STORIES OF BELONGING: WESTERN APACHE STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN AN ADULT BASIC AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

A Dissertation in
Lifelong Learning & Adult Education

by
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ABSTRACT

Educational research on belonging shows that a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom can positively affect everything from cognitive functioning and academic achievement to participation and retention (Baumeister et al., 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Slaten et al., 2018). Though a growing field of inquiry, research on classroom belonging continues to overlook certain populations and utilize narrow conceptualizations of belonging. For example, little research examines classroom belonging for Native American adult learners in adult basic education (ABE) or vocational education programs, nor considers classroom belonging beyond a social dynamic. This research addresses these gaps. Using Narrative Inquiry as a methodological framework, I interviewed 11 students in an adult basic and vocational education construction program in the Western Apache community of Pine Creek (pseudonym) to answer two research questions: 1) What do students’ stories of belonging explain about the development of belonging in general? 2) How might these stories of belonging provide a better understanding of how belonging in the classroom can develop?

Across students’ stories, three main pathways to belonging were commonly invoked: belonging through connection to place, connection to people, and connection to action or activity. Embedded within many student stories of belonging were also important components along these three pathways, such as significance of the activity, recognition from others, and the role of respect and responsibility in feeling a sense of belonging. Bronfenbrenner’s (1989, 1994) ecological model of belonging, particularly as adapted by Fish and Syed (2018), provided a helpful framework for understanding significant elements of culture and history shaping student stories of belonging. The model helps elucidate why certain pathways to belonging were inaccessible for some students within specific ecological contexts.
This research adds to the growing conversation in education about fostering inclusive communities within adult education classrooms, understanding, and adapting to local ecological contexts, and expanding the populations and communities included in research on classroom belonging. Lastly, this research suggests that the concept of classroom belonging should be expanded beyond a social phenomenon to embrace belonging opportunities that may blossom along a wider array of avenues such as belonging to place or through activity.
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offer your endless love and support throughout everything. I am continuously in awe that you
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Finally, to my dear Ben…I write this as we sit out in the sunshine of a new spring. We managed to get through a global pandemic, both having COVID, writing a dissertation, and co-living in 450 square feet without either of us losing our minds. What I can say other than you are the beginning of a good, good book and I am excited to see where our story goes in life.
DEDICATION

For Margaret & Eric,

for making me think I was ever capable of something like this in the first place.

You are missed.
Chapter 1

Pine Creek and Me: Setting the Scene of the Research

In the hills of the Southwest, nestled where painted hills meet short-grass prairies, there is a small town in which I lived for five years that is near several different tribal nations. I knew I wanted to return to this place for my dissertation because it was there, working for a local community college, that I developed many questions about adult education that propelled me to graduate school in the first place. Throughout my eight years of graduate school, I continuously returned there—teaching summer school, visiting friends, basking in a desert sun that somehow just shines differently, more deeply, there.

From the small Southwestern town, where I had dear friends—a surrogate family, really—offer me lodging during my research trip, I would drive South on a state road, through a short-grass prairie that is interrupted only by the occasional shrubbery and railroad crossing. As I drove, I could feel the anticipation of the landscape changing, sensing a moving upward, into a sky most days so blue it can make the heart ache. It always seemed the natural world also responded to the sights of those beautiful skies, as the greenery gradually lengthened upwards as if reaching up to the heavens. Tall pines, once small in the distance ahead, came to surround the me, and, when I was very lucky and driving through the area after a fresh rain, through a rolled down window the perfume of this place would flood the car. As I drove the trees would come to tower the road on each side, leaving only a river of black road below me and blue sky above.
It is through and amongst these trees that a small Native American nation exists, with the descendants of the people of this place stretching back centuries. This is the place of a small Western Apache community that, for the purposes of anonymity, I call Pine Creek¹.

My love of the Southwestern landscape goes back to my childhood. As a child, I loved going to art museums and I was particularly entranced by the landscapes and bright colors of Georgia O’Keefe. As I grew older, I sought different opportunities that would take me out West. Eventually, taking a break from undergraduate studies, I took an internship with the National Park Service (NPS) at a park in the Southwest. I was lucky enough to live in the park for a few years, and though I quickly learned the Park Service was not a career match for me, I also discovered what would be a lifelong love of mine: the Southwest. I had long suspected that different people connected deeply with specific landscapes; my mother, for instance, could happily spend full days in the ocean. For me, the Southwest became my ocean: I loved the specific sounds of quiet and silence found in the desert, the smell of the land after the monsoon rains, the particular and unique blues of the sky, and the fact that, although tourists often called the land barren and bleak, if you looked closely, you could see a land teeming with life.

Knowing I wanted to stay in the region and that I wanted a different career path than the NPS, I enrolled in the local community college and started working there part-time. It kept me in the area and connected me with incredibly special friends and surrogate family I will treasure for the rest of my days. Eventually, I moved into the college’s developmental and adult basic education program and, despite a vow that I never go into education and face all the struggles and

¹ There are two Western Apache communities discussed in this research. The larger town is Pine Creek, whose name is derived from English and where English language is mostly commonly used. Thus, I use English words for the town’s pseudonym. The other is town I call Hadziid. A few students reference the common use of Apache in this town that continues to this day, thus I use the Western Apache language for the town’s pseudonym as a reminder of the difference between the two communities’ linguistic landscapes.
stresses I saw my parents have throughout their career, I discovered that I loved teaching adults. I had finally found a career path I enjoyed in the place that I loved so much.

**Coming to the Questions: Identifying a Research Problem**

Originally, I went to graduate school to answer my questions about the role heritage languages play in adult students’ classroom experiences. My first teaching experiences stem from working in an ABE and developmental education department in a rural, Southwestern community college. While teaching a reading class on tribal lands, I began to understand how a student’s linguistic background could affect their understanding of classroom materials, particularly when this linguistic background differed from classroom language norms. As a white, middle-class, college-educated woman raised by two white, middle-class college-educated parents, the possibility of home language and classroom language being different from each other, and potentially conflicting, was a revelation. After four years teaching ABE classes, I knew I needed to immerse myself in learning about the educational experiences of my students if I were ever going to do them justice as a teacher. My goal in graduate school was mostly to learn how to learn better and how that learning could inform my understanding of individuals’ experiences in the ABE classroom trying to earn their high school equivalency (HSE) credential.

Over time, and with (hopefully) greater understanding, another motivating force emerged giving purpose to my studies and my future classroom goals. The words of Deloria (1969), Grande (2004), Kovach (2009), Nez Denetale (2007), and Tuhiwai-Smith (2012), among others, cracked open those norms I had taken for granted as true, universal, and good. I now have a very different perspective on the benefits of education, and begin to understand the many limitations of
education as conceptualized and enacted within what Grande (2004) labels the whitestream, or the norms defined and enforced by the dominant white population in the U.S.\textsuperscript{2} I was long ignorant to the assimilationist and alienating forces at work in the nation’s educational system.

During a research methodologies class, I became completely stuck on the seemingly straightforward question for deciding a research topic, “What do you want to know?” I thought of my former students: people from a variety of Native American tribes and communities; with a diversity of linguistic backgrounds, particularly in their degree of exposure to and knowledge of their heritage languages; an assortment of educational experiences (including many students who went to Native American boarding schools); a wide range of ages, past educational attainment, and skill levels; and an array of goals for their education and their lives. Ultimately, I came to the question, “Do these students feel like they can/do belong in the classroom?” Thus, belonging in the adult education classroom became the focus of my research.

Over time, my research questions evolved and ultimately settled on a desire to understand how belonging develops generally and how belonging can develop in the adult education classroom specifically. Though research has increasingly addressed belonging in education, it has gone largely unexamined within the context of Native American, non-traditional, adult education students. Belonging research has largely focused on the context of adult education students such as ABE students or Native American students at traditional four-year colleges and universities, particularly predominantly white institutions (PWIs). What is largely unaddressed, however, is the confluence of these two demographics as well as how past, negative educational experiences might affect the development of belonging in classrooms for adult students.

\textsuperscript{2} An off-shoot from the feminist term “malestream,” Denis (1997) introduced the term “whitestream” to describe mainstream Canadian society that is “principally structured on the basis of the European, ‘white,’ experience” but that “is far from being simply ‘white’ in socio-demographic, economic, and cultural terms” (p. 13).
The lack of research on this topic and context belies its importance. In three studies on the relationship between cognitive functioning and social group membership, Baumeister et al. (2002) found that even the threat of “social exclusion reduced people’s capacity for intelligent thought” (p. 825). More specifically, belonging is an important component of the educational experience, particularly in relationship to student retention and academic achievement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Slaten et al., 2018). Other research found classroom belonging to be a key support for adult education/ABE students, and/or emphasized the importance of student connection to others in the classroom (Albertini, 2009; Kerka, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Research on racial minority student experiences finds belonging as a key component of student success, including persistence, achievement levels, and integration into school life (Hoffman et al., 2003; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Further, a growing body of research examines non-tribally run institutions of higher education and their influence on Native American experiences of belonging versus alienation (Lowe, 2005; Shield, 2004; Tachine et al., 2007; Taiaiake, 2004; Tierney, 1999; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Thus, much research exists on tangential contexts of student belonging, but work examining all these components in confluence (Native American, non-traditional, adult education students at a non-tribally run institution) is scarce.

Given the important role belonging plays in a variety of academic outcomes, understanding its development within an adult education context for Native American students can have far-reaching implications. A high school diploma or equivalent (HSE) credential is increasingly essential in the U.S. for employment. Higher levels of educational attainment and skill levels can be correlated to earnings potentials and lifetime wages, though certainly a variety of factors can affect the degree of applicability of the correlation (Social Security Administration, 2015). Further, lower levels of educational attainment are linked to an increased risk for
incarceration (Sum et al., 2009), increased health problems and higher mortality rates (Woolf et al., 2007), and increased engagement in high-risk behaviors, such as smoking or drug use (Hahn & Truman, 2015).

In general, then, HSE credentials and higher levels of educational attainment can have far-reaching consequences for an individual’s life. The adult education and ABE programs that serve Native American populations and communities are an important avenue to boost educational levels for Native peoples. This is particularly important for those that do not complete K-12 schooling, or those described by Tuck (2011) as pushouts, a term meant to signify the matrix of systems that can compel individuals to leave school before completion. Though the non-completion rates in the United States have declined in recent years (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019), the problem of individuals being pushed out of school remains acute in many southwestern states. For example, Arizona and New Mexico are tied for lowest graduation rates in the U.S. (Kerr & Boyington, 2019). Further, Native American students across the nation have the highest noncompletion rates among all U.S. racial groups (NCES 2019). Thus, in states with low graduation rates in general, like Arizona and New Mexico, Native American students leave K-12 schooling at even higher rates than their fellow students. In Arizona, the largest graduation rate gap between racial groups was that between white and Native American students (University of Arizona, 2017).

Programs helping individuals with lower skill and educational attainment levels, such as ABE and developmental education programs, are essential for influencing quality of life for those most at risk for poverty, incarceration, health inequalities, and higher mortality rates. Research documents the advantages of having either a high school diploma or an equivalency certification, including lifetime wages 33 to 75 percent larger for those with a diploma/equivalency (Social Security Administration, 2015) and a decreased risk for incarceration (Sum et al., 2009). Insofar that we can make a connection between educational attainment and literacy/numeracy skill levels,
research also shows a correlation between skill-knowledge levels and wages (Kis & Field, 2013). The benefits of higher educational attainment, then, extend into various aspects of one’s life.

In both the Southwest and across the U.S., the educational system has underserved and misserved Native populations. This history begins from the first instances of white-compelled school attendance for Native Americans (Grande, 2004) and continues today. In particular, Native students continue to see their exclusion from U.S. educational systems in: the lack of fellow Native American students, staff and/or faculty; experiences of explicit and implicit racism (Huffman, 2001); curriculum that assumes that Western ways of experiencing and learning about the world are universal (Shield, 2005); assessment strategies based on “objective” test scores measuring knowledge valued by dominant society (Barnhardt & Kwagley, 2005); and the continuous underfunding of Native education that creates “deteriorating school facilities, underpaid teachers…and outdated learning tools” (Berry et al., 2003, p. xi).

