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EXPLORING ALASKA NATIVE & AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT PERSPECTIVES: THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

This DIP is a qualitative study to describe how Alaska Native and African American parents understand the achievement gap as well as their suggestions or solutions for reducing and ending the gap. Seventeen parents were interviewed, from both Alaska Native and African American descent. These interviews took place over the phone due to the current health pandemic, COVID-19. From these interviews, four themes emerged: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. Based on the parent input, solutions were created that could be implemented into the school system. These solutions will take both time and resources; however, this is an urgent educational issue deserving of such attention.

*Keywords:* culturally-responsive instruction, educational achievement gap, equity, equality, social-emotional learning, urban
Dedication

This doctorate of education is dedicated to my parents, Judy and Ian Fulp. They are tremendous parents and taught me to value learning, working hard, and the importance of advocating for the underserved in a community. To my husband, Jamar Hill, who supported me through this journey and has shown me a new perspective through his lens as an African American. It is also dedicated to the children I serve as an educational leader—I will always be an ally for you.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology Overview</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Relevant Terms</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations and Limitations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections of the Researcher</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Information—Alaska Native</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Information—African American</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Responsive Practices</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Diversity</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma and Stress/Socioeconomic Connections</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parent Understanding of the Achievement Gap ............................................. 50
Discussion ........................................................................................................ 51
Summary ........................................................................................................... 53
CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS .................. 54
Aim of the Study ............................................................................................... 54
Proposed Solution ............................................................................................ 54
Evidence that Supports the Solution .............................................................. 55
  Connection with School Staff ...................................................................... 55
  Diversity in the Schools .............................................................................. 57
  Instructional Methods ................................................................................ 58
  Parent Understanding the Achievement Gap ............................................. 60
Evidence that Challenges the Solution ......................................................... 62
Implementation of the Proposed Solution ..................................................... 62
  Connection with School Staff .................................................................... 62
  Diversity in the Schools ............................................................................ 63
  Instructional Methods ................................................................................ 63
  Parent Understanding the Achievement Gap ............................................. 64
Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution ....... 64
Timeline for Implementation of Solution ..................................................... 65
Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution ............................... 66
Implications ................................................................................................... 67
  Practical Implications ............................................................................... 68
  Implications for Future Research ............................................................ 69
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Dissertation in Practice</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.</td>
<td>Student Suspensions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.</td>
<td>Staff, Certificated and Classified, and Student Diversity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.</td>
<td>African American Students, Grades 3-10</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.</td>
<td>Alaska Native Students, Grade 3-10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.</td>
<td>Caucasian Students, Grades 3-10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.</td>
<td>Participant Data</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.</td>
<td>Themes from the Interviews</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.</td>
<td>Venn Diagram Showing the Four Themes that Emerged</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9.</td>
<td>Ideas and Suggestions by Theme</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Disparities in the educational attainment of students of different racial minorities in the United States have been well-documented (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The historical factors studied around the achievement gap included challenges at both home and school (National Education Association, n.d.-a). The home socioeconomic challenges included access to preschool or after-school programs, trauma and stress, and family participation. In school they included ineffective instructional leadership, low expectations for students, unsafe schools, large class sizes, lack of diversity amongst staff, and inexperienced teachers (National Education Association, n.d.-a).

Success could be measured in a number of different ways; however, one universal measurement used across the country is standardized tests (National Education Association, n.d.-a). Each student is unique, so different outcomes were expected; however, glaring disparities in minority subgroups within a district indicated large, urgent, and more complex problems. These variations were not limited to reading, writing, and math. The suspension and discipline referral data told a similar story, as children of color in the Anchorage School District were suspended far more than their Caucasian peers—African American were first with Alaska Native students following as second (Anchorage School District, n.d.-a). While my lens is on a large urban district in Anchorage, Alaska, there is a national crisis that matches these findings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The educational achievement gap is an urgent educational need. My belief is that it is critical to partner with parents when addressing this crisis; exploring this belief led to this study.
I am a Caucasian, or White, woman in my mid-thirties. I am an elementary school principal in the Anchorage School District and have been a principal for eight years. I have worked in a variety of schools ranging in levels of diversity and socioeconomic status. My husband is African American, and his family is from a rural area of the Caribbean. During a trip to Costa Rica, I met his uncle Dexter, who shared more of the cultural background of the Black Caribbean people, specifically the challenges they have had over many decades. He let me know, prior to sharing, “this is not the history that is taught in schools” (D. Lewis, personal communication, May 23, 2019). I realized I needed a new perspective on the educational achievement gap. The educational achievement gap has been studied extensively by educators (Anderson, 2012; Crouzevialle & Darnon, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). However, few studies explored the perspectives of parents from minority groups regarding the causes of the achievement gap. Their story may not only help the educational system adjust but could change systems radically. If there was not an intellectual difference between ethnicities of students (Ruston & Jenson, 2005), it is urgent for our educational system to find the answers to why certain ethnic groups of students were experiencing far less success.

Statement of the Problem

As it currently stands, the Alaska public school system has not been able to identify effective measures to bridge the academic and social achievement gaps, which identified that there were minority subgroups of children performing far below Caucasian children (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). The achievement gap is a national issue and has been studied extensively (Rushton & Jensen, 2005; Jeynes, 2014; Lopez, Heilig, &
Schram, 2013; Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012; Pasini, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, this author was unable to find studies that viewed these challenges through the lens of the parents whose children were not achieving in the school system based on standardized tests and discipline data. This study focused on two of the subgroups of students: African American and Alaska Native. The focus of these two groups of students was particularly important as African American and Alaska Native students were amongst the top three groups suspended the most in the Anchorage School District compared to the other subgroups of children (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). The focus on these two subgroups was not to minimize the experience of the other minority groups but rather to keep a targeted focus.

The Anchorage School District had 48,500 students and is ranked 100th in size among school districts in the United States. Minority students made up 50% of the student population: African American, 4.9%; Alaska Native/American Indian, 8.8%; Hispanic, 11.6%; Biracial/Multiracial, 15.7%; Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 16.9%; and Caucasian, 41.9% (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). According to the Anchorage School District Data Dashboard (n.d.-b) performance on M.A.P (Measures of Academic Progress), a nationally normed assessment for reading and math, the following percentages represented the number of students who scored above the 50th percentile: 39.27% Alaska Native and 46.95% of African American, compared to the 77.20% of their Caucasian peers.

In the 2019-2020 school year, there were 2,075 suspensions amongst all the 130 schools and programs (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). While the suspensions data
suggest an increase in the later grades, this study specifically focuses on kindergarten through sixth grade to identify patterns in the formative school age years. Figure 1 outlines the suspension data amongst subgroups of students.

**Figure 1**

*Student Suspensions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* These suspensions are by subgroup during the 2019-20202 school year in the Anchorage School District (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how Alaska Native and African American parents understand the achievement gap as well as surface their suggestions or solutions for reducing or ending the gap. The aim of the study was to identify patterns in their perceptions as well as to see if there were possible solutions that come from the parents in interviews. As it currently stands, the Anchorage School District has inequities in education that match the national achievement gap. Children of
color have been underachieving in academics and were suspended far more than their Caucasian peers.

While the educational attainment of minority students has been studied extensively, the angle I took has not been. That angle was to amplify the voices of parents and understand the challenges through their perspective as well as potential solutions.

**Research Question**

This qualitative study was guided by the following central research question:

**Research question:** What do parents understand about the factors that make up the achievement gap and how their child(ren) are affected?

This central question yielded the following sub-questions:

1. How do parent perspectives differ (if any) from historically listed factors?
2. What are the differences (if any) between the African American and Alaska Native parent perspectives regarding the causes of the achievement gap?
3. What suggestions or solutions do the parents interviewed have to end or reduce the achievement gap?

**Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to use how parents perceive the achievement gap to better inform evidence-based solutions within the Anchorage School District. The data gathered and proposed solutions will be presented to leaders of the school district.

**Methodology Overview**

A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was employed to explore the perceptions of the achievement gap through the lens of the parents whose children were non-proficient in academics or were experiencing behavioral challenges. During the
study, I interviewed African American and Alaska Native parents whose children were having challenges in school either academically or behaviorally. Through the outcome of the interview and study, I hoped to identify challenges that parents were facing as well as potential solutions that would be helpful. Using the word “parents,” I referred to the custodial guardians of Alaska Native and African American students.

My study was approved by the Anchorage School District, allowing me to work with the principals to review academic and behavioral data while following FERPA guidelines. The goal was to authentically understand the perspective of African American and Alaska Native parents and amplify their voices to be heard by the district. In order to accomplish this, following the IRB approval process, interviews were conducted with 17 parents, at which point saturation occurred. These interviews covered both academics and social-emotional learning, also known as behavioral topics. Due to COVID-19, interviews happened over the phone or via Zoom. The interviews were recorded through a device or through the platform Zoom. The interview recordings were sent to Rev. to be transcribed. Once interviews were complete, themes from interviews were coded so that my findings could be presented in a thorough manner.

Phenomenological methodology was appropriate for this study, and as the researcher, I explored participant experience with Alaska Native and African American children underperforming in the district as a phenomenon. This approach included interviews with parents. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest five to 25 interviews and ultimately, I did 17. As the researcher, I worked with multiple principals to identify potential students and parents. The principal determined the participants based on academic and behavioral data.
Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms were used operationally within this study:

*Alaska Native Cultures:* The Alaska Native tribes have 11 distinct cultures based on geographic location: Alutiiq, Athabascan, Northwest Coast (Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian), Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Yupik, and Cupik. Within each group, there are differences amongst culture, language, traditions, and customs. In addition, each group has a unique historical background and experiences with colonialism (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2011).

*Culturally Responsive Instruction:* Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings defined culturally-responsive instruction as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Arnez, 1995).

*Educational Achievement Gap:* This is the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The term generally refers to the differences in test scores between minority and/or low-income students and the test scores of their White or Caucasian peers. The student groups that the National Education Association (n.d.-b) identified as experiencing an achievement gap included the following: racial and ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, boys/girls, and students from low-income families.

*Equity:* The foundation of multicultural learning, which means ensuring every student has access to the curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and challenges he or she needs based on the recognition and response to individual differences and the
sociopolitical context of teaching and learning (The National Association for Multicultural Education, n.d.).

*Equality:* This is offering everyone the same curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and challenge, expecting that, despite differences among students, outcomes should be the same (The National Association for Multicultural Education, n.d.).

*Social-Emotional Learning:* The process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills vital for school, work, and life success (Committee for Children, n.d.).

*Urban:* This is a large metropolitan area with a population of over 250,000.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations included the sample of the study. While interviewing 17 parents certainly provided substantial information, I did not expect these experiences to be representative of all parents who were struggling in the educational system. In addition, each subgroup's findings may not have been representative of that subgroup as a whole.

