

**ACHIEVEMENT FACTORS IN RELATIONSHIP TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF  
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

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This research examines a specific group of American Indians; Forest Band and Prairie Band Potawatomi students in grades seven through twelve, who attend the same junior high and high school in rural Northeastern Wisconsin. This research attempts to determine if one potential factor impacting achievement levels for these Potawatomi students might be the fear that doing well academically will be viewed as adopting the dominant culture value system (“acting White”). This then is interpreted as rejection of their tribal culture, which can then result in loss of valued tribal relationships. While this was the primary focus of this research, other potential factors were also examined and are reported here. This combination of information may provide some insight that may challenge existing perceptions of some of the factors affecting Potawatomi student achievement and drop-out rates and potentially lead to programs that lead to academic success for these students.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest problems facing educators today is the underachievement of students, particularly minority students. The difference in the academic performance levels of different ethnic groups is referred to as the “achievement gap”. The achievement gap has recently become of even greater importance with the Congressional reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the principal federal law that affects education from kindergarten through high school. Reauthorization of ESEA included landmark education reform designed to improve student achievement, in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind or NCLB). Requirements of the law mandate that by the 2013-2014 school year all students score in the proficient area in every subject area tested. Thus, the success of every student, including every minority student, has become of critical importance to every school district in the United States with a minority student population.

Data regarding the underachievement of minority students in Wisconsin’s and America’s school systems has significant numbers of students underachieving. “School delay rates are substantially greater for African Americans, Latinos and American Indians than for European and Asian Americans. These groups repeat grades more often and generally take longer to complete school” (Banks and Banks, 1997, p. 199). According to the 2000 census data American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students now have a national drop-out rate of 16.1%, nearly twice the rate of that of white students. In Wisconsin only 78% of American Indian students graduate, as compared to 94% of white students (Guide to the Achievement Gap, 2001)

In a national study of eighth graders, as reported in Indian Education: A Federal Entitlement, 1992 Annual Report, American Indians were found to be at risk more than any other racial or ethnic group. This report also indicated that nearly 30 percent of these eighth graders had repeated a year of school and that almost a third performed below basic proficiency levels in mathematics and reading (National Advisory Council on Indian Education).

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) web page, Guide to the Achievement Gap (2001), indicates that analysis of the 1999-2000 Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exams

shows that “one of the most significant test findings is that the achievement gap is less pronounced in the 4th grade, but grows greater as students progress through school.... Over two-thirds of fourth grade students read at or above the proficient level; by 10th grade less than half of the students scored at or above proficient” (p. 3). In addition, at the tenth grade level only fourteen percent of American Indian students scored proficient in math and twenty-seven percent in science. White students on the other hand were twice as likely to be proficient in science and three times as likely to be proficient in math (p. 3). Nationally, data from the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has more dismal results for both white and American Indian students with only 40% of white 4th graders scoring at or above proficient in reading while only 17% of Native American peers were proficient. In the math area, 35% of 4th grade white students scored at or above proficient while just 14% of Native Americans scored at that level (Reaching Out...Raising American Indian Student Achievement, 2001).

The American Indian population increased 38% from 1980 to 1990 and the median age reported was 23.5 years compared to the overall national median age of 30.0. As we move into the twenty-first century demographically the white majority in this country will become a minority and vice versa. Students of color currently constitute the majority population in at least 41 of the nation’s one hundred largest school districts, and this distribution is increasing on a yearly basis (Banks & Banks, 1997). According to the 1999 College Board Task Force Report (Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement) African American, Latino, and American Indians made up nearly one-third of the under 18 population and by 2030 are predicted to make-up more than two-fifths of the under 18 population. It is therefore critical that the education system become successful in educating minority youth, as this nation will need to rely on them to become the trained/educated work force of the future. The 1999 College Board Task Force Report states, “To put it quite simply, America is a diverse society in which educational differences have the potential to become a progressively larger source of inequality and social conflict. Many people now recognize that eliminating these differences has become a “moral and pragmatic imperative” (p. 1- 2).

This ethnic educational achievement gap is not new and has been of concern by educators and others for several decades. In spite of this, there still has been no clear consensus reached as to the causes. The Wisconsin Youth Futures Technical Report, (1992) as well as a variety of other sources, cite a variety of risk factors within the individuals themselves as well as their families, their peers and social system, the school systems, and cultural and community factors as potential causes for these statistics.

### Statement of the Problem

The majority of the research done regarding underachievement has primarily been about African American and Hispanic students. The statistics cited verify that underachievement is a significant problem for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth and more research is needed in regard to this population of students. Efforts to positively impact the achievement levels of AI/AN youth need to be based on accurate data and research conducted specifically about American Indians and, because of the great diversity between the hundreds of different tribal groups, even more specifically about students from specific tribal or linguistic groups. Armed with accurate data, those who are involved in the education of American Indian youth will be able to make the appropriate information-based decisions that will more effectively address the needs of specific tribal youth. Underachieving minority students may perform poorly in school for many of the same reasons that other students do but they also face additional barriers specifically associated with their ethnicity, and it is important to determine what those specific barriers are. Underachievement is a symptom of not just one problem but of multiple problems.

This study will not be broad enough in scope to examine the impact of the concept of “stereotype threat” on Native American student test performance, but will begin with a look at whether or not “acting White” may be another of the potential factors affecting the academic achievement of American Indian students.

The purpose of this study is to describe the level to which American Indian high school students (specifically Forest Band and Prairie Band Potawatomi students) perceive academic

success as acceptance of, and adoption of, dominant white cultural behaviors and values, as well as rejection of tribal identity, as measured through responses to a survey developed by this researcher.