In particular, Native American communities continue to be underserved by the current U.S. educational system, and thus might disproportionately benefit from adult education programs specifically designed for student preparation in a particular career field and/or post-secondary educational opportunities. Similarly, students interviewed in this research spoke of the construction program as being a gateway for employment opportunities that could better support themselves and their families.

Thus, not only are adult education programs important for study and consideration, so too are the dynamics of such programs and their classrooms. Belonging is only one such classroom dynamic and further information on the role of belonging in the classroom specifically for Native American students rightly deserves greater attention.

I knew I wanted to focus in on the topic of belonging and I hoped I could do so within the department of my former employer. Initially, I returned to this place and my former employer, the community college’s adult basic and developmental education department, for a different
project—interviewing instructors about the metaphors of their teaching philosophies. At that time, I interviewed Nathan (pseudonym), the construction program instructor, and learned about his program for the first time in any depth (it was a new addition to the department since my departure in 2016). Though Nathan provided me with important background on the program itself, what most struck me from my interaction with him was not the interview but observing his interactions with the students beforehand. We did the interview in the main classroom of the construction program, and when I arrived—perennially early, just like in life—I saw and met students just packing up and leaving class for the day. The informality of their banter struck me—and it truly was banter. If someone had seen transcripts of the interactions, they would likely not guess they were interactions between student and teacher.

To my outsider eye, it seemed Nathan had somehow de-constructed what can often be a rigid classroom hierarchy—knower and learner, authority and novice. There was such an easy rapport, and the students seemed to both respect and like Nathan. Studying the teachers’ instruction, through both observation and interviews, I compared the atmosphere of this classroom with others in the department I had seen during that trip in early September 2019. In particular, the ease of Nathan’s classroom presence, balancing the roles of instructor, mentor, and comrade, was striking.

I remembered my first years of undergraduate schooling and entering classrooms that automatically seemed to awe me into silence; everyone else seemed so smart and I…was not. I thought of how nervous I often was to attend classes, particularly the larger lecture classes with professors known to suddenly spotlight their students about the most complex elements of class content. There was little comfort in these classrooms, little humor to break the tension, and an acute awareness of a hierarchy that did not empower the student. Granted, this was a very different setting—of physical, educational, and hierarchical place—but I was still struck by how different the educational process seemed to be here.
A year later, preparing for my dissertation research, I wanted to study the role of belonging in the adult basic education (ABE) classroom. I remembered the unique atmosphere and dynamic of the construction program and thought it represented a classroom where students seemed to feel they belonged. After working through various incarnations of research designs, I ultimately came to this research to focus on belonging within this one place and time: the construction classroom in a Western Apache community in the months before the COVID pandemic reached its borders. As I initially suspected and soon discovered, there was a sense of belonging within the classroom for many students. The story of the classroom and classroom belonging, however, is much more complex that I ever anticipated. In the following chapters, I attempt to recount this story of study, comprised of the stories and voices of the students who experienced it firsthand, and understand how belonging does, and sometimes does not, develop within a vocational education classroom.

**Research Setting: The Community College’s Construction Program**

The construction program featured in this program is part of a developmental and adult basic education department at a community college. The college covers a huge swarth of land in a southwestern state and includes several Native American tribal lands. The college has several satellite campuses and centers (the former being larger with higher enrollment rates than the latter). One such center is in Pine Creek on Western Apache lands. The college conducts most of its classes through a distance learning system using SMART Boards and virtual teleconferencing (VTC) systems. Students may not be in the same room as their instructors; for some centers the students almost never are. Though most students at the Pine Creek center are Western Apache
Native Americans, the majority of the college’s faculty are white individuals living on lands bordering tribal nations.

Like other community colleges, this college has a range of departments, ranging from liberal arts to workforce development areas such as cosmetology, nursing, and welding. Unlike these other workforce areas, the construction program studied here belonged to the adult basic and developmental education department. Initially, the department of the college focused on two inter-related content areas: GED® preparation (ABE) and college pre-courses. Both these areas covered common content in math, writing, and reading. Classes in each of these subjects were multi-level; thus, a math class might have one group of students studying fractions either for preparation of the GED® math test or to progress towards upper-level math skills, combined with students studying pre-algebra to increase their college placement test score. These classes covered what might be called de-contextualized content, that is, skills learned independent from any specific setting such as a career field.

Several years ago, the department began to shift from this stand-alone curriculum to contextualized curriculum, the integration of reading, writing, and mathematics content with career-specific skills and information (Maisak, 2017). The department subsequently renamed themselves based on this college- and career-readiness mission. (To differentiate from this department and workforce development construction courses, I use the abbreviation CCR, career and college readiness, to refer to the department under study in this research). The CCR department revamped curriculum to draw on specific career fields; for example, reading comprehension might be taught using examples drawn from or talking about nursing. Four years ago, the department took another step in implementing contextualized education, creating the construction program (technically called “workforce skills,” colloquially it is the construction program). Like the department’s previous classes, the construction program combined students
with varied skill levels. This meant that students needing an HSE\textsuperscript{3} credential would be in the same class with those seeking an associate degree.

Shortly after the construction program’s inception and following the debut of various GED®-alternative tests, the state created an alternative pathway to an HSE credential. Students in the state could take an HSE test but also could obtain an HSE credential through college coursework. Students accruing 25 credits from courses at or above the 100-course level could apply for this alternative pathway (the credits must include a certain number of English, math, and science classes for earning the equivalency credential). Given the increased expense of the GED® test, coupled with the fact that many students enrolling in the construction program would have tuition assistance for their classes, the alternative pathway represented a good opportunity for many students, especially those that struggled with high-stakes testing. The CCR department, construction program, and college worked together to create a two-year timeline for full-time students to earn the following credentials:

- HSE credential through the state’s alternative pathway program;
- Associate degree in construction technology;
- Certification from and inclusion in the National Center for Construction Education and Research’s registry system for earned qualifications (NCCER);
- Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration’s (OSHA) training for entry-level construction workers, known as an OSHA-10 certification.

Table 1-1 outlines the basic two-year program schedule followed by most students, those wanting an HSE credential and/or an associate degree.

\textsuperscript{3} Shortly after the American Council on Education made Pearson-VUE the sole administrator of the GED® test in 2014, a variety of other tests like the Test of Assessing School Completion (TASC) and High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) emerged (Davidson, 2017). Within the field and the department, then, the language changed from being GED®-specific to using the more general high school equivalency (HSE) terminology.
Table 1-1: Plan of student for students seeking HSE credential through state’s alternative pathway and/or an associate degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Course Title &amp; Number of Credits</th>
<th>Funding Source*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Semester</strong></td>
<td>Construction Course (CON)*: Jobsite Layout, 3 credits</td>
<td>CCR Departmental Scholarship Funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Introduction to Construction Methods, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Plan reading &amp; employment, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Framing Systems, 4 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CCR Course: Year-one course with the CCR construction program, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English 101, 3 credits</td>
<td>Tribal scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring Semester</strong></td>
<td>CON Course*: Concrete &amp; Masonry Systems, 3 credits</td>
<td>CCR Departmental Scholarship Funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Roofing, Thermal &amp; Moisture Protection Systems, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Electrical Systems, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Plumbing &amp; Mechanical Systems, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Math 101, 3 credits</td>
<td>Tribal scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities Course (student choice), 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summer Semester</strong></td>
<td>Science Course (student choice), 4 credits</td>
<td>Tribal Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Semester</strong></td>
<td>Technical Writing Course, 3 credits</td>
<td>Tribal Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Computer Course, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CCR Course: Year-two course with CCR construction program, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Computer Applications in Construction, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Sustainable Construction, 3 credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Construction Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring Semester</strong></td>
<td>CON Course*: Cost estimating, scheduling &amp; planning, 3 credits</td>
<td>College scholarship for graduating students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CON Course*: Capstone, 3 credits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Math: Business Mathematics, 3 credits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Small Business Symposium, 3 credits</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Represents a construction course offered through the college’s workforce development department, not CCR

Funding source covers tuition and college-related fees, it does not include a stipend to supplement a student’s income while taking classes

I include this schedule of study here to illustrate two points. First, students enrolled in the construction program for either their equivalency credential or for an associate degree both enroll in a rigorous course load that covers a variety of construction fields; for the sake of this study, then, regardless of a student’s educational goals, most students have similar classroom
experiences related to the kinds of classes they are taking, the instructors, instructional methods (i.e., in person or remote), and classmates. Second, students seeking an HSE credential through the state’s alternative pathway come away with the same credentials as those who enter the construction program already having a high school diploma or equivalent.

The construction program through CCR is two-years long. The first year includes hands-on construction work with content covering reading comprehension and applied mathematics. Projects completed during the first year vary, but examples include building stand-alone kitchen cabinets, a cradleboard, and a two-bedroom house (see chapters four and five). First-year students meet every Tuesday and Thursday. The second year moves students into administrative tasks within construction. Students spend most of their class time on computers, learning how to calculate project costs, develop Excel spreadsheets, and create their resumes. Second-year students meet once a week on Mondays.

My original research plan was to interview first-year students who enrolled in the construction program to obtain their HSE credential. I targeted this segment of the class because 1) I was interested in Native American ABE student experiences since, at the time of planning, they represented those students preparing for an expensive, time-consuming, resource-intensive standardized test; 2) preparation for the standardized test meant specific content and skills needed to be covered and practiced, leaving little room for classroom or instructor adaptation of curriculum; and 3) unsure of the timeframe for data collection, I assumed student experiences with the development of belonging would be freshest for first-year students, regardless of whether I was there for their first semester of the program (Fall) or second (Spring). Ultimately, however, I ended up interviewing any student who would sit down and talk with me.

There were a few reasons I changed my plans. First, as I discuss later, I was incredibly nervous about getting anyone to sit down for an interview in the first place. The first class I attended was a Monday second-year class, and thus the first person to volunteer for an interview
(Vaughn) was a second-year student. Being nervous about students deciding not to participate in the research, I jumped at the first chance to interview someone. Second, during my first trip to the college for interviews, COVID’s spread began getting increasing time in news coverage. I became very worried that a second trip from my home in Pennsylvania to the college would be delayed and, should I even be able to make such a trip, I worried that COVID would drastically change the class and student experiences in ways that could take years to fully understand. Of course, little did I know the wave of damage and trauma about to sweep across the U.S. and disproportionately affect communities of color, particularly Native Americans.4

Lastly, only recently having learned about the new HSE pathways, my perception of student experiences changed slightly. My experience was that the GED® (the only HSE test available at the time) greatly influenced the content of ABE classrooms, with instructors and curriculum focused on the kinds of language, skills, and tools students needed to pass the exam. With the advent of the alternative pathway, however, students seeking a HSE credential through the construction program no longer had to go through the testing crucible. The new system, rather, meant students needed to attend the same kinds of classes as those seeking their two-year degrees. Given the new context and that all the students in the construction program, regardless of the degree they sought, would be attending the same kinds of classes, it made sense to widen my focus to the entire class. Since all the student attended the class together and worked on the same projects, interviewing students regardless of educational level likely gave me a better understanding of the classroom context and the potential for belonging than I otherwise would have. Ultimately, then, this study derives from the experiences of 11 students enrolled in the

4 For more information on COVID’s effect on Native America, from higher rates of infection and COVID-related mortality to the pandemic’s halt/slowing of tourism and gaming, two industries that commonly make up large shares of tribes’ income, see American Public Media Research Lab (2021); Mineo (2020); and/or Hatcher et al. (2020).
construction program, representing a diversity of educational goals, strategies towards goal attainment (i.e., testing or alternative pathway) and time in the program.

**Seeking to Understand: Addressing My Research Questions**

In my original title for this section, I used the phrase “seeking answers.” That phrasing, however, was misleading. There aren’t any “answers.” Not in the sense of a single ultimate truth or some detail that would unlock the challenge of belonging across every time, place, and people. In reality, I sought interviews with Western Apache construction students because I wanted to understand *their* experiences of belonging. Understanding belonging in this specific context could inform practices within other settings, but the experiences detailed here cannot be directly replicated elsewhere.

With that caveat, this study uses Narrative Inquiry to address two key questions:

1) What do students’ stories of belonging explain about the development of belonging in general?\(^5\)

2) How might these stories of belonging provide a better understanding of how belonging in the classroom can develop?