There were limitations inherent in the interview process. If information was not shared in an interview, it was not present in this study. As the data were not statistical, and I was not testing students, there was a limitation to the information gathered being strictly perspectives. My interviews with parents were a moment in time; they will have more experiences, both positive and negative, after our interview, which may or may not be represented in this study.

As an educator, I am passionate about the educational achievement gap. When I have seen entire groups of students not successful in our school system, I think there is a clear systematic issue versus an indication of student success. I approached this study
with extensive experience as an educator, and through these experiences, I brought personal bias that was monitored throughout the research journey. In addition, outside of my professional role, I also have an African American spouse and have had personal experience with understanding the minority perspective. Creswell and Poth (2018) described bracketing as the process of setting aside personal experiences, biases, and preconceived notions about an idea. One way to bracket information was to write down beliefs and ideas prior to the interview process. In addition, I had a separate notebook for me to take any notes during the interview process when bias or preconceived notions came up in my mind, which was a way to keep bias in check and reflect on it during the study.

Reflections of the Scholar

After taking a series of doctoral-level courses with an interdisciplinary focus, I was excited to integrate that knowledge into my Dissertation in Practice. The educational achievement gap is a national issue and has been around for decades. It takes a special leader to be energized to tackle the issue head-on and encourage staff to do the same. After studying transformational leadership, I would say that is what is needed in schools to bridge the achievement gap. There were many definitions of transformational leadership, but here is one that resonated:

Superior leadership performance—transformational leadership—occurs when leaders evaluate the interest of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. (Bass, 1990, p. 2)
In the Anchorage School District, the schools that were experiencing the lowest academic performance are likely in need of motivation and understanding the vision to work with parents to bridge the achievement gap. There is a need to buy into a shared vision so all of the effort and expertise are working for the same outcome. The leader is instrumental in creating the path to solve this educational crisis—student by student and family by family. Traits of a transformational leader include charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1990).

**Significance of the Study**

This study provides a new approach to work with parents to understand their perspective with a complex challenge that the Anchorage School District is working hard to solve. Schools must understand what success means to the parents and what impact they can have on solving the achievement gap.

The aim of this study was to create an evidence-based solution to the educational achievement gap. Hearing the voices of parents to understand their perceptions was an important first step for systematic change to take place to support success for minority students. Parents were the first teachers of their children, regardless of socioeconomic status. It, therefore, makes sense for schools to partner with the individuals who know their child the best and who were a constant in their life, in order to make any substantial headway in improving student success. This Dissertation in Practice may provide new perspectives from two groups of minority families for administrators to consider when creating educational policy regarding the achievement gap.
Summary

The mission statement of the Anchorage School District (n.d.-a) is “educating all students for success in life.” Some rendition of student success is the ultimate goal for educators. In Anchorage, Alaska, there were tremendous disparities in the performance of African American and Alaska Native students compared to their Caucasian peers. These inequities were not limited to academic performance, but the suspension data also match, especially for African American students. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the achievement gap through the lens of the parents and also explore if the parents have potential solutions to bridge or reduce the challenges. This study provides a new approach, which amplifies the voice of parents.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational achievement gap occurs when one group of students (such as students grouped by race/ethnicity or gender) outperformed another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant, or larger than the margin of error (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). At the time this study was conducted, this gap certainly exists in the state of Alaska, where the academic achievement of Alaska Native and African American, or Black, students tends to be lower than their Caucasian peers. This was first evident through the Anchorage School Districts Data Dashboard (n.d.-b), which shared the statistics with the public. These statistics showed a disparity in the amount that these students were being suspended and also a disparity in academic achievement on nationally normed assessments. This chapter will review the historical information for the Alaska Native and African American people, as it related to the educational achievement gap. In addition, this chapter will discuss culturally responsive practices, the diversity of staff in the Anchorage School District, and how trauma and socioeconomic challenges related to the achievement gap.

Gillborn et al. (2017) countered the existing argument that something inherent in the culture, their families, communities, schools, and teachers was responsible for racial achievement gaps. Instead, Gillborn et al. (2017) indicated these achievement disparities were a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society had made over time. Different terms have been used to describe the stark differences in achievement; however, Gillborn et al. (2017) coined the phrase “inequality of achievement” to ensure there was not an assumption of an intellectual deficit between
groups of students. I continued to use the term “achievement gap” to avoid creating confusion, as that was the term widely used in academic literature.

**Historical Information—Alaska Native**

It is important to present the historical background information of the Alaska Native people, which may not be widely known. Each Alaska Native group has historical events unique to their people and geographic area; however, one common thread with these historical events was trauma and loss. The Dena’ina (pronounced da-nine-a) people lived what is now Anchorage about 1,500 years ago. Long after the Dena’ina people came here, the Russians came. The Russians were very interested in the furs; however, they did not know how to hunt animals for furs. They forced, with their guns and violence, the Alaska Natives to hunt furs for them. As time went on, eventually, they traded goods with the Dena’ina people. At this point, ships from other parts around the world came to Anchorage, including James Cook from England. On October 18, 1857, Russia sold Alaska to the United States. Gold was found in Alaska in 1880, and news quickly traveled around the world. For years to follow, people came to Alaska for gold. As soon as Alaska became a territory, it was clear it needed roads, schools, and public buildings (Gauster et al., 2013).

From the early 1900s to 1970s, Alaska Natives were taken from rural communities and sent to boarding schools run by the government, the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). It was evident in a study where 61 adult Alaska Natives were interviewed who had all attended boarding schools, that there was trauma involved in their experiences (Hirshberg, 2008). Interviewees reported physical and sexual abuse, and they were forbidden to speak their native language and were beaten by the school staff if
they did (Hirshberg, 2008). The outcome of these boarding school experiences for
students was a loss of language and cultural identity. Back home in the villages,
communities felt a void with their children having been taken away. According to
Hirshberg (2008), drugs, alcohol, and suicide were some of the effects interviewees
spoke of as coming from boarding home experiences. There was an overall loss of
identity and culture. This was historical trauma directly related to the educational system.
Current Alaska Native Elders were the students at these boarding schools. In Alaska
today, there is still a sense of loss over the Russians taking the land from the Dena’ina
people (Burrage et al., 2018). The community has put initiatives in place to recognize this
loss and provided an opportunity for healing. The Anchorage Museum in downtown
Anchorage had large lettering on the front of the building that reads, “This is Dena’ina
Elnena,” which means—“This is Dena’ina homeland” (Gauster et al., 2013).

**Historical Information—African American**

According to Hartman and Reamer (2020), Alaska never ranked among the top
destinations of the Great Migration; however, Alaska enticed thousands of African
Americans during the World War II decade. Overstreet (1994) reported that there had
been a documented presence of “Afro-Americans” in Alaska since 1870; however, the
presence had largely gone unreported. Given that the migration of Blacks did not occur in
significant numbers until the 1940s, most of what has been shared was documentation of
oral history (Overstreet, 1994).

Black Alaskans experienced many of the same issues that defined American race
relations in the 20th century: housing and job discrimination alongside marginalization
and violence (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). Black Alaskans were also able to make Alaska
their own. Black history in Alaska has not been extensively researched, and according to Hartman and Reamer (2020), it is worthy of scholarly attention, as the history has not fully been written. It began during the era of Pacific whaling in the mid-19th century and extended into the present, touching on such pivotal events as the Klondike Gold Rush, the World Wars (I & II), the Civil Rights Movement, and the modern questions of mass incarceration, police violence, and social justice (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). The first documented presence of Black men in Alaska’s waters and on land occurred in 1867 (Hartman, 2018). During that time, there was very little documentation until the gold rush era, the late 1890s and early 1900s. From 1916 through the 1950s, immigration slowed due to the depression; however, those years also corresponded with the Great Migration—the great movement of Americans from the South to the North and West (Hartman, 2018). Thousands of African Americans moved to Alaska in the late 1940s through the 1970s as soldiers, government workers, skilled tradespeople, and business people (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). Overstreet (1994) reported that the cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks were the primary locations for the Black population. The people were in search of a better life, which meant better-paying jobs (Overstreet, 1994). Two major projects that Black troops worked on in the early 1940s were the Alcan Highway project and the Canol Oil project (Overstreet, 1994). The Alcan Highway provided a road system between the contiguous state and the Alaskan territory. The Canol Oil project was designed to provide an oil supply source close to Alaska.

Upon arrival in Alaska, Black Alaskans had challenges during the postwar urban development. In a memoir that was published about Maj. Gen. Robert Bullard, it read, “Poor Negroes! They are hopelessly inferior…. Negroes were simply failures”
In Anchorage, Alaska, there were exclusionary policies and racial restrictions that confined the Black population to certain housing areas; one in particular was called “Eastchester Flats,” or simply known as the “Flats.” Many people who lived there experienced extreme poverty while also creating many institutions that were vibrant and culturally inspired (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). In the late 1960s and 1970s, this housing area was dismantled with an “urban renewal” initiative. This allowed for the Black population to spread out amongst the city; however, the Black community was challenged to have a unified voice amongst a majority-White city. According to Hartman and Reamer (2020), while Anchorage did not entice as many Blacks as Los Angeles or Oakland, it drew a greater percentage of Blacks than many western cities.

Racism was alive and well in Alaska and Anchorage during the post-World War II time period (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). There was a general feeling from the White community that Blacks were not supposed to be in Alaska (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). There was a trend in Anchorage of explicit and implicit housing discrimination; the first racially restricted housing covenants appeared in June 1941 (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). One covenanted stated:

No race or nationality other than those of the White or Caucasian race shall use or occupy any dwellings on any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race or nationality, if such servants are employed by an owner or tenant. (Hartman & Reamer, 2020, p. 8).

By 1950, racially-restricted covenants appeared throughout Anchorage, especially South Anchorage, which remains primarily Caucasian in 2020. Two cases in Washington DC fought the housing restrictions, *Hurd v. Hodge* and *Urciolo v. Hodge*, and these
rulings established that covenants in a non-state American territory could not be enforced, which included Alaska (Hartman & Reamer, 2020). The court never provided restorative measures, and the racial exclusions remained a fixture in Anchorage. Aside from the court rulings, housing discrimination in Anchorage continued to exist due to the social acceptance from Whites (Hartman & Reamer, 2020).

Alaska became a state in 1959. While the numbers were small, Alaska began to see Blacks hold public office positions and exercise their civic duty (Overstreet, 1994). The Black community also held religion as a cornerstone, and several African American churches formed in Anchorage and in Fairbanks (Overstreet, 1994). This was also an opportunity for leaders in the Black community to address large audiences regarding issues such as violence in the community and brutality by police officers (Overstreet, 1994).

The struggles for Blacks in Alaska were similar to the contiguous continental states: challenges with equal access, racism, obstacles around employment opportunities, and issues involving crime and justice (Overstreet, 1994). Despite the struggles, African Americans have played an important role in Alaskan history. The historical experiences of both Alaska Native and African American people that happened over the last one hundred years should not be ignored when studying the current achievement of students in our school system.

