultural and educational needs of students while being in alignment with state and

national standards” (Pavel et al., 2002, p. 46). Looking ahead to their initial teaching assignments, minority teacher recruits also face unrealistic expectations. Principals expect native teachers to act and behave like their non-native teaching staff (Weeks, 2001). Often minority teachers have the sense of being isolated and an invisible part of the school staff (Munsch & Boylan, 2008; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Resistance from administrators and policies to including elements of cultural education could also be listed as a deterrent for recruiting indigenous educators (Freed & Samson, 2004). These perceptions and practices create an unattractive picture of teaching as a career for minority candidates.

Multiple sources noted uncomfortable aspects of the western education system, K-12 through college, that put pressure on recruiting natives for teacher preparation programs. Specifically mentioned was the contrast between the western tendency toward a competitive academic environment and the cooperative nature of native systems of learning (Aragon, 2002; Christman et al., 2008; Pewewardy, 2002; Vogel & Rude, 2010). Even in teacher preparation programs, the motivators for achievement are of a competitive design rather than a more cooperative and supportive structure. The desire for cooperation rather than competition would impact students seeking scholarship or financial aid to attend college.

According to the literature, minorities often cope with feelings of isolation and being stereotyped. This notion, termed the blocked opportunities model, is applicable to various minority groups (Kao & Tienda, 1998, p. 376). Other researchers have noted this concept in reference to American Indian and Alaska Natives as being perceived as

“broken” (Dinero, 2004, p. 413). For students in college teacher education programs, this becomes a professional barrier. Torres et al. (2004) writes, “One persistent thread is that minority candidates often perceive themselves to be invisible, silenced, or powerless in traditional teacher preparation programs, including during the practicum phase” (p. 84). This leads to feelings of inferiority and fear that drive potential teacher recruits away from the teaching profession (Torres et al., 2004).

Some barriers to teacher recruitment may be viewed from the literature as generally applying to all minorities. Other barriers presented in the literature are more specific to Alaska Natives. Taken together, difficult K-12 experiences, college attendance, lack of support and guidance, and lack of cultural responsiveness emerge as common barriers that inhibit effective recruitment of minority teachers, including Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives.

### **Consequences of the Lack of Minority Teacher Recruitment**

The consequences of the barriers to recruiting indigenous teachers impact students and communities. High turnover, equipping outside teachers, lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity, and the lessened ability to meet the needs of rural native students are consequences of unsuccessful recruiting of minority teachers.

**High turnover.** Several authors cite the high rates of teacher turnover in rural schools (Christman et al., 2008; Dinero, 2004; Monk, 2007; Peters, 2009). The perception that teachers are only in villages for the money and the lack of consistent leadership are consequences of poor teacher retention (Christman et al., 2008; Peters, 2009). Recruiting more native teachers in rural Alaska would potentially improve

teacher retention rates (Dinero, 2004). Many teachers have short tenure in rural areas due to issues not relevant to indigenous local hires such as salary and teaching multiple subjects.

**Equipping outside teachers.** Non-native teachers also require more training and equipping to live and teach in rural areas (Sharplin, 2009; Weeks, 2001). Learning the culture and related curriculum is often neglected by non-native teachers in rural areas. This results in a sour relationship between communities and non-native teachers (Dinero, 2004). The consequence of being unequipped to teach in rural Alaska results in ineffective teaching and poor relationships. Some non-native teachers then blame the native students and/or their families for their poor academic performance, causing even further alienation (Freed & Samson, 2004, p. 43). Ultimately, failure to recruit native teachers results in students having unmet needs (Freed & Samson, 2004). Students and elders have stated that unequipped non-native teachers leave without having provided effective educational services (Dinero, 2004; Freed & Samson, 2004).

**Lack of cultural awareness.** As a lack of cultural awareness is a barrier to recruiting native teachers, it is also a consequence. Having few indigenous teachers in public schools results in a western culture being valued over all others, in policy and practice (Christman et al., 2008). This negatively impacts students, as described here:

When teachers fail to recognize cultural differences among learning styles, students may react in negative ways to instruction... consequently, when students have a learning style that differs from the instructional style of their teachers,

cultural incongruence appears in the teaching and learning process. (Pewewardy, 2002, p. 35)

**Inability to meet native students' learning needs.** The incongruence results in poor or non-existent relationships between teachers and their native students and communities (Freed & Samson, 2004). Rural communities in Alaska have indicated this consequence as they advocate for more cultural education in local schools (Dinero, 2004). The lack of cultural awareness leads to an attitude that western culture is the standard against which others are measured (Pewewardy, 2002). As a consequence of not having more native teachers to influence schools, stereotypes and common notions of what it means to be native are often skewed (Smetzer, 2011).

For minorities in general, a consequence of not recruiting minority teachers results in a loss of cultural knowledge and cultural teaching strategies (Torres et al., 2004). This would also apply specifically to Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. Much is lost when only western history and culture are recognized as legitimate.

### **Benefits of Minority Teacher Recruitment**

Just as there are consequences to not recruiting minority teachers, including Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives, the literature points out specific benefits when recruiting efforts are successful. Student performance, mentoring, effective cultural knowledge, retention, and cultural education of non-native staff are some of the benefits minority teachers have on students of the same race.

**Student performance.** The *Minority Teacher Recruitment, Development, and Retention Report* clearly states that “having a teacher of the same race supports increased

student performance on statewide standardized achievement tests” (Torres et al., 2004, p. 18). The reasons behind this are still being researched; however, it is noted that student grades may be impacted by the respective race of teachers and students (Torres et al., 2004). Some literature noted the low academic skills of students in many rural schools as being a barrier to teacher recruitment (Monk, 2007). Though this factor would present a challenge to any new teacher, it would be viewed differently by a local who shared a similar educational experience. In regards to minorities, including Alaska Natives, this more often evidences itself as motivating a sense of social justice that would erase the achievement gap (Quiocho & Rios, 2000), thus it becomes a benefit of recruiting natives.

**Mentoring.** In addition to academic performance, the teacher-student relationship often benefits when they share the same race. Teachers that share a minority race with students have reported feeling successful in relating to students even if they feel inadequate in their instructional abilities (Torres et al., 2004). Minority teachers have confidence that they can relate to minority students in a manner that others may not (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Another relational benefit is modeling for teacher recruitment. Minority teachers are role models of college attendance for minority students (Torres et al., 2004).

**Pre-existing cultural knowledge.** In contrast to the consequence of having unequipped non-native teachers in rural areas, effective recruitment of indigenous teachers can save expense and time normally used to train staff brought into minority communities from outside. Efforts to prepare non-native teachers for rural Alaska could be expended on improving the educational performance of native students if more



indigenous teachers were recruited. Though non-natives are uncertain and uninformed of life in rural Alaska, native teachers would enter a school already prepared for rural village life (Munsch & Boylan, 2008). The benefit of recruiting native teachers would alleviate the concerns raised by non-minority teachers such as isolation from family and friends, racial biases, loneliness, and relationship building difficulties (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Additionally, there are indications that indigenous teachers are more aware and skilled at identifying systemic and individual acts of racism in schools (Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

**Teacher retention.** Another impactful benefit to recruiting indigenous teachers is retention rates. Barnhardt states that “Alaska Native teachers who began teaching during the past 25 years are still out there teaching” (as cited in Weeks, 2001, p. 78). Even among school administrators, it is noted in the literature that more American Indian and Alaska Natives would reduce the high turnover rates in rural village or reservation schools (Christman et al., 2008, p. 56). Applied in the college setting, more minority professors are also shown to be beneficial to student matriculation (Torres et al., 2004).

**Increased cultural knowledge of non-native staff.** As one would expect, the literature is clear that schools demonstrate more cultural awareness when minority teachers are recruited. Cultural understanding is brought into classrooms through better dialogue with students and their families (Torres et al., 2004). The “community aspirations for children” are also enhanced by having minority teachers (Torres et al., 2004, p. 21). Some noted that the specific learning styles unique to various minority groups are best served by those minority teachers who share the same culture

(Pewewardy, 2002). A team of authors observed this first hand in their study of Nancy Sharp, an indigenous Alaska Native teacher (Lipka, Sharp, Breener, Yanez, & Sharp, 2005). The study noted that cultural instruction did not become an added component in lessons but was integrated into the content and delivery (Lipka et al., 2005, p. 33). Culture became a natural part of the classroom as opposed to a forced inclusion of something separate from the curriculum. Recruiting minority teachers, including Alaska Natives, benefit students in unique ways that could not be manufactured through training. One researcher explains this need as follows:

Minority group teachers tend to have a greater sense of how to develop (and therefore enact) culturally relevant curriculums and to understand the human, social, and communal nature of teaching and learning. (Quiocho & Rios, 2000, p. 522)

### **Solutions for Recruiting Minority Teachers**

As the literature makes clear the various barriers, consequences and benefits to recruiting minority teachers, it also offers specific solutions directly related to the barriers mentioned earlier. Mirroring the barriers, solutions presented in the literature to recruiting minority teachers can be clustered around the themes of improving K-12 educational experiences, providing support and guidance based on minority needs, adapting programs and policies, and creating culturally relevant teacher preparation programs (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999).

**Improving K-12 educational experiences.** Alaska's student performance results support the literature's notion that improving K-12 education for minority students will

create a better atmosphere for recruiting indigenous teachers (Alaska Department of Education, 2011). In the spring of 2011, only 53.7% of Alaska's Native American students were proficient in language arts. Only 49.7% were proficient in math. Better preparing Native American students for college and career is an essential part of solving the challenges of recruiting Alaska Native teachers. Guiding students through better academic achievement and career counseling is a step toward improved overall efforts to recruiting minorities (Torres et al., 2004).

**Support and guidance.** Recruiting solutions also include support structures for both secondary and post-secondary students based on relationships (Christman et al., 2008; Pavel et al., 2002; Torres et al., 2004; Vogel & Rude, 2010). Culturally sensitive guidance counseling is important for minority youth. College programs that attract minority youth, including Native Americans, are informed by the motivations and fears expressed by minority students (Pavel et al., 2002). The support needed by minority students highlighted in the literature also notes that constant feedback and an atmosphere of cooperation is "highly preferred" by American Indian and Alaska Native students (Aragon, 2002, p. 13). One-on-one styles of support are exemplified as necessary for successful preparation programs (Pavel et al., 2002).

**Cultural adaptation of learning modes.** The policies and programs in colleges must also meet the specific needs of minority students in order to recruit more candidates (Barnhardt, 2002). Most post-secondary institutions are based on western ideology of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Aragon, 2002). Changing these systems to

reflect native ways of knowing, such as cooperation over competition, is an element to effective solutions for better recruitment (Vogel & Rude, 2010).

**Cultural relevance.** Demonstrating cultural awareness and sensitivity is a necessary component in K-12 and post-secondary institutions if more indigenous teachers are to be recruited (Christman et al., 2008; Dinero, 2004; Freed & Samson, 2004; Penland, 2010; Pewewardy, 2002; Quioco & Rios, 2000; Torres et al., 2004; Vogel & Rude, 2010; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Specifically for native students, allowing and nurturing their cultural sense of identity is an important motivator, particularly as they navigate western educational systems (Penland, 2010). For many minorities, the call to advocate for social justice is cited as an important motivation for entering and remaining in college programs (Christman et al., 2008; Torres et al., 2004).

As students enter colleges, professors should recognize the importance of culture in the learning environment. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment should all recognize indigenous ways of learning in order to recruit and retain teacher candidates (Dinero, 2004; Freed & Samson, 2004; Penland, 2010; Pewewardy, 2002). Designing courses and teacher preparation programs to meet the learning and social needs of minority students will be an essential element to improving recruitment efforts (Torres et al., 2004). Similarly, another writes, “What is needed is multi-cultural education curriculum coupled with the power of the presence of minority group teachers and the cultural mediation abilities they bring to their work” (Quioco & Rios, 2000, p. 523).

These solutions are applicable to minority students in K-12 public schools and post-secondary institutions.

Recognizing the unique motivators for minority teacher candidates is also an important solution to increasing the number of indigenous teachers. Common western motivators often do not influence minority teacher candidates, including Alaska Natives (Monk, 2007). One native elder spoke regarding motivation for financial gain: “In our old way, we had social security too; but our social security was not a check. Our social security was a community where everybody knew everybody else, and people took care of each other” (Demmert, 2010, p. 39). This is a strong contrast to common western motivators for teacher recruitment, such as retirement plans.

### **Chapter Summary**

The review of literature related to teacher recruitment includes studies focused on K-12 public education and post-secondary institutions. The review included studies for minorities in general and some focused on American Indians and Alaska Natives. The literature celebrates the differences in learning styles and cultures by advocating for solutions based on those differences. The discovery of common barriers within unique cultures supports this study into the particular barriers that have prevented Ahtna Athabascans from becoming public school educators.

A report of research involving dropouts in Western Alaska articulates the limitations and rewards of research within indigenous Alaskan cultures in a manner applicable to this review of literature:

The research presented here is not an attempt to advance a comprehensive view of all the questions about native education in Alaska or to assign blame for the challenges confronting native education in Alaska. However, the research does

suggest that the complex questions that remain demand that educators continue to explore innovative solutions to ongoing education issues. (Freed & Samson, 2004, p. 42)

This review of literature is not a comprehensive review of native education; however, it does provide potential indicators of why Ahtna Athabascans have chosen not to become public school educators. This review of literature related to Ahtna Athabascans choosing not to become public school educators has identified the unique history and current experiences of Ahtna people. Additionally, taken collectively, the literature demonstrates the relationship between history and culture with teacher recruitment. This information provides a scholarly optic through which quantitative and qualitative data from Ahtna people can be analyzed meaningfully.

### Chapter 3: Methods

The study to determine barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives from becoming public school educators has been designed as an exploratory study. The design and execution of the study focused on identifying the barriers so that future research can be focused on further understanding the nature of particular barriers and potential amelioration.

Designing a cross-cultural study must meet two primary objectives. First, as with any other scholarly research, the study developed from a reliable methodology that produced authentic data for analysis. For a cross-cultural study, a second and equally important objective is necessary to achieve the first. The methodology must be indigenous to the culture in which it is being applied. Without the second objective, the first would not produce authentic data. The need for a methodology that is inherently indigenous is clarified in the following statement:

Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values, and behaviors as an integral part of methodology. They are “factors” to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood. (Smith, 1999, p. 15)

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines indigenous as “produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment” (indigenous, n.d.). Being a preliminary investigation into the barriers that have prevented

Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives from becoming educators, the methodology of this study was intentionally designed to occur naturally within Ahtna culture.

In order for the design to produce authentic data within the Ahtna culture, each component of the methodology had to be culturally minded. A recognition of how an indigenous population views research is imperative. Negative experiences with western research methods and research motives have nurtured a distrust and disinterest in indigenous research projects. These feelings of distrust have become pervasive, as described by one author:

The word itself, *research*, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

The research question, data collection instruments, setting and procedures in this study were each considered to determine any inherent taboos that would prevent the gathering of reliable data. Creswell (2007) says, "The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 60). The problem of choosing not to enter education as a career must be understood through individual Ahtna Alaska Natives. The importance of allowing native ways of knowing to drive methods has been stated thus: "Finally, and most significantly, tribal epistemologies are the centre of indigenous methodologies, and it is this epistemological framework that makes them distinct from western qualitative approaches" (Kovach, 2009, p. 25).



## Design

The design of this study is a mixed-method approach with an emphasis placed on the qualitative component. The quantitative data and analysis gave context to the qualitative portion of the study by placing it within a non-formalized sample of responses to forced-response questions. The qualitative component of the study explored the lived-experiences of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives who chose not to become public school educators. The non-formalized survey data provided a context from which to frame the interview data. Having a generalized view of the perceptions of a random group of Ahtna people adds insight into comments made by individuals during the qualitative data gathering process. Survey data in this study was gathered and used in a culturally sensitive manner to describe the attitudes and opinions of a non-formalized sample of Ahtna Athabascans (Rea & Parker, 2005).

Sensitivity is imperative in the research design of a study engaging an Alaska Native population that has a history of insensitive western research experiences. Entering the study with a goal of *bracketing* or setting aside preconceptions was worthy of the effort it took to accomplish. Creswell notes the importance as follows:

We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. (Creswell, 2007, p. 40)

One author writes about how often Creswell's proscribed approach has not been followed, pointing out further the need to consider the wider context of issues when identifying problems for research in the native community:

A continuing legacy of what has come to be taken for granted as a natural link between the term *indigenous* (or its substitutes) and *problem* is that many researchers, even those with the best of intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues. For example, researchers investigating poor health or educational underachievement among indigenous communities often focus on the community as the sole source of the problem and, because this is their focus, obviously fail to analyze or make sense of the wider social, economic and policy contexts in which communities exist. (Smith, 1999, p. 92)

Recognizing the exceptional need for sensitivity through a humble attitude of learning, the design of the study begins with the development of structural foundations. Native ways of knowing are unique and distinctly different from the western academic tradition. Story has been and continues to be an essential component of Alaska Native culture. Ahtna stories continue to be a primary form of cultural education, as noted by one author, stories teach us who we are, define our place in the natural world, and establish a history, an origin for many of our beliefs, traditions, and customs (Smelcer, 1997).

Studying a specific lived-experience, such as not choosing to become a public school educator, among Ahtna people must allow for data to be collected as a story. One author eloquently expresses the value of story in learning, through this quote:

Mythology is an invaluable pedagogical tool that transcends time. As the storyteller talks, the Yupiaq listeners are thrust into the world of imagination. As the story unfolds, it becomes a part of their present. As you imagine and visualize in the mind's eye, how could you not become a part of it and it a part of you?

There is no separation. The story and words contain the epistemological webbing; how is it we got to know these truths? The storyteller's inflections, play on words, and actions give special meaning to the listener. (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 77)

Story in native culture can be more than mythology. It is a means for instruction and learning. It is how history is transmitted as generations pass their legacy along into the future. The following passage describes this process:

Within indigenous epistemologies, there are two general forms of stories. There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences as the *kókom*s and *mósom*s (aunties and uncles) experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral tradition. Both forms teach of consequences, good and bad, of living life in a certain way. (Kovach, 2009, p. 95)

A phenomenological design, which allows participants to tell their own true stories, best accomplishes the goal of a cross-cultural exploratory study aimed at

discovering and articulating patterns of experience. Creswell says, “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The term *essence* was used to describe the action of “grasp[ing] the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

Another describes what this means for the researcher: “The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

As an exploratory study into the barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascans from becoming educators, a phenomenological strategy best acknowledges the necessity for approaching the research question with as few assumptions as possible. Even the question of the existence of barriers must be discovered within the culture rather than located from without. The study is based on human experiences that have been analyzed as a phenomenon of not becoming an educator in a local public school.