This study will focus on the following objectives:

1. Determine the current level to which American Indian students have internalized negative stereotypes regarding their level of academic ability.
2. Determine the level to which American Indian students value their relationships with their American Indian peers as compared to relationships with their White peers.
3. Determine how American Indian students view themselves in relation to the tribal community as well as the degree to which students value a tribal community relationship/attachment.
4. Determine the degree to which American Indian students value obtaining a high school diploma.
5. Determine the degree to which American Indian students perceive “acting White” to be different from “acting Indian”.
6. Determine how American Indian students perceive their parent’s feelings about the importance of doing well academically.
7. Determine the level to which American Indian students view academic achievement as “selling out”, “acting White”, and rejection of traditional tribal values and relationships

### Definition of Terms

*Academic underachievement:* Ford and Thomas (1997) define it simply as the discrepancy between ability and performance. This essentially means that performance in academic subjects is below the level that would be expected based on measured abilities on intelligence and aptitude tests. According to Warnemuende and Sampson (1991), underachievement is not in itself the problem, but a symptom that there is a problem which then results in underachievement. For many of us when we think of underachievement we might associate it with lack of effort or motivation - a condition that may be within the control of the individual.

The definition of achievement may vary depending on the situation in which it is being applied. For example, the definition would be somewhat different when talking about underachievement in terms of giftedness.

*African American/Black American:* In terms of this research these two terms may be used interchangeably to represent the same ethnic group. This research will generally utilize the term African American, but some sources cited may use the designation Black American.

*Native American, American Indian/Alaskan Native:* This researcher will generally use the American Indian designation while sources cited may utilize the Native American or AI/AN designation. For all intents of this research either reference used will be essentially referring to any person designated as one quarter degree blood quantum in any of the federally recognized tribal affiliations. The survey that was completed by the subjects of this research used the term “Indian” since that is the way that most of the students in the district refer to themselves.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much of the literature reveals that the majority of education research that has been done focuses on African Americans. In addition, review of the literature shows the multidimensional nature of minority student achievement and the historical evolution of the thinking and the research in this area, including the most recent research findings in regard to the impact of racism and negative stereotypes on academic achievement.

Research that focuses on family factors suggests that such things as low socioeconomic status, low parental aspirations, poor parenting skills, lack of maternal employment, and unstable families with single parent or step parent family living situations have a negative impact on student achievement. Singham (1998), states that educational achievement correlates more strongly with economic status than any other variable. In regard to cultural factors some previous research has found fault with the individual's culture itself indicating that "cultural difference" or a "cultural deficit", were the "cause" of underachievement. Other cultural factors examined have included behavioral styles and communication, and learning styles that differ from that of the majority population.

Within school systems themselves factors such as an inflexible curriculum, negative school climate, alienated teachers, lack of appropriate teacher training, weak administrative support and lack of counseling services available to students have been cited as factors contributing to lower student achievement levels. In the social/peer factor realm either a lack of friends, or having friends who have school problems or a negative attitude toward school, has been shown to negatively affect student achievement levels, as well as such things as negative peer pressure and lack of parental involvement. Those who support this view conclude that various social pathologies of, for example, the black community or the black culture are at fault for black kids' lack of achievement.

A variety of individual and psychological factors have also been cited as impacting achievement. Among these are low self-esteem and self-concept, feelings of isolation, alienation, anxiety, and feeling that decisions impacting their life are outside their locus of

control. Delinquent behavior, behavior problems and drug/alcohol use are also included as potential risk factors for negatively impacting achievement. The list of possible risk factors is extensive making it clear that “the phenomenon of underachievement is as complex and multifaceted as the students to whom this label is applied” (Ford, 1996).

For minority peoples, another potential explanation has been proposed supporting the idea that minority people are genetically/intellectually inferior and therefore not capable of doing well academically. Singham (1998) calls this the genetic model, which was most recently presented by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein (authors of The Bell Curve) who, “after making the appropriate regretful noises to indicate their lack of racial prejudice ... concluded that the educational disparity is a fact of nature, the results of long term evolutionary selection that has resulted in blacks simply not having the genetic smarts to compete equally with whites” (p. 3). There has been little evidence that minority peoples are genetically inferior to whites, and there has, in fact, been evidence through some promising successful programs, that the achievement gap in education can be narrowed and even eliminated (Singham, 1998).

Research conducted in the last decade has revealed the impact of additional factors or barriers that have previously been ignored or underappreciated as underlying causes for the persistent differences in performance across racial/ethnic groups. One barrier that has been identified is that of “stereotype vulnerability” which results from negative stereotypes held about a group of people (Steele & Aronson, 1994). In this instance both black and white undergraduate students who had comparable Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were given test items from the Graduate Record Examination. In the first test situation they were told that the objective of the experiment was to measure ability in order to understand what personal factors are associated with high or low ability. When the second round of tests was administered they were told that the purpose was to examine the psychology of problem solving. Blacks performed significantly worse than Whites when the test was presented as being a measure of ability, but as well as Whites in the second test which was labeled a problem-solving situation (Steele & Aronson, 1994).

In later research conducted by Steele and Aronson, the terminology was changed (as reported by DeAngelis, 1996) from “stereotype vulnerability” to “stereotype threat”. According to Steele’s social psychology theory the source of achievement problems for women in math and Blacks in school achievement is ‘stereotype threat’. As discussed previously, this threat for Blacks is that they are short on academic ability in comparison to Whites. “The fear of being judged by and perhaps conforming to the negative stereotype causes them to effectively ‘freeze up’ and perform worse in the area than they otherwise would” (DeAngelis, 1996). This has been identified as one of the factors involved in the lower academic achievement level of African Americans (Steele & Aronson, 1994). Stereotype threat occurs when an individual is in a situation (such as a standardized testing situation) in which poor performance would support an existing stereotype of inferior abilities because of the individual’s ethnicity or gender. In response to this stereotype threat the ethnic or gender individual’s performance on the test would then suffer, whereas those who do not labor under such a preconception will not have their performance level affected. Individuals may then attempt to distance themselves from stereotype threats. For example, if an African American is not heavily invested in a domain (such as school) - possibly because the stereotype threat is too great - they may disavow it completely by dropping out of school.