**Culturally Responsive Practices**

The cultural discontinuity between home and school was a topic that was considered when looking closely at the Alaska Native and American Indian educational achievement (Torres, 2017). Torres (2017) hypothesized that the implementation of
culture-based education would positively affect achievement outcomes. If the values and practices of the home are discontinued at school, and the enveloping cultural heritage of the dominant group in the society is imposed as a necessary end, it was argued the child from the nondominant group may feel pressured to choose one culture over another, leading to internal psychic conflict that interrupts normative educational growth (Torres, 2017).

It is critical for educators to examine the extent to which culturally-responsive practices are present in their classroom and school, as well as an awareness of implicit biases that could be affecting the classroom and individual students. According to Hammond (2015), culturally responsiveness is more of a process than a strategy. It begins when a teacher recognizes the cultural capital and tools students of color bring in the classroom. An example that was used, when considering culturally-responsive teaching, was a classroom on a reservation in which desks were put into small groups, and the teacher roamed the room. The contrast is the traditional setting, which had desks facing the front of the room with the teacher eliciting responses from the most competitive and vocal students. The traditional setting conflicted with minority cultural values (Torres, 2017). When teachers were not in tune with culturally-responsive practices, there were negative educational outcomes (Autin et al, 2019). In addition to culturally-responsive teaching, educators carried implicit biases, the unconscious attribution of particular qualities to a member of a certain social group. Torres (2017) discussed the “soft bigotry” of low expectations and tracking Native students into special education classes. Having curriculum practices in place that create a more responsive
environment affirmed the individual’s culture and could create a more comfortable space for family involvement.

**Staff Diversity**

Teacher diversity is not a new topic in teacher education; however, it is a current topic in the field (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Research revealed that teachers of color help closed the achievement gap for students of color (Carver-Thomas, 2019). “Teachers of Color” referred to by Carter Andrews et al. (2019) made up approximately 20% of the United States public school teacher population, and students of color represented about 52%. Figure 2 represents the Anchorage School District, where 28% of all of the staff (certified and classified) were staff of color, and the students of color represented 58%, which was similar to the national average.

There were historical roots to the issues faced by teachers of color in public schools throughout the United States. Following the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black teachers were primarily teachers of Black students (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). When schools were desegregated, there were no protections for the 82,000 Black teachers who were deemed unfit to teach White children. Black principals also were affected, and “between 1963 and 1970, approximately 50% of Black principals in Georgia were dismissed, and 90% and 95% of administrators in Kentucky and North Carolina, respectively, were eliminated” (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 7). The Alaska Native population’s history was that of boarding schools, which were taught by Caucasian teachers (Hirshberg, 2008). Outside of the western school system, teaching in the Alaska Native culture came through traditional ways of life. It was not common for Alaska Natives to leave their village to get a college degree and teaching certificate; this
was not the way of life. Fast-forwarding to the present day, there is a growing student population of diversity amongst our student populations both in Alaska and on a national level accompanied by the majority of staff being Caucasian (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b).

Figure 2

*Staff, Certificated and Classified, and Student Diversity*

*Note:* These numbers are from the Anchorage School District during the 2019-2020 School Year (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b).

The Anchorage School District has identified challenges with staff recruitment of minority teachers and leaders (S. Hunte, personal communication, January 20, 2020). Many of the screenings that school districts used disproportionately screen-out teachers
of color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). There were “high-stakes” professional readiness and licensure exams that were used in many teacher preparation programs. The research showed that these exams had negative effects on teachers of color, especially African Americans (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). When teachers of color made it through many of the barriers and land their first job, they have reported having negative experiences in their schools; “recent studies conducted by The Education Trust revealed that Black and Latinx teachers reported feeling disrespected and de-professionalized in their job despite the additional emotion and physical labor they perform relative to their colleagues” (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 7). It has also been noted that teachers of color felt they need to prove themselves differently from those who are Caucasian (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Teacher education programs have been historically catered toward the demographics of White, middle-class, Christian, female cis-gendered, heterosexual people who were born in the United States and for whom English is a first language (Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

There are great benefits to having teachers of color in the classroom. The research indicated that, as stated previously, the academic achievement went up for students of color; there was culturally relevant teaching, and teachers of colors had more positive perceptions of students of color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). They also assisted in helping their students of color feel welcome (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The Education Trust conducted qualitative studies in 2015 and found that Latinx teachers served as role models for their students and would often help them navigate the system in a society that supported their achievement (Griffin, 2018). In this same study, Black teachers were reported to have higher expectations for their students and held them accountable for
critical knowledge (Griffin, 2018). This study also found that teachers of color were more likely to implement culturally-responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, which was key for meeting the needs of historically and traditionally marginalized students in schools (Griffin, 2018).

**Trauma and Stress/Socioeconomic Connections**

There are culturally specific challenges when looking at the achievement gap. Whaley (2018) studied the potential impact of stereotype threat theory: the idea that African American students underperformed on standardized tests because of worry or concerns about confirming the stereotype of being intellectually inferior. This same theory has been applied to women and the effect this threat has on their math and science abilities. In two qualitative studies that Whaley (2018) referenced, African American college students reported experiences of stereotype vulnerability when they were the only students of color in the classroom. The vulnerability described came after interactions with a White teacher who questioned their academic abilities. The students expressed a desire to have other Black students in the class validate their feelings of discrimination. “Stereotype threat can result in poor test performance due to cognitive disruptions, affective/motivational deficits, physiological arousal/anxiety, and/or maladaptive-test taking behaviors stemming from the fear of confirming a negative stereotype of about one’s social group” (Whaley, 2018, p. 113).

Trauma and stress have been studied as a component of the achievement gap as well as the specific impact that stress and sleep had on the performance of standardized tests (Heissel et al., 2017). Children from low socioeconomic status (SES) and racial minority groups scored lower on average on standardized academic tests relative to their
Caucasian peers. Heissel et al. (2017) looked at the specific challenges that the children may be having outside of school, which may affect their performance. Students that were low-socioeconomic status and were a racial/ethnic minority were more likely to be exposed to stressful life events relative to higher-income White students (Heissel et al., 2017).

The exposure to stress affected the key biological stress systems; however, long-term stress exposure could affect students’ ability to learn new material and their ability to respond to acute cognitive challenges such as standardized tests (Heissel et al., 2017). Low SES and racial minority children (particularly Black children) in the United States were more likely than higher-SES or White children to experience negative life events such as violent incidents; harsh, inconsistent parenting; or parental divorce, death, or alcohol abuse (Heissel et al., 2017). The differences in stress exposure were not the only potential impacts of the achievement gap, but it is important to understand how stress could impact the ability for students to perform at school.

Another area studied in relation to the academic achievement gap was the importance of social-emotional learning or emotional intelligence. Minority students often needed a level of bicultural competence in order to navigate their way successfully in school. Bicultural competence was defined as the ability to function across two cultures while maintaining one’s sense of self and cultural identity (Chain et al., 2017). When students displayed bicultural competence, they often displayed high levels of cognitive functioning and social-emotional health.

Students who possess high emotional intelligence and bicultural competence are more capable of academic success in school settings that do not align with their cultural
values. Chain et al. (2017) reported that social-emotional competence may have been even more important for academic success and outcomes of students. CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) organized social-emotional competence into five core domains: self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Chain et al., 2017). Increasing a student’s social-emotional competence enables students to manage the macrosystemic causes of the achievement gap like poverty, racism, etc.

**Connection**

School connectedness has been identified as an important factor for youth. There is a large body of research that supports the positive outcomes when students are connected to school and their teachers, including training students in social skills and problem-solving skills (Vidourek et al., 2012). School connectedness is the leading protective factor in the school against youth involvement in depression, suicide, violence, risky sexual behaviors, and substance abuse (Vidourek et al., 2012).

Zaretta Hammond (2015) contended that culturally responsive educators need to practice mindfulness and being present, while also being reflective. Hammond (2015) purported that educators who engage in reflection recognize the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that get in the way of their ability to form strong connections with students. Hammond (2015) noted her own experience as a student and remembered the teachers in which she felt seen and heard. Hammond (2015) described this as teachers doing the “inside-out” work. According to Hammond (2015), this work involved the following: developing the right mindset, engaging in self-reflection, checking implicit biases, practicing social-emotional awareness, and holding an inquiry stance regarding the
Hammond (2015) believed that connecting with students is not something nice to have, it is critical, and “the only way to get students to open up to us is to show we authentically care about who they are, what they have to say, and how they feel” (p. 75). The term learning partnership was coined as building a culture of care that helps dependent learners move toward independence. Students need to have a strong rapport and appreciation built with their teacher, and Hammond (2015) noted that it is when students of color come to school they begin to feel marginalized, unseen, and silenced. Teachers can build affirmation and rapport by building trust with students, which frees the brain up for creativity, learning, and higher-order thinking (Hammond, 2015).

**Instructional Methods**

Hammond (2015) has done extensive research on the needs of minority students in the classroom. She believed it starts with information processing or the way we take information in with the intent to retrieve it and understand it so that it is relatable (Hammond, 2015). An example of this is hearing a teacher lecture. Students need to store that information so that they can understand it and retrieve it for later learning or building background knowledge. Marzano (2006) believed that the inability to process information effectively can lead to other disadvantages such as lack of access to enrichment activities. School leaders see this when there is little to no representation of minority students in enrichment programs. Training is needed for educators to understand the brain research scholars have done around the early learning stages and important steps that can be taken to scaffold learners and abilities. Content can be given in a variety of ways to meet different learning styles, including: rhythmic song or spoken word
poetry, creating stories out of content, use of graphic organizers and other nonlinguistic representations, metaphors and analogies, and word play and humor (Hammond, 2015). Educators can review material in engaging ways, such as playing a game, and “the very act of playing a game encourages the brain to strengthen the new neural pathways by making the learner continuously search his/her memory for information” (Hammond, 2015, p.137). Long-term projects are also a way that an activity can be connected to real life and the community. An example of this is collaborating with a local organic farmer and building a garden at the school that the students maintain (Hammond, 2015). Engaging academic approaches integrated with strong core content, project-based learning, and vocabulary has shown to support culturally responsive instructional practices “to help culturally and linguistically diverse students build in their heads a ‘cognitive power plan’ that will get them ready to take on the rigorous Common Core State Standards at every grade level” (Hammons, 2015, p. 140).