Recognizing the limitations of a strictly traditionally western approach to research is an ongoing effort. Researching an Ahtna lived-experience must include an understanding of Ahtna learning. The following passage gives us more insight by addressing research specifically:

Many areas of social and scientific research teach one way of trying to learn and understand phenomena. Our technological and scientific training imprison the students’ minds to its understandings, much to the detriment of the learners who

enter the mainstream Eurocentric world to become members of progress and development. (Kawagley, 2010a, p. 77)

The design of this study is to understand the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans Alaska Natives becoming public school educators with an understanding unshackled by western or personal traditions and experience. A mixed-methods approach acknowledges the traditional ways of knowing truth, including from experience and the culture. In addition to empirical means of investigation, this mixed-method study respectfully approaches the cultural tradition of story as a legitimate means of data gathering. Phenomenological hermeneutic design bridges the cultural divide by recording and describing experiences. It is more than just a collection of experiences or simple life stories, as described in the following selection:

To do a phenomenological study of any topic, therefore, it is not enough to simply recall experiences I or others may have had with respect to a particular phenomenon. Instead, I must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience, is lived through, are brought back, as it were, in such a way that we recognize the description as a *possible experience*, which means as a *possible interpretation* of that experience. This then is the task of phenomenological research and writing: to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 41)

The methodology of this study is designed to ask the research question in a culturally appropriate and relevant manner. Other social and human science methods

were considered. Phenomenological hermeneutic, though sharing some strategies with other methods (i.e., ethnography, grounded theory, case studies), approaches the participants with an opportunity to not only answer the question, but re-ask it themselves within their own dialogue. The interview process accomplished two tasks as explained here:

- (a) It may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the human phenomenon, and
- (b) The interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 63)

The relational foundation of the Ahtna community identifies with the phenomenological approach of dialogue and narrative. Another author confirms that “Story and indigenous inquiry are grounded within a relationship-based approach to research” (Kovach, 2009, p. 98). Rather than create categories for information regarding the barriers to Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives becoming educators, a phenomenological hermeneutic discovers meaning from the life of the culture, or “lived-experiences.” This is in keeping with Ahtna’s oral histories and story-telling methods of instruction.

van Manen (1990) also says, “The fundamental model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact” (p. 4). The

phenomenological hermeneutic of this study is focused on producing increased thoughtfulness of barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascans from becoming educators. The thoughtfulness may then be utilized to design future research to produce increased “practical resourcefulness or tact” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4).

This mixed-method study combines survey data and phenomenological interviews to construct a solid study that future investigations can build upon. In the traditional western view, limitations are acknowledged so the purpose of the study is evident.

### **Instruments**

Two data gathering instruments were used to discover barriers that prevent Ahtna Athabascans from becoming educators in public schools. Both instruments were piloted with Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives and others familiar with the Ahtna culture. Sensitivity to cultural norms was foundational in the selection, development, and application of both instruments.

**Survey.** The first tool, a short survey, was developed to provide context to assumptions and subsequent interview data (see Appendix A). The survey asked 21 forced-response questions. Demographic information was gathered for age, ethnicity, and educational experience. Seventeen of the 21 questions were *yes/no* responses. The survey responses were compared with the review of literature and data from transcripts as a triangular check for validity.

**Interviews.** In addition to the short survey, guiding interview questions were developed as a second tool to gather phenomenological data for a thematic analysis (Kvale & Brinckmann, 2009). The questions were open ended and allowed participants

to reflect on barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming educators in public school based on their own lived-experiences (see Appendix B). Interview questions were asked in a circular manner in keeping with Ahtna traditional ways of processing, consistent with the recommendation that follows:

Methods that are congruent with tribal epistemology include approaches such as a conversational method that involves an open-ended structure that is flexible enough to accommodate principles of native oral traditions, and is thus differentiated from a more traditional interview process. (Kovach, 2009, pp. 123-124)

Questions moved from individual introspection to re-asking the question with a cultural and community focus. The last interview question pivoted full-circle back to individual self-introspection.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted using both instruments. Due to the relatively small number of participants, the type of design, lack of formal samples, and need for cultural sensitivity, a pilot study was warranted to collect credible and reliable data. Creswell explains the importance of collaboration in qualitative studies:

We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a research and the participants in a study. To further de-emphasize a power relationship, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions. (Creswell, 2007, p. 40)



Both the forced-response survey instrument and the interview questions were assessed during the trial. The pilot study was conducted to demonstrate a genuine participatory and culturally sensitive approach to the study and to create the most effective data collection instruments possible.

The researcher utilized personal acquaintances and staff at the Ahtna Heritage C'ek'aedi Hwnax "Legacy House" Cultural Center located in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park Visitors Center campus to refine the instruments. Four Ahtna Athabascans, one Caucasian, and one non-Ahtna Alaskan Native took the survey and reviewed the interview questions. These pilot-study respondents included the only Ahtna Athabaskan teacher in the Copper River School District, Ahtna language preservationists, and a laborer. All four had graduated from high school. All of the respondents were chosen because of their familiarity with the Ahtna culture and interest in research with the potential to improve the quality of life and educational experience for all Ahtna Athabascans. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 50+ and lived in two different villages within the Ahtna region. They brought a variety of experiences along with their common interest in recruiting more Ahtna people into classrooms in local schools.

The first review of the study took place in a personal residence during a social visit. The individual survey and research questions were discussed in addition to comments regarding the general research project. This pilot was spontaneous and informal. The participant shared opinions as to the conclusion she thought the study would find after gathering the research.

Another participant engaged with the research instruments in the Copper River School District administrative office. He made some suggestions as to question order, but was primarily interested in discussing the value of the study and his opinion on the positive impact it would have on the community.

Both of the other participants used the instruments at the Ahtna Heritage C'ek'aedi Hwnax Cultural Center. They took the survey and wrote answers on the questionnaire or responded verbally. The discussion was a dialogue among the respondents and the researcher. It was a dynamic evolving conversation, with the primary focus of the conversation being on cultural sensitivity when giving the survey. Though each used the instruments separately, their feedback was presented both individually and corporately.

The feedback received from the pilot participants was valuable and resulted in some small alterations to the instruments. The modifications were as follows:

- Rearrange survey question order.
- Reword interview questions to be more clearly open-ended and conversational.
- Add demographic questions to the survey.

It was noted by pilot study participants that Ahtna Athabascan tradition taught children that it was inappropriate to talk extensively about oneself. Consequently, penetrating personal questions, particularly related to experiences with public education, may cause some participants to be uncomfortable. Thus the pilot study guided the researcher in balancing the need for credible data sufficient for analysis with cultural norms and the dialectic nature of the study. Keeping the demographic questions limited

and broad became necessary. Utilizing the interview questions to gather lived-experience data within cultural norms by not asking penetrating personal questions also resulted from information gained through the pilot study.

### **Validity**

As a mixed-method study that includes phenomenological interviews, interpretation becomes a major factor in validity. Creswell notes that “many perspectives exist regarding the importance of validation in qualitative research, the definition of it, terms to describe it, and procedures for establishing it” (Creswell, 2007, p. 202). The interpretation of the meaning of lived-experiences is, by nature, subjective and cannot be verified with the same techniques as quantitative data. Marcel states that “Phenomenological questions are meaning questions. They ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomena. Meaning questions cannot be solved and thus done away with” (as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 23). Instead, “to embrace indigenous methodologies is to accept subjective knowledge. This is difficult for sectors of the western research community to accept, and it is where much of the contention about indigenous research arises” (Kovach, 2009, p. 111). There is no objective conclusion to a study that includes a phenomenological qualitative component.

Recognizing the differences between western and indigenous epistemologies is essential for a valid cross-cultural research process. Much of the western epistemologies are largely built on enlightenment ideals regarding the pursuit of objective certainty, such as math and science are intended to provide. Indigenous methodologies are grounded in language and a “holistic orientation” (Kovach, 2009, p. 58). The different epistemologies

are a challenge for cross-cultural research. As a result, “Indigenous researchers are grappling with way to explain how holistic epistemologies inform their research design in ways understood by western academic minds” (Kovach, 2009, p. 58). Kovach goes on to describe the power of language for indigenous research in this way:

The holistic nature of indigenous science often creates a chasm between it and the beliefs held by western science. Language bridges gaps by acting as a mechanism to express divergent worldviews. Like inward knowing, language is so powerful because it reminds us who we are; it is deeply entwined with personal and cultural identity. (Kovach, 2009, p. 59)

Given that language is powerful and a central part of knowing and being known in an indigenous culture, it must then become part of validity in a cross-cultural study. Story and its retelling in research become valid if it is accessible for giving back to the community and being accountable to accurately restate the information that has been gathered. Without denying or diminishing truth as absolute, this research strives to recognize Ahtna epistemologies. The research is designed to describe knowledge gained from the experiences of Ahtna Athabascans who have chosen not to become public school educators. It is not designed to prove something true and repeatable in the enlightenment tradition.

Indigenous cultures, including Ahtna, have traditional values that pre-date the influence of western academia. There is agreement among indigenous cultures how those values should influence research, stated as follows:

Indigenous research, flowing from tribal paradigms, shows general agreement on the following broad ethical considerations: (a) that the research methodology be in line with indigenous values; (b) that there is some form of community accountability; (c) that the research gives back to and benefits the community in some manner; and (d) that the researcher is an ally and will not do harm. (Kovach, 2009, p. 48)

By adhering, through relationship, to these paradigms, the researcher provides the framework necessary for gathering reliable data. Additionally, in order for the project to have accountability within the community and for the research to give back to the community, it must be presented in an accessible manner. The project should be presented so that “it is not mystifying but rather useful to a range of individuals” (Kovach, 2009, p. 52). An accessible presentation enhances the accountability necessary to foster validity.

The interpretative process includes the researcher, participants, and the reader (Creswell, 2007). The researcher mediates between different meanings of the lived-experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 26). In this case, the various meanings of not choosing to become an educator are interpreted. As a whole, each person interacting with the research question through this phenomenological study became a part of the interpretative process.

Though subjective, this design and implementation of the study provided credibility to the findings. By being a student of the culture and phenomena concurrently, the researcher approached the question in this manner: “Subjectivity means

that we are strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way, while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions” (van Manen, 1990, p. 20).

Trochim (2006) recommends Guba and Lincoln’s four alternate criteria for judging validity of qualitative studies:

1. *Credibility* involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research.
2. *Transferability* refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings.
3. *Dependability* emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs.
4. *Confirmability* refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others.

This study’s credibility is confirmable by collecting “rich, thick” descriptions of Ahtna individual’s lived-experience of not choosing to become a public school educator. Interview transcripts from several sources provided a pool of data from which we can look for confirmability. Eisner’s view of credibility through confirmability is that “We seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 204). The transcripts of interviews, survey data, and review of literature were the confluence of evidence. Creswell also says that the naturalistic researcher looks for confirmability rather than objectivity in establishing the value of the data.

Additionally, reliability, according to Silverman, can be helped by “employing a good-quality tape for recording and by transcribing the tape” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 209). Both of these strategies were used in this study. Interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim. Each interview was stored securely in multiple locations so that the transcriptions could be checked if needed. The data set was secured to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

Another validation strategy was to review the analysis with participants. Once the interview data had been collected, transcribed, and analyzed, the researcher reviewed the information with a number of the interviewees. Creswell (2007) refers to this as *member checking*. He suggests convening a focus group composed of participants in a study to “ask them to reflect on the accuracy of the account” (p. 209).

### **Threats to Validity**

As an interpretive analysis, threats must be identified early in the process. Outside and inherent characteristics can impact a mixed-methods study that includes a phenomenological component. As an interpreter of the data, the researcher’s subjective bias threatens the validity of the analysis more than any other factor because “the researcher’s interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understanding” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). The researcher has lived and worked among the Ahtna people for over 15 years, as described in Chapter 1. This familiarity could threaten validity if the analysis were to be based on predetermined conclusions.

Research design and analysis review by participants helps ameliorate the threat of bias due to familiarity. The phenomenological component of the design creates an avenue for the lived-experiences of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives to be recorded and transcribed as told by the people themselves. The telling of the story itself, by the person who experienced the phenomenon, removes pre-interpretive impact on the data. Additionally, the participatory nature of the phenomenology tends toward authentic data collection. In this study, participants assisted in the formulation of questions on both the survey instrument and guided interview questions.

Another potential threat to the validity of the study was the researcher's own lived-experience of choosing a career in education. The researcher's college, work, and life experience that led to a career in education is fundamentally different than that of an Ahtna person choosing a career in education. The culture, society, location, family history, and economic circumstances all vary in a substantial degree. Thus in order to gather and analyze credible data for this study, the researcher attempted to begin with no assumption of the process by which an Ahtna Athabascan would decide to become an educator. The threat from the researcher's own lived-experience is reduced by recognizing the experience, isolating it, and then resisting assumptions while collecting data. In addition, Creswell (2007) explains, "Clarifying the researcher bias from the outset of the study is important so that the reader understands the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry" (p. 208).

The validity of the data collected can also be negatively impacted by the researcher's position within the community and local education establishment. This



researcher's position, having lived in the community for a number of years serving in several administrative capacities within the local school system, could potentially influence participants' willingness to provide authentic descriptions of lived-experiences. Participants may feel the need to tell the researcher what they would expect he would want to hear. Creswell describes this as "power imbalances" (Creswell, 2007, p. 44).

Several strategies were implemented to reduce any perceived or felt power imbalance. The short survey, administered at the Ahtna Annual Meeting, was in part designed to give a broad notification of the study and its intended purpose and long term goal of increasing the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools. By allowing elders to be seen taking the survey along with other adult attendees, the balance of power shifted. As elders were observed taking the survey (observation being a strong characteristic of Ahtna people), the study was perceived as less of an interest to the school system and more of an interest to the culture and Ahtna community. Additionally, when requesting permission to interview, the researcher always offered to conduct the session at a location other than school premises. This, and the careful interaction during interviews, cast the study away from focusing on benefits to the school system to a focus on the community and cultural compatibility in schools. In this way, the researcher took on less of an administrator role and more of a co-participant role.

### **Setting**

The forced-response survey took place at the 2011 Ahtna Annual Meeting at Kluti-Kaah Hall in Copper Center, Alaska on Saturday, June 4, 2011. The Ahtna Annual Meeting is the largest Ahtna specific gathering each year. The hall is arranged with the

Ahtna Incorporated Board of Directors sitting in the front of the room on a raised platform with a speaker's podium in the center. Elders sit at tables near the platform, with other shareholders sitting toward the back. Food is served throughout the day, with a large lunch as part of the scheduled activities. Door prizes and other recognitions are given out throughout the day's meeting. The agenda for the annual meeting began with registration at 9:00 a.m. The official call to order by the Chair of the Board of Directors was at 10:50 a.m. The remainder of the agenda included guest speakers, reports, and announcements. The conclusion of the meeting included a vote for new board members and other elected decisions as required by the articles of incorporation. The official adjournment was scheduled for 5:40 p.m., though in the traditional Ahtna style, the gathering concluded in an informal manner after an evening dance performed by the Ahtna Heritage Youth Dancers.

The researcher was invited to give remarks relevant to education at the Annual Meeting in Copper Center Alaska. The opportunity was used to introduce the study and administer the short survey. Ahtna shareholders distributed the survey and writing utensils. Elders and shareholders completed the survey and either returned them directly to the researcher or another Ahtna shareholder. Forty-four surveys were completed. Three surveys were only partially completed. Approximately 90 blank copies of the survey were available for completion. Some respondents wrote short anecdotal comments next to their indicated answers.

Interviews took place at various locations throughout the Ahtna region. As mentioned in the previous section, when requesting permission to interview, the

researcher always offered to conduct the session at a location other than school premises. Some requested to be interviewed in the researcher's office, others somewhere related to their work or village.

### **Participants**

All participants in this study were all or part Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native living in the Copper River Valley, which is traditional Ahtna territory. Ahtna traditional territory encompasses the Copper River drainage. Villages include Cantwell, Mentasta, Chistochina, Gakona, Gulkana, Copper Center, Mendeltna, Tazlina, and Chitna. Based on the 2010 United States Census, 3,401 people lived within the Ahtna Alaska Native Regional Corporation (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development Research and Analysis, 2010). Of the 3,401 people, 918 are classified as American Indian and Alaska Native with a combined racial status.

Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives continue to live a subsistence lifestyle. Moose, caribou, berries, and most prominently, Copper River salmon sustain families. Many activities are centered around subsistence. Modern Ahtna villages are located on the road system, allowing residents to travel frequently to large urban areas within Alaska. Medical care, consumer goods, and entertainment activities are often sought in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

The study's participants were from multiple villages within the Ahtna region. Ten participants were chosen to be interviewed. Each participant had never served as a public school educator. Miles and Huberman describe this as purposeful sampling (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The criterion for participants was to be Ahtna

Athabascan Alaska Native and to have not chosen to become a teacher in public education.

### **Procedures**

The survey was given in an open meeting format, as described in the section on the research setting. A brief introduction to the study was given, explaining the purpose and future goal of increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers. The researcher noted grant possibilities and highlighted a recent district initiative with the University of Alaska Fairbanks to establish a local Future Educators of Alaska program. The survey was offered as voluntary and as a means to assist educators in making a case for measures that could lead to the eventual increase of Ahtna Athabascan teachers. Ahtna shareholders assisted with the distribution and collection of surveys.

Each of the interviews began in similar fashion, with each interview conducted individually. The interviewee was greeted, welcomed to a table, and offered a beverage. Before recording, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the hope that it would, with more inquiry, lead to an increase in the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers in local schools. The researcher explained the recording and transcribing process. Interviewees were assured that their anonymity would be protected. All interviewees were assured that only the researcher would hear the recordings. The researcher asked permission before initiating the record feature of the digital recorder.

## **Analysis**

Creswell (2007) notes that “qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 37). Data from the review of literature, surveys, and interview transcripts were analyzed thematically. As a cross-cultural mixed-methods study, the analysis needed to be accessible for the members of the culture to review. Creswell also described this type of comprehensive approach: “Following description, the researcher analyzes the data for specific themes, aggregating information into large clusters of ideas and providing details that support the themes” (p. 244). The review of literature related to Ahtna culture and teacher recruitment was used for the structure of the themes and textual descriptions of the interviews. In this way, each component of the study was used to confirm the reliability of the other.

Atlas TI software was used to code interview transcripts into the themes identified in the review of literature. In the initial review of verbatim transcripts, comments were coded into four primary categories of barriers, consequences, benefits, and solutions. In subsequent reviews of each transcript, each major theme was coded for clusters based on the review of literature, survey data, and comments.