Signithia Fordham (1988) believes that those students, who want to succeed in school and after school in the work world, will attempt to develop a raceless persona in which they minimize their relationship to the Black community and the stigma attached to “Blackness”. In order to achieve vertical mobility they become “un-Black” (p. 58). Her research also indicates that racelessness appears to be more prevalent among high achieving students.

Studies have also shown that some students may be torn between wanting to achieve academic success and the desire to be accepted by their peers. This has been demonstrated in the case of African American students who have come to see that being successful academically seems to be synonymous with “acting White” and thus contributing to their simultaneous rejection of their ethnic identity. As a result some African American students have adopted a

strategy that Fordham (1988) identifies as “racelessness”; in which students behave in a race neutral manner in an effort to not draw attention to themselves. In 1999, the College Board created the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement. The 1999 report of findings by this group states that, “There is evidence that some of these underrepresented minority students come to view doing well in school as “acting White”. For students who have been experiencing academic difficulties from the start of their school careers, this may be another reason to lower their academic effort, especially once they reach middle school or high school. For high achieving minority students in such settings it may mean that they have less support from their peers for doing well in school than would otherwise be the case” (p. 18).

In addition, Singham (1998) identifies African Americans as an “involuntary minority” (in this country due to enslavement) as opposed to voluntary minorities (those who have come to this country through their free choice to do so, such as Asians, and earlier in history Jews and Germans). Singham’s research indicates that the performance of any given minority may depend on a complex interplay of factors, such as whether the minority is an involuntary or a voluntary one, as well as the perceptions of the dominant community toward that minority. Involuntary minorities can be exposed to more pervasive and extensive exclusion from the mainstream than other minorities. Having experienced this exclusion, they maybe more likely to avoid learning skills, since their efforts will not result in the same kind of pay off that others might experience. To separate themselves from the White mainstream they may employ oppositional practices as a form of group cohesion and support.

The research that is available in this area focuses on African Americans, but Singham identifies American Indians as also being an involuntary minority in this country, due to conquest (1998). Thus, while much of the research that has been done in this area has not included American Indians it may be possible that the research findings can be somewhat generalized to them as well, as a result of also being an involuntary minority.

Griffin (2000) cited Ogbu and Steele in his article Academic Disidentification, Race and High School Dropouts. He states that Ogbu in a 1992 work discusses involuntary minorities and

the development of “secondary cultural differences” (i.e. differences that develop after confronting the dominant culture) as a way for the involuntary minority to cope with their subordination to the dominant culture. These secondary cultural differences can lead to what he calls “cultural inversion”, which Ogbu explains;

...is the tendency for involuntary minorities to regard certain forms of behavior, events, symbols and meanings as inappropriate for them because they are characteristics of White Americans. At the same time the minorities value other forms of behavior, events, symbols and meaning, often the opposite, as more appropriate for themselves. (p. 2)

Griffin (2000) cites research that documents Black and Hispanic students appearing to have oppositional subcultures that devalue academic accomplishments. These students face peer pressure to resist academic success. Failure to do so can result in their being identified as either “acting White” or being labeled as a “school boy” or “school girl.” The process of devaluing education and engaging in oppositional behaviors is termed “academic disidentification.” (p. 2).

St. Germaine defines a process for Native American students that he terms “cultural discontinuity,” in which minority children who are initially raised in a distinct culture of their own are then put into a school system that promotes the values of the majority culture. This can result in a clash of cultures in which the minority child feels they must choose one culture over the other. The paradox then becomes, “success (in school) becomes failure (in the community), and failure becomes success” (1996, p. 2). This then can evolve into a process whereby “failure is not simply the passive act of neglecting to complete required tasks, but that it may be a status that is actively pursued by ethnic minority students in order to preserve their culture of organ” (St. Germaine, 1996, p. 2). St. Germaine acknowledges that cultural discontinuity is only one of the obstacles that are present for the Native American child, as well as other similar minority children.

Steele believes that the data he has collected illustrates the “situational nature of stereotype threat” even in circumstances that would initially appear to be neutral. The fear that may result

from such a situation can cause students to disinvest in education, saying that it's not important and they are therefore not going to put out any effort to master it. In that way a poor performance is only a measure of the individual's lack of interest in the subject and not a sign of their inability to master it.

Whatever the terminology used, be it stereotype vulnerability, stereotype threat, academic disidentification, cultural discontinuity, or a raceless persona - what they all have in common is the conflict and/or ambivalence that is being experienced by minority students in achievement oriented academic settings.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter delineates the subject selection process as well as provides a description of those subjects. This is followed by a description of the instrumentation and procedures utilized in the collection of the data.

#### Subjects

Subjects were composed of male and female American Indian high school students from the Northeastern part of Wisconsin. Subjects are of Forest Band (specifically Forest County) and Prairie Band Potawatomi heritage. Participation was on a voluntary basis but an attempt was made to include all eligible students, as the population size is small (approximately 43 students in the Waban, Wisconsin School District). An effort was also made to include five students who had dropped out of school in the previous year, bringing the total potential subject number to forty-eight. Five students opted not to participate. Of those who chose to participate ten were junior high (7th and 8th grade) students (7 males, 3 females), twenty-three were high school students in grades nine through twelve (8 males, 15 females) and three students who had recently dropped out of school (3 males). There were a total of 18 males and 18 females for a total of 36 subjects.