The Anchorage School District

The Anchorage School District educates 46,000 students across 2,000 square miles. It is ranked 100th in size among United States school districts and has more than 130 schools and programs. Minority students comprise more than 50% of the student population: African American, 4.9%; Alaska Native/American Indian, 8.8%; Hispanic, 11.6%; Biracial/Multiracial, 15.7%; Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 16.9%; and Caucasian, 41.9% (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). There are over 110 languages spoken within the Anchorage School District. The top five languages spoken after English are Spanish, Samoan, Hmong, Filipino, and Yupik (Anchorage School District, n.d.-a).
In order to be responsive to students’ needs, the Anchorage School District has adopted the model of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). This means that on a daily basis, the Anchorage School District staff work together to support every student academically, behaviorally, and socially based on ongoing needs. The Anchorage School District has a webpage specifically dedicated to MTSS for both elementary and high school students (Anchorage School District, n.d.-a). The MTSS model is the primary method to solve the achievement gap as well as the adoption of a new reading curriculum at the elementary level, which provides a structured instructional day and is a direct instruction approach.

The Anchorage School District’s (n.d.-a) strategic plan, “Destination 2020,” which was compiled by the superintendent and the board, included the following goals:

- 90% of students will be proficient in reading and writing.
- 90% of students will graduate high school.
- 90% of parents will recommend their child’s school to others.
- 90% of students will graduate high school.
- 100% of students will feel safe in school.
- Students will attend school at least 90% of the time.

The following figures were the most recent, 2018-2019, state testing results on Alaska’s State Assessment—P.E.A.K.S. (Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools). Figures 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate proficiency levels for all students in grades 3 through 10 by the subject area test and ethnicity of students (Anchorage School District, n.d.-a).

Figures 3 through 5 include the two subgroups that were the focus for this dissertation; however, there were areas of concern in regard to the achievement of the
other subgroups in the Anchorage School District. According to the Anchorage School District Data Dashboard (n.d.-b), the following were student scores on the nationally normed assessment called Measures of Academic Progress (M.A.P.) for students in 3rd through 10th grade in areas of reading and math. The percentages represented the percentage of students who scored above the 50th percentile:

- Pacific Islander, 29.27%
- Alaska Native, 39.27%
- African American, 46.95%
- Hispanic, 54.31 %
- Asian, 55.85%
- American Indian, 58.68%
- Multi-Ethnic, 59.83%
- White, 77.20%
Figure 3

*African American Students, Grades 3-10*

**Reading**

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<th>Percent of students by proficiency level as compared to district percentage</th>
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**Math**

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*Note: (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b)*

Figure 4

*Alaska Native Students, Grades 3-10*

**Reading**

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**Math**

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*Note: (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b)*
Beyond the transformational qualities that are needed to inspire employees and create a clear vision (Bass, 1990), there is another area of leadership that is key to addressing the inequalities in achievement amongst students. Ethical leadership and ethical decision-making are necessary for accountability in stakeholder groups (Winston, 2007). In a school setting, administrators make important decisions for curriculum and interventions. In most cases, students are not able to advocate for themselves in deciding what interventions should be in place and rely on the teachers to be well-prepared and have high expectations for them instructionally. It is key that educators are using data and making informed decisions to provide a rigorous environment where all children are challenged, and growth can take place. Torres (2017) discussed the soft bigotry that
happened when lower expectations were placed on students. When leaders place an importance on ethical decision-making, that sets the stage for all employees as the standard.

Maranzo (2006) argued that educational standards are dense and, in order to be used effectively, must be discussed, unpacked, and prioritized into skills essential for students to learn. Collaboration and collegial discussions must happen in order for unpacking and prioritization to occur. Dufour and Dufour (2008) espoused professional learning communities serve as a professional development model targeted at having authentic conversations around standards, student work, and student mastery. Professional learning communities established a culture of inquiry into student performance. Student work and assessment data were used to have a larger conversation around instructional patterns occurring within the school (Thompson et al., 2004).

Goodwin et al. (2015) shared that to positively affect school change and student achievement, school leaders should focus on sharing a clear focus, managing change, and creating a purposeful community. Distributed leadership included the use of organizational structures and processes to empower others, encourage participation in decision-making, and foster joint action and shared accountability for outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Robbins and Judge (2016) offered that employee participation used employees’ input to increase their commitment to organizational success, which could help lead to member productivity and job satisfaction. While participation in decision-making maintained a strong association with satisfaction and performance, it also helped to create followership, sustain member agency, and lead to better organizational decision-making.
Change in an organization does not come easily. Michael Fullen (2019) is well known for his work with “Change Theory.” Fullen coined the term “implementation dip.” Essentially the dip, a drop-in performance and confidence, happens after a change is normal, and behavior changes before employee beliefs. He also believes that shared vision or ownership is more of an outcome than a precondition. Savvy change leadership involves careful entry into a new setting, listening to and learning from those who have been their longer, engaging in fact-finding and joint problem-solving, carefully (rather than rashly) diagnosing the situation, and other very helpful tools that school leaders would benefit from learning. Michael Fullan (2019) also has Six Secrets of Change: Love your employees, Connect Peers with Purpose, Capacity building prevails, Learning is Work, Transparency Rules, and Systems Learn.

In addition to the work that happens internally with staff, parents must be part of the conversation. In today’s society, it is rare to find a school that does not emphasize the importance of parents and their involvement in the school’s life (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999). Parents and educators serve as partners in a child’s education and development. Therefore, it is important that parents and educators work together so that each child can thrive (Rodriguez et al., 2014). Research has emphasized the importance of involved parents in the educational environment and the positive effects that involvement can have on the child’s motivation, well-being at school, and learning outcomes (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013).

Summary

The achievement gap has been studied far and wide, and experts have taken a multitude of different approaches to the issue: historical trauma, socioeconomic effects,
culturally-specific challenges, curriculum-related ideas, and the results of trauma and stress, to name a few. While each approach can solve one piece of the puzzle, the gap continues to show a continual crisis in current practices. It is important for leaders to support teachers with developing a clear focus, managing change, and creating a purposeful community. In addition, a culturally responsive educator understands the importance of connection for students as well as the critical need for engaging and meaningful instructional methods. Learning standards need to be unpacked with an opportunity for rich collegial discussion. Schools must work with parents to fully address the achievement gap, and parents and educators should serve as partners.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I used the qualitative method to study reducing the achievement gap. This chapter is organized in terms of a specific research question posed in the first chapter. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 7). Qualitative research could be a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, photographs, recordings, and memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used interviews to collect information and inform my evidence-based solution. Specifically, I interviewed Alaska Native and African American parents whose children were struggling in our school system and revealed other artifacts that were shared with me during the interviews. I worked with principals to identify students based on academic and behavioral data. All participants were drawn from Title I schools. I received approval from the Anchorage School District.

As it currently stands in the Anchorage School District (n.d.-a), there are inequities in education that match the national achievement gap. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of the achievement gap through the lens of the parents who had students that were experiencing academic or behavioral challenges. The two subgroups I focused on were parents of African American and Alaska Native students. The reasons behind picking these two subgroups were they were among the lowest-performing groups in the district and had traumatic historical events connected to their cultural history with the school system.
Research Question

This qualitative study was guided by the following central research question:

**Research question:** What do parents understand about the factors that make up the achievement gap and how their child(ren) are affected?

This central question yielded the following sub-questions:

1. How do parent perspectives differ (if any) from historically listed factors?
2. What are the differences (if any) between the African American and Alaska Native parent perspectives regarding the causes of the achievement gap?
3. What suggestions or solutions do the parents interviewed have to end or reduce the achievement gap?

Research Design

A phenomenological study reports the experiences of a single individual or several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My proposed research design included working with district administrators to identify students of African American and Alaska Native heritage who were struggling, measured by both academic and behavioral data. Administrators shared the names of students and parents, whom I asked to interview the parents. I informed the school district as detailed in Appendix A and school administrators as detailed in Appendix B. I received permission from the Anchorage School District for my study as detailed in Appendix C. Once 20 parents or a representative from each family were identified, 10 Alaska Natives and 10 African Americans, I used recruitment methods to get parent or guardian approval for an interview. This included calling them on the phone to explain my study and to seek permission. Seventeen parents agreed to be interviewed. Creswell and Poth (2018)
indicated that researchers should use in-depth and multiple interviews when conducting a phenomenological study. In this study, I conducted 45-to-60 minute semi-structured interviews with participants by phone or videoconference. The type of phenomenology that was used is hermeneutical phenomenology, which describes research oriented toward lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This dynamic method allows the researcher to make an interpretation of the meaning of the life experiences being described.

The interviews that took place with 17 parents were in-depth with multiple questions. The participants were asked broad to more specific questions that gathered information about their lived experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), other forms of data could be collected including observations, journals, poetry, music, and other forms of art. None of these forms of data presented itself during my study.

**Participants/Data Sources**

I interviewed 17 parents, seven of Alaska Native descent and 10 of African American descent, or until saturation was reached. I aimed to interview 20, 10 of each culture; however, three Alaska Native parents declined being interviewed. Saturation did occur, so no further interviews were sought. The parents interviewed were identified as having students who were struggling in the Anchorage School District based on academic or behavioral data the school provides. I worked with school administrators in the Anchorage School District to identify the students and their parents. Students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade were specifically chosen as those are formative years in a child’s education. In order to effectively address the achievement gap, it is critical that those years are closely examined. Upon identifying students, I worked with the school to obtain permission to interview the parents. Due to COVID-19, interviews happened over
the phone. I am currently an administrator in the Anchorage School District, and I was able to successfully work with my colleagues to recruit parents who were willing to speak to me about their experiences in our educational system. As far as the age of the student, I spoke with any family that had elementary-aged students, which included kindergarten through sixth grade.

Academic and behavioral data were provided by the district. This included state standardized scores and discipline data. I sought permission from the district and worked with a principal at a Title I school to secure this data. I worked with the principal to get permission from the parents to interview them. I interviewed 17 parents, which was right in the middle of what Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended, which was five to 25. I needed to ensure parents that I contacted and was working with had given permission to release their information. In addition, I needed to be sure my personal and professional opinions of the achievement gap were not intertwined in the research that I collected. I believe schools that are successful hear from all stakeholders, and parents are certainly part of that process.

In this study, I conducted 45- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with participants by phone after they signed the consent form, as detailed in Appendix D. I specifically focused my conversations with adults to gain their perspective on their children’s education. Creswell and Poth (2018) shared recommendations from experts that in-depth interviews should happen with five to 25 people who had experienced this phenomenon. Acknowledging that I interviewed parents from a different cultural background than myself, I made sure my questions were phrased in a way that did not promote misunderstanding. For example, I limited my educational jargon and was sure I
asked questions in a certain order, which led to more difficult topics after a rapport had been established. As the interview progressed, it prompted me to ask new or different questions than I originally planned. Each response guided my next question. Sample questions included:

- Tell me about your school experience as a child.
- Tell me about your child's current school experience.
- What are your relationships like with administrators and teachers at your child’s school?
- How do you feel when you walk into your child's school?
- What has been helpful for your child’s educational success?
- What is the greatest challenge your child faces in learning?
- What are your educational goals for your child?
- How does the school support your family’s cultural values?

Data Collection Procedures

The data that guided my study were collected through a human instrument, myself. Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out that data collection is a complex process, and “it means anticipating ethical issues involved in gaining permissions, conducting a good qualitative sampling strategy, developing a means for recording information, responding to issues as they arise in the field, and storing the data securely” (p. 147).