To address these questions of belonging, I interviewed eleven students enrolled in the construction program at a Southwestern community college during the 2020-2021 academic year. These pages record that endeavor to the best of my ability. Though this record adheres to the formats and requirements deemed necessary for completing a doctorate degree, at heart it is really a story.

\(^5\) I use the general term “student” in my research question rather than specifying Western Apache students because, as described in greater detail ahead, not all students interviewed were Western Apache.
In hearing, learning from, analyzing, coding, writing, and, yes, even dreaming about the stories students told me, in these pages I find my own story being co-told as well. This is only fair. As the people I interviewed told their stories they divulged personal—intimately personal—knowledge about themselves, it seems only fair that I likewise tell of myself. To that end, I include passages examining my own experiences with this research and with belonging and education as well.

Storying in this work, then, happens at various levels. I draw on the stories shared with me by students in the construction class. I tell my own stories, both those I see as leading me to who I am and where I am in this moment, and my observations of the class. These stories intertwine and build the larger narrative of this research. In this first chapter, I provide a foundation for the study, beginning as I do with my travel to the setting of this research story. In chapter one, then, I mean to give the reader a sense of what to read for. The second chapter gives larger context in examining past work on Native American educational experiences, information on Western Apache peoples\(^6\), research on belonging and relevant terms, and why it all matters. The third chapter provides the motion of the story in its detailing the mechanics of the study, including the purpose, design, participants, setting, and assumptions. The four and fifth chapters focus on understanding student responses to questions about their experiences with belonging, with chapter four examining stories of belonging told by the students around a variety of contexts, and chapter five exploring their stories of belonging regarding the construction program specifically. Last is the dénouement, the conclusion—as if a story such as this ever really does conclude. In chapter six, I summarize this study and its findings, discuss new understandings of belonging from the stories entrusted to me during this research; suggest what might come of this

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\(^6\) Appendices A and B also provide more detailed information on these two topics.
new understanding; reflect on the research limitations; and consider the work yet to be done, the stories yet to be told. To those ends, I continue onward to set the scene for the stories to be told.

**What to Look For: Methodology, Theoretical Frameworks & Key Terms**

**Methodology and Methods**

This work uses Narrative Inquiry (NI) as the overarching methodological framework. NI emphasizes the importance of stories for understanding events, experiences, and how individuals make meaning of them. This methodology matches well with educational research, as people often explain learning experiences in story form (Umphrey, 2007). I crafted general interview guides meant to draw out student stories: stories of belonging, of classrooms past and present, of learning. The original research plan was for a series of three interviews with each student. The interview structure was roughly based on Seidman’s (2006) three-interview format with the idea that each interview would focus on a specific line of inquiry and subsequent interviews could build on the stories shared earlier. I adapted this model slightly so that initial interviews would focus not just on an individual’s past but would also allow openings for students to talk about their experiences in the construction classroom. Appendix C provides the interview guides used for this research.

Ultimately, I conducted 20 interviews in spring and fall 2020 with 11 students in the construction program. The initial interviews were in-person, done over a three-week period when I was in the Southwest and able to attend the construction class. Due to COVID, however, follow-up interviews had to be done remotely. As a result, follow-ups were difficult to obtain, schedule, and complete. In particular, unreliable and inconsistent technology meant I was unable to contact
many students to follow up and many of those I could contact had no way of doing a distance interview.

Theoretical Framework

I use an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s (1989, 1994) ecological model of belonging to analyze and contextualize student stories and responses. Bronfenbrenner (1989, 1994) created his original model to address his critique of earlier belonging models that did not take the surrounding environment into account when examining belonging development. His ecological model of belonging examines the various systems in the environment that affect one’s ability to develop belonging with others. Despite his inclusion of environmental context in his model of belonging, the ecological model follows the norms of other models in its conceptualization of belonging as a social function. In this dissertation, I will argue this conceptualization of belonging development should be expanded beyond the social dimension.

The Native American student stories of belonging featured in this work, however, are more accurately understood through an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s original model. This adaptation is from Fish and Syed’s (2018) work on Native American student belonging in higher education. In particular, the authors re-arrange some of Bronfenbrenner’s systems’ level hierarchy, positioning two levels, the microsystem (which they define as cultural factors) and the chronosystem (historical factors), as internal to the individual. This repositioning of the two systems as factors internalized by an individual within the ecology of a place and time is an important contribution to the ecological model as a whole and for its applicability to this research. As I realized listening to and analyzing student stories of belonging, understanding what cultural and historical factors an individual has lived and internalized helps clarify why certain pathways of belonging may be accessible for some students and not others. Thus, this theoretical work on
belonging provides an important framework for understanding the lived experiences of belonging through people, place, and activity—as well as illuminates why belonging along these pathways does not work for all people in all contexts.

Key Terms

There are several key terms used throughout this study. A more detailed description of these terms follows in chapter two; however, I also include a list of key terms here to provide a terminology blueprint to guide the reader for the subsequent content.

Belonging

Belonging can have many different definitions but is often bifurcated into two conceptualization categories in much of the relevant research (Christensen, 2009). The first is the idea of belonging in general—the idea that to belong is to feel a part of something, most generally used within the context of group membership (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000). The Belonging Hypothesis is that everyone feels the need to belong and that this is a basic human drive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). The second strand conceptualization is the politics of belonging (Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Though these strands of belonging might be intellectually separated, student stories of belonging and not belonging illustrate that they are deeply intertwined.

Belonging within the classroom is mainly viewed as a social dynamic. Other research, though, has explored belonging as connection to place. bell hooks (2009) invokes this connection in describing belonging as finding a “home in the universe” (p. 67). This idea of belonging as home can speak to both the social component of belonging (such as belonging to family) as well
as the place-based component (such as belonging to a place as a specific location). This research builds on these two types of belonging and adds a third: belonging through action or activity. Thus, through this research, I speak of three pathways along which belonging might develop: connection to people, place, or action.

Along each of these pathways are key components needed for belonging development. Not all people, places, and actions will be potential pathways for all individuals. Rather, key elements, or conditions, are needed for an individual to develop a sense of belonging. Below, I explore three key conditions that student stories of belonging often featured. Students’ stories thus often demonstrated the importance of significance, purpose, and recognition in their experiences of belonging along one (or more) specific pathway(s).

Significance

In the term significance, I invoke something akin to Beswick’s (2017) term meaning. Beswick (2017) defines meaning as an object or action that has a larger meaning for an individual and can inspire a sustained interest. In particular, I discuss the relevance of significance within the context of belonging through activity or action. Student stories of belonging through action or activity often required that the specific action have some level of significance to them. Within the action pathway of belonging, an individual attaches significance to the specific activity because there is a personal and important meaning of it and/or interest in that activity. For example, some students felt a sense of belonging in the classroom because of their connection to learning the construction trade. For these students, the activity pathway of belonging through learning construction was possible because they had a past connection to or interest in the activity making it significant.
**Recognition**

Stemming from Honneth’s (1996) examination of the topic, recognition is somewhat synonymous with affirmation or approval (Hopkins et al., 2019; Leopold, 2019). More specifically, recognition is the alignment between a person’s own self-view and the view of that person by others. Key to the idea of recognition, though, is its positive connotation; recognition inspires one person to positively view another, and that positive affirmation subsequently can serve to bolster the individual’s self-esteem and their sense of capacity and capabilities.

**Purpose**

Lastly, an important component of the belonging pathways is purpose. In this, an individual partakes in something larger than the immediate moment that might build towards some goal for their future self. For example, many students have a specific sense of purpose in their enrollment in the construction program, hoping that the program will build towards some future goal like a degree or better employment. In addition to purpose as an important component for fostering belonging, other research also illustrates the importance of this component in general for adult education students and its potential positive effect on student retention and achievement (Mellard et al., 2012; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013).

**Summary**

The goal of this first chapter is to outline the research problem, purpose, setting, and methods and to preview the work detailed in the following chapters. I have summarized the NI methodology, interview structure, and the relevant theoretical framework used for analysis (ecological model of belonging) and described the construction classroom and Southwestern
setting of this research. In detailing my personal interest in this topic and providing an overview of this research, I attempt to draw a clear backdrop against which the people and stories of this research might be best understood. Further, in this chapter I mean to describe what is at stake, why this research matters, and who it matters for. Perhaps most importantly, though, I hope that in this first chapter I offered a glimpse of the wonderful people this research allowed me to meet and honored all the stories they so graciously shared during our brief time together.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the theoretical and contextual underpinnings for the stories told in subsequent chapters. A variety of topics must be considered to encapsulate the complexity of the landscape within which each student voices their experiences. First, I examine the realm of adult education and its role and importance in the U.S. today. Next, I look more closely at education for Native peoples, and why there is a need for adult education programs for Native Americans and research on their efficacy. I then turn to the literature of belonging in general and belonging within the classroom, outlining its importance and potential for reshaping educational places. Lastly, I provide some sociocultural and historical background of the Western Apache people to help contextualize students’ stories of belonging and not belonging. By covering each of the subjects, I hope to paint the detailed backdrop against which one might envision the students’ stories unfold.

Adult Education Context

The original intention of this research was to learn about the experiences of Western Apache adult students working to earn a high school equivalency (HSE) credential. Within adult education, students at this level of classes enroll adult basic education (ABE) programs (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). The particular vocational program studied in this project, however, combines educational levels, meaning ABE students are co-enrolled with those that have high school diplomas or equivalencies and are working towards a college degree or certificate. In rural places especially, combining adult educational levels are common simply because enrollment
numbers are not high enough for separate classes. This first section will examine both ABE and vocational education in the U.S. generally.

**Adult Basic Education (ABE)**

Although there is limited information about ABE programs that primarily serve, or are specifically for, Native American adults, there is extensive research on the ABE student population in general. Though dangerous to ever assume a one-size-fits-all mentality for ABE students in general, it can provide some context for the parameters of the field, the lines of inquiry at present being followed, and gaps to be further explored on how to apply such information to marginalized and under-served populations.

Within any adult learning or educational experience, a key difference between adults’ learning and children’s learning is the role of prior learning and experience—i.e. adults bring a variety of prior knowledge, skills, and experiences with them that must be considered in order to create a meaningful learning experience (Belzer, 2004). As Lindeman explained almost a century ago “the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience…experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (citation in Belzer, 2004, p. 42). Within stand-alone ABE programs in community colleges, this lack of attention to the prior knowledge and experiences of adult learners, as well as little to no connection from classroom content to “real-world” applications, are common critiques (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008).

This critique was borne out by my own experiences within a community college’s ABE program where half the faculty was individuals from K-12 education that moved to adult education, and most of the supplemental curricular materials were worksheet resources drawn from K-12 educational websites. Further, the overwhelming number of students at the time using the state’s online GED®-prep materials complained of its juvenile game-style learning activities.
Additionally, I also observed another key difficulty commonly cited in the research on community-college-based ABE programs: the isolation of the program from the rest of the college, with no clear pathway from obtaining their high school equivalency to further educational attainment (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). Research varies about post-secondary educational attainment for those that pass the GED® test, however estimates range from 1.7% to 4% of individuals with a GED® credential ever complete some level of post-secondary degree (Garvey & Grobe, 2011; Goldberger, 2007). Since this earlier research, however, several factors have conspired to create ambiguity on educational attainment for HSE credential recipients: the sale of the GED® test to Pearson-VUE in 2014, the creation of other HSE exams by for-profit companies, the variety in exams accepted by different states (instead of one nationally recognized exam), and the fact that neither Pearson-VUE (GED®) nor Data Recognition Corporation (TASC) release testing data (Barshay, 2018).