#### Instrumentation

A twenty-seven statement survey that utilized a 5-point Likert Scale response system was developed by this researcher. For each statement students were able to respond on a continuum from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Survey statements were grouped into several different categories; feelings about being of American Indian heritage and the importance of such things as history, culture, and language (tribal attachment/belonging), and feelings about school, teachers, grades and participation in activities and leadership positions (school attachment and belonging). Other statements covered such things as friendships with both Indian and non-Indian students (peer relationships), family support for education, their personal goals for graduation, and their perceptions of themselves as students (achievement orientation).

### Procedures

This researcher is a Title VII, Indian Education Act, Project Coordinator and has been employed in this capacity for more than 25 years. As a result, access to the names of all of the Potawatomi students in the district that were in grades seven through twelve, including recent drop-outs were readily available as a professional staff member. As a result of this long-term employment the researcher was very familiar with the majority of the families and students. All 48 students in this category were selected as potential subjects due to the small sample size. Since the survey was administered during the summer, it was not necessary to get the approval of the school district.

The Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Stout reviewed all parts of the consent form (Appendix A) and the survey instrument (Appendix B). The research project was then presented to the Wabeno Indian (Potawatomi) Education Committee and their approval, in the form of a letter of support, was obtained. (Appendix C) Home visits were made to the parents/guardians of students. They were shown the letter of support, and the research project, the surveys and consent forms were explained. Parents and students were given an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. The surveys were then left at the home. Participants had the option of returning the surveys and consent forms in stamped and addressed envelopes which could then be mailed or plain white envelopes to be picked up at a later time. The majority of the surveys were picked up on return visits. Five students opted not to participate, three students were not located, one student moved out of the area, and three did not return their surveys. Thirty-six surveys were returned (75%).

### Limitations

One limitation of this study was that the survey was administered during the summer. The potential exists that the results could be somewhat different if it were administered during the school year. A second potential limitation may be the level of familiarity that exists between the researcher and the students who completed the survey. The level of familiarity could potentially

affect their survey responses as they may have responded according to the way they believe the researcher was seeking.

## CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Thirty-six surveys were completed and returned, out of a total pool of 48 potential subjects. Eighty percent of the subjects indicated that they were half or full blood quantum Potawatomi. Subjects reported that 61% of their mothers and 53% of their fathers had reached a high school education level, and that 25% of mothers, 22% of fathers had obtained a technical school or college level education.

Data percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Twenty-five survey statements have been grouped into four categories while two statements are reported independently from these four categories.

The first category of statements that will be analyzed are those statements relating to feelings about the importance of tribal relationships and tribal affiliation. This category, encompassing four of the survey statements, will be labeled tribal attachment and belonging. Seventy-two percent of the students responded that they participate in tribal activities (statement #5), 61% indicated that it was important to them to speak their tribal language (statement #1), while 36% responded that they were not sure whether or not it was important. Another 75% of the students responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that it was important for them to be part of their tribal community (#2) and 25% were not sure whether it was important or not. One hundred percent of the students responded that it was important to know about their tribal history and culture (#4). The most positive response of all, not only for this grouping of statements but for all 27 statements, was in regard to their feelings about being Indian. One hundred percent of the students responding to the survey indicated that they liked being Indian (statement #27) and 94% of those students indicated that they strongly agreed with this statement. One junior high student it seems, felt so strongly about this statement that they were moved to not only circle a response but to also write “hell yeah” next to the statement as well.

The next category of statements is that of peer relationships. Two statements make up this category: #18 “I have more Indian friends than White” and #19 “I have both Indian and White

friends.” On one hand 89% of students surveyed indicated that they had both Indian and White friends, while 47% said they have more Indian friends than White. The school district in which these students reside is approximately 15% American Indian with the remaining 85% of the student body being Caucasian. While the majority of students indicated that they had both Indian and White friends, just under half of those surveyed seem to be indicating that more of their friends were Indian. Interestingly, 42% of students responded that they were “not sure” whether or not they had more Indian friends. There may be a variety of reasons why students responded this way, i.e. the fluidity and often changing nature of friendships, the definition of friend and uncertainty about who fits that definition, uncertainty regarding whether or not relatives (i.e. cousins) can be friends, or variation in the degree of friendships ( i.e. acquaintances, classmates, best friends).

The third grouping of statements to be examined will be the achievement orientation category. In the area of family support 92% indicated that it is important to their family that they get good grades (#9). In comparison, 89% responded that it is important to them that they get good grades (#3), and that it is important that other Indian students get good grades (#6). However, it seems that while these students say that getting good grades is important to both them and their families, in reality the majority of Potawatomi students indicated that in their view they actually do not get good grades. The survey contained two statements that dealt with student’s views of their level of academic achievement (# 7 “I get good grades” and # 12 “I usually get good grades”). There was a high level of internal consistency in student responses to these two statements with 42% indicating that they “usually get good grades” and 44% indicating that they “get good grades”.

As to their perceptions of whether or not other Indian students get good grades (#11) 75% selected the “not sure” response. However, 61% were also “not sure” about whether or not White students get good grades (#13). Another statement, (#14) “Indian students are as smart as White students” had 86% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Once again, one student felt compelled to further explain their choice of response by clarifying

that he agreed that Indian students were as smart as White Students “if they would try”. This would seem to indicate that this student sees a discrepancy between what Indian students are capable of achieving and what they actually achieve based on the perception of the level of effort expended. Finally, the last statement response to be examined in this category is statement #8 “It is important to me that I graduate from high school.” Of the 27 statements, the response to this one resulted in having the second highest ranking (after “I like being Indian”) with 72% of respondents strongly agreeing that it was important to them to graduate.