The procedure used when interviewing parents was an interview protocol, as detailed in Appendix E. There was not an existing validated protocol that could be used, so I developed my own. I pilot tested the protocol with a parent not associated with my study. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified strengths of using a predesigned form was
allowing the interviewer to take notes and organize thoughts such as headings and information during the duration of the interview. Each interview was recorded and transcribed through Rev.com. I utilized a system to secure the information. This included: backing up copies of computer files, using high-quality tapes or recordings devices for audio recording information, developing a master list of information gathered, protecting the anonymity of participants by masking their names in the data, and developing a visual means of locating data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Data Analysis Plan**

Semi-structured, recorded interviews were conducted over the phone or through the platform Zoom. Once data were collected and stored, I developed an inductive coding system to classify themes. This was an appropriate method as I knew little about the interviewee other than their ethnic background and some baseline information about their child(ren). The information from the interview was built from scratch. During the initial process, I read through the data and got familiar with it. I utilized an open coding system, looked at the responses broadly to see if I could easily identify patterns. The next step was to code line-by-line, in which I combed through my data, trying to code everything possible. The codes became much more detailed at that point. Then there was a categorization process, which included sorting similar codes into the same category. At this stage, I was able to identify common themes and patterns. I used the NVivo qualitative data analysis software system for my coding. The end result of inductive coding was that the data formed a narrative (Spear, 2018).

The triangulation process was put in place to confirm the reliability and validity of findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the importance of bracketing, meaning
the researcher brackets himself or herself out of the study by the researcher not discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon. This allowed the focus to be on the participants in the study. In addition, I removed identifying information from each participant and used coded names for the findings and analysis.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues needed to be considered in all phases of the qualitative research process. It was important to consider the different roles held when pursuing the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) described best practices including considering ethical considerations involving our roles as insiders/outsiders to the participants; assessing issues that we may be fearful of disclosing; establishing supportive, respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace; acknowledging whose voices will be represented in our final study; and writing ourselves into the study by reflecting on who we are and the people we study.

During my tenure as an Anchorage School District employee over the last 13 years, I have had exposure to different school initiatives and leadership styles. Due to my role as an educator, I have extensive knowledge of the educational methods, curriculums, and programs. In addition, I am a Caucasian woman, and my spouse is African American.

At an informal level, conversations of oppression and race have taken place. The perspective my husband brings to the table has influenced my views at times. Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed the importance of bracketing, where the researcher brackets himself or herself out of the study by the researcher not discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon. This allowed the focus to be on the participants in the study.
Summary

This qualitative study focused on the achievement gap between Caucasian students and their African American and Alaska Native peers, as viewed through the lens of the perceptions of parents. This chapter reviewed the systems in place to gather data and the proposed research design process. It was critical to identify those processes at the front end as it supported ensuring that ethical procedures and approval processes were in place. After reviewing those processes, I identified the timeline for my study and utilized the anticipatory reflection tool prior to beginning my research.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings based on 17 one-on-one interviews with Alaska Native and African American parents of students in the Anchorage School District. The chapter reviews the purpose of the study, the research questions, the aim of the study, and the participant demographics. Then I review the data analysis method, including the process of going from open coding to developing the final themes. Finally, the themes are discussed in detail, showing their relationship to the research question.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how Alaska Native and African American parents understand the achievement gap as well as surface their suggestions or solutions for reducing or ending the gap. The goal was to identify patterns in their perceptions as well as to see if there are possible solutions that come from the parents in interviews.

**Research Question**

This qualitative study was guided by the following central research question:

**Research questions** What do parents understand about the factors that make up the achievement gap and how their child(ren) are affected?

This central question yielded the following sub-questions:

1. How do parent perspectives differ (if any) from historically listed factors?
2. What are the differences (if any) between the African American and Alaska Native parent perspectives regarding the causes of the achievement gap?
3. What suggestions or solutions do the parents interviewed have to end or reduce the achievement gap?
Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to use how parents perceive the achievement gap to better inform evidence-based solutions within the Anchorage School District. The data gathered and proposed solutions will be presented to leaders of the school district.

Methodology Overview

A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was employed to explore the perceptions of the achievement gap through the lens of the parents whose children were non-proficient in academics or were experiencing behavioral challenges. During the study, I interviewed African American and Alaska Native parents whose children were having challenges in school either academically or behaviorally. Through the outcome of the interview and study, I hoped to identify challenges that parents were facing as well as potential solutions that would be helpful. Using the word “parents,” I was referring to the custodial guardians of Alaska Native and African American students.

Participants

The participants involved in this study came from two schools in the Anchorage School District—Mountain View Elementary and Nunaka Valley Elementary. Both schools are Title I schools, which means the majority of the students in the school qualifying for free and reduced lunch due to the families’ socioeconomic status. Nunaka Valley is located in Northeast Anchorage and is a Title I school in the Anchorage School District. The student population at Nunaka Valley and Mountain are relatively smaller in comparison to other elementary schools in the Anchorage School District. Nunaka has approximately 250 students and Mountain View has 270 (Alaska Department of Education, 2020).
Mountain View Elementary is also on the northeast side of Anchorage. The neighborhood has a population of slightly over 7,000 and according to US Census Data is the most diverse neighborhood in the United States (Basu, 2016). The principal at Mountain View provided a list of 10 families of African American descent. He specifically looked for families that did not fall into the category of refugee or English as a second language. He also identified students that were experiencing challenges with either their academic or behavioral performance. The 10 families interviewed from Mountain View were eight mothers and two fathers. Seven of the 10 interviewed self-reported that they were single parents (six of them were single mothers and one single father). Two of the single parents mentioned a boyfriend in the child’s life, and the father was not around. See Figure 6 for a breakdown of participant data.

**Figure 6**

*Participant Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALASKA NATIVE</th>
<th>AFRICAN AMERICAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOTHER, #2</td>
<td>MOTHER, #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTHER, #4</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>FATHER, #9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>MOTHER, #16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants involved in the study from Nunaka Valley were identified by the principal. He identified 10 Alaska Native families whose children were experiencing
academic or social emotional challenges. Of the 10 families, only seven opted for participation. Six of the participants were female and one male. Two of the participants had custody of the child but were not their biological parent. They both were relatives of the child and cited challenges with their biological family that led to them caring for the child.

The purpose of separating the participants in two schools was to ease the burden on one school in participating in the study. In addition, it was easier for each principal to focus on one specific demographic when they analyzed the student performance data. There was more apprehension with the Alaska Native parent group than the African American group. This was seen through two of the Alaska Native parents opting out and asking to not share their opinion. It was also seen through three of the Alaska Native parents being apprehensive to be interviewed. This apprehension was relieved once they understood the protections to keep their comments anonymous. In the African American parent group, there was no sign of apprehension to participate in the study or share their voice.

**Results**

Four major themes were derived from the coding process from interviews with both Alaska Native and African American parents. These themes, detailed in Figure 7, included: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap.


Connection with School Staff

The first theme emerged from 13 of the 17 participants discussing the need for the staff to genuinely care for their children. The theme of connection came through in different questions. For example, Participant 6 was an African American parent who happened to work as a teacher assistant in one of the schools. She felt strongly that teachers did not always take the time to understand the individual child and the background that they came from and said,

You have to know your students. The way they come off is really cultural, but some people might think it is rude. If a little Black kid comes down the hallway and says, “Hey what’s up?” he is not being disrespectful. That just be how they talk at home.

Participant 9 was an African American father who voiced that the district needed to work hard to scan teachers before they are hired to see if they connect well with students. He said,
What’s that called when you don’t speak? Your body language, your body, that all comes with teaching too. You got to teach a kid. You might be a teacher and deep down racist inside your heart. “No I don’t want to teach this Black kid.” You know what I mean?

An Alaska Native mother, participant 11, described extensive behavioral issues that her daughter was having in kindergarten. She described health situations that were happening prior to kindergarten, which made the transition very challenging. Her daughter would escape from the classroom and did not feel connected to her teacher. The behavioral issues happened throughout the entire year, and the student was unable to have success with her education due to the impact of the challenges. Participant 11 stated, “My daughter would have a student do something to her, and she would go tell the teacher, and the teacher would tell her to go sit back down. She didn’t feel seen.” Participant 11 felt uncomfortable walking into the school and noted that the office staff would call her to tell her that her daughter was acting up. She sensed in the tone of the voice that they disliked her daughter, and over time, participant 11 felt increasingly more uncomfortable simply walking into the building due to the tone from the two staff members in the front office.

Participant 4 was an Alaska Native mother. She described that starting school was emotional for her daughter.

Socially starting a new school…it was a bit emotional for her, not knowing anyone. I try to let teachers know, I just hoped they would be supportive like her previous teachers in Washington were. I didn’t see that caring, compassion that I hoped for.
Throughout the interviews with both Alaska Native and African American parents, the need for connection was strong, with 13 of the 17 participants contributing to this theme. Out of these 13 participants, five were Alaska Native and seven were African American parents. It was the connection that they desired with the school to how their child was treated by staff. The desire for staff to connect with their children on an interpersonal level and for their children to be seen and heard by staff was an important outcome of the interviews.

**Diversity in the Schools**

African American and Alaska Native parents voiced the need for more cultural diversity amongst the adults in the building. This theme emerged with 12 of the 17 interviews, with the majority, eight of the 12, being African American that showed concern. An African American mother, participant 5, stated, “We need more Black teachers that understand our culture. We also need more men.” Another parent, participant 7, stated that children need to be able to see themselves in their teachers, and “We need to give the children something they can relate to.”

Participant 17, who was an Alaska Native grandmother in care of her granddaughter, described her frustration with the lack of Alaska Natives in the schools in general. During the interview, she described the Indian Ed program, which her granddaughter really loved. This program provided an Alaska Native teaching assistant that went around and was supposed to support the Alaska Native children and also do cultural activities with them. Her granddaughter’s school was using this Alaska Native tutor to help all children, which limited the time her granddaughter had with her. She said,
I just wish my granddaughter and all the Native students had more time with the Indian Ed aide. I would like to see her do more Native activities. Maybe beading. It could be fur sewing. It could be storytelling. It could be dance. It could be music. They could bring in a Native speaker that would work with the children.

Participant 17 felt very strongly that more Native role models were needed in the schools. She expressed ideas around bringing guests into the schools if the school district could not find Alaska Native teachers to hire.

Participant 12 was an African American father. This parent disclosed that he grew up in the “crack era” of Philadelphia, and he does not know how to read or write to this day. He passionately shared about an award his son received in class:

My son got an award for “Always having something to say.” That wasn’t a proper award to give my child. What the crap kind of award is that, you know? People need to be mindful. They got to be mindful or understanding, that’s why [Black people] are falling short. She gave my little Black boy an award for always having something to say. He needs an award for reading or math.