## **Chapter Summary**

The principle features of the methods were to be culturally sensitive while (a) collecting descriptive statistics and (b) making recordings of interviews describing a

lived-experience. The melding of these features is the essence of how the study's methods allow for an effective mixed-method phenomenological study.

In addition to designing a scholarly methodology, the study's design aimed at demonstrating to the culture a sensitive and relevant research project. The study, though not an inquiry into the culture, is an important means for honoring and preserving the culture through educational activities. The study sets a precedent in both topic and method. The mixed-method approach with a substantive phenomenological component is most closely aligned with the Ahtna manner of study. Beginning with listening and dialogue rather than prescriptive categories for analysis allowed the Ahtna people to speak to this and future studies.

## Chapter 4: Results

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from within the Ahtna community served to answer the question of why Ahtna Athabascans have chosen not to become public school educators while also facilitating trust through a culturally respectful research process. All data presented is from participants who self-identified as Ahtna Athabaskan Indians in the Copper River Valley of Eastern Alaska.

### Survey Data

Forty-four people took the survey at the Ahtna Annual Meeting in June of 2011. Four respondents identified as not being Ahtna or part Ahtna Athabascans Alaska Natives. The responses to those surveys were discarded. The charts below represent responses from 40 Ahtna Athabaskan Alaska Native participants. Charts totaling more than 100% reflect rounding. Reporting of data in charts is a true reflection of responses. Outliers indicate multiple responses or indicate the presence of an unsolicited written response. Participants who did not indicate a response to a particular question are reported as *nr* for “no response.”

The survey data gathered in this study is not necessarily transferable to the entire Ahtna population (Fink, 2003). Neither should it be considered non-representative. For reasons already stated, primarily cultural, the scope of this study did not include a formalized sample with controls.

The survey data represented below was conducted on a single occasion at the 2011 Ahtna Annual Meeting in Copper Center, Alaska. The participants were those in attendance at the general session. The surveys were completed in the Kluti-Kaah Hall.

The results represent those opinions and attitudes of attendees at the annual meeting on June 4, 2011. See Appendix A for the survey instrument.

Basic demographic information was gathered in a culturally sensitive manner as suggested by participants in the pilot study. For example, the question regarding the age of the participant was given broad categorical options for answers so as not to seem inappropriately probing. The majority of the survey respondents reported being over 50 years of age (Figure 3; nr = no response).

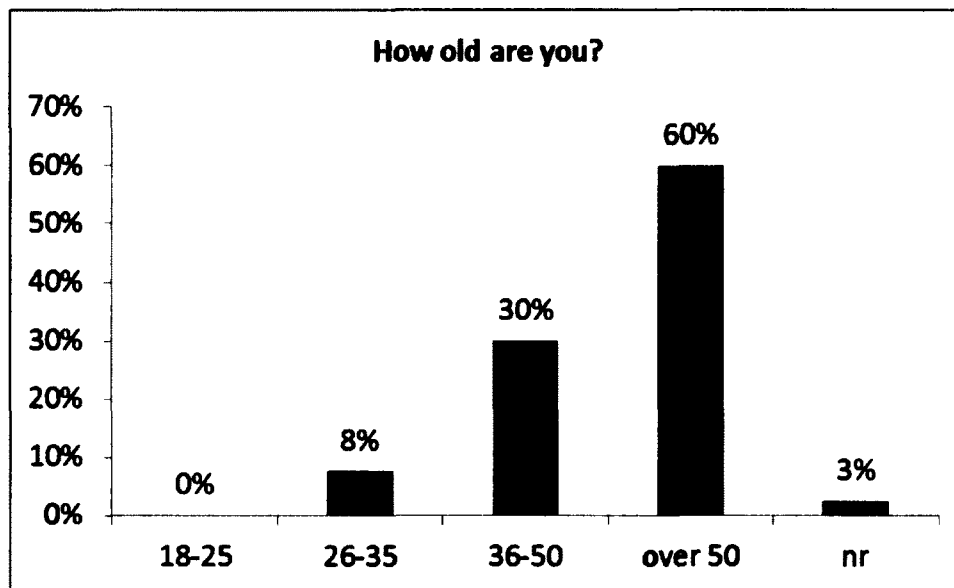


Figure 3. Age of survey respondents.

The majority of those responding to the survey reported having attended public school in Alaska (Figure 4). Two participants marked both *yes* and *no*, implying they attended public school both in Alaska and elsewhere.



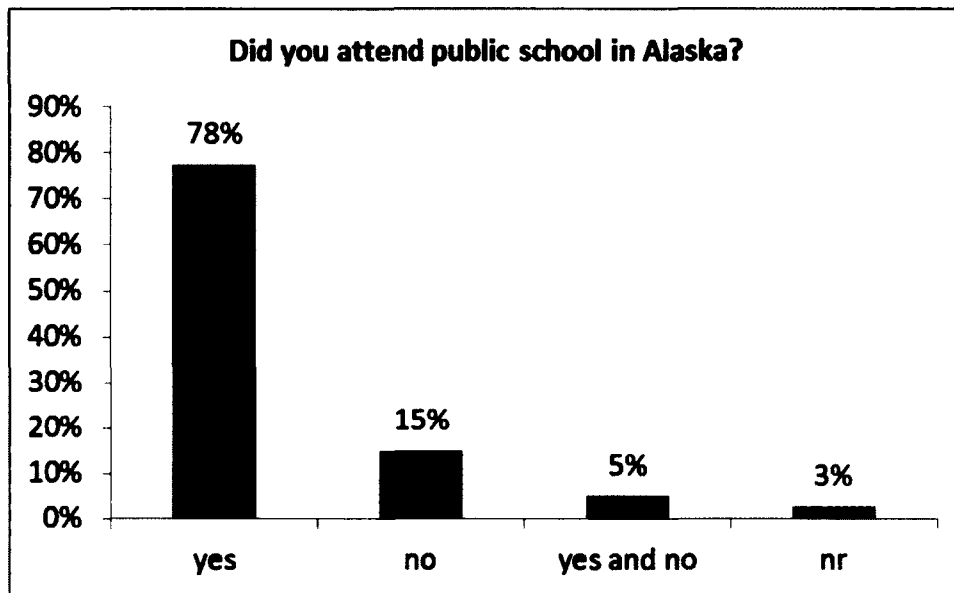


Figure 4. Public school attendance of survey respondents.

Corresponding to the age of most participants being over 50, most participants indicated not having children in public school at the time of the survey (Figure 5).

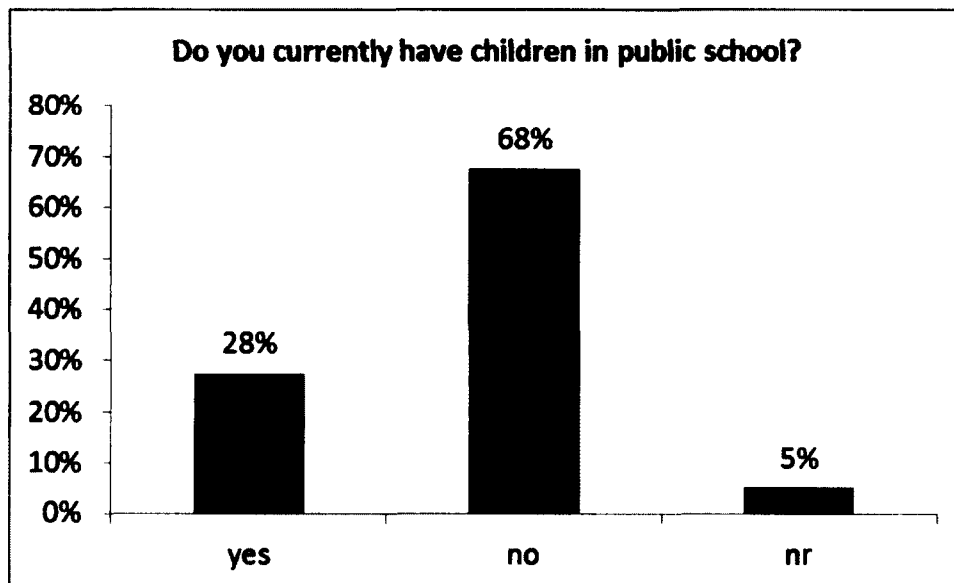
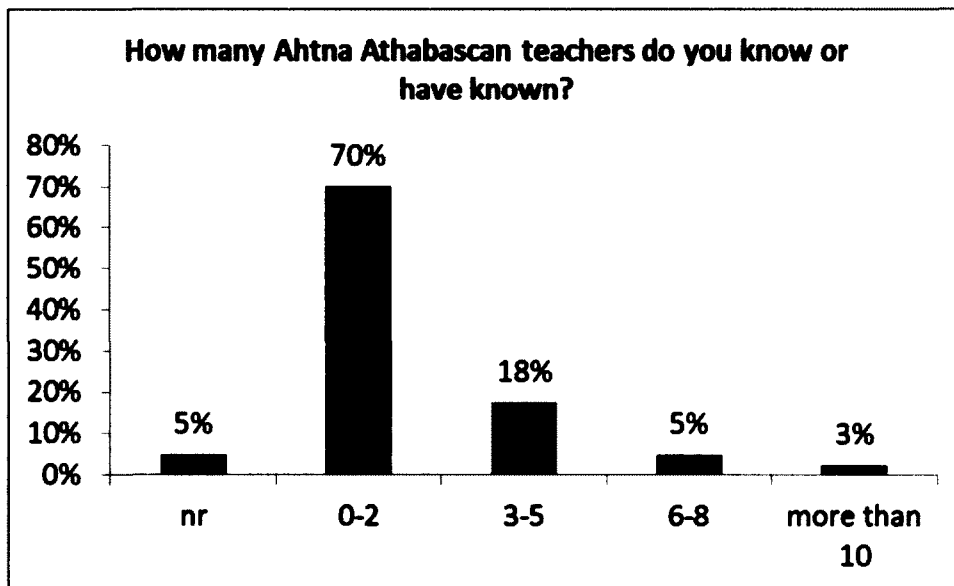


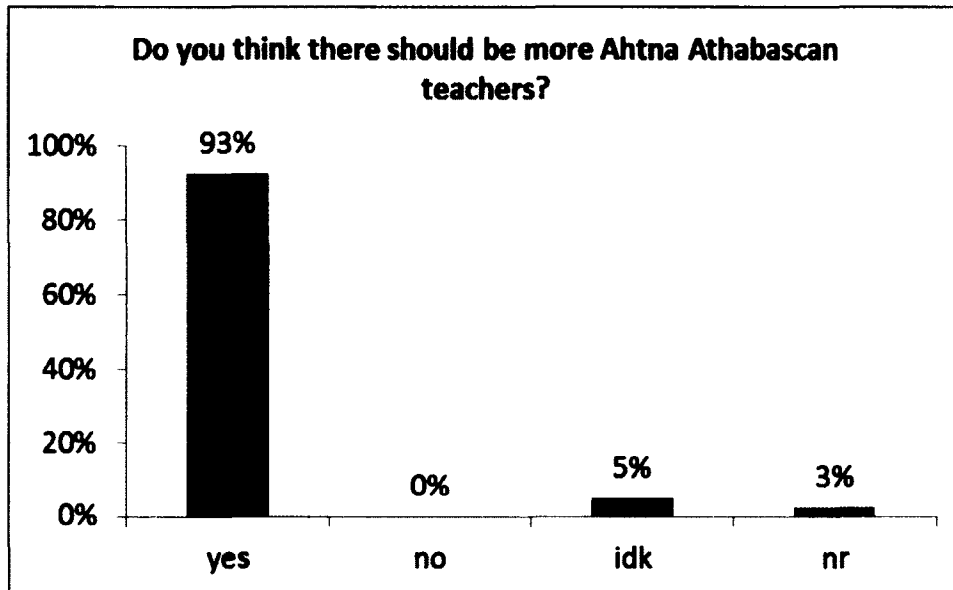
Figure 5. Children in school for survey respondents.

When asked to identify the number of Ahtna teachers they have known, most participants confirmed the researcher's finding that only one Ahtna certified teacher has worked in the local school system (Figure 6). Seventy percent of respondents identified with having 0 to 2 Ahtna Athabascan teachers in public school. Those who marked knowing more than two Ahtna teachers may have been referring to non-certified Ahtna personnel in local public schools.



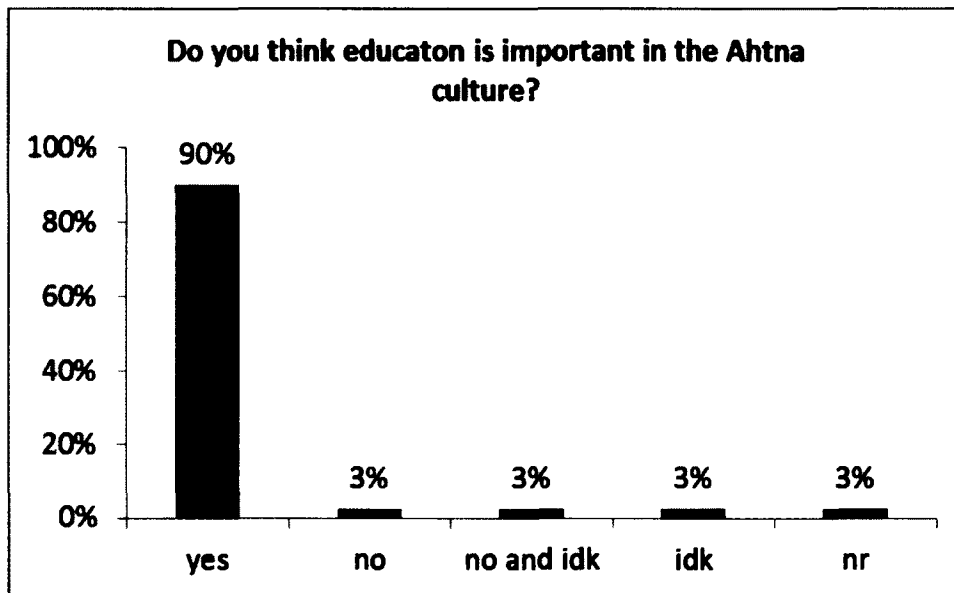
*Figure 6.* Ahtna teachers known by survey respondents.

Overwhelmingly, the participants on June 4, 2011 felt there should be more Ahtna Athabascan teachers (Figure 7; idk = I don't know). Interestingly, not a single participant indicated there should not be more Ahtna Athabascan teachers in public schools. Two participants marked the response option *I don't know*. Clearly, Ahtna Athabascans want more Ahtna teachers in local public schools.



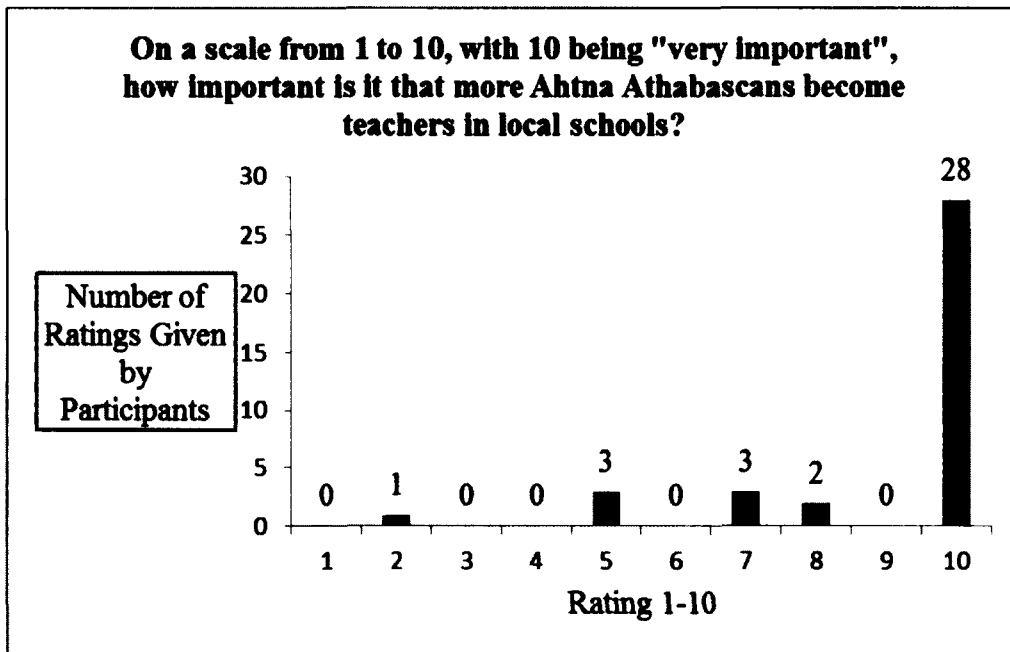
*Figure 7.* Respondent opinion on more Ahtna teachers.

Affirming the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the majority of participants felt that education is important in the Ahtna culture (Figure 8). One participant marked two answers, indicating *I don't know* and *no*. Another participant marked *no*. The *no* answers do not reveal if those two participants believe that (a) education is not an important value or whether (b) in practice, the western style of education does not appear important, as would be indicated in Figure 10. The literature and majority of responses to this question demonstrate clearly that education is highly valued in Ahtna history and Ahtna culture.



*Figure 8.* Importance of education.

When asked to rate the importance of having more Ahtna public school teachers using a Likert scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being very important, 28 participants marked the maximum importance of 10 (Figure 9). The average of all responses was 9.03. The lowest rating given by a respondent was 2. Twenty-eight participants gave a rating of 10.



*Figure 9.* Rating frequency for importance of Ahtna teachers.

The question regarding the relevancy of public schools to Ahtna culture produced a mixed-response (Figure 10). Only about half of the participants demonstrated confidence in the relevancy of public schools to Ahtna culture. It is also noteworthy that six participants did not know whether public schools were relevant. In a small Alaska Native community, it is significant that one would not be aware of the cultural relevancy in the local public schools.