Retention in ABE programs is a perennial problem for programs across the country; one study found that HSE-prep programs could commonly see dropout rates anywhere from 38-50% before program’s end (Mellard et al., 2013). A student’s skill level upon entering such a program can influence how long they stay in the program; of the 1.4 million adults enrolled in HSE-prep programs across the country in 2013, only 38% of ABE learners (those testing with skill levels at or below the 8th grade) will stay long enough to achieve at least one educational gain (a score increase on the Test of Adult Basic Education, or TABE, of roughly two grade levels), and 45% of ASE (Adult Secondary Education, or those with skill levels above the 8th grade) learners will earn their HSE credential. Obstacles to ABE persistence may be classified into three categories: situational, or issues related to a specific student’s context such as lack of childcare; institutional, or problems specific to a program such as limited class offerings; and/or dispositional, or issues specific to a student’s internal perspective, such as self-esteem or feelings about learning and education (Comings, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2013; Kerka, 2005). Other research adds a social
component, including the degree of support from one’s social networks, family obligations or pressure, or internalized racism, sexism, or other socially constructed negative perceptions of one’s identity (Albertini, 2009; Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Increasingly, recent research continues to demonstrate the importance of the social dynamics and community formation within the ABE classroom for adult learner persistence, participation, and achievement (Kerka, 2005; Prins, 2009; Prins et al., 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

**Vocational Education**

The concept of vocational education for adults in the U.S. dates to the mid-1800s and reached a level of national consciousness with the passage of several federal acts promoting learning in areas such as agriculture, home economics, and certain basic mechanical practices (Roumell et al., 2020). Though its implementation predates his theories, vocational education might best invoke the educational philosophies of Dewey (1958) in that vocational education programs are explicitly aligned with Dewey’s call for curriculum based in first-hand and hands-on experience. Most simply, vocational education is often defined as “that which prepares individuals to work with their hands in one of the manual trades” (Merrill, 2018, p. 41). This definition is historically aligned with the majority of vocational programs being based in fields such as agriculture, construction, and various types of mechanical work. With the dawn of the computer age, however, and as education moves further into the twenty-first century, the notion of vocational programs has expanded to include fields such as healthcare and learning “soft skills” in communication, customer service, and basic computer knowledge (Sulak et al., 2020). With expanding ideas of vocational education have come other terminology for the field such as workforce development, career and technical education (CTE), and, more recently, career pathways (Schwartz, 2016).
CTE and/or career pathway programs differ from early models of vocational education programs in their integration of both academic instruction and career preparation (Bonilla, 2020). These programs are often able to integrate preparatory curriculum for a HSE exam with the development of career-specific knowledge and skills (Maisak, 2017). Such programs stem from the reality that modern jobs often require some level of post-secondary education, but not necessarily a four-year college degree (Schwartz, 2016). Vocational programs are most often based on employment sectors with high-wages and with continuing/growing need for employees. Common fields targeted by CTE/career pathway programs are healthcare, information technology, certain areas of manufacturing (varying by region), and construction.

Though it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between retention rates of ABE programs versus career pathway programs, there is some limited evidence that student enrolled in the latter are retained at higher rates. In one study on Tennessee community colleges’ movement away from standalone classes for ABE and developmental (pre-college level) courses towards guided pathway models for specific career paths, researchers found the percentage of first-time college students successfully completing 12 or more credits increased from 13% to 30%, while students completing 24 or more credits in their first year doubled (Jenkins, et al., 2018).

Similarly, in a two-year study of two cohorts enrolled in community colleges in North Carolina, Maisak (2017) found that for two consecutive years (2013-2014 and 2014-2015), students enrolled in the career pathways programs had higher retention rates (37% and 61%) than those enrolled in ABE programs (10% and 44%). In the latter study, however, researchers were not able to control for demographic or background characteristics, making the study’s conclusions less definitive.

Regardless of the specific approach, both ABE and vocational education programs could benefit from further research into their various facets. In particular, such programs serving marginalized populations, such as Native American peoples and communities, continue to be
under-studied. This research attempts to add one small piece in understanding the larger picture of ABE and vocational education programs in the U.S.

Native American Peoples & U.S. Education

Studies examining educational belonging have increasingly documented the concept of belonging uncertainty most often experienced by members of historically marginalized groups (Walton & Cohen, 2007). The concepts of belonging and belonging uncertainty are further examined in a following section. Understanding the presence of belonging uncertainty, however, must be contextualized through the historical record of educational initiatives pushed onto Native American communities throughout U.S. history. Throughout this history, education’s purpose was the inculcation of white supremacy and cultural norms and the destruction of Native cultures, languages, and ways of knowing (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2004; Katanski, 2005; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). Perhaps the most infamous era of educational policy in the U.S. was the boarding school era that separated Native American children, with varying levels of cooperation and force, from their families and communities to attend boarding schools (Grande, 2004; Katanski, 2005). Appendix A delves more deeply into the history of U.S. education for Native peoples, the boarding school era, and its white supremist mandate. Despite it perhaps seeming tangential content to this particular study, I see this history as essential context for understanding how history informs and shapes the experiences of the present. For many Native students, the legacy of U.S. education’s attempt at cultural and linguistic genocide continues to echo across their lives.

The boarding school era lasted into the twentieth century and its imprint continues to be readily observed in the twenty-first century. Many first-hand accounts of boarding schools come not from historical records, but from adults recounting their experiences years later, from a
vantage point that allowed them to voice its lasting effects (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999). Weaver and Brave Heart interviewed a variety of Native American individuals working in social services and found that, of the 45 individuals surveyed, 72% had attended a boarding school, and over half of those that had attended a boarding school rated their experiences as negative (1999). Even more bleakly, 58% of those previous boarding school students reported suffering physical abuse from the staff, 71% reported experiencing racism from the staff and instructors, and men and women both reported sexual abuse (29% of men and 18% of women). Further, boarding schools today continue to be “plagued with a lack of funding and substance abuse and suicide among students” (Pember, 2007, p. 26).

The legacy of both the boarding school era as well as the larger indelible mark white education has left on Native American communities can be seen in students of all ages. Throughout my four years of teaching Native adult students, many of the individuals that entered the classroom had parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents that attended boarding schools; the stories of these places can haunt even those that did not step foot inside their doors. The legacy of education’s mission of colonization and cultural erasure looms over any educational endeavor happening in Native America.

This history provides helpful context to Vangie’s story in particular, as her boarding school experiences happened in the 1980s and resembled the historical narratives of the boarding school era from the 1830s onward. Other students, like Chris and Brandan, attended boarding schools post-2000. Their stories of boarding school experiences were much different from Vangie’s, and featured Native faculty and staff members as well as instruction and curriculum covering Native cultures and histories.
ABE Programs within Native Communities

Advancing, or more aptly not advancing, through the educational pipeline, is the conclusion of a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* regarding the Native American “achievement gap” (Wong, 2015). Of particular concern in the article was, despite a national increase in graduation rates, the current and projected decreased number of Native American students graduating high school. Nationally, close to 20% of the Native American population was without a high school diploma/equivalency in 2017 (U.S. Census, 2019a), a percentage that has remained steady since 2007 (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Within the Southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico, two states with the majority of Apache tribal lands, noncompletion rates are even higher (for those aged 16-24 years old) higher than the U.S. average of 6.0% for the years 2013-2017 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). The overall noncompletion rate for Native American individuals in the U.S. is 11.5%, almost twice the national number. In Arizona, the percentages are even larger, with an average noncompletion rate of 8.5 overall and 12.8 for Native American students, the highest such rate of any other racial group in the state. New Mexico had slightly lower rates than their neighbor, while still having averages much higher than the national average—8.6% overall and 11.1% for Native American students.

This noncompletion rate has severe economic implications for Native American households, as less than one-third of Native American 20-24 year-olds without a high school diploma or equivalency are employed at least part-time, while only 18% of 16-19 year-olds not enrolled in school (and without a diploma or equivalency) are employed (NCES, 2020). Once again, this is the racial demographic with the lowest rate of employment among individuals.

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7 Though much of the literature on the subject uses the term dropout, I echo Tuck’s (2011) critique of the term in that it implies more agentic control on the part of the student and disregards the role various systems have in pushing students out of school. For this reason, I use the term non-completion/non-completers in lieu the term dropout.
without a high school diploma or equivalency. With lower employment numbers comes higher rates of poverty, evidenced in the fact that Native American families experience poverty a little over twice the rate of the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b).

The numbers reveal a sad truth about the failure of U.S. education for Native communities and peoples. They demonstrate the need for quality adult basic education programs that can actually serve the Native American students enrolled and that better tailor their content and instruction for its applicability and relevance to the communities in which they are based. Further, the dynamics of these classrooms and their effects on students need to be more closely considered within the contexts of the communities and students they serve. Belonging is only one such classroom dynamic that should be more closely considered, given its almost total absence within the research literature when considering the experiences of Native American ABE and vocational education students.

**Belonging**

**Definitions and Benefits**

…I plundered the depths of my being to see when and where did I feel a sense of belonging, when and where did I feel at home in the universe (hooks, 2009, p. 67)

Belonging is a nebulous concept, but its presence or absence is one acutely felt. As hooks explores in her book *Belonging*, this sense might be described as finding a “home in the universe,” a place to which one might belong.

In their theorizing the concept of community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined two types of community—geographic and relational—both of which play a role in the concept of belonging. They believed that creating community required four elements: influence, integration
and fulfillment of needs, a shared emotional connection, and membership. It is from this concept of membership within a community that belonging stems, which they explicitly call “a feeling of belonging,” positing that when “one has invested part of oneself to become a member” they feel “a right to belong” (p. 9). Community building cannot be separated from a concomitant development of a sense of belonging which ultimately leads to helping and supporting fellow members of the community (Osterman, 2000). Goodenow (1993) explores this notion of membership as a psychological element for the learner within an educational community. According to Goodenow (2000), a sense of belonging is “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80).

The Belonging Hypothesis posits that this need to belong—to feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—is a fundamental human drive and as such influences our behavior, emotion, and thought (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). This drive for belonging is as basic a driver as any biological need, and ultimately “human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 498). The Belonging Hypothesis includes several observations of belonging’s influences: our tendency to give preferential treatment to those within our group; the effort we expend to maintain contact and relationships with others as well as our hesitancy to break such bonds; our relationships to others affects the way we store information about each other (members of other groups often are categorized by traits or roles while in-group members are remembered by personal interactions); the extent to which we feel more positive emotions when experiencing a

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8 Though their work does not explicitly look at belonging, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) also emphasize the importance of respect as an integral component for creating educational spaces for Native American and First Nations students. Several of the students’ stories of belonging, particularly in belonging to place, similarly invoke respect as key to their sense of belonging.
sense of belonging, and those without such a sense are more at risk of experiencing increased stress, depression and anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Just as Maslow (1968) first emphasized in his hierarchy, and subsequent research and theoretical frameworks have further developed, belonging is an important human need. Belonging has positive effects on our physiology, psychology, social connections, and, particularly relevant to this study, educational outcomes. Research has connected a sense of belonging with internalized well-being, including “higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, greater life satisfaction, and better transitioning into adulthood” (Allen & Kern, 2017, p. 9-10). People who feel they belong in some way or another also have lower risk for heart disease, can recover faster from certain illnesses, have lower rates of cognitive decline and dementia as they age, and may even live longer (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009). In their work on the Belonging Hypothesis, Baumeister & Leary (1995) were also able to connect belonging with decreased occurrence of psychiatric issues such as depression and anxiety.

Conversely, the lack of belonging has been linked to a variety of detrimental conditions and outcomes. Just as belonging is integrally linked to a manner of positive health outcomes, lack of belonging has been connected to greater engagement with high-risk behaviors, increased risk for self-harm and even suicide, higher occurrences of mental illness, and cognitive decline in ability to perform complex cognitive exercises (Allen & Kern, 2017; Baumeister et al., 2002; Jetten et al., 2012). In fact, recent work has shown that belonging within a social circle may have a greater impact on mortality than negative factors such as obesity and lack of physical exercise (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).
**Belonging Theory: The Ecological Model**

Since Maslow’s (1968) inclusion of belonging in his hierarchy of needs, a variety of different theories have attempted to understand the various dimensions of belonging and its importance for human beings. A key commonality held by many of these theories is the primary function of belonging as an internalized element forged through interpersonal relationships (Allen & Kern, 2017). Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) Belonging Hypothesis, perhaps the most cited theory within the realm of classroom belonging, formulates belonging as possible through social interactions meeting socioemotional standards, such as positivity and conflict-free interactions. Bronfenbrenner’s (1989, 1994) Ecological Model deviates from most models of belonging in its inclusion of the wider environment for its potential influence on belonging. Because this study’s research examines the role of the wider environment and not just social components to understand belonging, other theoretical models emphasizing only social and relational contexts for belonging are too limited in scope. It is from Bronfenbrenner’s model, in particular as adapted in the work of Fish and Syed (2018), that there is a theoretical framework more suited to address the complexities of belonging examined in this study.