The participant went on to explain that the Black community needs to aware of how their children are viewed in the school system by staff. Amongst both the Alaska Native and African American participants, diversity in the school was an important theme.

**Instructional Methods**

A majority of parents interviewed, 15 of 17, felt more hands-on support would be helpful for their children or the option of multiple approaches to reach learners. Out of the 15 who responded about instructional methods, eight were African American and seven Alaska Native. Six wished that a teaching assistant could be in the classroom to
help. Participant 13 was an African American father and stated, “If you want someone to learn, you got to make it fun, you got to be active, just be more active and hands-on with students.” An Alaska Native mother, participant 14, shared that there were distinct differences between Alaska Native and Caucasian students, which needed to be addressed. She said,

A lot of times the Native students, oh, let me see. They’re so different from White expectation. I’ll just use the word White. When White kids are encouraged to be first, be best, ‘I’m the greatest,’ I, I, I, and Native students are not taught that way. It’s always, ‘you don’t bring attention to yourself, and you work for the whole of the family. That makes a big difference because they’re not used to trying to let everybody know how great they are. That is really frowned upon in the Native community.

Many of the parents expressed an appreciation when their school has cultural events where food was shared, and families brought a meal. Several parents in the Mountain View community expressed their appreciation for these types of cultural events. Meanwhile, several parents expressed frustration around the lack of cultural content in school and saying,

Please teach more than Black history month. We need to go over Dr. Martin Luther King and all of that. You know, teach about when Black people were successful. I don’t know exactly what is going on, but it is discouraging to kids to only learn about slavery.
Alaska Native parents voiced their desire for their children to participate in hands-on cultural activities during school. This was accompanied by several parents stating Alaska Native parents and grandparents could come into the school to teach these activities.

Through the theme of instructional methods, there was a general desire for multiple approaches to be available for students to learn, higher student engagement, and an ability for projects and hands-on learning. This was accompanied by dialogue surrounding the need for culturally responsive content that is current and encouraging, while also including students in the conversation. Participant 8, an African American mother shared:

So the kids, they’re just different now. Kids like rhymes and just, I don’t know, doing things and they have great ideas. So I feel like instead of…maybe just asking the kids what they want to do or giving them more options. Because my middle son, he did a speech, and he did excellent, but it was more difficult for my oldest son to do a speech. And he would have rather made a rhyme or something like that.

**Parent Understanding of the Achievement Gap**

None of the parents interviewed, from either the African American or Alaska Native background, knew what the educational achievement gap was about. As the researcher, I explained the achievement gap to all parents. There was a range of responses once it was explained to the parents. The responses ranged from disbelief around the gap to agreeing with how that could be the case. One African American parent, participant 1, asked about the performance of his child’s school as he sounded shocked when hearing about the data. He asked, “Where does Mountain View fit into those stats? That’s what I
want to know because that’s what I am concerned with. Now, I’m concerned with Mountain View and the stats in Mountain View. You understand what I am saying?"

One African American mother, participant 9, who was going to school to become a teacher, responded that she had no idea what the achievement gap was. After explaining that she had never heard of the achievement gap, she stated, “So I am currently in school. I’m going to school for elementary education and special education.” She went on to mention that in her schooling she has not learned about these disparities in educational achievement.

After explaining more information about the educational achievement gap to all of the parents, some responded with further ideas that fall into the theme of instructional methods. As the researcher, I felt uncomfortable talking with the parents directly about the achievement gap. This feeling built when all participants shared that they were not aware of this discrepancy in performance data. I was concerned that I could offend them and was not clear on the most culturally appropriate way to discuss the issues. As the researcher, it led me to consider how many educators may not directly communicate concerns of these types with families, due to the possibility of the sensitivity of the conversation or it not being received well.

**Discussion**

The four themes depicted in Figure 8 (connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap), demonstrated areas where the school district could make considerations in enhancing and adjusting their approach.
The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how Alaska Native and African American parents understand the achievement gap as well as surface their suggestions or solutions for reducing or ending the gap. The goal was to identify patterns in their perceptions as well as to see if there are possible solutions that come from the parents in interviews. It was clear that none of the participants knew what the educational achievement gap was; however, all participants contributed ideas that could lead to African American and Alaska Native students experiencing more success in school.

This study identified themes that have been traditionally tied to the achievement gap, but it also brought awareness to new information. Parents voiced a need for diversity amongst staff for both Alaska Native and African American students. If staff were not able to fulfill this role, parents suggested bringing mentors, leaders, and guests into the building to support an ongoing presence of role models for students. The strong theme of
students feeling connected to adults and for them to genuinely feel seen and heard by adults, regardless of race, needs to be explored deeper by educational systems. If students are unable to have teachers and mentors that they can relate to culturally, it is critical that they can connect on some level to ensure they feel safe and comfortable in the classroom. Scholarly research has not identified the importance of minority parents understanding the achievement gap and seeking their support in bridging the gap. I will speak more about this in chapter five; however, if parents are not clearly aware of the challenges, it is not possible to have them be the partners school systems need to ensure there is a partnership. Finally, it is key to examine the instructional methods being used to support Alaska Native and African American children. Both groups are unique in the sense that there is a strong desire for culturally responsive content that empowers and encourages the students; parents also voiced a strong desire for higher engagement and hands-on learning.

**Summary**

After interviewing 17 parents of both African American and Alaska Native descent, I drew themes that were important and could be connected to student achievement. These themes were: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. Within each theme, parents provided ideas and input that could be examined more deeply by educators. In chapter five I will review the ideas that parents voiced in more detail as well as discuss the potential differences, if any, that were between the Alaska Native and African American perspective.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The educational achievement gap has been an issue school districts across the nation have been grappling with for decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This issue has been studied from a variety of lenses; however, one lens appeared to be missing: the perspective of parents whose children are impacted by the achievement gap. While the achievement gap could be an overwhelming issue to take on, as it is complex and related to many other social issues, amplifying the voices of parents could only support bridging the gap. This chapter will address the study’s aim by recommending a proposed solution, describing procedures for implementation, and discussing practical, research-related, and leadership-related implications.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to use how parents perceive the achievement gap to identify possible solutions based on results of parent interviews. The data gathered will be presented to leaders in the Anchorage School District with the aim of evidence-based solutions to be implemented.

Proposed Solution

Four themes emerged that are relevant to this study, depicted in Figure 9: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. Ideas and suggestions developed within these four themes.
Both Alaska Native and African American parents voiced their strong desire for their children to feel more connected to school staff. According to Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2020), improving students’ relationships with teachers has had important,
positive, and long-lasting implications for both students’ academic and social development.

Picture a student who feels a strong personal connection to her teacher, talks with her teacher frequently, and receives more constructive guidance and praise rather than just criticism from this teacher. The student is likely to trust her teacher more, show more engagement in learning, behave better in class and achieve at higher levels academically. (Kafman & Sandilos, 2020, p. 1)

Instructional leaders should put an emphasis on providing ongoing culturally responsive training for educators. According to Zaretta Hammond (2015), the foundation of culturally responsive instruction was not technical but relational. When school districts have intensive academic programming and initiatives to raise achievement, the time for connection could get limited and even overlooked. According to Hammond (2015), there was science behind the idea of caring as the on-ramp to learning, and “when we feel cared for, our brain is flooded with neurotransmitters and hormones like oxytocin, the same hormone that makes mom fall in love with their babies even after the pain and effort of labor” (Hammond, 2015, p. 35). When students are going through school without feeling affirmed or seen, it not only did not create feelings of enjoyment, but it could make students feel guarded, untrusting, and possibly even hostile (Hammond, 2015).

When educators have current, ongoing training that includes culturally responsive practices, as well as time allowed to connect with students, they will value building rapport and connection. Hammond (2015) called for educators to be warmer demanders, which are educators who connects with students but also shows tough love—ensuring
that students are rising to their highest potential. “Becoming culturally responsive starts with showing genuine caring that recognizes the unique gifts of every child, particularly when that child doesn’t look like you” (Hammond, 2015, p. 35).

**Diversity in the Schools**

The second theme that emerged for both African American and Alaska Native parents was the need for adults in the schools that represent the children’s culture. The Anchorage School District recently hired an equity director and has put resources into recruiting and identifying minorities who could join the district’s team and become leaders. Those initiatives are needed and should be continued and expanded.

On the immediate level, schools should consider vetting mentors and leaders in the community of both African American and Alaska Native descent to have a presence in schools. These mentors and leaders can even be compensated using federal funds that are given to Title I schools. The goal would be to provide role models the students can identify with and look up to. Schools can get creative with this and personalize it with having students set social or learning goals with this adult. Several parents interviewed in the African American community voiced a need for Black male role models in the schools. In the Alaska Native interviews, the need for Elders and mentors to come into the school to support cultural crafts and traditions emerged.

There was historical trauma related to both the Alaska Native and African American people that was discussed in chapter two. Effort is still needed to restore the connection of school being a positive experience for both African American and Alaska Native families. Creating space and funding to hire mentors and role models could be a step in the right direction in both reaching students and restoring a multi-generational
relationship with the school. One of the questions asked to parents during the interviews was to describe their own school experience. An Alaska Native mother, participant 7, responded to her school experience:

It was actually very terrible, honestly. So I never technically graduated. I was in second grade and my parents pulled me out of school because just a lot of struggles with that, with um... There was some stuff with my brother. I don't know. It was so long ago. Let's see, my brother was struggling with one of his teachers. She spit when she talks, she was mean and just very belittling and awful. So my parents actually pulled all of us, my brother and I out of school. My younger sister wasn't in school yet. We were homeschooled for many years, but we never actually did the schoolwork because my dad had sleep apnea. So we didn't have good discipline. My mom worked full time, so we didn't have good discipline with that.

The situation that participant 7, and others, describe is not only challenging but has lasting effects that influence the relationship with the school system.

**Instructional Methods**

During the interviews, parents voiced a need for higher engagement and more hands-on learning. Phrases such as “make school fun” and “they shouldn’t sit so long” were shared. Participant 13 described the need for teachers to be flexible with the way students show their learning. She described her son, who struggled in school, as having challenges writing an essay, but if the teacher allowed him to create a song or rhyme, he would be able to do that with more engagement. The frustration throughout the interviews stemmed from the perception that there was only one way to learn when every
child was different. This desire for teachers to have dynamic and engaging instructional methods, with a possible teacher assistant in the classroom, was voiced from a majority of the interviews amongst both African American and Alaska Native parents.

Zaretta Hammond (2015) described the term equity as reducing the predictability of who succeeds and who fails, interrupting reproductive practices that negatively impact students, and cultivating the gifts and talents of every student. Hammond (2015) believed that courageous conversations need to take place where educators recognize and acknowledge potential implicit bias. Refocusing the equity conversation on helping underperforming students of color, immigrant students, and poor students of color could build their skills and help them become powerful learners. Hammond (2015) acknowledged that most educators believed there are gaps, and many believed the root of the problem is motivating students of color or increasing engagement. A three-prong approach for further training for teachers on multicultural education, social justice education, and culturally responsive education would contribute to educators building a larger toolbox in delivering high engagement instructional methods. In addition, ongoing parent contribution to the conversation and a presence of diversity amongst adults in the schools would also support instruction.