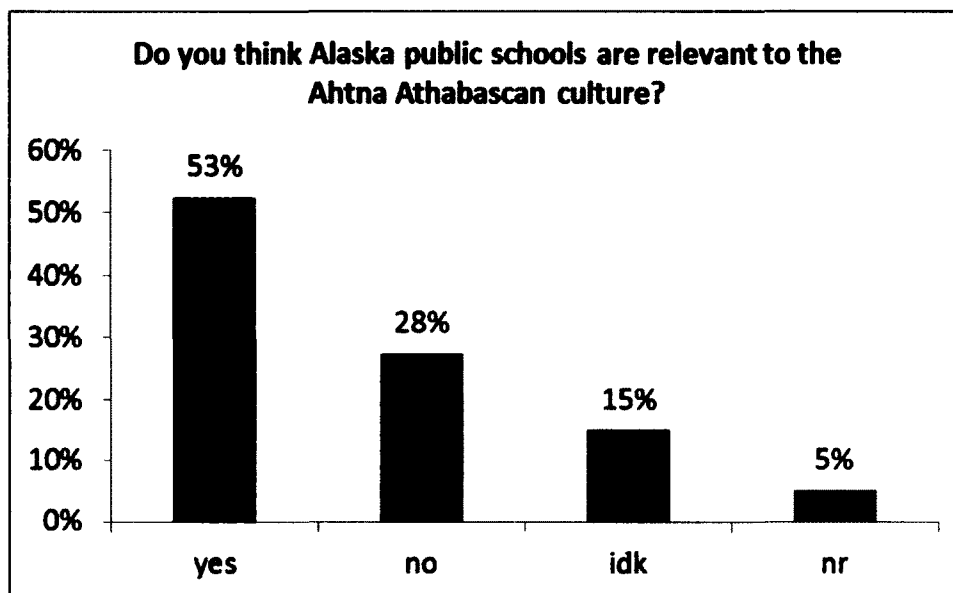


Figure 10. School relevance as perceived by survey respondents.

Though the majority of participants noted only knowing 0 to 2 Ahtna Athabascan teachers, 58% report not having had an Ahtna Athabascan teacher in public school (Figure 11). Subsequent discussions with participants and Ahtna people seem to indicate that, for some, any Ahtna working in the local school system was considered a teacher. An equal number of participants said they had or do not know if they had an Ahtna teacher in public school. The eight *I don't know* responses could mean the question lacked clarity for participants to determine who was and was not a teacher in their public school experiences. It is also important to connect the age of most participants with the response to this question. The local system, as described in the literature, was less structured and included more elder participation than the current heavily government-regulated local school system.

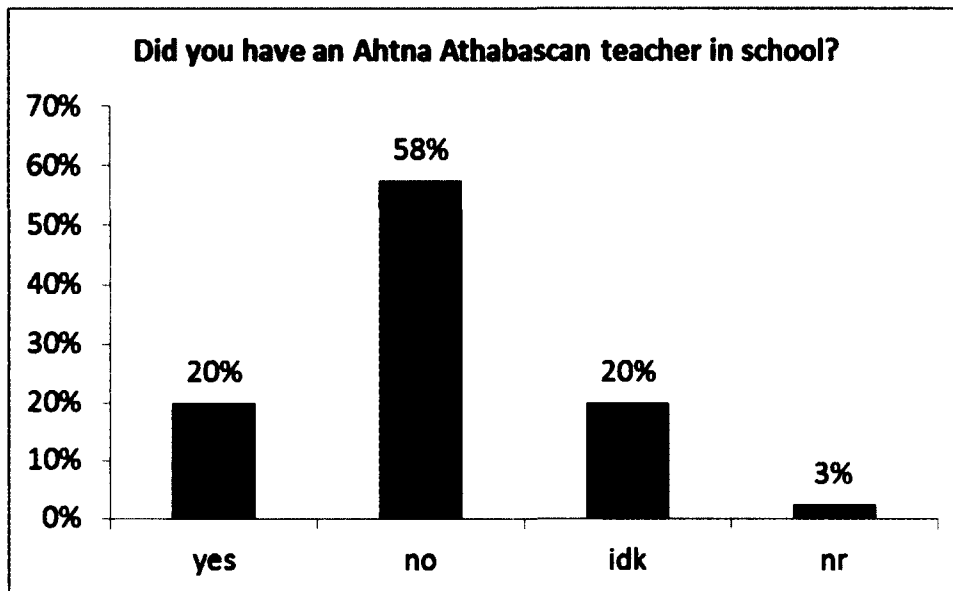


Figure 11. Experience with an Ahtna teacher by survey respondents.

For those who had an Ahtna Athabascan teacher, only 28% felt they performed better in that class than in others (Figure 12). The *I don't know* option received more responses than any other answer to the question. Though not clearly apparent from the answers to the question, one could conclude from the literature that *I don't know* demonstrates the disconnect between western means of assessment and traditional Ahtna teaching and learning patterns.

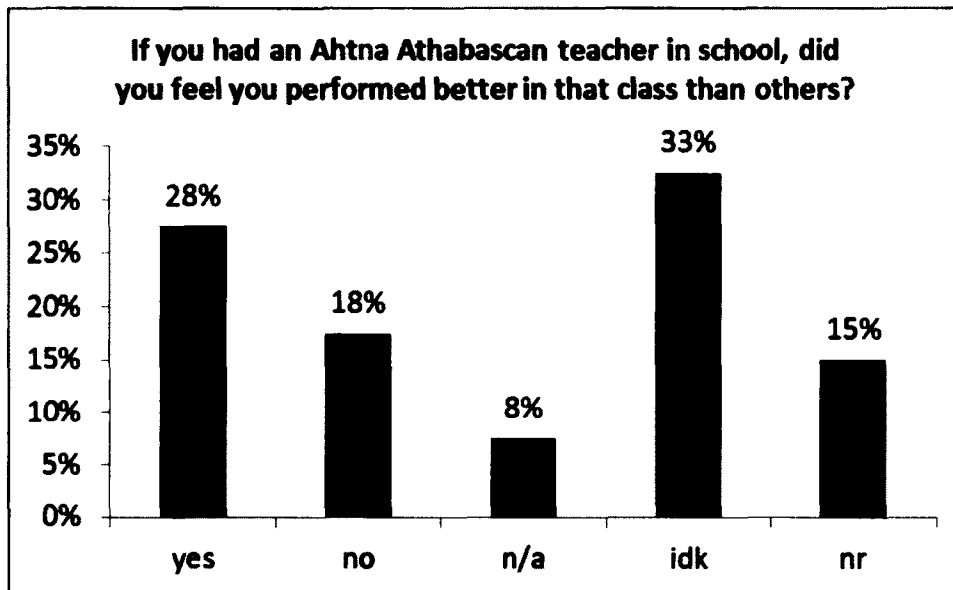


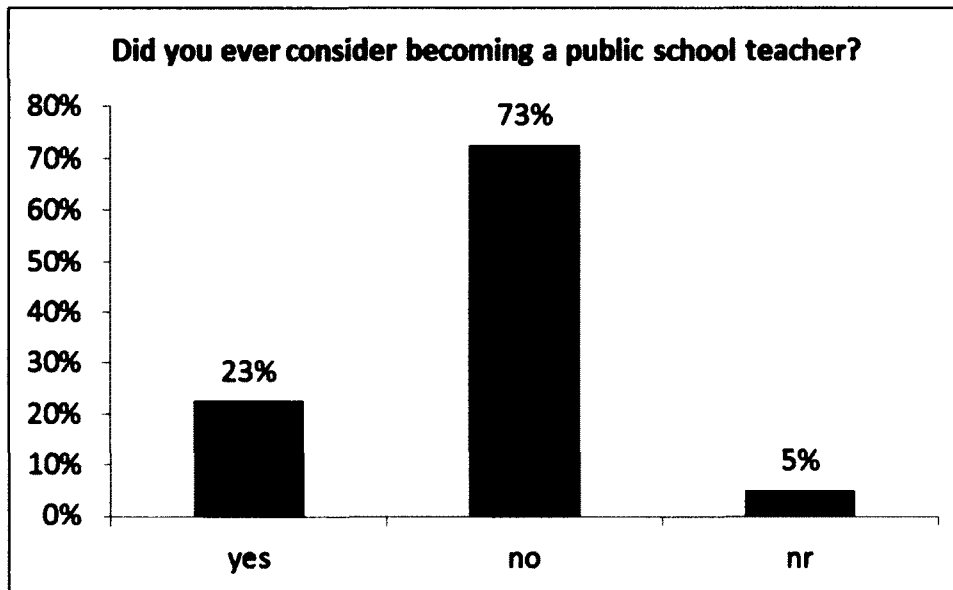
Figure 12. Perceived performance with an Ahtna teacher.

When comparing the two previous question (Figure 11 and Figure 12), five participants that marked *yes* to having had an Ahtna Athabaskan teacher also marked *yes* when asked if they felt that they had performed better in that class. Four marked *no* to having performed better with an Ahtna teacher. Two indicated they did not know if they had performed better in a class with an Ahtna teacher. None of the participants that had an Ahtna Athabaskan teacher and felt they did not do better in that class answered *yes* when asked earlier in the survey if they felt there should be more Ahtna Athabaskan teachers in public schools. All of the participants who did not have an Ahtna Athabaskan teacher in school felt there should be more as indicated with a *yes* response to the question represented in Figure 7.

The most direct question regarding the personal experience of choosing to become a public school educator shows that most of the survey participants had not



considered becoming a public school educator (Figure 13). Only nine participants marked *yes* to considering becoming a public school educator.



*Figure 13.* Consideration of becoming a teacher.

The data set shows that the younger the participants, the more likely they were to have considered a career as a public school teacher (Figure 14). All three participants age 26 to 35 said they had considered becoming a public school teacher. Out of 24 participants over 50, only 3 ever considered becoming a public school teacher.

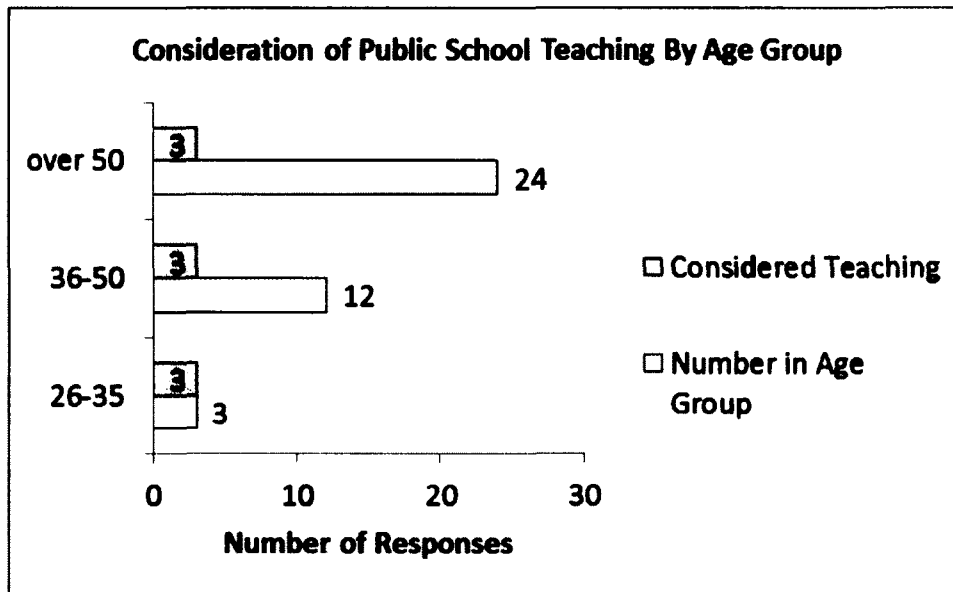


Figure 14. Consideration of teaching career by age of survey respondent.

Almost of third of those who took the survey knew of someone other than themselves who had considered becoming a public school teacher (Figure 15).

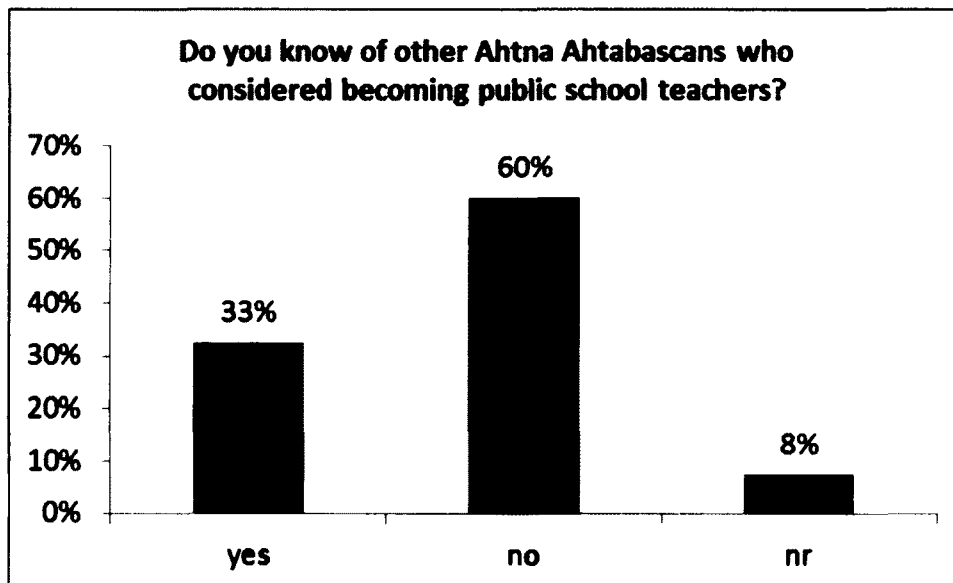


Figure 15. Knowledge of others who considered teaching.

When asked about their personal educational experience, the majority of participants liked school (Figure 16). Two participants marked both *yes* and *no* as having liked and not liked school.

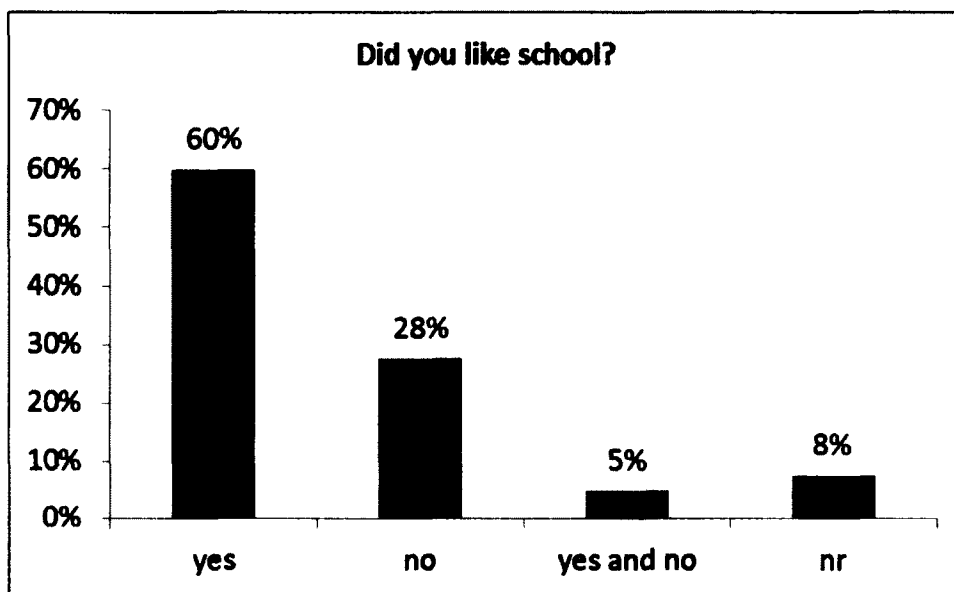


Figure 16. Respondent like or dislike of public school.

Of those who chose to complete a survey, 70% reported having earned a high-school diploma (Figure 17). This is remarkable given that many participants were over 50, having attended school in the earliest days of public education for Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives. Also, given that the participants were not a formalized controlled sample, this may also be indicative of the type of attendee to Ahtna Annual meetings.

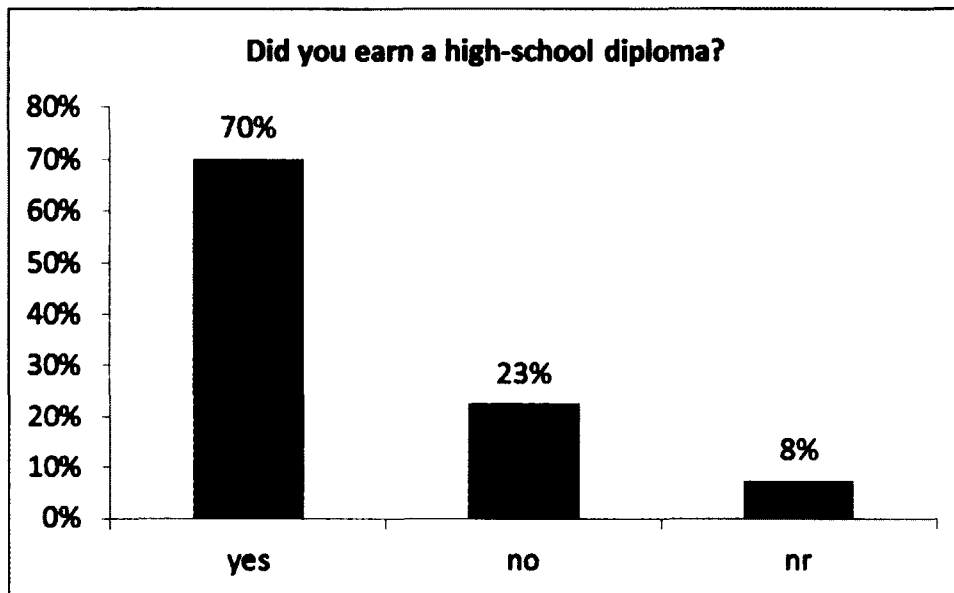
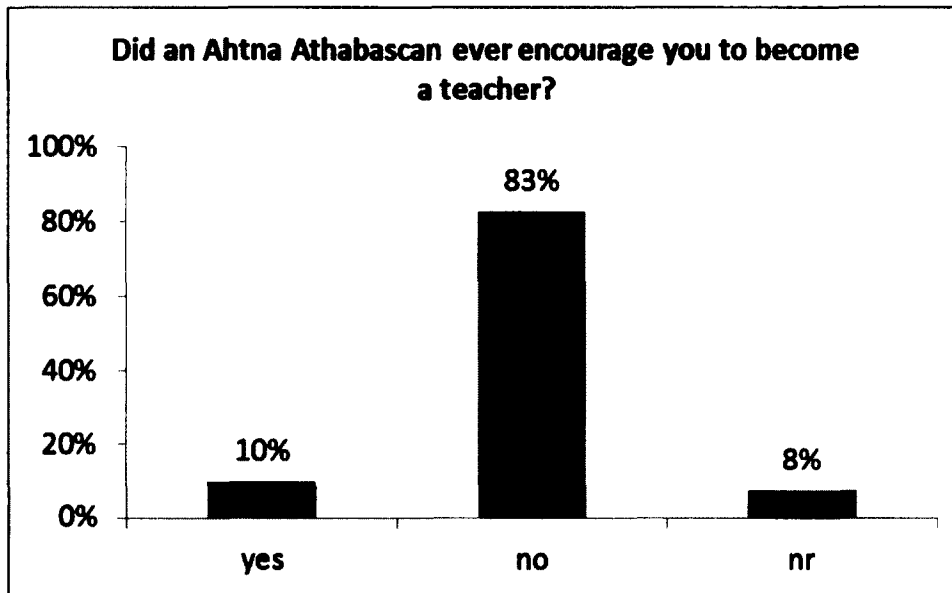
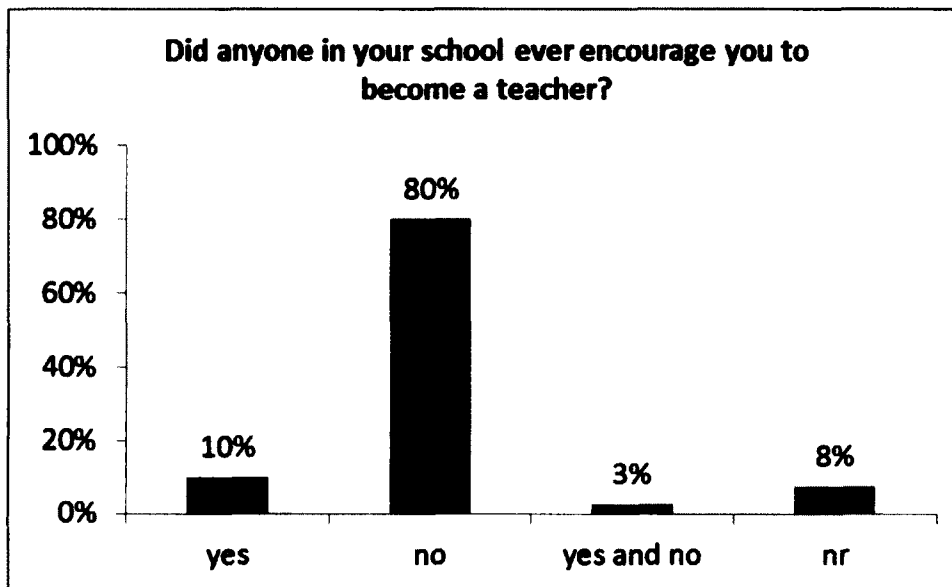


Figure 17. Respondent receipt of a high-school diploma.