The responses of these Potawatomi students in regard to the achievement orientation statements seem to indicate that they value getting good grades and graduating, not only for themselves but for other Indian students, and that they see Indian students in general, as having the capability of obtaining “good” grades. However, their responses about the grades that they actually achieve seem to indicate that there is a discrepancy between what they perceive as having importance and value and what exists in reality.

The fourth category of statements is that of school attachment and belonging. It is comprised of eight statements that center around questions about their level of school involvement, their views regarding student and teacher relationships and their feelings about school. In regard to school involvement there were two statements (#22) “I participate in sports or other activities as school” and (#15) “Indian students are involved in some leadership positions at school.” Thirty-six percent of students indicated that they participate in sports or other activities, while the majority (47%) responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (they do not participate). Two students opted not to respond to the statement about leadership positions while 59% responded that they were “not sure” and 31% percent agreed that Indian students are in leadership positions.

Six statements revolved around student and teacher relationships and American Indian student perceptions of their relationships with teachers (four statements) as well as their perceptions regarding teachers and White students (two statements). The first statement was #20, “my teachers like me.” Two students did not respond, and of the remaining students, 58%

agreed that their teachers like them, while 29% were not sure if their teachers liked them or not. Fifty percent of the students also felt that teachers have helped them a lot (#25), while 31% were not sure. Fifty-three percent perceived that teachers in the district like to see Indian students succeed (#23), but 42% of the students were not sure if that was the case or not. Another statement asked if it was important for teachers to know Potawatomi tribal history and culture (#26) and 81% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

Regarding Indian student perceptions of White student and teacher relationships (all of the teaching staff is Caucasian), the first statement was “White students get more attention from teachers than Indian students” (#21). One student did not respond, 42% were not sure, 37% agreed and 20% disagreed. The second of these two statements, “Some teachers seem to like White students more than Indian students” (#24) showed that a majority of students were not sure, while 31% percent agreed that teachers seem to like White students more. The last statement in this category to be examined is #10 “I like school”. One student did not respond, 37% agreed or strongly agreed, and 17% disagreed/strongly disagreed while the largest percentage 44% responded that they were “not sure.”

The final two statements to be reported are those that have the strongest connection to the purpose of this research project. The researcher wanted to determine if one of the most significant factors impacting the academic success rate of Forest Band and Prairie Band Potawatomi students in the Wabeno School District, may be the perception that if one does well academically they will be viewed as “acting White”, adopting White values and behaviors, thereby rejecting their tribal heritage and relationships. In response to statement #17, “It is OK for Indian students to get good grades,” 97% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed. In comparison, for statement #16, “If I do well in school, some of my friends will think that I am “acting White”, 64% of the students responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, while 14% agreed that this could be the case and 22% were “not sure”.

The final portion of the survey asked the students to respond in one or two sentences to the following: How important or unimportant is school and getting an education (high school

diploma) to you? Eighty-six percent of the students responded in very positive ways to this question, some of them expressing a very strong desire to graduate and providing the reasons why they felt it was important. (See Appendix D for a listing of student responses to this open-ended question). Four students did not respond to the question or wrote that they were not sure (11%), while only one student (3%) responded that they “don’t care”.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY

The survey that was administered to Forest Band and Prairie Band Potawatomi students included 27 statements and one open-ended question. Twenty-five of the statements were grouped into four different categories with the remaining two statements being reported separately along with the open-ended question responses. These results will now be summarized by category and then discussed in regard to the significance of the conclusions may be drawn from them.

The survey results indicate that in the area of peer relationships 89% of students surveyed indicated that they have both Indian and White friends with 47% of them recognizing that they have more Indian friends than White while 42% of them being not sure

Based on the responses of the students in the area of tribal attachment and belonging it appears that they feel strongly attached to the Potawatomi tribal community. In general, these responses seem to indicate that these Potawatomi students value their tribal heritage and culture and that participation in tribal activities is important to them. While some students were uncertain about the importance of some components of their heritage (their tribal language), their positive feelings about being Potawatomi appear to be quite strong and positive.

The achievement orientation responses appear to indicate that the majority of students value academic achievement and obtaining a high school diploma and that they see themselves as just as capable (“as smart as”) their White counterparts. While consciously 86% responded that they see themselves as being on an equal level with Caucasian students it is important to keep in mind the research done by Steele and Aronson seems to indicate that stereotype threat may impact student achievement on a subconscious level as well as a conscious one. Even so, according to the student’s responses, less than half of them actually get “good grades”. Thus, there is a considerable gap between what they say they value and what is, in fact, reality.

Examination of their responses to the school attachment and belonging grouping may provide some insight into factors that might contribute to the apparent gap between what they say they value in terms of achievement and what they actually achieve. In general, student

responses to this grouping of statements were less positive than to statements in the other categories (see Appendix D). With one exception there were many more “not sure” responses in this grouping of statements. The statement that was an exception dealt with whether or not it was important for teachers to know the Potawatomi tribal history and culture. Eighty-one percent of students responded that it was important. Unfortunately, there was no statement directed at determining their perceptions of the teacher’s actual level of knowledge of Potawatomi history and culture.

In regard to participation in school life, just over one-third of students indicated that they are actively involved in school life through participation in sports and other school activities.

Unfortunately, 29% of the Potawatomi students are not sure whether or not their teachers like them (2 students, 5%, did not respond) and only approximately half feel that teachers have helped them and that they care about whether or not they succeed.

Finally, as to whether or not their friends (Indian peers) may perceive them as adopting White values and behaviors if they do well academically, 64% of students responded that this was not the case for them. However, for the remaining students, 22% were “not sure” and 14% agreed that this could be the case.