The Alaska Native parents specifically wanted to see their children participate in cultural activities. Schools need to examine how they are utilizing Indian education tutors, who are provided through federal funding. Those tutors should solely be working with Alaska Native and American Indian students. Their focus likely needs to be reexamined, as it could be tempting to look at this position as an extra adult in the building to help with general needs, when in fact this staff member plays a critical role in
the empowerment of the Native children. Finally, schools should look at every opportunity where they can bring parents into the school to contribute to positive educational experiences.

Many of the parents interviewed referenced their time going to the school to manage a behavioral issue or go there when something went wrong. An Alaska Native mother, participant 3, referenced her daughter’s kindergarten experience.

So I'm hoping that the staff take the time to get to know her better, instead of being so quick to judge that, oh, she's a problem child because she always runs out of the room and she's always up, wandering around. And then the next day, a couple of times I've dropped her off and they're like, "Oh Christonya, are we going to have a good day today?" But then it all comes back. It brings her back to the day before when she really didn't end the good day well. And so it's like the principal would bring her back, because not just, "Good morning Christonya." And just let her go to class. So it was difficult for her to have mixed signals. Over time this can lead to the family having a negative experience with the school system.

**Parent Understanding of the Achievement Gap**

In all of the 17 interviews, none of the parents from both African American and Alaska Native descent knew what the achievement gap was when that question was asked. While this could have been a case of educational jargon, there were several participants that were very concerned they were not aware of this gap. This information was presented in fancy charts and graphs at school board meetings and to educational leaders during meetings with the Superintendent; however, it has not been presented in a
clear, easy to understand way to parents. I am a firm believer that parents are the first and most important teachers to their children. It is essential that if we expect and hope parents are partners in their children’s education, they are aware of the data and inequities in the system. Principals and instructional leaders should be guided in their approach to presenting this information in a way that is sensitive yet informative. The goal is to bring parents on as partners to reduce the impact of the achievement gap and close it over time. Parents have wisdom about their own children that educators will never have. Bringing in parents as partners to solve the issue of the achievement gap has been supported with scholarly research on the positive effects of parent involvement in schools. Ongoing research shows that family engagement in schools improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, and restored parents’ confidence in their children’s education (National Education Association, 2019).

In many cases educators look to research or experts in the field to provide answers. When the school district examines a culturally responsive way to create dialogue around the achievement gap to parents, it would be ideal for parents to give voice as to how this is communicated. This can be done through a focus group at the district level that represents parents of different ethnic groups. The focus group can provide a framework for schools that can be made more specific. As seen in this research study, the parent voice amongst the minority students has been missing in the conversation. The majority of staff in the Anchorage School District, as seen by the graphs in this study are Caucasian. The investment in parents of diverse ethnic backgrounds, guiding the approach, will not only ensure we are being culturally responsive but will add a meaningful partnership.
Evidence that Challenges the Solution

In Alaska, standardized testing is required by federal law in grades 3 through 10. The assessment is called PEAKS (Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools), and it is designed to measure a student’s understanding of the skills and concepts outline in the Alaska Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics standards, and the Alaska Science Grade Level Expectations (Alaska Department of Education, 2020). When schools do not show adequate performance on standardized testing, the response in the Anchorage School District has been an explicit instructional approach in reading and math. According to Anchorage School District (n.d.-b.) the reading outcomes in Alaska fall below the national level. The percentage of students in Alaska who performed at the NAEP Below Basic Level was 44% in 2017, and “children not reading by the time they reach fourth grade may not catch up. As many as one-sixth of children who are not reading by the end of third grade fail to graduate high school” (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). This evidence supports the importance of academic time and the urgency for underperforming schools to improve.

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

The four themes that evolved from the interviews with parents of both African American and Alaska Native descent were the following: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. The following solutions can be considered:

Connection with School Staff

There should be ongoing training for staff on culturally responsive practices, social justice, and multicultural education. This training should be relevant and provide
increased awareness of challenges for students of color while also providing tools to
increase engagement and rigor. During this training, educators should learn about
systematic racism and implicit biases while examining their own practices deeply. In
addition, parents of students who are not achieving need to be brought to the table to
contribute ideas and provide input.

Diversity in the Schools

The goal for every school district should be to have positive, encouraging, and
reliable adults in their schools. The adults are there to provide safety for students and
guidance in instructional materials. The parents voiced their concerns loud and clear that
it would be helpful for students to see themselves in the adults in the building. School
districts should continue the focused effort to hire and retain quality teachers and
administrators of diverse cultural backgrounds; however, in the meantime, having guests,
Elders, and success coaches in the building to support students could be the needed
bridge.

Instructional Methods

As teachers gain a greater tool kit and understanding of culturally responsive
practices, social justice issues, and multicultural education, that is a natural place to
examine instructional practices. In addition, schools should look at putting a teacher
assistant in every classroom. Many Title I schools use additional federal funds for
behavior coaches and other school-wide positions. However, a teacher assistant in every
classroom could provide a more proactive solution to supporting students before
behavioral issues occur. In addition, when student engagement is higher, there likely
would be fewer behavioral incidents.
Parent Understanding of the Achievement Gap

It is critical that parents are aware of the challenges their child may be having as well as the successes. None of the parents interviewed knew what the educational achievement gap was, and several were surprised by the information. This information needs to be given to parents in a sensitive and understandable way. The goal of parents having this information is to be partners in their child’s education and be part of the solution. While this information is presented in forums such as school board meetings, we need to find new ways to show families this information, and these conversations can spark solution-based thinking. All of the parents interviewed shared their voices and had ideas. In addition, many of the parents commented that they enjoyed multicultural events with food. Having a parent night, where food is shared and this information is explained, would be a great place to start.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

Training and awareness in social justice, culturally responsive teaching, and multicultural education needs to happen at the highest level of the district. If the leadership at the district level lacks diversity, they should strive to have leaders in the community with which they meet regularly to provide input and guidance. The goal should be for school district leaders to represent the students that they serve. Principals all need to be calibrated with a clear understanding of the challenges amongst cultural groups in their schools. From this awareness and education, there can be a consistent message and delivery to all staff in the building. When all staff in the building are provided with training, students can count on consistent support and messaging. In order to achieve high-quality training, funding, and time need to be secured. This can be
achieved during an in-service day prior to the school year. The training should be
dynamic and ongoing.

School districts need to continue to focus on enhancing the diversity in the
schools at all levels from district office administrators to certified employees in the
schools. In the time between achieving this goal, schools can consider partnering with
community members and hiring people to serve as mentors, success coaches, and Elders.
The goal would be for students to have additional advocates and leaders whom they can
relate to on a cultural level. This can creatively occur through cultural activities, sports
opportunities, arts, and more. Finding culturally responsive ways to support this goal can
also achieve higher student engagement in schools. This goal likely will take funding,
time, and effort. School leaders can look for grant opportunities throughout the
community as well as set aside Title I federal funding for this important purpose. In order
for this to go smoothly, principals and school administration would need to put the time
and effort into properly vetting and supporting these community members to be
successful. This can include a general orientation and awareness of school practices with
managing student behavior and adult-student boundaries.

**Timeline for Implementation of the Solution**

Social justice issues and the educational achievement gap are urgent around our
entire world McFarland et al. (2019). The timeline for implementing and reexamining
systems that are not effective should be current and ongoing. Parent groups need to be
formed, and district leaders can benefit from taking a stance of listening and learning and
then adjusting. Voices need to be amplified that have been silent. We need to find new
ways to gather input as we know there are cultural differences, and the parents who need
to be heard may not be the ones who are going to show up at a school board meeting to testify.

A suggested timeline would be to present this information to district leadership in the fall, followed by a task force during the 2020-2021 school year to develop an implementation plan for the 2021-2022 school year. The task force should include district leadership who are decision makers. The task force can identify a plan with a specific timeline for implementation. The key role of proposed solutions will be site level administrators. They will need to successful present the plan as well as follow-through with staff to ensure best practices are being followed and contacts are being made.

**Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution**

The educational achievement gap could be looked at as an educational crisis. School districts across the nation have analyzed the issue with little success in reducing the challenges in our system (2019, National Center for Education Statistics). While the themes that have been brought forth from this study may not solve the complexities of a systemic problem, it does provide a new framework to look at issues that may come up with positive results. An evaluation model should include a method to gather input from parents who have minority children underperforming in school, academically or behaviorally. This input should be taken at the beginning, mid-year, and at the end of the year. While a more personal approach, such as a visit over Zoom, may take longer, it would give schools the opportunity to connect with families in ways that may be missing. I do not think the traditional methods of gathering information, such as an electronic survey, are culturally responsive or would yield the type of information needed. The home visits would also be an opportunity for teachers to build connections and
relationships with families that would support a stronger connection. Another staff member, such as a child specialist or counselor, should accompany the teachers when they make these visits. I would suggest a home visit at the beginning of the year, followed up with phone calls to gather more information as the year goes on.

When traveling last year, I went to a fast-food restaurant that we do not have in Alaska, which was Chick-Fil-A. Servers came up to my car when I was in the drive thru and asked me for my order. While this seemingly small gesture seems simple, it really caught me off guard and provided a much more personal experience. I believe a personal approach with families can have this same effect. Prior to calling the families to interview them, I felt apprehensive that the calls would not be welcomed. The opposite effect happened, families were very willing to share their insight, and many thanked me for my time. I think it is time for schools to provide a new and different approach to gathering input and information from families.

**Implications**

**Practical Implications**

When educators create an environment where all students can be challenged and supported, safe and respected, and heard and seen, learning is optimal. This study contributes to the greater good of society as the research amplifies the voices from parents that had not previously contributed their thoughts. In order to make changes related to a systemic issue such as the gap between subgroups of students, we need to think outside the box and bring all stakeholders on as partners in the solution. When parents are heard and seen, they likely will be more comfortable to go into the school.
Implications for Future Research

This research project could be extended by in-depth studies of specific areas of the achievement gap. This could include solely examining the suspensions or an academic content area. When such a specialized study takes place, more specific solutions and ideas can be brought forward. A focus on one specific culture could also yield specific results. In addition, the Polynesian community was not included in this study, which was the lowest performing group in the district. A study to amplify the voices of their parents would be a meaningful contribution to the Anchorage School District. Another area of future research would be looking at grades seven through twelve and doing research specific to the academic and disciplinary issues. In those grades the district sees an increase in behavioral challenges. A study to review that information would also create a meaningful impact.