Participants were asked if they had ever been encouraged to become a public school educator by another Ahtna Athabascan or anyone; 83% reported that no Ahtna person had encouraged them to become a teacher (Figure 18). The responses were similar when asked if anyone, not just an Ahtna Athabascan, had ever encouraged them to become a teacher, with 80% saying *no* (Figure 19).



*Figure 18.* Encouragement toward teaching career by Athna.



*Figure 19.* Encouragement toward teaching career by anyone.

Still, 18% of the participants indicated that they both liked school and had considered becoming a public school teacher (Table 1). Nine respondents or 23% neither liked school nor considered becoming a public school teacher. Only two participants did not like school yet considered becoming a teacher.

Table 1

*Considered Teaching or Not and Liked School or Not*

	Liked School	Did Not Like School
Considered teaching	7	2
Did not consider teaching	17	9

When comparing high school completion with consideration of becoming a teacher, the data shows that for the survey participants, having earned a diploma seemed to indicate a greater likelihood of considering teaching in a public school (Table 2).

Table 2

*Considered Teaching or Not and Earned a Diploma or Not*

	Earned a Diploma	Did Not Earn a Diploma
Considered teaching	8	1
Did not consider teaching	20	8

Out of the 40 surveys completed by Ahtna people, 68% marked both *no* for having considered becoming a teacher and having received encouragement from an Ahtna person. Only 8%, or three participants indicated having received encouragement from an Ahtna Athabaskan and having considered becoming a teacher.

When asked if they would make a good teacher, survey respondents showed no clear pattern (Figure 20). This may be related to the Ahtna traditional value of not speaking about oneself. It is notable that the *yes* and *I don't know* responses combined are significantly more than the *no* responses. More Ahtna respondents believed there is a possibility they might be a good teacher than did not believe so.

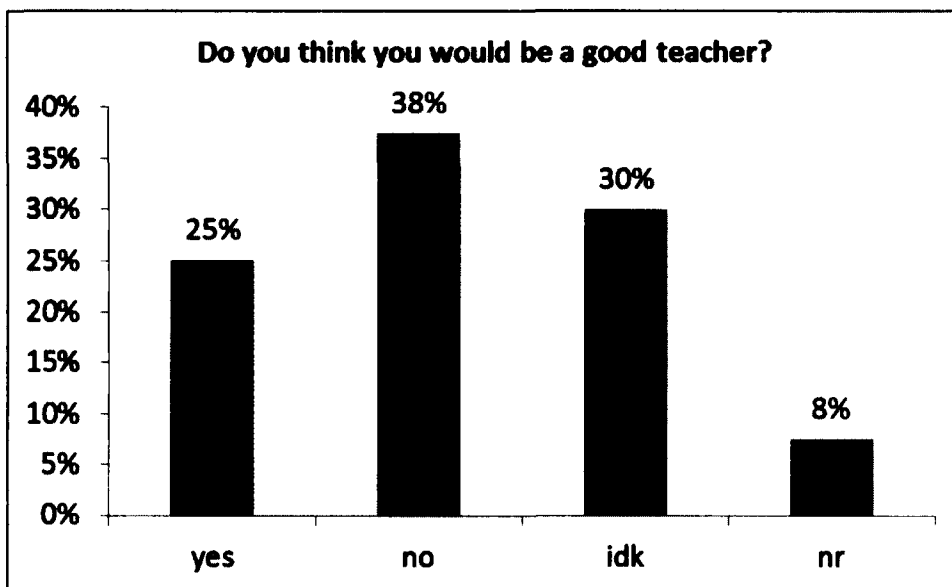
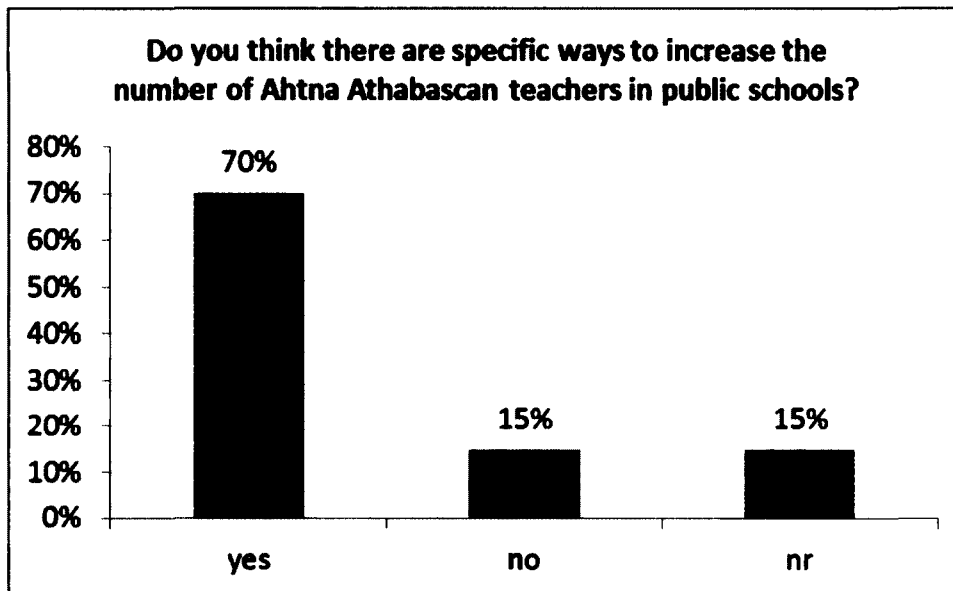


Figure 20. Respondents' belief that they would be good teachers.

A large majority Ahtna people who took the survey believed that there were specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools (Figure 21). An equal number of participants marked *no* or had no response to the question. The difference between the *yes* and *no* responses indicated a firm belief in a pathway to increasing the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools.



*Figure 21.* Agreement that there are ways to increase number of Ahtna teachers.

In an interesting contrast to the low number of respondents over 50 who considered becoming public school teachers, 67%, or 16 participants over 50 believe there are specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools. All of the participants 26 to 35 years old believe there are ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools.

An equal number of those participating in the survey felt that schools are relevant to the Ahtna culture and that there are ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers as did not agree with either of those statements (Table 3). In other words, 40% also felt that public school are not relevant to Ahtna culture and that there are not specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna Athabascans public school teachers.



Table 3

*Public School Relevance and Ways to Increase Number of Teachers*

	There are specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools	There are <i>not</i> specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools
Public schools are relevant to Ahtna culture	40%	5%
Public schools are <i>not</i> relevant to Ahtna culture	20%	40%

Only one participant indicated having considered becoming a public school teacher yet felt there are not ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools. Twenty participants (50%) said that they had not considered teaching but felt there are ways to increase the number of Ahtna public school teachers. Only five (13%) had not considered becoming a teacher and felt there were not specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools (Table 4).

Table 4

*Consideration of Teaching Career and Ways to Increase Number of Teachers*

	There are specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools	There are <i>not</i> specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools
Considered teaching	8	1
Did not consider teaching	20	5

When asked another question about their personal educational experiences, 65% of the participants indicated that a public school teacher was a significant influence in

their lives (Figure 22). Most of the 24 participants who liked school also reported having an influential public school teacher (Figure 23).

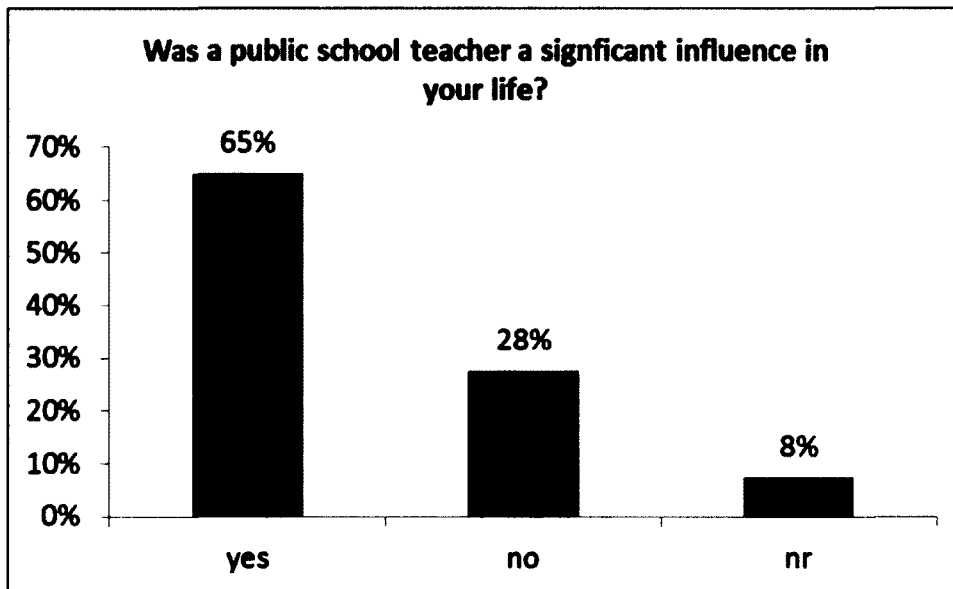


Figure 22. Experience of a public school teacher as a significant influence.

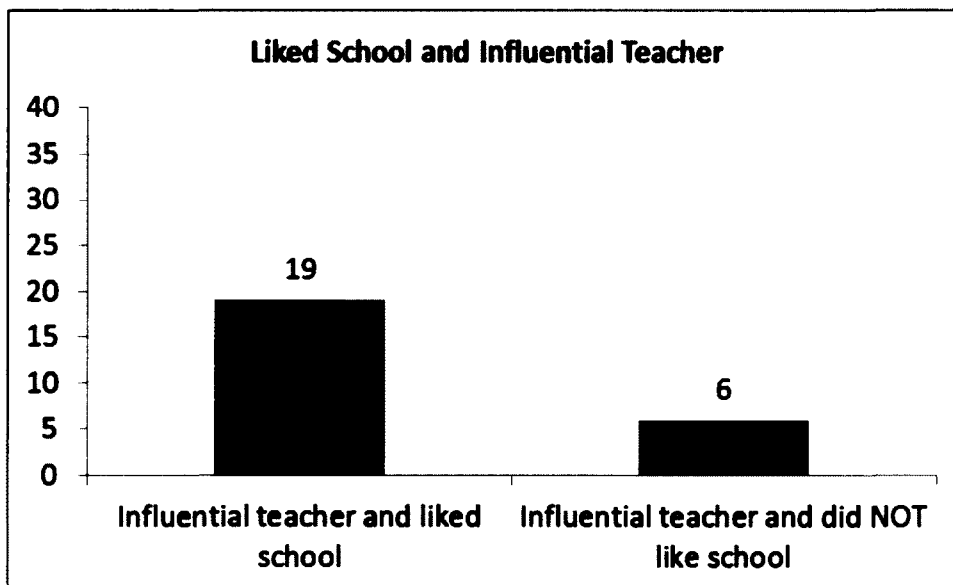
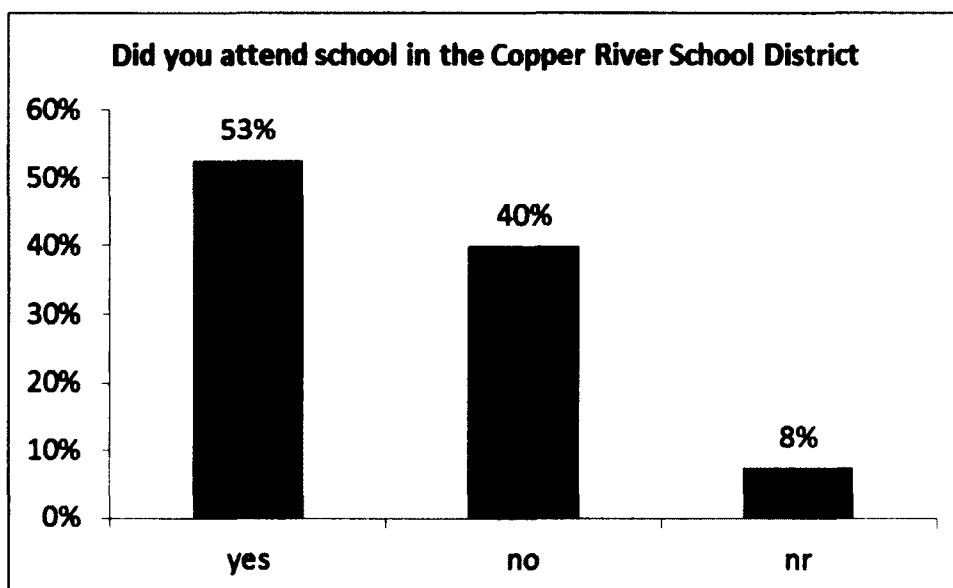


Figure 23. Liked school compared with influential teacher.

About half of the survey participants had attended school in the Copper River School District (Figure 24). Given that most participants were over 50, if they attended school it was likely before the State of Alaska created the Rural Educational Attendance Areas (REAAAs) on July 1, 1976.



*Figure 24.* Copper River School District attendance by survey respondents.

The survey data set provides a context and framework through which the subsequent interviews took place. The Ahtna Annual Meeting is a gathering of shareholders and Ahtna community members. The survey served to present a one-time, non-formalized picture of how Ahtna people feel about having Ahtna teachers in local public schools. In addition to illuminating subsequent interviews, the survey served to initiate the conversation between the researcher and the Ahtna community in preparation for one-on-one phenomenological interviews regarding the experience of not choosing to become a public school teacher.

### **Interview Data**

Interviews for this study were conducted over a period of 4 months in the late summer and autumn of 2011. Participants were all Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native. Interviewees included high school graduates and those whose education did not include a traditional western high school diploma. Interviewees ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-50s. Some, but not all of the interviewees were employed at the time of their interview.

Triangulating the data in this study, the themes from the review of literature were considered with the survey data and used as an optic to review the interview transcripts. Individual quotations gathered from the transcripts were analyzed by coding into four primary categories: barriers, consequences, benefits, and solutions. These four categories were identified in the review of literature and through the initial review of interview transcripts. The comments, as presented by theme, were not categorized by the participants, but by the researcher based on review of literature, survey data, and the overall message conveyed by the collective transcripts.

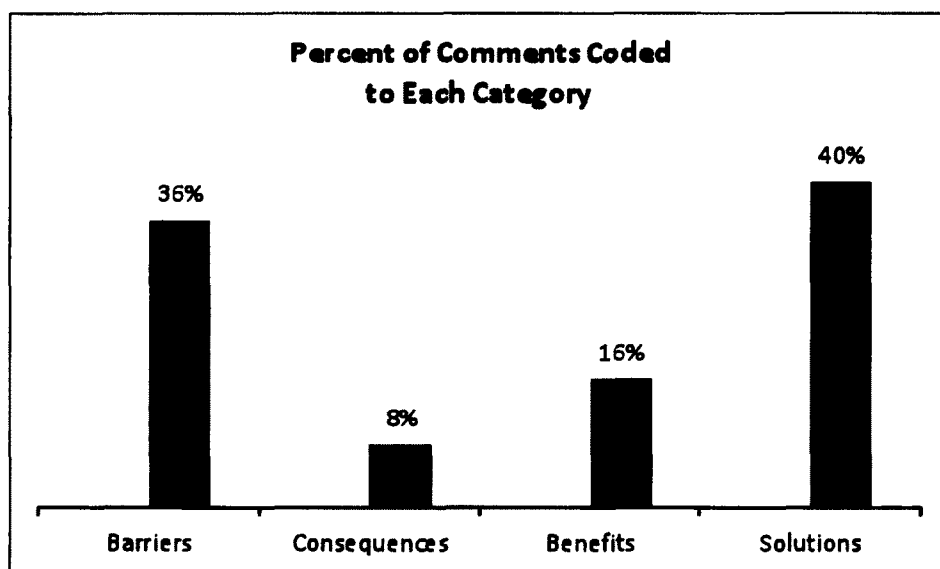
### **Category Definitions**

The four main categories were defined as follows:

- **Barrier:** A comment describing a hindrance to choosing to become a public school educator.
- **Consequence:** A comment describing the impact for individuals and the Ahtna community from the individual and collective choices to not become a public school educator.

- **Benefit:** A comment describing a realized or potential positive impact for individuals and the Ahtna community from the individual or collective choices to become a public school educator.
- **Solution:** A comment describing a means to facilitate the choice for Ahtna individuals to become public school educators.

Interview transcripts were coded using Atlas TI into 54 pages of comments. The comments were then categorized into themes and clusters based on the review of literature and survey data. There were 381 comments coded into the four primary categories of barriers, consequences, benefits, and solutions (Figure 25).



*Figure 25.* Percentages of coded comments assigned to four main categories.