The Ecological Model stems from Bronfenbrenner’s critique of early developmental models that did not take environmental context into account (1989). Bronfenbrenner (1989, 1994) saw human development as a complex interplay between an individual and their environment, which includes various elements such as familial relationships, peer groups, communities, but also interlinks with macrosystem elements such as culture, religion, material resources, hazards, and opportunities. Further, these levels of environmental contexts are not isolated entities, but rather complex systems that interact, influencing and being influenced by each other (1994). This early model saw several levels nested within each other, from the inner-most layer of the...
microsystem moving outward to mesosystem, exosystem and finally to the macrosystem (see Figure 2-1 for details).

After his earliest versions of the Ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner (1989, 1994) subsequently added the chronosystem as a way of incorporating the concept of time, both over an individual’s lifetime but also on all the surrounding systems as well, for understanding an individual’s development. Though Bronfrenbrenner’s work has primarily been used in work on individual development, it has also more recently been adapted for the study of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017; Fish & Syed, 2018).

![Figure 2-1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model](image)

In their work on Native American student belonging in higher education, Fish and Syed (2018) used the ecological model as a better framework for understanding Native American student experiences because of its “privileging historical and cultural factors” (p. 387). In their adaption of the model, the meaning of each system level remained the same, while the positioning...
of the systems within the model changed. Because of the relevancy and continued influence of the historical record on Native American educational systems and student experiences, and to also acknowledge the importance of tribal cultures on a person’s identity development, Fish and Syed rearranged the original levels of the ecological model (as seen in the figure 2-2). An important element of the adapted model is the dual positioning of the chronosystem. In Fish and Syed’s (2018) model, the chronosystem is both the inner most and outermost systemic layer. In their

![Figure 2-2: Adaption of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System, moving chronosystems and macrosystems as elements internal to the individual. (Fish & Syed, 2018, p. 390).](image)

model, the internalized chronosystem is labeled historical context, but also signifies an individual’s relationship with time—past, present, and future. This dual presence emphasizes the importance of history particularly for Native students whose lives may be continuously informed by their ancestorial histories, the historical context of their communities and homelands,
relationship to the surrounding nation-states, and a grounding in the cultural sense of time representing the past, present, and future.

Further, another feature of note is the move of the macrosystem, represented in this model as cultural considerations, as nested inside the individual. This change in positioning is particularly important within the context of racial minorities and the prevalence of belonging uncertainty when joining communities and places that have traditionally marginalized other members of their cultural or racial group. For those groups historically marginalized—in this case Native American students within educational institutions—sociocultural factors may become internalized in ways specific to their families, tribes, cultures, and moment in time (i.e. their location in history).

Fish and Syed’s (2018) adapted model and its consideration of cultural and historical context as internalized by the individual demonstrates the connection between the notion of belonging and the politics of belonging. Conceptualizations of belonging are often bifurcated into two categories: belonging and politics of belonging (Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Research and theory on belonging forces on socioemotional connection to an entity, most often a group of other people (Christensen, 2009). The politics of belonging, conversely, focuses on the boundaries of group membership—who gets to be a member, and thus belong to a group, and who does not (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Student stories of belonging in this research, however, reveal that belonging cannot be understood without considering the politics of belonging. With its internalized micro- and chronosystems, the adapted ecological model helps explain how history and culture can foster or inhibit belonging development. Linking together belonging with the politics of belonging helps explain those students that spoke of not belonging within a particular group, place, or activity.

The ecological model, both in its original conceptualization by Bronfrenbrenner (1989, 1994) and its reformulation by Fish and Syed (2018), represent an important and relevant
framework for understanding belonging within the context studied in this research. By extending the concept of belonging to consider the relevance of other systems beyond the social on belonging development and its applicability to the politics of belonging, a more complex understanding of how belonging develops might come into focus. Thus, considering the role of the wider context and various interacting systems at play is important for understanding the nuances of belonging.

Like the other belonging theories, however, the ecological model continues to frame belonging as a social concept. As important as the various systems are for fostering belonging, the model still considers belonging as a function of an individual’s ability to connect with other people. What is lacking in this model is a concept of belonging beyond the interpersonal. The important contribution of the ecological model to this research is its consideration of larger contextual elements, such as culture, history, and customs, in their connection to belonging. In later chapters, I use the ecological model, particularly as presented by Fish and Syed (2018) as a starting point for connecting context to belonging. From there, I discuss the expansion of the ecological system to include the development of belonging along three different pathways (people, place, action). This application of the ecological model, then, moves beyond interpersonal belonging to understand how students relate to those people, places, and actions in which they invest special meaning.

Classroom Belonging

Goodenow (1993) focuses on the importance of membership, as emphasized by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as one important element for the development of a community, as a psychological element for the learner within the classroom as a sense of belonging, or “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the
school social environment” (1993, p. 80). These elements Goodenow identifies (acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support) are likewise emphasized within the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995) on belonging. Their Belonging Hypothesis found two elements both essential for fostering belonging: 1) frequent, generally positive, and conflict-free interactions with others over time, and 2) relationships that are stable, include a sense of mutual concern for the other’s well-being, and that can last into the foreseeable future. The lack of these elements for belonging can have far-reaching consequences, and students in a classroom are not immune. Osterman (2000) found that belonging has the potential to affect students in five different dimensions: “1) the development of basic psychological processes important to student success, 2) academic attitudes and motives, 3) social and personal attitudes, 4) engagement and participation, and 5) academic achievement” (p. 5).

Multiple studies show students who feel like they do not “fit in,” see themselves as outsiders, or feel socially isolated from other people in the school, are much more likely to drop out (Goodenow, 1993). Goodenow’s Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (1993) found a small correlation between belonging and student effort, a moderate correlation between belonging and achievement, and a strong connection between belonging and motivation. Further studies show the power of belonging for at-risk students; students that begin participating in school social activities become less likely to drop out then their other at-risk peers (Walton & Cohen, 2007). The positive relationships that come with a sense of belonging in the classroom, such as a positive relationship between student and teacher, can also encourage further learning, as students with such relationships are more likely to take advantage of other learning opportunities (Kerka, 2005; Prins et al., 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

Belonging also connects to a student’s sense of risk within the classroom, which ultimately impacts participation: when students worry about the reactions of their fellow
classmates, they are less likely to participate, but when students feel a sense of community, the perceived risk of participation lessens (Osterman, 2000). Interviews with 100 high school non-completers found the vast majority of these students “perceived their school as uncaring environments and experienced no sense of school membership” (p. 17).

Though much of the earliest work on belonging focuses on the K-12 environment, this concept is increasingly being applied to higher education and adult learners. For example, a study of college women found that the more female students felt they knew their fellow classmates, the less likely they felt subject to peer judgment and the more likely they were to participate in class (Osterman, 2000). Further, a long-term study of adult basic education students’ persistence found five key strategies ABE programs could implement to impact student retention and persistence; the very first strategy listed was “sense of belonging and community” (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). In addition to increased student persistence as well as specific comments made by students about feeling like they belonged, program staff also noticed increased positive behaviors such as better communication with the program staff, noted concern over fellow classmates’ absences, increased engagement with classroom conversations, greater support displayed for classmates’ goals and their efforts to meet them, and students even began to stay late to do schoolwork together.

Reynolds and Johnson’s (2014) four pillars of support bring further illustrate the importance of belonging. In two of their pillars, defined as community and institution, relationship and belonging are essential components. For example, an institutional support mentioned is the relationship between students and teachers and the latter’s ability to “foster a sense of belonging” (p. 43). Likewise, these relationships are the foundation of the classroom’s transformation to a learning community, one that creates a comradery between students that fosters “a sense of understanding, common goals, and shared experiences” (p. 43). Students
participating in the study explicitly mentioned the importance of their relationships within the classroom and its overall sense of community:

student narratives indicated the sense of community within the ABE classroom contributed to students’ ability to persist despite difficulties. Fellow students provided encouragement and support at critical points throughout the program experience (p. 45).

Recent findings regarding the role community plays in learner retention suggests that social and emotional dimensions are particularly important. The broad label of ‘student support’ is often cited when considering ways to increase retention; this includes things like mentoring, increased counseling resources, teacher empathy and care, teacher encouragement, and quality of teacher-student relationship (Zacharakis et al., 2011). For example, Mellard et al’s 2012 study found ABE students that received more help and attention from both the instructor and fellow students were more likely to continue attending the program. Additionally, Zacharaki et al’s 2011 study found the program strength most cited by ABE students as important were teacher qualities such as instructors that create a community “more like family” and teachers with general qualities like patience, care, and belief in their students’ potential (p. 92).

Research continues to show the benefit of belonging, regardless of age group. New lines of research, however, are beginning to examine how and when the sense of belonging does not develop. This is of particular interest to those seeking to understand the experience of minority students, specifically students of color, at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

In her book Belonging, bell hooks (2009) explores issues of belonging, or not belonging, to and within communities, including PWIs. Belonging expands the idea of belonging to be something one experiences (a “sense of” belonging) but also as someplace that one finds (a place to belong). For hooks, the gain of a “good” education was the loss of place and the loss of belonging: “When we left the hills to settle in town where the schools were supposedly better…I experienced my first devastating loss…” (p. 7). Belonging is not just a social component, then,
but also a contextual one dependent on place and time. This place may relate to geographic location—one of the two characteristics McMillan and Chavis postulated groups form around—but it can also be a place for oneself. The researchers capture this secondary sense of place in their definition of belonging, which they find “involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and therefore has a place there (emphasis added) …” (p. 10). Similarly, hooks draws on a sense of belonging that involves both the relational and the place-specific, particularly seen in her incorporation of Scott Russell Sanders and his writings on the quest to find a place of belonging:

It is rare for any of us, by deliberate choice, to sit still and weave ourselves into a place…so that we feel a bond with everything in sight. The challenge, these days, is to be somewhere as opposed to no where, actually to belong to some particular place, invest oneself in it, draw strength and courage from it… (67-68)

What hooks invokes in her book, in both her move to the town’s school and to Stanford, is belonging uncertainty, an experience not uncommon for minority students.

**Racial Minority Belonging & Post-secondary Contexts**

The majority of research on Native American post-secondary student experiences and belonging focuses on Native students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), particularly traditional four-year colleges and universities located outside of tribal lands. Much of this literature begins not from a point of belonging, but, similar to other racial and social minorities attending PWIs, rather from a belonging deficit. If social belonging is a level of assurance, internalized and externally validated, and of having strong social belonging, belonging uncertainty is its opposite (Stephens et al., 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Experiences of racism, microaggression, and exclusion (undermine students’ ability to connect or develop a sense of belonging, leading to belonging uncertainty, or when “members of socially stigmatized groups
are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging” (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 82).

Research on belonging uncertainty often focuses on those individuals from groups historically excluded from certain educational spaces (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Belonging uncertainty for those students that are “members of socially stigmatized groups” stems from being “more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging” (p. 82). Several studies look at the outcomes of students facing belonging uncertainty, and its negative influence on a variety of educational outcomes.

In their analysis of Native American college students at a PWI, Castagno and Lee (2007) poignantly describe how minority students may be sought out by colleges and universities only to be summarily marginalized, ignored, or discriminated against. Their interviews with Indigenous students led to the overwhelming consensus that “the university prefers Indigenous students who will be supportive of the status quo in general,” with one student outright stating the university “want[s] us to be here but they don’t want us to be of color” (p. 9). Their paper supports a main tenant of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit) that governmental and educational policies and institutions primarily seek to assimilate Native American peoples into the whitestream society, and any initiatives for diversity and/or inclusion will ultimately never go far enough to challenge the status quo (Jones Brayboy, 2005).