### Conclusions

A high percentage of the total possible surveys were returned (75%). With a few exceptions, students responded to every survey statement. Family and student familiarity with the researcher as well as the support of the Wabeno Indian Education Committee for the research project hopefully contributed to a high comfort level in regard to participation in the survey. Of concern to this researcher is the possibility that as a result of the personal familiarity with the students, they may have responded to statements the way they believe they should respond to them, rather than the way they would honestly respond. A second concern involves the fact that the survey was administered during the summer (August), and while students are “on vacation” from school. During this hiatus they may have an opportunity to divorce themselves to some extent from the reality and potential frustrations and conflicts that they experience during the school

year. As a result, perhaps, their responses to some statements in the achievement orientation and school attachment and belonging category may have been positively affected by the “rose colored glasses” of summer vacation. Additional evaluation during the school year may be appropriate.

Overall, the most positive responses were those in the tribal attachment and belonging category; in particular, their feelings about being Indian (Potawatomi) were quite strong. The strength of this response seems to indicate a significant level of value for tribal community relationships and feelings of belonging to the tribal community. The strength of this response supports research indicating the value placed on their cultural relationships.

In the peer relationships category, while the majority of students (89%) indicated that they had both Indian and White friends, almost half responded that they had more Indian friends than White. An area of concern here was that 42% of the respondents were “not sure” of whether they had more Indian friends or not. Is this response indicative of feelings of confusion about friendships or in regard to the statement itself? Was the statement itself asking for the wrong information? Would the quality or degree of friendships be more important than the quantity? What exactly was it that students were not sure of? Further research with more specific statements or a statement that allowed for a more specific response may be helpful. Without that information, the results seem to be somewhat inconclusive in this category.

Examining the achievement orientation category seems to indicate that students and their families generally value academic achievement (i.e. getting good grades as well as graduating) and that they see themselves as capable of doing so, since a strong majority of students view Indian students as being as intelligent as their White counterparts. Student responses to the open-ended question also support this conclusion. In reality, less than half of the students who indicate that academic achievement is important are actually achieving that standard of performance, according to their own assessment. That their level of performance does not rise to their purported level of aspiration could potentially be due to a number of factors: weaknesses in basic skills, underdeveloped study or organizational habits, low teacher expectations,

communication or learning/teaching style variations, negative school climate, feelings of alienation or isolation, drug or alcohol use, absenteeism, etc. This data would also potentially support research cited earlier, such as St. Germaine's "cultural discontinuity" perspective regarding the clash of cultures and the "success in school becomes failure in the community and failure becomes success" paradox. Could there be a subconscious fear that doing well academically could result in loss of valued tribal community relationships, and as a result of the perception, that they have adopted White dominant society values?

While this data does not provide definitive answers about the separation between the level of academic achievement desired and the level attained, perhaps what is most important here is the fact that these Potawatomi students seemingly value academic achievement and graduation. This is important information that may be in direct conflict with beliefs/misconceptions currently held by a variety of adults (school administration, staff, parents and others) that in general the Indian students "just don't care" and that "they aren't motivated." Certainly such things as low academic achievement, absenteeism, tardiness, failure to turn in work, and statements made by some students to the effect that "they don't care", "they don't need a diploma", or "this is stupid" may lead people to the reasonable conclusion that a large percentage of the Indian students "really don't care". However, based on the information from this survey, it may be a more constructive approach as well as more conducive to change to recognize that this data may reflect student's true feelings, whereas, angry words expressed during moments of frustration and anger may be a cover up to keep others from knowing that they do care. Examining how the students responded can hopefully help concerned staff to move beyond negative assumptions and to be able to not only recognize what other factors may be involved in perpetuating high drop-out rates and low achievement, but to plan strategies for working with the tribal community, parents, and students to initiate change.

The school attachment and belonging data may also provide valuable information for determining some starting points for impacting the status quo of underachievement. Of the four categories of statements, the mean student responses and percentages of students selecting

positive responses was lowest for this grouping (see Appendix E for the ranking of statements according to the mean response). Only about a third of respondents view Indian students as being in leadership positions or active in participating in sports or other activities at school (more participate in tribally sponsored activities). In addition, only 64% of students thought that their teachers liked them and only half believed that teachers wanted to see them succeed and had helped them toward that goal. If significant numbers of students believe that teachers “don’t care” about whether or not they succeed the potential also exists that an “I don’t care” response by students may at least in part be a reflection of the perceived lack of caring, understanding or support they feel from school staff.

The responses to these school attachment and belonging statements seem to indicate that this is an area of weakness for a number of students. For students who may be experiencing the stress of cultural discontinuity, to also feel that they are not in a warm and supportive environment could potentially make it even easier for them to decide to not extend themselves academically and to give up, drop-out and distance themselves from the discomfort of the situation. Discussing Indian student perceptions in this regard as well as ways to initiate change can hopefully lead to development of a supportive school climate that would enable students to reach their academic potential.

### Recommendations

In regard to the primary focus of this research, the data would seem to indicate that for some students the possibility does exist that they may be seen as “acting White” and rejecting their tribal values and culture if they are successful academically. While the majority of Potawatomi students in this school district are apparently not experiencing this conflict, it would seem appropriate to consider the possibility of its existence for some students. However, as the brief review of previous research has indicated, this is but one of many factors to be considered in determining what may be affecting AI/AN student achievement. It would be important to keep in mind the complexity of the issue and to realize that because it is so complex, it may require further and possible on-going research to further clarify some of the concerns noted earlier, i.e.

would students place such a high value on academic achievement if they were surveyed during the regular academic year? Students indicated that they have both Indian and non-Indian friends, but do the friendships with other Indian students carry more weight because of the value placed on tribal relationships?