As qualitative coding is a subjective analysis, the statistics are meant to identify the basis for the hermeneutical analysis that follows. When analyzing statements regarding the lived-experience of not choosing to become a public school teacher, some

comments could be considered a solution or a barrier. For example, the following quote was coded as a barrier, consequence, benefit, and solution:

But they're raising their kids now, and some of them are raising them maybe with those memories or saying, "Well, when I went to school there; they were terrible," or anything that goes wrong, "Well, it's because they're White," or, "It's because they're not from here." So now, having people in the system that could un-teach that maybe or show that it's changed; it's different.

Elements of the quote fit within the definition of each code. For presentation and analysis of the data, each quote was used to illustrate only one category.

### **Barriers**

Comments from interviews were coded as barriers if they indicated a causation or hindrance to an Ahtna Athabascan becoming a public school educator. Both direct and indirect comments were included if, in context, the interviewee was discussing reasons why they or someone else may have chosen not to become a public school teacher. Of a total 381 comments coded, 136 were identified as being barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators.

Negative school experiences, particularly in K-12 educational settings, were mentioned as a barrier to considering a career as a public school teacher. One interviewee related the following story of an elder who now uses Facebook to share stories, including his personal negative educational experiences:

And I read some one of our elders now, his post on Facebook, he'll do just a little snippet of things in his memories, and it's his healing process. "I remember I was

number 67” or something and “I didn’t have a name and when we showed up they cut off all their hair and gave us this uniform and they bathed them and powdered them and did all kinds of things like look for lice or whatever.” I don't know, but that’s what happened to him.

The interviewee went on to say that “old hurts” are barriers to students now considering teaching. Conversely, she explained that such experiences can also motivate one to finish and get a diploma to prove oneself, as it did in her own experience. It was clear that barriers in K-12 settings are at least in part due to experiences from the past. In her words, “that’s the kind of stuff you guys [Copper River School District] are catching flack for now.”

Another interviewee was also articulate in describing negative K-12 experiences as a barrier to recruiting Ahtna Athabascans to become public school educators. In a haunting sentence, after stating that a number of Ahtna people have had negative experiences in school one said, “that would be the last place that they would want to spend their career.”

Multiple interviewees mentioned the dropout rate in relation to barriers caused by negative K-12 experiences. Without placing blame for the dropouts, they connected the failure to complete high school with there being so few Ahtna Athabascan public school teachers. One interviewee said, “I think the dropout rate, it’s probably a good reason for why a lot of people are not pursuing school teaching, because they haven’t finished high school.” Another quantified it by saying, “I grew up with probably about eight other natives in my class...and out of every one of them I was the only one that got a diploma.”

Some interviewees went so far as to connect their own personal experience of not earning a diploma with the lack of Ahtna Athabascan public school teachers. An interviewee commented on this topic, “Uh, probably ‘cause I didn’t make it all the way through school” stated one interviewee when asked if he had ever considered becoming a public school teacher. Another also made the connection between personal experience and the number of Ahtna teachers, stating, “I mean, I don’t know. Like for me, I didn’t even graduate from high school, and I’m just like by the end of this week I’ll be finished with my GED.”

According to the interviewees, the dropout issue isn’t time specific. One person said, “Well, in the past, I don’t think that many people finished high school.” This interviewee indicated that the current low number of Ahtna teachers is due to the low graduation rates in the past. Another interviewee spoke more somberly, “Mostly I think it’s just the dropout rate. There are people out there who would be good for the position but they’ve never finished school themselves.”

Another aspect mentioned of negative K-12 experiences that became barriers to Ahtna people choosing to become public school teachers was the teachers themselves. One person mentioned not getting along with some teachers. Interestingly, another interviewee stated that, “I think students have a hard time seeing teachers as people.” This statement was made in the context of the culture shock native students experience when entering public school.

Related to education, but moving beyond the negative experiences of K-12, participants mentioned various aspects of college attendance as a barrier. One



interviewee could not think of an Ahtna person in college at the time of the interview.

Another summarized the issue of college attendance, “I think, just the whole college, you know, finishing college is a big obstacle and you know we have few people that will start and even fewer people that will finish.”

A factor in college attendance as a barrier is location. The solitary Ahtna teacher employed in the local school district was remembered by an interviewee as having to leave home in order to become a teacher. Relating that fact to others who do not attend college, she said, “I tried talkin’ people into going to school all the time and they don’t like the idea of leaving.” Another spoke of personal preference, “Yeah, and I just, you know, I prefer staying close.” One interviewee generalized for other Ahtna people by stating that “a lot of people are rooted here too.” That rootedness was described by another interviewee as making college an uncomfortable experience for Ahtna people. He said, “Teaching, right, yeah, so a lot of people probably aren’t comfortable with that, leaving home.” Leaving home for college was also spoken of by another as almost inappropriate, stating, “That’s too much time out of the home.”

The financial implications of college were spoken of directly and indirectly. Direct references to the expense of college were related in personal terms for some. Another spoke of the few applicants for scholarships awarded locally. Someone also mentioned the need for financial education to address the financial issues of attending college, even discussing the possibility of someday teaching a personal finance class. One very specific comment related to finance mentioned the lack of transportation or childcare for someone wanting to attend college.

Related to finances, some interviewees mentioned the need to work as a barrier to attending college in order to become a teacher. Getting to the root of the issue, one interviewee compared the income of working with the expense of attending college:

Well, my first job in high school, since my dad was always in construction and he was an operator and my first job in high school paid \$42.00 an hour, and...so...you know I waged, I jumped into a life of construction. Rather than spend 4 years spending money, I spend 4 years making money.

Four other interviewees specifically referred to construction as an attractive alternative to college or a career in teaching. One stated, "Yeah, and, out of the guys, most of the other guys I know are all...are all in construction and everything." Another stated, "Yeah, I went into construction and then I've, I'm still going to college. I've been going to college since 1994." A similar comment was the following:

...but I know it is hard and a lot of young people just start, you know, looking for jobs right away or expecting a high-paying job right out the gate, so when you see a job that you know somebody's willing to hire you for right out of school, a lot of times, if you're willing to just show up that's enough.

One person specifically mentioned the pipeline and the effect it had on school attendance, K-12, and college: "their education's cut short in, you know, '70s, '80s, pipeline, everything going on, oil spills, or a lot of dropouts were going for a while."

The responsibilities of family and home weighed on some interviewees' minds as they discussed college as a barrier to more Ahtna Athabascan teachers. One person said flatly, "Yeah, I got no time. I got family. I got, you know, kids and survival. Gotta

work.” Another felt college would be difficult, stating “I don’t think I would be successful as a working single mom.”

The actual process of getting enrolled in college was mentioned as a barrier. One interviewee simply asked, “how would you get from point A to point B?” in reference to attending college in order to become a teacher. One interviewee did not feel she had received adequate support from school counselors saying, “Because when I went to school, the counselors were not, not extremely helpful in finding colleges.” Though one person said, “I’m not sure how long you have to go to school for that,” another was more certain it involved “too much” to give and said, “But it was just too much to go through to get, to get anywhere in there.”

A couple of interviewees that enrolled in a post-secondary institution related personal college experiences. One described the struggle as a college freshman with new found freedoms and unfound help setting personal boundaries. Another described the realization that there are many options and not knowing which to choose. This person said, “I didn’t, ended up not finishing college.”

Significantly, the notion of college attendance as a barrier to recruiting more Ahtna teachers came both from those who had and those who had not attended college. Lack of guidance, the financial costs, the responsibilities of family, and the lure of making money all were discussed as barriers to college attendance and the pursuit of teaching as a career.

Another barrier mentioned by interviewees regarding the choice to become a public school teacher involved support. As identified in the review of literature, the

Ahtna people are relational and interdependent. Support from the community was mentioned in terms of both positive and negative influences that could impact one's choice to become a teacher. Financial support was also mentioned as an outside factor. Additionally, several comments were made in reference to self-motivation or the support that comes from one's own choices.

The importance of family support was mentioned in regards to making education a priority. One stated emphatically, "it's not a priority for parents anymore." In contrast, another interviewee mentioned how recently Ahtna people have been involved with western educational practices and noted there are more parents now talking about education.

Finances were also mentioned as a barrier regarding the support necessary to choose teaching as a career. One interviewee who had worked in a school setting said getting paid only once per month might deter some Ahtna people from choosing to become a teacher. Related to college attendance, another interviewee mentioned parents' lack of resources to support college attendance for their children. This respondent stressed the importance of scholarships as a support necessary to have ever chosen college attendance and a career in education. Another aspect of finances was the relatively good pay from local native organizations. The option of comparable pay combined with a comfortable atmosphere with other Ahtna people may make it difficult to choose the more difficult pathway to public school teaching, as expressed in this respondent's words:

Ahtna and CRNA pay pretty well. The villages pay pretty well. And then you just, you know, feel more at ease within those organizations because you're familiar with them and you know how it works and you know everybody there coming into it.

Another interviewee specifically connected the need for support from friends and the negative influences present in their youth, stating, "I could see that I was, you know, going to end up, end up doing what they were doing." Family was ultimately the support that gave this interviewee the motivation necessary to complete high school.

Interviewees referenced the need for adequate guidance counseling. At least two interviewees felt there was not enough guidance available for current students. One said, "I just don't think it's made available enough to students." Another mentioned the need for native organizations to have better contact information for students so they can provide the counseling necessary for college attendance. Specific ideas for providing guidance information were shared by another interviewee:

Like that's kind of what I'm talking about. Like you need to figure out what classes it takes to be a teacher and then, or what the steps are. I mean, I don't know if you have to have a degree to be a teacher or not. But um, just getting information on our pamphlets about being a teacher, and you know, what kind of teacher jobs are available in the district.

Half of the interviewees had comments identified as referencing the importance of self in establishing adequate support for choosing a career in teaching. In speaking of students, one said, "They just don't know they have the potential." In another interview,

it was noted that Ahtna students lack “confidence in themselves.” A different interviewee thought students were not motivated to consider their own careers, stating, “I think that they just don’t consider it as a career goal and been really thinking about how we get kids involved into furthering their education.” The importance of parents’ role in students developing motivation for choosing specific careers was also noted in interviews.

As shown in the previous comments, the importance of the need for adequate support was noted as coming from several sources. Interestingly, one interview included a comment regarding the overdependence on support that has developed. Specifically they noted the dependence on governmental support that has become a factor in people’s choice to not attend college and further training.

The pervasive aspect of culture in choosing to become a public school teacher was noted in multiple interviews. In reference to students in public schools, interviewees noted the difference between a traditional Ahtna home and a western school setting. “So it’s just a total different kind of setting. And it’s kind of a culture shock when we get kids to go to school and it’s just so structured....And uh, not only that, they probably see more of a non-native atmosphere that they’re not comfortable with.”

The lack of cultural awareness in the broader community was noted by another as being a barrier to choosing to teach in public schools by stating, “I think the lack of cultural awareness, not just on the native, non-natives not knowing enough about native people.”

In some comments, culture was connected to the experience of students in school ultimately choosing whether or not to teach in public schools. In a personal reference, one interviewee remembered he had “bumped heads with teachers and stuff” because “we grew up different.” Another contrasted teaching and other important cultural issues by saying, “I guess it’s just ‘cause I never envisioned myself being a teacher. I really got involved in, like ah, native issues really early in my life.”

Language was mentioned by three interviewees as being a cultural factor in choosing not to teach in public schools. One noted that teaching English would not be very appealing personally as it had been difficult to master. Another noted other schools in other areas of the state that do teach local languages and the lack of Ahtna language instruction locally. Another interviewee mentioned language and noted the difficulty in finding Ahtna people to teach it in local schools: “And like we’re, at work we’re talking about making Ahtna language teachers, and it’s even difficult to find people that want to learn the language and then teach it.”

In the most powerful statement regarding culture, one interviewee noted the foundational difference in how western schools view education and how the Ahtna culture views education, stating, “We’re probably more raised in a cultural environment that has teaching every day, but no one actually really sees it as a job.” A comment from a different interviewee illuminates this point, “But you know, they’re so, like teachers are an authority figure for students, and I guess they just don’t see themselves as being, doing that.” Still another said, “I think culturally, we’re not made to just be out in the public and showing people things, so it’s culturally hard for us to teach other people because we

get taught by being shown how to do things or stories and stuff like that.” Based on these comments, interviewees perceived that being a teacher in a western school setting is fundamentally different than being a teacher in traditional Ahtna culture.

A final category of barriers mentioned in the interviews were comments of a personal nature. The comment “just life got in the way” describes similar comments by other interviewees in describing barriers to choosing to teach in public schools. One simply stated, “I don’t know. I just never really, no, I’ve never thought about that,” when asked about considering becoming a teacher. That is notable as others also answered that question in a similar fashion. In other words, some had thought about it and said no to teaching. Others never even considered it. A couple of interviewees mentioned their impatience with children as being a barrier to pursuing a teaching career. These comments, unique to the individual, were part of their individual lived-experience of not choosing to become a teacher.

### **Consequences**

Though fewer, the comments noting the consequence of Ahtna people not choosing to become teachers in local public schools is another category evident in the interview transcripts.

The people who noted consequences were primarily concerned with how it impacts children in school. One person simply stated, “there is a lot of pain in there,” when talking of the impact of having only non-native teachers. This statement is made more solemn by personal stories of hurt caused by non-native teachers. This was not said



with a tone of resentment, but one of longing for Ahtna teachers that could identify with them.

One interviewee recounted an experience involving a non-native school administrator. When the interviewee turned 16, the administrator made a point to notify him of his eligibility to drop out of school. This same interviewee painfully recounted that some of his friends received similar treatment from this administrator and subsequently became alcoholics. In his pain he said, “I could probably blame that man for it.” He also noted that the consequences of not having native teachers could have contributed to the prejudice he observed outside of school.

Another interviewee specifically referred to the consequences of not having native teachers in regards to guidance counseling and recruiting more Ahtna teachers:

But my perception is that the guidance counselor helps kids who are already going to excel and going to be achieving and whatever so they can, you know, they’re really helped and then all the other kids who should be being pushed and guided and everything else aren’t being targeted as they should be.

In this interviewee’s mind, this is both a barrier and a consequence of Ahtna Athabascans not choosing to become public school educators.

Other statements regarding consequences were declarations noting the lack of Ahtna teachers, such as this example:

Um, so coming to school, they, there was—you never see—we have never seen a native teacher here hardly. I mean, I don’t know. I can’t even think of one native

teacher that ever taught me. And I'm just talking about all, like natives in general; I mean even an outside Indian or anything.

One interviewee past middle age stated the consequences plainly by saying, "School history has not been good for a lot of people, you know, like in my age group."

One interviewee noted the consequences in his own life regarding college. He said, "I didn't know the first thing about going to college when I graduated from high school. And so, I was really stressed out trying to figure it out afterwards and thought, 'that shouldn't happen to anybody'." In his mind, the consequence of not having Ahtna faculty was a cyclical breakdown that perpetuates the problem of Ahtna Athabascans not choosing to become public school educators.

There was also an acknowledgment of the unique support Ahtna students received from Ahtna people and the consequences of not having that option in school. One interviewee noted that a bad experience with a non-native teacher can sway an Ahtna student in negative ways. Another mentioned the need to catch kids "early before they get into drugs and alcohol." In a statement that notes consequences and benefits, an interviewee pointed out the feelings of inferiority that Ahtna students have, in a so-called White man's world, by stating the following:

I'm not saying that every home, every native home, has that in their home, but just the general problems, the feeling of, inferior feeling of being a native in a White man's world, as it might be called, and feeling like you don't belong or feeling like you don't fit in and having somebody there that's been through that and successful and can kind of coach you through it or encourage you or just be

that person that you can go and say, “Man, these people hate me,” and they can say, “No, they don’t.”

A consequence of Ahtna people not choosing to become public school educators is missed opportunities for supporting students, particularly as they perceive themselves in a western-dominated school environment.

The cultural consequences of not choosing to become a public school educator were noted by interviewees. The presence of racism in the 1980s was mentioned. The interviewee noted that Ahtna people might not want to be teachers because they would not want to reenter a racist environment that existed when they attended school. Though no one specifically mentioned racism in current school environments, they did note that the lack of native teachers can “intimidate” Ahtna students. Another noted that non-natives do not have an understanding of “who we are.” One interviewee noted that the barriers that have prevented Ahtna people from choosing to become a teacher in local schools contributes to the loss of native language: “We’re running out of fluent speakers dramatically,” she said.

### **Benefits**

The interview transcripts also showed that Ahtna people clearly recognize the benefits that would come from more Ahtna Athabascans choosing to become public school educators. As with the other themes, the benefits focused on students in K-12, their support structures, and the Ahtna culture.

Some interviewees noted the benefits by remembering instances in their own school careers when Ahtna Elders visited their classrooms. One said fondly, “I felt a

little more favored in the class” when remembering a particular elder that regularly visited her classroom. Another mentioned the excitement of “breaking the ice” that has happened with other native teachers she has known. One interviewee felt that having a Ahtna teacher in the class would motivate students more and said, “Like seeing is a big part of believing in getting motivated.” The benefit of seeing an Ahtna teacher would be the motivation for Ahtna students to choose to do well in school, enabling them to become teachers if they chose to.

Two interviewees specifically mentioned positive experiences they had working in a K-12 setting. From that experience, one interviewee said she learned how to function in a professional environment. Another said, “When I was that Indian Ed. tutor, just having me in the school made a difference in a lot of kids’ lives.”

The transcripts also included reference to the relational benefits for students if more Ahtna people chose to become teachers. One said that knowing someone from the same “setting and surroundings” would make students more comfortable. Speaking of high school, another said, “And then, in high school, I think just having somebody that could relate to what you’re going through without really having to talk about it.”

The benefits of a supportive environment established by an Ahtna teacher were noted confidently by interviewees. One clearly stated that if students had more Ahtna teachers, “then students will feel it.” A different interviewee said of the benefits, “I would say greatly. To be having someone in there that’s of their own, not a foreign or a different, you know, diversity of teachers, the races or whatever, it’d be more authentic.”

The educational process, to this interviewee, would be more “authentic” if more Ahtna people chose to become teachers.

Other interviewees noted the benefits of relationship. One even mentioning “a hug here and there” from someone you know would be good for Ahtna students. Another angle of relationship was mentioned by a different interviewee when noting the benefit of knowing parents. The relationship with Ahtna teachers would keep parents better informed of their children’s academic progress and behavior.

Another supportive benefit noted was the role models Ahtna teachers would be to the entire community. One participant saying, “I think it would really show them a good positive role model and knowing that their culture is valued is really helpful.” Another said the benefit would be Ahtna people could “see the results” if Ahtna people chose to become teachers.