As researchers point out, many institutes of higher education, particularly PWIs, do not adapt to or accommodate minority students in meaningful ways, and American Indian students can often experience alienation, microaggressions, and racism (Castagno & Lee, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). The historic exclusion of Native American students from the educational sphere might be first obviously seen in the history and trauma of boarding schools; the concerted effort to enroll, forcibly or otherwise, Native Americans in assimilationist boarding schools has been amounted to a historic trauma, or a “cumulative wounding across generations,” whose influence
can still be easily observed today (Shield, 2004, p. 113). Beyond this history of traumatic schooling, the historic exclusion of Native American students may also be seen in: the lack of fellow Native American students, staff and/or faculty, and in American Indian students’ experiences of explicit and implicit racism (Huffman, 2001); in curriculum that assumes the Western way of experiencing and learning about the world is universal (Shield, 2004); assessment strategies based on “objective” test scores measuring that knowledge valued by dominant society (Barnhardt & Kwagley, 2005); and in the continuous underfunding of Native education that creates “deteriorating school facilities, underpaid teachers…and outdated learning tools (Berry et al., 2003, p. xi). Further, “the behavioral expectations and the personal prejudices of personnel” at PWIs can all serve to further communicate to Native American students their own cultural heritage and identity are of little or no value within an educational sphere (Huffman, 2001, p. 15).

Masta’s (2018) interviews with Native American college students found two major themes in her participants’ stories: colonialism and microaggressions. The continued colonizing forces within education are well documented, but include: the marginalization of any discourse, information or knowledge system that deviates from Western norms; the limited inclusion of minority figures, cultures, or histories within curriculum; the presentation of colonized peoples as historic entities; and the use of language in ways that reinforce Western perspectives. Masta’s (2017) student interviews also documented a variety of microaggressions, most commonly the disbelief of personal experiences, the assigned role of cultural educator for a white audience, the constant need to self-identify for the curious, and the positioning as a kind of cultural spectacle. With the long list of negative and alienating experiences detailed in her article, it is little wonder that Masta tilted the piece with a student’s exclamation: “I am exhausted.” Other documentation of Native American students’ negative experience with modern education, particularly in higher education, include feelings of being alone and having those feelings discounted, needing to be a counterexample against negative stereotypes, and constant representing of all Native American
peoples ever in existence (Lowe, 2005). As many researchers have pointed out, social and educational institutions are adept at marginalizing such critiques and maintaining their status quo (Brayboy, 2005; Castagno and Lee, 2007; Chavez et al., 2012).

In her study of Native American college students, Huffman (2001) found that those students that strongly identified with their Native American culture ran a higher risk for becoming “estranged”—a process beginning with alienation, or belonging uncertainty, that eventually grows into an emotional rejection of the institution and its knowledge, practices, and setting before eventually becoming outright disengagement. Native American students, Huffman writes, might express this disengagement by not participating in classes or extracurriculars, cutting classes, or even dropping out altogether.

Students that strongly identified as Native American, however, had another potential path, one Huffman labeled transculturation and others label cultural integrity (Tachine et al., 2007). Huffman’s transcultural hypothesis (2001) posits that a student’s strong identification with a particular culture or group can be a facet from which students can draw strength, inspiration, and determination. According to this hypothesis, many Native American students may experience a moment where they make a conscious decision to both maintain their cultural identity and to use this identity as a foundation from which they can venture into the foreign world of higher education.

Another model for understanding Native American student experiences in whitestream schools is Cultural Difference Theory. This theory posits that minority students experience cultural conflict in schooling because the culture of the school does not match the culture of their home and/or community (Dehyle, 1995). Cummins’ (2001) Cultural Difference Theory’s begins with the premise that minority student success depends on three levels of social interaction: student-teacher, school-community, and social groups-society. Within these interactions, four elements (cultural/linguistic incorporation, community participation, pedagogy, and assessment)
can be oriented so they are either empowering or disabling for minority students. The onus of integration and student achievement is on the school and its representatives, rather than the student and their community. In his model, Cummins (2001) also argues that the strength of a student’s cultural identity creates strength for succeeding in their education. Here, individuals have the strength of their identity—a place for belonging—to draw from when experiencing assimilationist practices. For Native American students at PWIs, research demonstrates a correlation between strong grounding in their traditional cultures and increased academic achievement (Deyhle, 1995; Huffman, 2011; Tachine et al., 2007; Tierney, 1999).

These models all serve to underscore how PWIs foster belonging uncertainty in Native American students. Taken together, they provide a picture of alienation, uncertainty, and marginalization experienced by many students of color. Because in reality “students of color” and Native American students as a category is extensively heterogeneous, no one theory captures the spectrum of possible experiences for American Indians. As Lowe (2005) points out, Native American students, even students at the same institution from the same tribal background, can differ in their tribal affiliation, their identification as Native American, their relationship to the reservation, and their experiences with whitestream U.S. Native American individuals may or may not fit neatly into Huffman’s traditional-assimilated categories, may not experience Cummin’s cultural mismatch, and may or may not have experienced schooling as a cultural threat. Thus, there are a variety of considerations relevant to understanding how one’s identity affects belonging within post-secondary educational places and spaces. Though there is growing literature on racial minorities, and specifically Native American students, focusing on belonging in post-secondary contexts, little of this research extends to non-traditional adult students attending ABE, vocational education, or non-bachelor’s degree track educational programs. It is in this gap in the literature that I locate this study in an attempt to expand the research of belonging for Native American students into overlooked educational places.
Expanding the Notion of Belonging: Place and Activity

In her book about belonging, hooks (2009) connects belonging to place in her examination of attending a PWI far away from her rural, Southern home. hooks is not alone in her linking belonging to place, nor in drawing on both personal and larger historical narrative as influencing factors in belonging development. For example, Miller (2002) theorizes belonging as a matrix of history, people, and place. Likewise, connection to place features as an integral component of identity for many Indigenous people and individuals (Brayboy, 2005; Deloria and Wildcat, 2001; Momaday, 1997; Trigger & Mulock, 2005). In their work on American Indian education, Deloria and Wildcat (2001) speak extensively to the importance of connection to a universe that is both alive and personal. It is in our connection to the living energy found throughout the universe and to places we inhabit that we find that personal connection to the larger universe. Thus, the idea of belonging to place discussed in this research is not novel in and of itself. Additionally, place-based education is an ever-growing field centering connection to place within educational practices (Barnhardt, 2010; Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Sobel, 2004). This realm of educational inquiry certainly opens up space for examining belonging through connection to place. However, because belonging within the classroom is so often exclusively considered a social dynamic within the literature, belonging as a social construct often overshadows the potential for belonging developed through other means. Perhaps this focus on belonging in the classroom as a social function is unsurprising, though, given Deloria and Wildcat’s (2001) critique that the goal of “modern education seems to be socialization” (79).

Similarly, some work connects action and activity to developing belonging (Leach, 2002). In particular, ritualized action is not only a means for belonging development but also for its maintenance (Bell, 1999). Ritualized action can also be a means of blending together belonging to place, community, and action (Fortier, 1999; Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). Thus,
the research literature does contain precedent of belonging through people, place, and action. I draw on this work in connecting people, place, and activity to belonging in the student stories related in the following chapters. In considering people, places, and actions as belonging pathways, my research findings are not novel for general theories of belonging. However, this expanded idea of belonging remains largely unexamined within the realm of adult education generally and adult basic and vocational education more specifically.

Meeting the Western Apache

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1989, 1994) emphasizes the role of the ecological system for the development of interpersonal belonging and which I expand to include belonging through place and activity. To understand the ecological system within which the students exist, some background information on the Western Apache community is important. Appendix B uses Holm et al. (2003) peoplehood model as a framework to offer more detail about Western Apache society and culture. Here, I outline two elements of Western Apache culture that are important contextual details for my later discussion of student belonging in the construction program: the social organizing of Western Apache groups and communities and the interconnection of place, spirituality, and action/activity for Western Apache peoples.

Western Apache Social Organization

Background information on the social organization of the Western Apache people provides important context for understanding various community groupings and how belonging might play out among them. One key consideration for the notion of belonging for Western Apache individuals today is the Western Apache’s history of community independence. The
Western Apache are made of six larger groups, each with their own number of subgroups or bands (Goodwin, 1969). Though bands and groups had unifying social and cultural backgrounds, they are usually defined as separate groups because of the important link between communities and clans to specific places, locales often geographically separated by mountainous terrain (Basso, 1996; Goodwin, 1969). As a result, the various bands of the Western Apache were entirely independent from each other with cooperation between groups being voluntary and often event-specific (Perry, 1993). Though such events might once have been forming raiding parties, greater cooperation between the bands became more common in the 1800s as Western Apache groups faced encroaching white settlers (Perry, 1993; Goodwin, 1969).

Apart from these moments of unification for a specific cause, the Western Apache groups and bands had no unifying political structure. Rather, social organization occurred around the small groups of extended families that often settled in particular areas (Goodwin, 1969; Perry, 1993). These group-specific homelands were important places of belonging, with many Western Apache attaching greatest kinship with family and “the locality where he is reared” (Goodwin, 1969, p. 543).

Thus, small communities, with a few extended families settled nearby each other, were the primary groupings of the Western Apache, with those coming from other groupings—even those Western Apache closest by—considered outsiders. In this sense there were strict lines of demarcation between outsider/insider status based on geographic location. For example, Goodwin (1969) describes “an elderly man from Cibecue and who had married among the White Mountain Apache once said that although he had lived among the latter people for forty years, they still considered him an outsider” (p. 8). Thus, group membership largely revolves around locality, regardless of amount of time spent within a new community.
Relationship to Place: Grounding Spirituality & Actions

Just as belonging can be a matter of connection to people, so too can it be a matter of connection to place or activity/action. Here, some knowledge of interconnection between Western Apache homelands, spirituality, identity, and daily life becomes a helpful foundation for understanding the students’ stories of belonging in this research. In reading about Western Apache peoples and their connection to their ancestorial lands, I learned an insightful linguistic fact. In Apache, *ni’* means both land (such as homeland or country) and mind (Welch & Riley, 2001). As many scholars point out, language is a key indicator of culture, identity (both individual and collective), and perspectives of the universe (Gee, 1992; House, 2002; Norton, 1997; Perez, 2004; Valdes, 2017). A language that connects mind and land through the same word reveals an important interconnection in the speaker’s perspective, in this case seeing the concept of one’s own mind (and its connotations) as inextricably linked to the land.

The social organization outlined above revolve around the specific landscape of Apache lands. The Western Apache homeland was roughly the size of West Virginia before Spanish and subsequent American settler encroachment (Welch & Riley, 2001). The families and their extended clans hunted across a large swath of Arizona and New Mexico, though much of their more permanent settlements and farmlands were close to Mt. Graham (LaDuke, 2005). Mt. Graham9 is more than a geographic and geologic place, but also as a San Carlos Apache spiritual leader explains:

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9 Today, Mt Graham is also home to three large telescopes individually owned by the University of Arizona, the Vatican, and the Max Planck Institute in Germany (Mount Graham International Observatory, 2021). The university and observatory made news in 1998 when a Western Apache man was arrested for trespassing on the grounds; the man traveled to the mountain to pray before his daughter’s womanhood ceremony (Clark, 1997; LaDuke, 2005). The observatory website has this to say about the history of Indigenous peoples in the region: “While the Mt. Graham area has been inhabited more or less continually in the past, the Gila Valley can trace its recorded history back to the time of the Spanish Conquistadores” (Ratje, 2021, para 4). A more accurate and comprehensive response to the extended history of the Western Apache people around Mt. Graham and in their homelands as well as analysis of the controversy over the observatories on the mountain can be found in Williams (2012) unpublished dissertation.
The mountain is home of the Mountain Spirit and other sacred beings which gave creation, guidance, strength, knowledge, and direction to the Apache people by way of *Dzil nchaa si an*. …This is our religion, these are our traditions. The Apache relationship with the mountain includes showing respect to the things we have discovered in revelations, or that the mountain has given to us (Frank Stanley qtd in LaDuke, 2005, pg. 21-22).

This quotation provides helpful framing for understanding the various roles of the land: a source of spirituality as much as a way of being in the world (i.e. acting with strength and direction and respect). Much work has been done on fundamental connections between Native peoples’ homeland and their cultures, languages, and ways of knowing (Basso, 1996; Deloria, 2003; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; LaDuke, 2011; Momaday, 1997). The previous quotation by Stanley likewise speaks to the interconnection between the sacred nature of Mt Graham, Apache spirituality, and the Apache people. Though Stanley mentions a variety of purposes the sacred land fulfills, particularly notable for this research is the mention of respect. In speaking about their experiences with belonging to a specific place, two students interviewed for this research mention the importance of respect for connecting with a place. This suggests that belonging is not simply a one-sided relationship but rather a reciprocal one that demands certain treatment from the individual.