In addition to other research, the following recommendations should prove helpful for those seeking to change the status quo of underachievement to a status quo of achievement:

1. Recognize that the anger and challenging behaviors exhibited by some students may be just a symptom of the problem and therefore cannot be the basis for a diagnosis of an individual student nor a generalization about a specific population of students.
2. Provide for a means of on-going dialog between families, students, the tribal community and school staff. This dialog should not focus on finding fault or assessing blame but may need to be oriented toward providing opportunities to heal from past hurts which, once accomplished, can enable individuals to move forward in developing plans for change.
3. Provide for a diverse group of parents, school staff, students and tribal community members to create an “affirmative development” plan, as recommended by the College Board in their 1999 report, Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement.
4. Suggest that those individuals interested in initiating change in the area of minority student achievement refer to current research regarding “best practices,” and effective strategies. One potential resource Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education (1998), by Linda Miller Cleary and Thomas Peacock, is a collection of what sixty teachers have found to be successful approaches with other American Indian students.
5. Consider and dialog about all possible risk factors (i.e. individual, family, peer, tribal and school communities) together rather in isolation from each other in order to be able to formulate school improvement strategies for addressing student needs, thereby enabling Potawatomi students to be more prevalent among the most academically successful

students in the school district.

6. Focus on building supportive relationships between school staff and students. As stated by Leary and Peacock (1998), “The relationship between students and teachers is probably what is more essential than what is taught and how it is taught. For many American Indian children, learning cannot begin until the teacher is perceived as safe and caring” (p. 245).

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## APPENDIX A

Debra Kruger of the Guidance and Counseling Department at the University of Wisconsin Stout is conducting a research project titled: Achievement Factors in Relationship to Academic Success of American Indian Students. We would appreciate your participation in this study. Before completing the survey please read and then sign this consent form, indicating that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you understand your rights as a participant.

It is not anticipated that this study will present any medical or social risk to you. The information gathered will be kept confidential and reports of the findings of this research will not contain the names or any other identifying information of any of the participants. Once the study is completed, the analyzed findings will be available to your parents and the Wabeno Indian Education Committee. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. If at any time you wish to stop participating, you may do so without any consequences to you.

Questions or concerns about the research study should be directed to Debra Kruger, the researcher, at 276-7404, or the research advisor, Jill Stanton at 715 232-1622. Questions about the rights of research subjects can be addressed to Sue Foxwell, Human Protections Administrator, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 Harvey Hall, Menomonie, WI., 54751, (715 232-1126).

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### Consent Form

I understand that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may discontinue (stop) my participation at any time without consequence. I understand that I will be asked to complete a survey which consists of 27 statements and one open-ended question. I understand that I have the option of not answering a question if I chose not to do so. It is estimated that it will take approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey. I understand that when I complete the survey I should fold it and put it in the envelope provided, which may be either mailed or will be picked up.

I understand that any information about me that is collected during this study will be held in the strictest confidence and will not be part of my permanent record. I understand that in order for this research to be effective and valuable certain personal information needs to be collected. I also understand that the strictest confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study and that only the researcher and the advisor will have access to confidential information. I understand that at the conclusion of this study all records which identify individual participants will be destroyed. I am aware that I have not and am not waiving any legal or human rights by agreeing to this participation.

I have read and understood the above information, including the potential risks, benefits, and my rights as a participant, and all of my questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction.

**I hereby give my informed consent to participate in this research study.**

Signature of Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### *American Indian Student Survey*

*The results of this survey are confidential. Individual student responses will not be shared with anyone. Please do not put your name on the survey. Any questions about this survey should be directed to Debra Kruger at 276-7404. When you have completed the survey please put it in the envelope that was provided and seal the envelope. Your time and help in completing this survey are greatly appreciated!*

#### Background Information:

Sex: male \_\_\_\_\_ Grade level: Junior high \_\_\_\_\_  
 female \_\_\_\_\_ High school \_\_\_\_\_  
 Left school before graduation \_\_\_\_\_

What grades do you get in most of your classes? (Check one) \_\_\_\_\_ A's  
 \_\_\_\_\_ B's  
 \_\_\_\_\_ C's  
 \_\_\_\_\_ D's  
 \_\_\_\_\_ F's

Are you tribally enrolled? \_\_\_\_\_ No  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Yes --- If yes, what degree of Indian blood are you?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ full blood  
 \_\_\_\_\_ half blood  
 \_\_\_\_\_ one quarter  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Not sure

Highest level of education reached by each parent:

Mother _____ grade school _____ GED _____ high school _____ Technical school _____ College	Father _____ grade school _____ GED _____ high school _____ Technical school _____ College
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Please circle only one response for each statement. Circle the letters that goes with the response that most closely describes how you feel about each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. It is important to me that I speak my tribal language.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
2. It is important to be part of my tribal community.	SD	D	NS	A	SA

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
3. It is important to me to get good grades in school.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
4. Is it important to know about tribal history and culture.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
5. I participate in tribal activities.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
6. It is important for Indian students to get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
7. I get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
8. It is important to me that I graduate from high school.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
9. It is important to my family that I get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
10. I like school.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
11. Indian students get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
12. I usually get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
13. White students get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
14. Indian students are as smart as white students.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
15. Indian students are in some leadership positions at school.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
16. If I do well in school some of my friends will think that I am "acting white".	SD	D	NS	A	SA
17. It is OK for Indian students to get good grades.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
18. I have more Indian friends than white friends.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
19. I have both Indian and white friends.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
20. My teachers like me.	SD	D	NS	A	SA

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
21. White students get more attention from the teachers than Indian students.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
22. I participate in sports or other activities at school.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
23. The teachers at my school like to see Indian students succeed.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
24. Some teachers seem to like white students more than Indian students.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
25. The teachers at school have helped me a lot.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
26. It is important for my teachers to know about Indian history and culture.	SD	D	NS	A	SA
27. I like being Indian.	SD	D	NS	A	SA