Benefits related to culture were focused on teaching methods, content, and relationship. The interviewees felt that the instruction in Ahtna culture would benefit if more Ahtna people chose to become public school teachers.

One interviewee connected Ahtna learning styles with the benefit of having more Ahtna teachers. He said, “it’s natural for us to learn best hands on.” He mentioned beading as an example of a culturally relevant learning activity that Ahtna teachers would be qualified to teach.

Other interviewees noted the benefits to content that would come from more Ahtna Athabascans choosing to become public school teachers. One interviewee noted that math and science would be subjects she would naturally feel comfortable teaching as

an Ahtna Athabascan. She said she could “incorporate a lot of the culture” into science. Other interviewees noted their own expertise in various skills and subjects. One mentioned a talent in arts and crafts while also pointing out that other Ahtna teachers would have skills in other specific areas. Another mentioned the skill of making traditional drums. They also noted that they learned these skills by observing, not in a traditional western classroom. Story telling by Ahtna teachers was also mentioned as benefiting the culture.

Interestingly three interviewees mentioned the behavioral benefits if more Ahtna people chose to become teachers. One said, “I think we keep each other accountable.” He went on to explain that “We’re tight-knit enough that we would know if a kid isn’t going to school or if a kid’s failing.” Another remembered her great-grandma’s strictness while teaching beading in school many years ago. The unique relationship between Ahtna students and Ahtna teachers was specifically noted by one participant who said, “having people that kind of know where you’re coming from and don’t assume that your home is the same as theirs would be really helpful to a teenage person, I think.” The benefits of Ahtna people choosing to teach was relayed very personally by one interviewee when he said, “Like for me I think it would benefit me,” going on to say “Like you have that understanding of each other or something.”

### **Solutions**

Many comments from the interviews offered solutions. Many comments relating their own positive experiences were shared as a desire to see them repeated for current students. Many interviewee comments seemed to presuppose the benefit of assisting

students through school and into college by raising student achievement is important so that more Ahtna people could choose teaching as a career. As stated by one interviewee, solutions to the barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school teachers “would start with education.”

As verified by the literature, the Ahtna interviewees naturally sensed the importance of positive K-12 school experiences to remove barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. One interviewee in particular gave a list of classes that were positive and motivating. These enjoyable experiences would be the foundation for other students choosing a career in education. For this interviewee, these positive classes often offset other negative experiences in life, even serving as surrogate parenting at times. Another interviewee cited another school in Alaska as an example of a solution for improving K-12 experiences for the purpose of encouraging students to teach.

Related to positive K-12 experiences were comments related to improving the graduation rate and college attendance. One said clearly, “getting more kids to actually graduate” would be the answer to increasing the number of Ahtna teachers in local schools. One interviewee highlighted the transition from K-12 to college well when he said, “We’ve come a long way just with graduation rates. Now we need to take it the next step and, you know, with college and completing a degree.”

Two interviewees mentioned the inspiration of non-native teachers as being a solution to barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. One mentioned a specific non-native teacher that had inspired him while in K-12 school and led to eventual college attendance and graduation. Two mentioned current Ahtna

students in college that were considering becoming public school teachers because of teachers they had in the local school system. One summarized by saying, “I think that they would become a teacher as long as they’re inspired by a teacher. It would make them feel like they want to become one because they were inspired by that person.”

One interviewee mentioned the importance of Ahtna influence on school policies as a solution, saying, “I think one way may be to get more involvement or get not just the native parents involved, is to kind of change the structure of that Indian Ed committee.” Unless there is native involvement in policies, “it was going to be kind of status quo.”

Language and Ahtna oral history was also mentioned by one interviewee as being a solution for getting more Ahtna people to choose a career in education. By including more culturally specific content, Ahtna students would be motivated to pursue a career in teaching.

The interviewees recognized the need to get more Ahtna students to attend college in order to become local teachers. One said, “I would just like myself to find an answer about the whole college thing. I mean maybe the number of teachers would increase if we just had more people, you know, pursuing a degree in something.”

The emergence of online options for college was suggested by one participant as a solution to increasing college attendance. This participant even noted that Ahtna students might be more comfortable in an online setting due to the “embarrassment” and “shame” some Ahtna students might feel in a traditional college setting.

Four participants mentioned local options for college attendance as a solution leading to more Ahtna teachers. One interviewee mentioned the only two local colleges,



Prince William Sound Community College and Alaska Bible College, as preferable options for Ahtna students to attend college. Another even mentioned bringing the training closer by having classes brought to individual villages.

Supporting students and the Ahtna culture were mentioned as specific ways to remove barriers to Ahtna Athabascans choosing to become public school teachers. The notion of initiating conversations about becoming a teacher was strong. Suggestions were made such as holding public meetings, handing out information, and upholding Ahtna people as examples.

Affirming this study was one way people offered a solution to removing barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. Comments such as, “probably what you’re doing, like talking to people” was offered as a means to get more Ahtna teachers. Another said, “I’m glad you’re doing a study on it and trying to reach out to more.” Other interviewees share similar sentiments. One said more information should be given when talking about Ahtna teachers and said, “Like talking,” adding “maybe like kind of guide them or give them options of what they could do.” Many comments noted the importance of a dialogue within the Ahtna community regarding choosing to become a teacher in local schools. One interviewee said, when asked how to increase the number of Ahtna teachers, “Well, encourage it for one thing, and you know, really push it as a career goal that they could have.”

Some interviewees mentioned the advantage of having Ahtna people encourage students. There were suggestions like bringing in guest speakers, including native teachers from other tribes. One mentioned having people from church be an

encouragement. Another said generally it would be a benefit, “if we could actually have some other native teachers to come up and talk about how they got into it and how much they enjoy it and what they do.” The participants also noted the importance of family involvement to make public school teaching an attractive career.

Early intervention was mentioned as being very important for eventual career choices, such as talking to elementary students about teaching as a career. One interviewee in particular said that thoughts about becoming a teacher usually begin in elementary. This participant eloquently stated the importance of “just knowing that there is a certain window of opportunity in the life of a kid where you can kind of help them to make, you know, decisions on what path they’re gonna go in life.”

Specific school programs were mentioned as ways to remove barriers and increase the number of Ahtna teachers in public schools. One mentioned the role a Native Student Council could play in providing career information to students, and also mentioned the Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI) Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as well as Close-Up Washington, D.C. Another interviewee mentioned attending a native-specific conference while in school and how the speakers motivated her to consider a career in teaching.

Several interviewees stated that clear information regarding college attendance and career goals was needed to remove barriers for Ahtna students to choose careers in teaching. One said, “maybe having something that’s step-by-step what needs to be, you know, done just to get to certain points, like, if you want to be a full teacher, or if you just

want to be a guest speaker.” Another participant mentioned very generally that technology could help provide information necessary to choose a teaching career.

The issue of finances was also mentioned as a necessary element of solving barriers to more Ahtna teachers. Grants to provide for training and the inclusion of more culture in the classroom were suggested. Another suggested financial literacy classes as a supportive solution.

Acknowledging and respecting the local Ahtna culture was noted as being a motivator for Ahtna people to choose careers in public schools. Integrating Ahtna culture into the local schools would, according to one interviewee, be a “big initiative” to get more Ahtna teachers. Even non-school related programs like community summits would motivate people, she said. The idea of using culture to motivate Ahtna students in an after-school club was suggested as a solution by another interviewee.

One interviewee noted that all solutions to removing barriers to Ahtna Athabascans choosing to become public school teachers have a cultural element. This interviewee said, “It really is kind of studying people and how they relate to people, how they perceive things, as being either invasive or inquiring.”

### **Outliers**

As participants relayed their lived-experience or the experiences of others not choosing to become public school educators, most of their comments naturally fit into the categories as presented. Outlier comments or those that did not clearly fit into the four basic categories of barriers, consequences, benefits, or solutions were usually of a deeply personal nature. Some interviewees told stories of past school experiences, family

trauma, or personal choices that were part of their choosing not to pursue a career in education. In some cases, outlier comments could be nested into one of the four categories, but for privacy about personal content, these were left out. No comments were identified that would have created a theme other than the four identified in the literature related to barriers of minority teacher recruitment.

### **Chapter Summary**

Both the surveys and the interview transcripts contained relevant data regarding the choice of Ahtna Athabascans to not become public school educators. Participants demonstrated a thoughtfulness that benefited the collection and reliability of the data. The four main themes—barriers, consequences, benefits, and solutions—encapsulated the findings into a clear outline that will be discussed in the final chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Review of Purpose**

Though the Ahtna Athabascan culture has and continues to value education, Ahtna people have chosen not to become educators in local public schools. The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of Ahtna people who chose not to become public school educators. The investigation is designed to identify barriers that have kept Ahtna Athabascans from choosing to become teachers in local public schools.

### **Review of Statement of the Problem**

The achievement gap that exists between Alaska Native students and Caucasian students demonstrates the need for educational reform. One possible means of improving educational outcomes for Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native students is to have more Ahtna teachers in local public schools. No previous study has been conducted to explain the barriers and reasons why Ahtna people, in particular, have largely chosen not to become certified teachers.

### **Review of the Methodology**

As an interdisciplinary cross-cultural project, this study was designed to gather data in an effective and culturally sensitive manner. The instruments and analysis respected Ahtna values. Based on input from Ahtna people, the identity of the participants remained anonymous in the presentation of the data.

The data collection instruments followed the Ahtna pattern of circular reasoning without repeated personal questions. The western style of probing for specific data was

exchanged for interviews in which participants were able to share their lived experiences in a culturally comfortable and appropriate manner.

A mixed-methods approach was implemented to gather contextual data through surveys and individual lived-experience data through phenomenological interviews. The methodology was designed to gather reliable data while building trust in the research process among Ahtna people. The data collected and analyzed in this study is not necessarily transferable to the general Ahtna population. Neither is the data necessarily unrepresentative. The information gleaned from this study is valid for the construction of future Ahtna-specific research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The review of literature, survey of Ahtna Athabascans, and interview data gathered from 10 individual Ahtna Athabascans all triangulated to identify themes from which barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators could be identified. By categorizing the data into the themes that emerged, specific barriers were identified that have prevented some Ahtna Athabascans from choosing to become public school educators. Barriers that were identified among Ahtna Athabascans were: (a) negative school experiences, (b) lack of Ahtna culture in public schools, (c) hindrances to college attendance, (d) lack of support structures and guidance, and (e) personal circumstances such as substance abuse and/or broken families.

### **Ahtna Reflections**

Throughout this study's research process, Ahtna Athabascans offered their insights and suggestions regarding the research question. Their involvement established the tone necessary to build trust with the Ahtna community as a whole. In addition to shaping the methods of this study, the Ahtna people embraced the topic and potential for positive impact on the education of Ahtna youth.

On January 26, 2012, the researcher met with five Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives to review the findings of this study. The meeting took place at the Ahtna Heritage Cultural Center C'ek'aedi Hwnax Legacy House. The results of the survey, themes from transcripts, and specific quotes from interviews were shared and discussed. Three of the five participants in the discussion had also participated in interviews for this study.

The project was affirmed by those present as being culturally appropriate and educationally beneficial. One survey question was analyzed with particular scrutiny. The participants in the reflection wondered if the survey question asking if education was relevant to the Ahtna culture could have been confusing for some participants (see Figure 10). Speculation on various interpretations was discussed. One participant thought the results from the question should be discarded from the presentation of results. Another participant noted that some people taking the survey would not distinguish between certified teachers and instructional aides. They suggested future studies clarify the distinction. The validity of the other survey questions and transcript themes were not questioned.

Participants discussed the age of survey participants. As Figure 3 shows, most Ahtna Athabascans that took the survey were middle aged or older. The participants attributed this to the setting in which the survey was conducted. It was noted that Ahtna Annual meetings are attended mostly by older shareholders. The researcher and participants discussed the difficulty of establishing a formalized sample among Ahtna Athabascans.

When asked specifically if the data gathered was valid and reliable, one participant noted that she did not agree with how some people responded, but that it was not appropriate for her to say how other people should have answered. The researcher asked all participants in the reflection if there was anything in the data that was not appropriate to submit as part of the project. Each participant felt that the data was appropriate for submission and provided helpful information for increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers in public schools.

When reviewing the themes and Ahtna-specific essences from the transcripts, the participants in the review focused particularly on the fact that youth have attractive opportunities with the Native Corporation and Tribal Councils for making money. The amount of money that can be made, even without a high school diploma, becomes a significant barrier for Ahtna Athabascans to choose a career in education, according to the participants. The option to make a good income elsewhere, combined with negative K-12 educational experiences, is a large obstacle for increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native teachers in local public schools.



One participant noted the lack of previous dialogue regarding the topic. She specifically noted that though she expects all of her children to attend college, she never had considered that one may want to become a teacher. Another participant noted that it is because they have heard teachers do not make very much money. It was mentioned by a participant that they had heard from the news media about teachers striking because they do not make much money. Other careers, such as medical and legal professions, would make more money. The lack of adequate pay and benefits, she said, would be a barrier to anyone choosing a career in education.

As the participants reviewed and reflected on the data, they noted the brief period that Ahtna culture has been influenced by western educational policies. Two participants specifically identified themselves as only being the third generation in their families that have experienced schooling in a western educational setting. Their grandparents were the first in their families to attend a traditionally western school. The difficulty of such a rapid transition in education and cultural traditions has not been successful according to participants. One noted that “this generation is playing catch-up” due to the negative experiences of the first generations of Ahtna Athabascans to attend western schools.

Overall, the Ahtna participants who reviewed and reflected on the data expressed optimism that more Ahtna Athabascan teachers would be in local classrooms. One specifically noted that the younger respondents that took the survey all had thought about becoming a teacher (see Figure 13). The participants were hopeful that the topic and discussion would not stop with this project, but that steps should be taken to put the

information gleaned to use for Ahtna youth. The overall impression expressed by the participants in the review was one of optimism and potential.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

A strength of this study that became apparent through the written analysis was the triangle of support created by the review of literature, survey data, and interview transcripts. The themes that emerge in each component of the study closely matched the data from the other two components. The interviewees, without prior knowledge of the literature review or results of the surveys, made statements relevant to the themes that emerged in the review of literature. The survey data supported the subsequent statements made in interviews. Each component seemed to verify the data gathered in the other.

Both the survey data and interview transcripts lead one to conclude, without question, that the Ahtna people want more Ahtna teachers. When the topic is raised, they eagerly focus on solutions and express the importance of crafting strategies to increase the number of Ahtna teachers in local schools. There is a demonstrable enthusiasm for the topic and positive solutions. The participants in the study used the interview as a means for starting a dialogue in their communities regarding Ahtna involvement in local education system.

In general, the study revealed that the barriers to choosing to become public school teachers experienced by Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Natives align with the barriers faced by other minority groups in the United States. In the particulars, however, those barriers are experienced in unique ways within the Ahtna culture and community. For example, most minorities are hindered by poor K-12 educational experiences that affect

their desire to attend college. The Ahtna people share this general barrier to choosing to become public school teachers in local schools. The uniqueness of Ahtna's past educational experiences is based upon the relatively recent introduction of western educational policies into their culture. This combined with the remoteness of rural Alaska warrants a consideration of the general and particular hindrances Ahtna Athabascans face when choosing whether to become a public school educator.

From the interviews, it was also apparent that a dialogue regarding the reasons more Ahtna Athabascans have not chosen to become public school teachers has been missing. Several interviewees initially responded with a statement similar to, "No one really ever talked to me about becoming a teacher." Some went on to note specific reasons why they had not thought of becoming a teacher. The reasons for the lack of dialogue are connected to the specific statements shared in interviews by the participants, such as "I didn't graduate from high school." Even so, this lack of conversation is an indicator that barriers definitely exist and remedies should be sought.

Another significant conclusion based on an integration of themes and statements is the foundational difference in the way Ahtna culture and western cultures have traditionally viewed education. One must keep in mind the astounding fact that western educational policies and practices have been introduced into Ahtna culture only in the last 50 to 75 years. Given that short amount of time, neither western nor Ahtna culture, has had sufficient time to adapt to the other in comprehensive ways. One interviewee stated it best, "we're probably raised in a cultural environment that has teaching every day, but no one actually sees it as a job." This statement from the interview transcripts

corresponds to a quote highlighted in the literature, “We did not always have these problems of the meaning and purpose and approach to education” (Davidson & Napoleon, 2010, p. 241). The choice to become a public school educator must cross cultural norms that out-distance the presence of western traditions in the Copper River Valley by centuries. Though seemingly a simple proposition, one must be continually reminded that each theme and statement should be interpreted with the recognition that Ahtna and western culture are different.

Negative educational experiences are not unique to Ahtna students, yet the specific instances of negativity and the reasons for subpar educational experiences for Ahtna students are unique. Boarding schools as a means for educating youth were only a generation ago in Ahtna territory. This along with high dropout rates means that providing a free public education among Ahtna people has not been a success in the past. The effect on teacher recruitment among Ahtna people cannot be overstated. As articulated in one interview transcript, “that would be the last place they would want to spend their career.” In a small, close-knit population in a rural setting, even a handful of negative school experiences can dramatically change the reputation of teaching as a career.

College attendance is also a common barrier with unique Ahtna nuances. Traveling to attend college in a distant city is not just an issue of homesickness. One interviewee expressed it with the sense that it was almost inappropriate for Ahtna people to leave home. One must consider the relationship between the Ahtna people and the land, and not just any land, but the Copper River watershed. The dramatic changes in

Ahtna lifestyle in the past 100 years have strengthened the security that comes from place. College attendance is more than just giving up the security of family, but also the security of place that developed over many centuries. In sum, leaving for college is an event of great cultural significance for Ahtna people.

Financial issues also presented themselves as a barrier for Ahtna Athabascans to become a public school teacher. In addition to the common concerns regarding the high cost of college attendance, there are also unique opportunities that present themselves to students as they finish high school. Ahtna Incorporated and other local tribal organizations often pay well and provide good benefits. The opportunity to make money and work with other Ahtna Athabascans is very attractive. When compared with the expense of getting certified and the awkwardness of working in a predominantly non-native environment, working for a native corporation can seem very appealing. The issue of finance then becomes cultural as Ahtna Athabascans desire to strengthen their culture by remaining connected to home and other Ahtna people by working in a uniquely Ahtna setting at the same time that they enjoy financial freedom.

The lack of adequate school counseling was mentioned by several interviewees. Related to the blocked-opportunity theory found in the literature, some felt that guidance counseling only helped those who already had the support necessary to become a teacher. There was the sense that Ahtna students needed more guidance in school as they cross the cultural divide between home and the western education system. Ahtna students, growing up in a culture that has not had the time to adapt to western educational practices and western bureaucracies, need consistent guidance designed to meet their particular

needs. Guidance counseling programs designed in the typical western tradition does not provide the support necessary for students whose choice of college and/or career involves traversing cultures.