Likewise, spirituality and its inspired values are important components for many Western Apache people’s daily lives (Goklish, 2005). These values are expressed through the correct behavior as emphasized within the Western Apache culture: acting with resilience, strength, and respect (Basso, 1996; Goklish, 2005; LaDuke, 2011). Western Apache spirituality is connected to the land, the land calls for and inspires correct action or behavior, and correct action becomes the daily expression of the spiritual. Thus, connection to place and connection through action (or behavior) become important markers of Western Apache identity.

In this research, connection to people, places, and action are all potential gateways for belonging. The goal of this small section on the Western Apache people’s culture, traditions, and
social dynamics is to provide key context that might facilitate a deeper reading and understanding of Western Apache students’ experiences with belonging described in this work.

Conclusion

This chapter covered a great deal of theoretical, historical, and sociocultural ground. Each of the sections outlined in the chapter provide a foundational understanding needed to provide a sense of the larger context for stories of belonging and not belonging. By connecting notions of belonging and its development; the educational practices and realities of this moment contrasted with the historical legacies still shaping the world today; and a beginning understanding of the Western Apache people and their history, culture, language, and place, we might build a foundation upon which students’ stories might unfold.
Chapter 3

Methodology

From my first exposure to the community college’s construction program in Pine Creek, it was clear there was something there that warranted attention and study. In particular, the dynamics of the instructor and students as well as the seemingly supportive atmosphere of the classroom made me immediately think the construction program represented a great opportunity to study belonging. I saw this opportunity as one embedded within stories, as it was through the stories of the students in particular that I might gain some insight into their experiences with belonging, both when it did and did not develop. The relevance of stories as research also connected to my interests since it was, after all, the story of my own past that positioned this adult education classroom as so different from the ones I entered in my early twenties. Grounded in my own storied past, I hoped to understand the experiences of Native American adult learners by hearing their own stories, particularly of schooling and education, and understand how they connected to their classrooms.

My dissertation research thus examines two research questions:

3) What do students’ stories of belonging explain about the development of belonging in general?

4) How might stories of belonging provide a better understanding of how belonging in the classroom can develop?

This chapter outlines the rationale, design, and procedures done in seeking answers to these two questions.

To that end, first I will discuss the methodological positioning of this study within qualitative work, specifically Narrative Inquiry (NI). Second, I examine the study’s place and
people—the beautiful setting of this story and the people featured within. Third, I will outline my implementation of NI, explaining the data collection process—or storying—and subsequent analysis. Lastly, I provide a critical look at my study and its design its underlying assumptions, ethical implications, and limitations.

**Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry**

Telling a story…may be one of the most personal and intimate things we can do. Through storytelling we can come to know who we are in new and unforeseen ways. We can also reveal to others what is deepest in our hearts, in the process, [build] bridges. (Lawrence & Paige, 2016, p. 64)

Many answers to questions naturally lend themselves to stories. A personal example of this most readily springs to mind, a byproduct of the recent election year wherein Georgia was swing state for the first time in decades. Many Northerners have asked me what it was like growing up in the South, and I usually answer with the same story—my experiences being a Northern Civil War soldier in the Nutcracker done “Kennesaw Style.” In this production, the only stylistic change was a recasting of the battle between toy soldiers versus rats as a Civil War battle between North and South. It's a story that speaks to a very specific place and time, as stories so often do, one both like and utterly different from the present. It's a story that tells a person a lot about myself, beyond my upbringing and contextual background, to the events that stood out to me and a tendency to find humor in moments most strange. The story offers the questioner much more information than the simple answer might imply.

In his book, Umphrey (2007) points out that questions about learning often engender stories, as “deep learning always takes the form of a story” (p. 15). It's a notion borne out with this research as well, as people offered up all kinds of stories in response to my questions. Storytelling is a natural human impulse. It is through story that we can convey a sense of
ourselves, our experiences, our positionalities, and it is often through stories that we can humanize one another.

Within research, our ability to know the world might be categorized into two different forms: paradigmatic cognition and narrative cognition, or “storied knowing” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 9). The use of logic and rational thought that make up the former has traditionally been the process of knowledge construction valued and prioritized throughout Western history, certainly throughout colonization; contrastingly stories may be commonly dismissed as poetic expressions rather than valid process of knowledge construction (Benham, 2012; Collins & Blot, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1995). A foundational tenet of NI, though, is that not only are stories a valid way of knowing the world and understanding experience, but they are commonly how humans make sense of their own experiences (Bell, 2002). It is only by telling my Nutcracker story outside of my community that a broader understanding of both the story’s events and its broader context that I gain a deeper insight into my childhood community and its nuances in the mid 1990s.

Beyond the central importance of the story in NI research, other key assumptions of the methodology are that stories can and do evolve over time with new experiences and perspectives, and that our personal and communal positioning influence our stories and their telling. From these key assumptions, NI moves beyond story or stories to surface the “underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (Bell, 2002, p. 208). By listening to and analyzing a variety of narratives, a deeper understanding of a person, a people, an experience, or a context can emerge. Broadly, Narrative Inquiry is any research framework that uses stories as data and wherein analysis builds outwards from individuals’ stories to gain an understanding of human actions and experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995).

NI, a methodology grounded in this storytelling impulse, became a fertile ground for stories of the construction program, the stories of a program uniting people, place, and purpose
for a length of time. NI also explores “the telling” of the story—and argues that there is knowledge is to be found in both the stories themselves and also how people tell them (Kim, 2016). Further, and essential due to my outsider status and the difference in background and experiences between myself and the storytellers featured in this work, NI builds on the stories of those with particular experiences in ways that may bridge divides between people. Our stories are bridges we build between one another that expose us to other worlds and forge a pathway towards understanding and even empathy (Lawrence & Paige, 2016).

Though stories are important mechanisms for understanding, their place within research is contested. For the researcher seeking written documentation for what Levi-Strauss labeled “the science of the concrete” (citation in Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 2), personal narratives and stories are subjective and therefore unreliable sources of knowledge and truth. This is a position commonly taken throughout history and the social sciences, both of which have historically classified narratives, especially those of Indigenous peoples, as mere mythology devoid of factual meaning (Benham, 2012). In the preface to his book of essays, N. Scott Momaday (1997) examines and then dismisses the debate over stories’ factual or fictional nature as unimportant:

Stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition...stories are true in that they are established squarely upon belief. In the oral tradition stories are told not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed. They are true. (p. 3)

Thus, our stories matter and regardless of content, there is unequivocal truth to be found in all stories. What stories are told and for what purpose is an important line of inquiry for understanding another person’s life, experiences, and, by extension, the surrounding world. NI reflects this value statement in centralizing stories as both a valid way of knowing the world and understanding experience, and also a universally human method of sense-making (Bell, 2002).

Further, centering stories most often overlooked or dismissed has the added benefit of pushing back on whitestream narratives that serve to other and exoticize Native peoples and, as
Said writes, can “become a method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (as cited in Nez Denetdale, 2007, p. 10). The use of story as both methodology and data subverts the traditional dismissal of Native oral traditions and stories as mythologies inferior to the “documentary evidence” produced by literate societies and that may be verified against other historical documents (Collins & Blot, 2003). The applicability of NI, thus, is important not only for its general possibilities, but also for its commentary on whose voices and stories are heard and whose are not, and its celebration of traditions found outside the Western academy and within historically devalued and silenced communities.

NI operates on two important levels, then, the micro and the macro. From the perspective of identity, the stories we (re)tell speak to our perceived identities, our representations of self, and the context of the moment of (re)telling. As Bamberg and Georgekopoulou (2008) describe stories—particularly small stories of the everyday—are a representation of the “self at the level of the talked-about” (2008, p. 380). We give a sense of self in the stories we tell and how we tell them.

Stories (re)told, however, reflect not only those stories of our own personal lives we see as most salient, but stories retold across communities, societies, and time reflect those stories deemed most valuable, important, and even powerful (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). History is at its most basic level the series of stories accepted and disseminated by dominant groups, or as Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) describes “It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominant others (p. 35). Additionally, centering stories and narratives within research with Indigenous communities and participants is to honor and reflect the place of storytelling within many such societies. Various Native American and Indigenous scholars around the world write of storytelling’s centralized place in Indigenous cultures, epistemologies, and systems of knowledge construction (Battiste, 2002; Benham, 2012; Chavez et al., 2012; Grande, 2004; Kovach, 2009;
Manuelito, 2005; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Benham (2012) points out that for many Indigenous groups, narratives are the central way for conveying knowledge and therefore are both deeply personal and “deeply communal” (p. 520).

In her list of roles a researcher must assume, Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) first lists “storyteller” (p. 90). Likewise, throughout her book Indigenous Methodologies, Kovach (2009) incorporates the words and stories told to her by other researchers because “stories are who we are. They are both method and meaning” (2009, p. 108). In her formulation of a Native American pedagogy, Grande (2004) also first cites the need for such pedagogy to be “historically grounded in local and tribal narratives” (p. 35).

Thus, to use NI in research is a way to push back against the pervasiveness of predominant group narratives—most often those of white settler colonialists—and add new narratives to the record. To this end, and given the setting and stories of this research, grounding this study in NI and adding the stories told by Native American, adult students to the educational literature helps extend such records beyond the historically privileged.

For a variety of reasons, then, stories and narratives comprise important components of our everyday lives and stand uniquely positioned when framed as data to push back on traditional, predominating discourses in the academy. Because of their ability to subvert colonizing narratives of minority communities, their strength of conveying deeper understanding of different perspectives of the world, and, due to their centralized position in both Indigenous methodology as well as many Indigenous cultures and epistemologies, Narrative Inquiry provided the best fit for my own learning about student experiences with belonging.
Setting

The place

This study took place at a Southwestern community college spanning thousands of square miles and several different tribal lands. One such campus is in Pine Creek, built within a Western Apache community. At the Pine Creek campus, the career and college readiness department included a vocational education program for construction. The construction program on these tribal lands is the location of this study.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, there are six tribes, or divisions, within Apache groups, which can be further subdivided into groups and bands (Goodwin, 1969). Though it is possible to use a more precise name than Western Apache for the community surrounding the construction program, to be more specific would be to leave enough clues to threaten the confidentiality of all those that offered up their stories. To be less specific, though, would be to fall into that common outsider pitfall of overgeneralizing people into a racial categorization imposed on them by white settler colonization. Thus, I use the more generalized term Western Apache as the identifying label for the communities, culture, language, and people described throughout.

Originally, the construction program was first situated in a town further north—one within that shortgrass prairie drive. After floundering there for two years, the program was moved to the Apache lands when it became apparent there was both community support for the program and a population of students eager to enroll. By the time I encountered it, the program had been in Pine Creek for two years, with steady enrollments between ten and twenty people each year.
The Reservation

In addition to my own observations and the knowledge offered by students during our interviews, some information about reservations in the U.S. in general and this specific Western Apache reservation provides some helpful context for envisioning the individuals and their stories that follow. The meaning and purpose of Native American reservations has greatly evolved in the centuries since the arrival of white settlers. In their attempt to define reservations, Van Otten and Vasquez (2009) describe them as “unique, arbitrarily-imposed geopolitical entities [that] are vestiges of federal efforts to solve the “Indian problem” (p. 3). Despite the centuries of effort by empires and self-declared democracies alike to do otherwise, many Native American tribes and communities persisted, survived, and were able to pass down their traditions, languages, religions and spiritualities through generations.

The Western Apache community, Pine Creek, is the largest on the tribal lands with about one-third of the tribe’s population living in this one town (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). The town includes a few stores, several fast-food restaurants, the largest high school on the reservation, a large community-owned and worked farm, and much of the tribal governmental infrastructure. Most students in the construction program both currently live and are originally from Pine Creek. Both the Western Apache reservation more broadly and Pine Creek specifically struggle with the same challenges reservations across the country also face, with the lower levels of “…whatever conventional criteria one chooses to apply—per capita income, household income, unemployment figures, property ownership…” in comparison with the rest of the country (Perry, 1993, p. 17). Across this Western Apache reservation, close to half of all adults are unemployed (ages 20 to

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10 The current U.S. policy towards reservations is one of self-determination, though that policy comes with a caveat. Tribal lands, or reservations, are geographic areas held by a federally recognized Native American tribe; lands may be owned by the specific Native American nation or legally owned by the U.S. government which grants permission for a specific tribe to settle on the land (Van Otten & Vasquez, 2009). In either case, though, the ultimate control of the land rests in the hands of the federal government, specifically the Department of the Interior.
and about one-third of those living on the reservation have less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). The median income per household is just over $30,000, compared to the national medium income of $62,843 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). Throughout interviews with the construction students, students referenced personal experience with these challenges, including difficulty in finding work and having limited incomes. In particular, many students struggled with food uncertainty, making many of the instructor’s efforts to provide regular access to food all the more important.