Due to COVID-19, all of my interviews took place over the phone. Studies initiated post-pandemic might include face-to-face conversations and visiting the students and schools in person. An in-person conversation provides a human connection that provides a different experience than a phone interview or even a video conference session.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

Gilborn (2017) claim that something inherent in cultures, families, communities, schools, and teachers are responsible for racial gaps; that these achievement disparities are a result of historical, economic, and political decisions we have made over time. My study’s findings relate to this theory. In order to start bridging the gap, schools need to restore relationships with families. A personal approach is needed, and resources in
schools need to be protected and used for students who are underperforming. Staff members at the highest levels need training to reframe thinking and expose implicit biases that may be part of the classroom environment. Students deserve the best from educators and learning environments that are rigorous, engaging, and where support is given. Schools need to partner with community members to support diversity goals while also striving to find qualified staff members that reflect the ethnicities of students. Transformational leadership is needed as the work around the achievement gap is going to take energy, empathy, creativity, and restorative practices (Bass, 1990).

**Summary of the Dissertation in Practice**

The educational achievement gap has been well documented and is a national education issue (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). There have been many elements of the achievement gap studied, which include challenges at both home and school. This study focused on two subgroups of students: African American and Alaska Native. This focus was chosen because African American and Alaska Native students are among the top three groups suspended the most in the Anchorage School District compared to other subgroups (Anchorage School District, n.d.-b). There was also historical trauma amongst both groups related to school.

The purpose of my qualitative study was to describe how Alaska Native and African American parents understand the achievement gap as well as surface their suggestions or solutions for reducing or ending the gap. Four themes came forward: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. Parents from both cultures voiced a strong desire for their child to have a deeper connection to school staff. Many voiced the root of
behavioral or academic problems came from not being understood or feeling connected. A desire for more diversity amongst school staff or simply adults in the school was needed in order for their kids to succeed. Parents asked for an examination of the instructional methods and voiced a strong desire for an increase in student engagement and hands-on learning as well as a teacher assistant in every classroom. Finally, none of the parents interviewed knew what the educational achievement gap was and wanted more information. There was not a significant difference in the perceptions between the Alaska Native and African American parents. There were differences in the tone of the parents and the apprehension felt by the Alaska Native parents sharing their voices. The African American participants readily shared and did not have apprehensions. The Alaska Native participants had a quieter tone and two asked to not participate due to feeling uncomfortable in sharing their opinion.

The recommendations in this DIP are based on the four themes that came forward from parents: connection with school staff, diversity in the schools, instructional methods, and parent understanding of the achievement gap. Moving forward, schools need to give adequate attention to the systemic issues of minorities underperforming in the public-school setting. This attention will take time and resources, but the time is now.
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Dear Anchorage School District Officials,

This spring, I will be doing a qualitative research project as part of my doctoral research in Creighton University’s Interdisciplinary Leadership program. I am studying the educational achievement gap, specifically with Alaska Native and African American students in the Anchorage School District.

As part of my study, I would like to interview approximately 10 Alaska Native and 10 African American parents of students who are experiencing academic challenges and/or social-emotional challenges. The goal is to provide a platform for parents and to share their voices with district administrators who are interested in reducing this gap. The voice of parents is critical as they are key stakeholders in the decisions that are being made.

I would like my research to occur during the spring of 2020. Thank you for your consideration in allowing me to work with one or two principals and interview parents. The students and parents will be chosen based on the child’s data in social-emotional areas (discipline referrals) or performance in core academic areas (standardized assessments). Due to COVID-19, interviews will over the phone or via Zoom. The interviews are expected to be one hour in length. As a principal, I am trained in FERPA protocol and will keep any student data absolutely secure and confidential. Student names will not be published in my dissertation.

I have permission from the Anchorage School District to conduct this study. Please let me know if you are able to be part of this study. I am also able to answer any questions about this study.

Sincerely,

Clare Hill
Dear School Administrator,

This spring, I will be doing a qualitative research project as part of my doctoral research in Creighton University’s Interdisciplinary Leadership program. I am studying the educational achievement gap, specifically with African American and Alaska Native students.

As part of my study, I would like to interview parents of students who are experiencing academic challenges and/or social-emotional challenges. The goal is to provide a platform for parents and to share their voices with district administrators who are interested in reducing this gap. The voice of parents is critical as they are key stakeholders in the decisions that are being made.

I would like to work with you on selecting 10 African American parents and 10 Alaska Native parents that I can interview between May and June of 2020. If you are interested in collaborating but cannot provide all of the 20 parents, I am able to work with more than one school. As stated previously, these students are experiencing academic or social-emotional challenges. Parents will volunteer for this process. Due to COVID-19, interviews will take place via phone or through the platform Zoom.

Please let me know if this project is something that you can entertain. I look forward to further collaboration in the best interest of our students.

Sincerely,

Clare Hill
Hello Clare,

Your research request to conduct a qualitative study of the achievement gap at the Anchorage School District has been reviewed by ASD leadership and is approved. Please coordinate with your ASD director and building staff as needed for the next steps of your data collection. Thank you for submitting a research request and good luck with your project moving forward.

Best,

Carolyn Tix Research Analyst
Anchorage School District
tix.carolyn@asdk12.org
(907) 742-4451
Appendix D

Consent Form

CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: EXPLORING ALASKA NATIVE & AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT PERSPECTIVES: THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP
Principal Investigator’s Name: Clare Hill, Creighton Interdisciplinary Leadership doctoral student and researcher
Principal Investigators’ Phone: 907-854-8093

Study Summary
This is a qualitative research project. Twenty parents or guardians of Alaska Native and African American students will be interviewed to hear their input about the achievement gap.

Important things to know:
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. You can choose not to be in this study or stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this study, your choice will not affect your relationship with the investigator of this study or the school. There will be no penalty to you.

If you agree to participate in this study;
- One visit is required.
- Due to COVID-19, the interview will happen over the phone or through the platform Zoom.
- This visit will take one hour.
- The potential benefits of participating in this study are for the district to hear the voices of parents.
- The potential risks to be in this study are no more than what is encountered in everyday life.
Introduction
You are being asked to take part in a research study to hear from African American and Alaska Native parents about the educational achievement gap. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Study Purpose and Procedures
- The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of the educational achievement gap of parents of Alaska Native and African American students.
- If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you, asking questions about your experience in the school system.
- The interview will take about one hour. Due to COVID-19, the interview can take place over the phone or via Zoom.

Benefits of Participating in the Study
- The potential benefit of this study is contributing your important voice to the conversation at the district level.

Risks of Participating in the Study
- The potential risk to be in this study is no more than is encountered in everyday life.

Confidentiality
We will do everything we can to keep your records confidential. However, it cannot be guaranteed. We may need to report certain information to agencies as required by law. The records we collect identifying you as a participant will be maintained and stored on an external hard drive at my private residence.

Records that identify you and this consent form signed by you may be looked at by others. The list of people who may look at your research records are:
- The investigator
- The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other internal departments that provide support and oversight at Creighton University.

We may present the research findings at professional meetings or publish the results of this research study in relevant journals. However, we will always keep your name and other identifying information private.

Disclosure of Appropriate Alternatives
- An alternative would be to choose not to participate.
Compensation for Participation
- There is no compensation provided for participation.

Contact Information
- This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study. If you have been approached by a third party and wish to participate, please contact the researcher, Clare Hill, at 907-854-8093 or by email at clarehill@creighton.edu.
- For more information and/or questions, please contact the researcher’s dissertation chair, Dr. Britt Watwood, at 804-335-7578 or by email at brittwatwood@creighton.edu.

SIGNATURE CLAUSE
You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, or any effect on your medical care.

*My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.*

__________________________________   __________________
Printed Name of (person signing)   

__________________________________   __________________
Signature of (person signing)   Date Signed

The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) offers you an opportunity (anonymously if you so choose) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; or offer input about this project with an IRB administrator who is not associated with this particular research project. You may call or write to the Institutional Review Board at (402) 280-2126; address the letter to the Institutional Review Board, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178 or by email at irb@creighton.edu.

*A copy of this signed form has been given to me.*   _______ participant’s Initials

For the Research Investigator—I have discussed with this participant (and, if required, the participant’s guardian) the procedure(s) described above and the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the consent document and is competent to give legally effective and informed consent.

__________________________________   __________________
Signature of Responsible Investigator   Date Signed
Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.

2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.

4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.

5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.

6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.

7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.

8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

**Interview overview:**
Success can be measured in a number of different ways; however, one measurement is on standardized tests. Children are expected to have different outcomes, but when there are glaring disparities in entire minority subgroups, district-wide, that paints a picture of a larger, more complex issue. The goal of this interview is to hear from parents and share patterns that come up with the district in order to improve how we educate our young people who are African American and Alaska Native.

**Time of Interview:**
Date:  
Place:  
Interviewer:  
Interviewee:  
Ethnicity of interviewee and ethnicity of children:  
Age of child(ren) of interviewee:  
Number of years in the Anchorage School District:  

**Project description**
Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study on the educational achievement gap, specifically with African American and Alaska Native students. My goal is to uncover themes from the interviews I am conducting to determine if any commonalities exist. Your comments will be kept confidential and remain anonymous. You may refrain from answering any questions or end participation at any point. I anticipate this interview will take approximately 60 minutes, and you are free to take a break whenever needed. Please let me know if you have any concerns or wish to clarify a question asked as we proceed. Please note this interview will be recorded for the purpose of accurate recall unless there are objections. We will begin with the consent form. Here is also my contact information should you want to add or follow up on anything later. I may be in touch in the near future to clarify statements made today. Thank you again for your participation.

**Questions:**

1. Describe your family, who are the members, and what are their ages?
2. Please describe your cultural background. Noting if you are part of a specific tribe or group, or the country your family is from.
3. Tell me about your school experience as a child.
4. Did your child attend preschool prior to entering kindergarten?
5. Can you please describe your child’s current school experience?
6. What are your hopes and dreams for your child?
7. What is going well at your child’s school?
8. How do you stay current with what your child is working on at school?
9. How does the school communicate with your family?
10. What is hard at your child’s school?
11. Does your child struggle with behavioral issues at school?
12. How do you feel when you walk into your child’s school?
13. When you experience a problem at school, how do you handle it? Whom can you talk with?
14. If you were to change anything about your child’s school experience, what would that be?
15. How does the school support your family’s cultural values?
16. What can the school do to let your family know that your culture and heritage are important?
17. Do you know what the educational achievement gap is?
18. Has the school partnered with you to support your child?
19. How can the school district partner with parents?
20. Is there anything else you would like to voice that could help your child be more successful at school?

Secondary Questions? (dealing with behavior)
1. What types of behavioral issues have happened at school?
2. Why do you think those are taking place?
3. How does the school respond to these issues?
4. Do you feel your child’s skin tone is part of the reason they are having challenges?
5. What can the school do differently to support your child and your family when a behavior issue arises?
6. Is there anything else you would like to voice in regard to your child being successful with behavior at school?
Field Notes

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