**Please write a response to the following question.**

**How important or unimportant is school and getting an education (high school diploma) to you? (Please use the back side if you need more room.)**

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**Thank You! YOUR TIME IN COMPLETING THIS SURVEY IS APPRECIATED!**

**Please put this survey in the envelope that you were given and seal the envelope.**

### Appendix C

**Note: The attached Appendix C is a letter of support from the Wabeno Indian Education Committee. I have known some of the Wabeno Indian Education Committee members for much of my life and have also had the pleasure of working with some of them for as much as 25 years. The attached letter of support reflects that level of familiarity.**

**To: Debra Kruger**

**From: Wabeno Indian Education Committee**

**Dear Debbie:**

**In regards to your student project titled: Achievement Factors in Relationship to Academic Success of American Indian Students, the Education committee would like you to know that you have our support and best wishes on this project.**

**We understand that the committee will receive the results of the survey.**

**Good luck on the project!**

*Patsy Shepard, Sec.*  
**Patsy Shepard**  
**WIEC Secretary**

## Appendix D

### Student Responses to Open Ended Question

**Question: How important or unimportant is school and getting an education (high school diploma) to you?**

Note: Of the thirty-six students who completed the survey thirty-four of them wrote a response to this open -ended question.

I think that it is important. You need that in life. I try and I want to get my diploma.

It is important to me because I want to get a good college and I don't want my self or my parent to think that I can't do this, but I can (being smart not dumb).

It is important to get a diploma because I'm the oldest child and I have to be a role model. Also you need a high school diploma to get a job.

It's very important to me. I want to succeed in everything that I do especially high school. I want to make both of my parents happy. I want to live life to the fullest.

Important because you can apply to college and maybe become successful in the goals that you are trying to achieve. To prove to people that you can be Native American and graduate.

It is important to get your high school diploma to get a job and go to a good college.

I think that it is very important to get a good education and a diploma.

Because I think it is important for Indians to get good grades for a better future.

It's really important to me. It's something I want to do for myself and my mom.

It is important to me to get a high school diploma so I can go to college and to get an education.

It is important because you need to know stuff in order to do college. A diploma is good because it will take you farther than high school, like college and getting a job.

It is very important because in today's work field you usually need more than just a high school diploma.

Because you need it now days to get good jobs.

It is really important to me because I want to be able to tell my kids how I succeeded in life and how good things like a high school diploma mean in the real world.

I am not sure.

It is important to me because I know I need an education to succeed in the real world.

I don't care if I graduate or not.

It is important to me because I want to graduate from high school so that I can go to college.

I do not know.

It is important to me because I don't know if my mom or dad graduated, so I am.

I think it is important to me because I wanna make something of my self because I'm here and there is nothing else that interests me.

It is really important to me because I want to be successful in life. I plan on going to college and being a doctor or a marine biologist. Everybody should at least graduate. They need skills from school later in life.

I think that it's really important for me to graduate.

Very good.

It is important because my mother and father want me to graduate and go to college and have a good job and to be educated. It is also unimportant because I

think I have better things to do and it doesn't seem important at times, so I just stop trying awhile.

For me to graduate from high school it is important. It is important to graduate so I can get into college.

It is very important to me to graduate from high school and so do my parents think so too.

I need to get my diploma so I can go to the college that I have been wanting to go to for further education in computer programming.

I think that it is really important to get a good education to show some people that we can do it.

It's important to get a education, a high school diploma can get you some good jobs in the world.

It is really important because you need to know about school and because you need to now days in order to get a good job.

Its very important to me to graduate. I need to graduate in order to reach all of my goals and dreams.

Very important, because some day with all I've learned, I will make a difference in the near future.

## Appendix E

### Ranking of Statements According to Mean Student Responses

Note: Statements are ranked from those with the highest mean response to those with the lowest. Highest possible mean was 5.0 and lowest possible was 1.0

Statement	Mean Response	Category
I like being Indian.	4.94	Tribal attachment/belong.
It is important to me that I graduate.	4.7	Achievement Orientation
It is important to my family that I get good grades.	4.47	Achievement Orientation
It is OK for Indian students to get good grades.	4.42	Achievement Orientation
Indian students are as smart as White students.	4.4	Achievement Orientation
It is important for Indian students to get good grades.	4.38	Achievement Orientation
It is important to know about tribal history and culture.	4.36	Tribal attachment/belong
It is important to me to get good grades.	4.33	Achievement Orientation
I have both Indian and White friends.	4.26	Peer Relationships
It is important for my teachers to know tribal history and culture.	4.13	School attachment/belong.
It is important to be part of my tribal community.	4.06	Tribal attachment/belong
It is important to me to speak my tribal language.	3.85	Tribal attachment/belong
Teachers like to see Indian students succeed.	3.69	School attachment/belong.
I participate in tribal activities.	3.66	Tribal attachment/belong
My teachers like me.	3.56	School attachment/belong.
Teachers have helped me a lot.	3.5	School attachment/belong.
I have more Indian friends than White.	3.47	Peer Relationships
White students get good grades.	3.36	(Not categorized)
Indian students are in some leadership positions.	3.27	School attachment/belong.
I like school.	3.26	School attachment/belong.
I get good grades.	3.22	School attachment/belong.
White students get more attention from teachers than Indian students.	3.22	School attachment/belong.
Some teachers seem to like White students more than Indian students.	3.2	School attachment/belong.
I usually get good grades.	3.2	Achievement Orientation
Indian students get good grades.	3.17	Achievement Orientation
I participate in sports or other activities.	3.03	School attachment/belong.
If I do well my friends will think that I am "acting White".	2.16	( Not categorized)