The review of literature included descriptions of a sense among minorities that they could not achieve certain goals. This expression of blocked opportunity prevents some minorities from even considering certain careers or freedom from poverty. There were statements in the transcripts that revealed that a sense of blocked opportunity may be a barrier to some Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. In the interviews, this came through in comments related to lack of high school completion and/or personal stories of addiction or criminal charges. Future researchers must recognize that the lack of Ahtna teachers in local schools, negative K-12 experiences, and the recent and rapid intersection of western and Ahtna culture create an environment in which a sense of blocked opportunity becomes rampant.

It is also noteworthy that taken as a whole, the transcripts revealed that Ahtna people are more apt to identify barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators by offering solutions. Rather than articulate a barrier negatively, interviewees identified barriers by stating solutions positively. When stating a barrier negatively, more than one interviewee would preface the comments with something like, "I hate to say it like this but..." They then would go on to mention a barrier, such as poor guidance counseling. This is another important cultural pattern that should be recognized when conducting future research. In many cases, Ahtna people would rather have the

opportunity to answer a question positively than negatively. Designing research questions with this in mind is important for gathering accurate data.

The data confirmed that barriers common to other minorities are present for Ahtna people who make the choice not to become public school educators. These barriers, though similar to other minorities, are demonstrated in unique ways within the Ahtna culture. A failure to recognize the distinctive nature of the barriers would result in a failure to implement effective solutions. As these common barriers evidence themselves in Ahtna-specific ways, Ahtna-specific solutions should be developed to remove the barriers.

### **Limitations**

The data collected in this study is not necessarily transferable to the general Ahtna population. The survey was conducted among a random sample of Ahtna Athabascans who attended an annual Ahtna event in Ahtna territory. The interviews were conducted among a purposeful sampling of Ahtna Athabascans chosen by the researcher based on gender, age, education, and willingness to participate. As part of the effort to build trust in the research process, the interviewees were not asked to self-report personal demographic information.

As an exploratory study, this data collected does not propose specific new policies to remove barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators. The problem of not having Ahtna Athabascans teaching in local public schools is not solved through this study. As a culturally sensitive project, the study does not dictate new practice for recruiting Ahtna Athabascans.

## **Recommendations**

This study, as designed, has created an opportunity for greater dialogue with and among Ahtna Athabascans regarding the recruitment of Ahtna Athabascans to teach in local public schools. The identification of the unique application among Ahtna people of common barriers found in minority teacher recruitment provides opportunity for solution-focused conversations. This study can be used as means for focusing agendas for developing practices and policies that encourage more Ahtna people to become teachers.

Future research can also be designed based on the Ahtna-specific experiences of barriers to becoming public school teachers. Trust in the research process must continue to be developed by including Ahtna people in the design and execution of research projects. With care, indigenous methodologies can guide the development of traditional qualitative and quantitative studies. Studies that focus on one particular theme or a specific barrier can both continue the dialogue and provide more data for analysis and problem solving. Quantitative studies in particular could be developed as longitudinal studies among high school students. This data would be valuable to compare and contrast qualitative studies. By comparing longitudinal quantitative studies among high school students with qualitative studies, the western traditions of research can be informed by indigenous methodologies. Both the research questions and the research processes would benefit.

## **Conclusion**

The study to explore barriers to Ahtna Athabascans becoming public school educators has identified valuable data, highlighted the value of Ahtna specific research,



and initiated a dialogue for increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascans in local public schools. The review of literature, survey data, and interview transcripts merged to identify Ahtna-specific evidence of common barriers to minority teacher recruitment. The uniqueness of barriers evident among Ahtna Athabascans provides a foundation for Ahtna-specific solutions and more Ahtna-specific research.

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### Appendix A: Survey Instrument

You are being asked to take part in a research study about barriers to the recruitment and retention of Ahtna Athabascan teachers and school administrators. The goal of this study is to learn why there are a disproportionately low number of Ahtna Athabascan educators. You are being asked to take part in this study because your life experiences as an Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native will give us important information on how career decisions are made in your culture. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to answer questions related to your decision to choose a career in education or why you chose some other activity. The survey will take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

Please check  or circle  an answer to each question.

1. Are you all or part Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native?  
 Yes       No
2. How old are you?  
 18-25       26-35       36-50       Over 50
3. Did you attend public school in Alaska?  
 Yes       No
4. Do you currently have children in public school?  
 Yes       No
5. How many Ahtna Athabascan teachers do you know or have known?  
 0-2       3-5       6-8       9-10  More than 10
6. Do you think there should be more Ahtna Athabascan teachers?  
 Yes       No       I don't know
7. Do you think education is important in the Ahtna culture?  
 Yes       No       I don't know
8. Do you think Alaska public schools are relevant to the Ahtna Athabascan culture?  
 Yes       No       I don't know
9. Did you have an Ahtna Athabascan teacher in school?  
 Yes       No       I don't know



10. If you had an Ahtna Athabascan teacher in school, did you feel you performed better in that class than others?  
 Yes       No       I don't know
11. Did you ever consider becoming a public school teacher?  
 Yes       No
12. Do you know of other Ahtna Athabascans who considered becoming public school teachers?  
 Yes       No
13. Did you like school?  
 Yes       No
14. Did you earn a high-school diploma?  
 Yes       No
15. Did an Ahtna Athabascan ever encourage you to become a teacher?  
 Yes       No
16. Did anyone in your school ever encourage you to become a teacher?  
 Yes       No
17. Do you think you would be a good teacher?  
 Yes       No       I don't know
18. Do you think there are specific ways to increase the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers in public schools?  
 Yes       No
19. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being "very important", how important is it that more Ahtna Athabascan become teachers in local schools?  
(not important) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (very important)
20. Was a public school teacher or teachers a significant influence in your life?  
 Yes       No
21. Did you attend school in the Copper River School District?  
 Yes       No

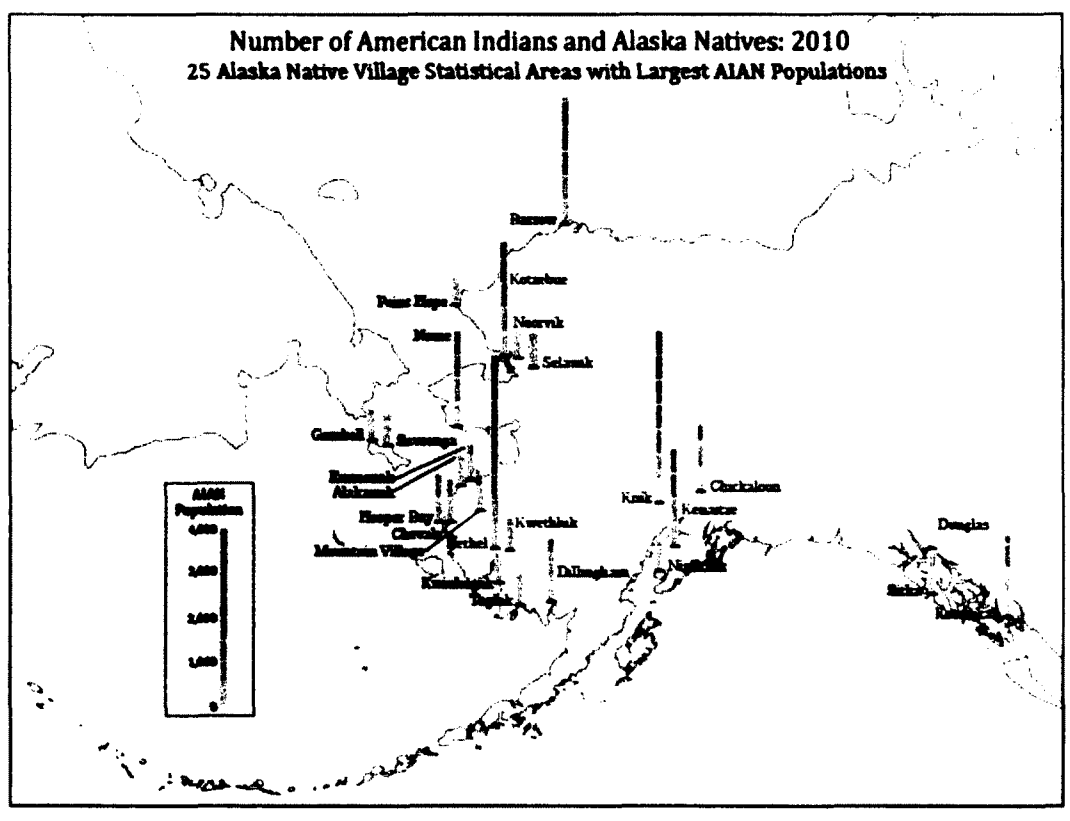
## **Appendix B: Interview Instrument**

You are being asked to take part in a research study about barriers to the recruitment and retention of Ahtna Athabascan teachers and school administrators. The goal of this study is to learn why there are a disproportionately low number of Ahtna Athabascan educators. You are being asked to take part in this study because your life experiences at an Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native will give us important information on how career decisions are made in your culture. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to answer questions related to your decision to choose a career in educator or why you chose some other activity. The interview will take no more than 45 minutes to complete. You will be asked to share the factors that encouraged or discouraged you from becoming an educator in an Alaskan school. You will also have an opportunity to share your ideas for increasing the number of Ahtna Athabascan Native Alaskans educators.

1. Did you ever consider being a public school teacher? Why or why not?
2. If you once considered being a public school teacher, why did you or did you not pursue a career in education?
3. Why do you think there are so few Ahtna Athabascan teachers?
4. How can we increase the number of Ahtna Athabascan teachers?
5. How would having more Ahtna Athabascan teachers in public schools improve the educational performance of students?
6. Do you think the public schools in Alaska are a comfortable place to work for Ahtna Athabascans? Why or why not?
7. Would you or another Ahtna Athabascan Alaska Native you know make a good teacher public school teacher? Why or why not?

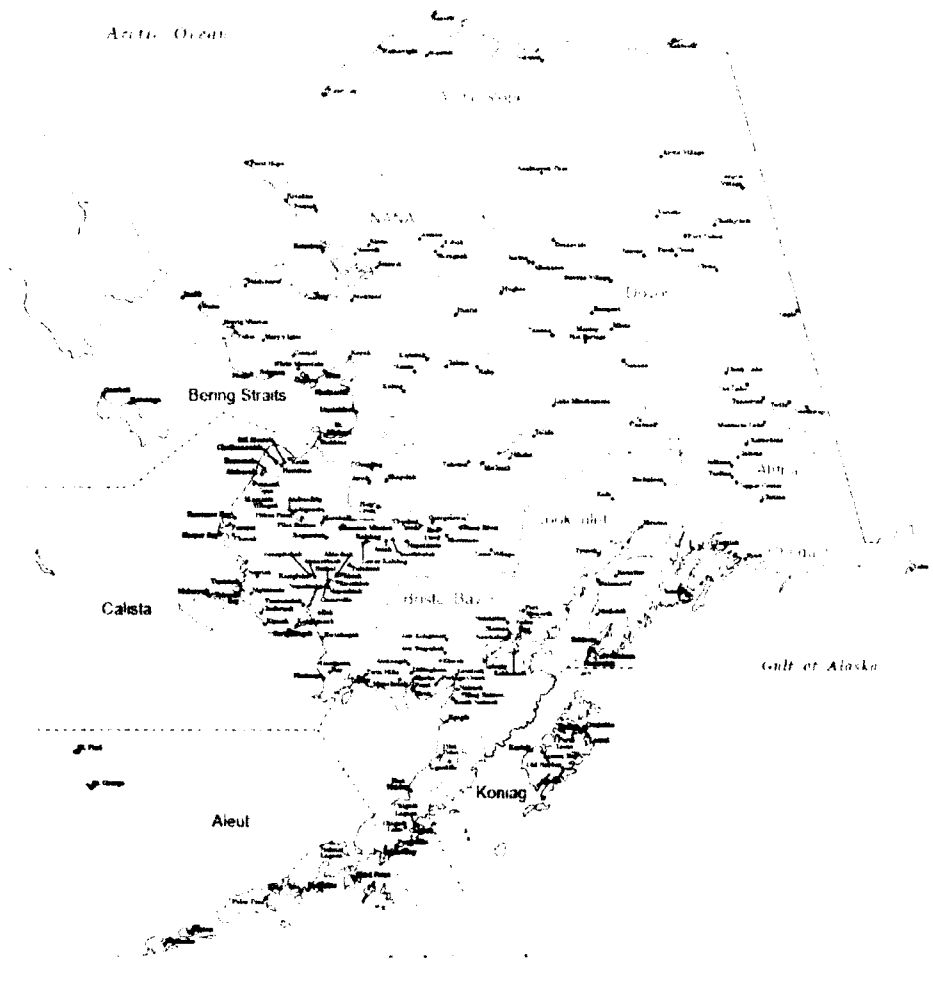
### Appendix C: 2010 Alaska Natives Maps



*Source.* U.S. Census Bureau, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) areas and statistics, please visit [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and [factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov).

For information on AIAN tribal groupings, see Appendix B in the 2010 Census Summary File 1 - Technical Documentation at [www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf).

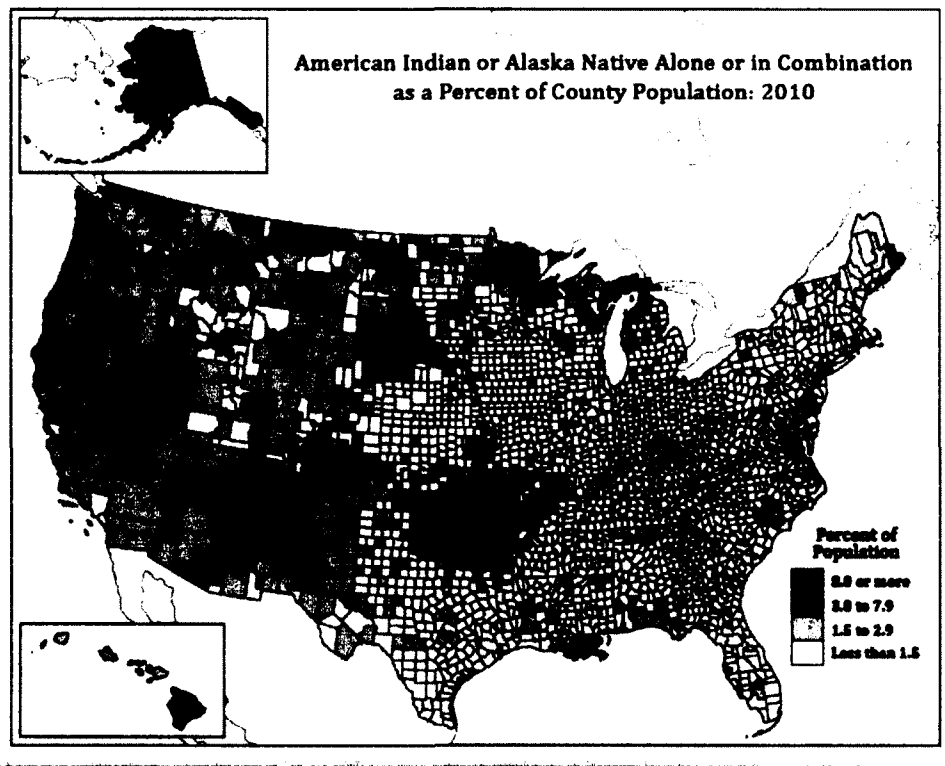
U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Table P1 and 2010 Census Summary File 1.



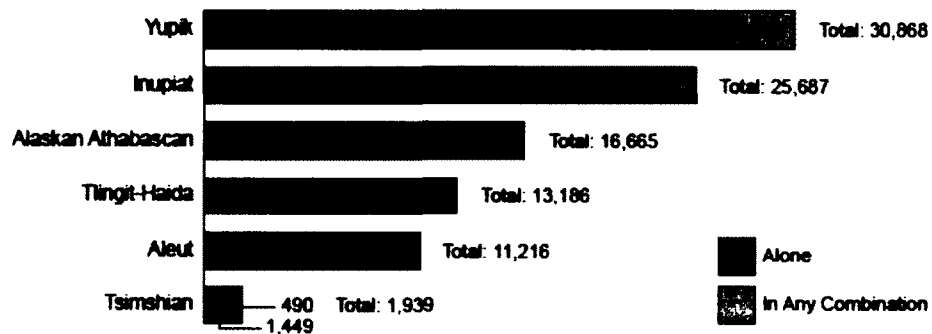
### Legend

- Annette Island American Indian Reservation and/or Off-Reservation Trust Land (Federal)
- Craig Alaska Native Village Statistical Area
- Aleut Alaska Native Regional Corporation
- International Boundary

**NOTE:** The boundaries and names shown on this map are those reported to the U.S. Census Bureau and are in effect as of January 1, 2010. The boundaries shown on this map are for Census Bureau statistical data collection and tabulation purposes only; their depiction and designation for statistical purposes do not constitute a determination of jurisdictional authority or rights of ownership or entitlement. The geographic areas shown on this map are simplified and may be displayed as point locations due to map scale limitations.



### Alaska Native Tribal Grouping Populations in Alaska: 2010



*Alone* includes individuals who reported one or more tribes within a single tribal grouping.  
*In Any Combination* includes individuals who reported one or more races and/or detailed tribal groupings.

## Appendix D: IRB Exemption



(907) 474-7800  
 (907) 474-5444 fax  
 fyrb@uaf.edu  
 www.uaf.edu/irb

### Institutional Review Board

909 N Koyukuk Dr Suite 212 P.O. Box 757270, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-7270

March 4, 2011

**To:** Gary Jacobsen, PhD  
 Principal Investigator

**From:** University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB

**Re:** [200989-1] Barriers to the Recruitment and Retention of Ahtna Athabascan Educators.

Thank you for submitting the New Project referenced below. The submission was handled by Exempt Review. The Office of Research Integrity has determined that the proposed research qualifies for exemption from the requirements of 45 CFR 46. This exemption does not waive the researchers' responsibility to adhere to basic ethical principles for the responsible conduct of research and discipline specific professional standards.

<b>Title:</b>	Barriers to the Recruitment and Retention of Ahtna Athabascan Educators.
<b>Received:</b>	January 3, 2011
<b>Exemption Category:</b>	2
<b>Effective Date:</b>	March 4, 2011

This action is included on the February 24, 2011 IRB Agenda.

*Prior to making substantive changes to the scope of research, research tools, or personnel involved on the project, please contact the Office of Research Integrity to determine whether or not additional review is required. Additional review is not required for small editorial changes to improve the clarity or readability of the research tools or other documents.*