It would be inaccurate, though, to see only the negatives of life in Pine Creek. Throughout my interviews with students in the construction program, individuals continually drew on the land, the people, and the activities of life on the reservation as sources of joy, strength, and belonging. Thus, although research about and demographics of the reservation may present a variety of challenges for those that live there, the individuals featured in this study tell stories of both good and bad, much like those that might be found in communities around the world.

The people

The people interviewed for this study were individuals enrolled in the construction program and taking classes at the Pine Creek campus on the reservation during the Spring semester of 2020. Eleven people were interviewed for this study. Basic demographic information on each person interviewed can be found in Table 1 below. By the time I interviewed individuals, they had taken classes in the program for at least one full semester: three students were the end of their second year in the program and eight were at the end of their first year.

Though students in the construction program, and at the satellite campus, are more demographically similar than many of the other campuses off tribal lands, as became quickly
evident during interactions and interviews, the students in the program are far from homogenous. The majority of students interviewed were enrolled members of their Apache tribe, however there were some students that were either not members of the tribe or even identified as Apache. Some students had lived their lives on their ancestral lands, but others had lived in other states and even another country. Some had attended schools only run by the tribal government, and others had gone to boarding schools. Most students were from the Pine Creek. Additionally, some students had finished high school and earned a diploma, and other students were in the construction program working towards a high school equivalency degree.

During my interviews, lines of social, historical, and geographical groupings, of which I was initially unaware, became visible. I discuss the effect of these social divisions in more detail in chapters four and five. The table below, however, provides some initial context for some of the commonalities and differences mentioned by students throughout the interviews. For example, Vangie spoke of being an outsider in the class because she was not from Pine Creek. Other lines of social division relevant to belonging included tribal affiliation/race, and gender.

The other key figure, an indirect participant in this study, was Nathan, the instructor. In September 2019, I traveled to the community college to interview faculty members in the College and Career Pathways department as part of a different research project (my former department and the department that houses the construction program). During this visit I first met Nathan, an interaction that served as the catalyst for this study. Nathan worked at the college, in the CCP department, for four years. The first two years he taught the construction program in his own hometown and, most recently, for two years taught on at the satellite campus on the Western Apache community. Nathan is a Caucasian male, in his mid-to-late 40’s, and formerly worked a
Table 3-1: Background information of students interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year of program</th>
<th>Ethnicity &amp; Tribal Membership</th>
<th>Home Community</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beamer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Studying for HSE Tests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>High school diploma, working on associate degree</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache &amp; Puebloan; not a tribal member</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Finished 10th grade; working on HSE credential through pathway to diploma</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Finished 8th grade; working on HSE credential through pathway to diploma</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>High school diploma; working on associate degree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaneisha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>High school diploma; working on associate degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Finished 10th grade; working on HSE credential through pathway to diploma</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Finished 9th grade; studying for HSE Tests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>High school diploma; working on associate degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vangie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Western Apache</td>
<td>Hadziid</td>
<td>Finished 10th grade; attempted HSE from GED® Test*</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaughn</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Non-Western Apache; tribal member of another Southwestern tribe</td>
<td>Pine Creek</td>
<td>Finished 11th grade; working on HSE credential through pathway to diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Vangie mentioned taking the GED tests in the past but was unsure of her current plans for obtaining her HSE credential at the time of our interviews.
variety of jobs in construction. Having moved with his wife from another Southwestern state before joining the construction program as faculty, Nathan had a great deal of experience working construction jobs on various tribal lands and with Native co-workers. This background, as well as an empathetic personality, were what caused many of the construction students to say Nathan really understood their lives on the reservation.

**Meeting the Student Storytellers**

My words exist at the level of my voice. If I do not speak with care, my words are wasted. If I do not listen with care, words are lost.

N. Scott Momaday (1997, p. 55)

But when I get to know you, I’m real opened up to hear what you got to say and how I can learn from you. And you can learn from me. What I can teach you, what you can teach me.

Chris

Central to any story are the words used, in Momaday’s passage made synonymous, with the speakers’ voice. To understand the story, to appreciate and convey it into memory, both words and voice must be centralized. In the realm of the story, the voice is sacred. No story is complete—or started, even—without some understanding of the voices doing the telling. This section provides a context for the storytellers in this research. Though a brief overview of the students is in chapter three (methodology), in this section I provide more detail about each person as they described and sought to convey themselves. As much as possible, these passages selected are direct quotations of how the students described themselves; I convey them here, to be listened to with care, so their words may not be lost with my interference. Any omissions in these quotations were done to avoid specific place names and maintain confidentiality; to remove pauses and filler language; or to move to lines within passages that focus on the specific topic
discussed. Other than these deletions, I have kept people’s words as close to verbatim as possible in hopes of recreating a sense of the voices that spoke to them and the way they expressed them.

The quotations chosen below were those that described some level of the speaker’s self—their self-descriptions, their choices for a pseudonym (those few that chose to use one), their likes and/or dislikes. Additionally, for those that referred to their racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds, I included such quotations to provide a sense of their positionality. I end this section with my own self-description; as the author and designer of this research, all this work is inseparable from my own voice and positionality. Just as I want readers to know the voices of the speakers whose words are written here, so too should they know my own voice and how it has shaped this work.

The Student Storytellers

Beamer

An Apache father, brother, son, and partner, in his 40s, Beamer enrolled in the construction program to earn his high school equivalency degree. He described himself thus:

If I was to come up with my own name, I would’ve been known by Beamer, like the car name. …like I say, I have a passion for cars. I don’t know why, but that diesel noise. I like that noise.

Beamer saw the construction program as a way to get his life back “on track” after being incarcerated:

Now I can get back on track. Once I get out, I can do this, I'll have kids and be a daddy, be responsible. This is where the program— well, for one thing about all that, I basically say that I lost it. Or I'm confused, I lost a lot of things after I dropped out of school. Things I wanted to be. Because I started missing school. I started driving by my home school. And I was going to work. And I started growing up at a young age. Say, what was it, sixteen, seventeen. I just had to work. So I was working, which was good to me, and
my part. It was responsibility. You know. Just going to work every day, going to work. But I used to look at that school. I was thinking, man, I miss school.”

**Brandan**

Born and raised in the same town (Pine Creek) as the construction program on Apache lands, Brandan (age 25) graduated from high school and enrolled in the construction program to earn an associate degree. He described himself as “kind of shy. Kind of awkward. But a little bit outgoing. …I get comfortable around people, and then I start being more outgoing.” When asked about the last time he felt a sense of belonging, Brandan described his connection to the nearby river:

I think the river…Just wonder[ing] like, how long it’s been there and what it means to—what it meant back then. And that reminds me of where I’m from. How many—all those times we went swimming in it and fishing or just hanging out by the river.

**Chris**

Chris (28 years old) is Apache and Puebloan, though not an official member of either tribe. Chris often spoke of being in a liminal space between these two tribes, not quite belonging in either: “…it was probably ‘cause I wasn’t a tribal member at the time too. And I’m still not a tribal member. …I’m half <Apache tribal name> but they won’t accept me still. Its just weird.” Chris attended a boarding school in another state for his junior year before returning to the reservation. After trying numerous times (unsuccessfully) to get his credits transferred back to his original school on in Pine Creek, Chris left school in his senior year. Chris described himself as:

Very, just shy, quiet. But when I get to know you, I’m real opened up to hear what you got to say and how I can learn from you. And you can learn from me. What I can teach you, what you can teach me. …kind of like a goofy guy.
Jose

The only non-Native speaker interviewed, Jose is in his mid-twenties. He married an Apache woman and they had two daughters before moving back to his wife’s hometown, Pine Creek. Jose reflected on being first-generation Mexican American, particularly in the hardships involved in growing up with undocumented parents:

I’m first-generation Mexican American here. My parents were immigrants. So they came over here, had us, tried to start the whole life thing. Like tried to start with no papers, nothing. And then, well, we got—they put us into school here, American institutions and stuff, school. But every now and then, our parents would take us back to Mexico.

Jose further elaborated on the challenges of his childhood when asked how he made the decision to return to school

…we live[d] like in a really poor neighborhood…We came from like Section 8, food stamps, government assistance, really poor stuff…Just something in my head was like, I started getting jobs, starting going to rich people areas, white people that have all these mansions. I was cleaning their yards like a normal Mexican, cleaning a rich person’s yard. And I’m just like…how come I can’t do this? How come I can’t have a house? Like, I’m living here, it exists, I’m look at it, I exist too. How come I can’t? I can do that. I can figure out a way. …People tell me, that sounds stupid. I’m like, man, I just want to be rich. I’m tired. I know what poor feels like. I want to be rich.

Junior

Born and raised in Pine Creek, Junior (age 22) graduated from the local high school before enrolling in the construction program after a year off from school. Junior first described himself relative to his enrollment in classes at the college:

Well, I live here. And I think it’s my third year [in college]. I started in 2017. I started with general studies. I was going for general studies in associate’s…And then I found out they were bringing this program down here, so I switched up to construction.

When asked about his hobbies or places he liked to go, Junior haltingly listed a few things that first came to mind:
I think I liked to go to the basketball games...basketball is big here. And what else did I like to do? The mountains, going to the mountains when I was a kid. Just like exploring, hiking, playing in the dirt, whatnot. The rivers, the streams, the lakes...also the ski, skiing. Sunrise.

**Kaneisha**

Kaneisha (age 26) is a woman of many hats. When asked to describe herself, Kaneisha first listed the various roles she has in life:

I guess, just—I have two kids. I work for <name of conservation agency>. I’m married. I don’t know what else. ...I work full-time...this past semester [did] six classes plus working. ...to get my full hours, I’d have to work weekends so my days off were days I was going to school.

Like a few other individuals interviewed, Kaneisha also went to another town to attend high school, but unlike others, this was not a boarding school specifically for Native Americans:

My mom has like, this, she was paying this lady for me to live with her. So I was walking to school from her house and doing whatever, school, sports, and then walking back to her place. And during the school year, I didn't really see much of my parents till later. ...Because it was suggested that the schools down here were too far behind. And I was a little too ahead. So they told me that <high school name>...will be more of a challenge for me.

Because Kaneisha was not attending a formal boarding school, her family paid someone in the community for Kaneisha’s board during the week and Kaneisha could return home on the weekends. The arrangement became too expensive, however, and Kaneisha returned home for her senior year and graduated from the local high school.
**Lonnie**

Lonnie is both a student in the construction program and a lab aide, a position she took great joy in doing. In describing herself, Lonnie talked of her family life growing up, her family she has created with her long-time partner, and her struggles in school:

I was born and raised here. I never graduated [from high] school. I think I went all the way to sophomore. I was a bad child growing up…And my mom and dad split when I was about six. Then I think about last year, he finally wanted to do a DNA test on me. So all this stuff happened last year. I guess I was like in a troubled relationship growing up. And I got out of that. I think I was with her for like seven years. And then I went, I just got up and left. Then I met another girl, and I’ve been with her for seven years now.”

When asked about times she had felt a sense of belonging in the past, Lonnie mentioned both school at the college and her children as fostering belonging:

School now. School now. Because like, I wouldn’t be where I'm at right now if I didn’t get up and come to [construction] orientation….My kids. Mostly my kids. ‘Cause I think, yeah, if it wasn’t for them, we probably wouldn’t be right here. And alcohol and drug free. All the way around.”

**Phyllis**

Phyllis was in the minority of the construction students not only because she is as a woman, but also because she was not originally from Pine Creek. She grew up in a town about 45 minutes away on the same reservation. At the time of interviews, though, she had lived in Pine Creek for many years. When asked to describe herself, Phyllis began with her family and its recent changes:

I’m a mother of four daughters. I went through a complicated relationship and marriage, and this year has been different. I’m starting out on my own this year. The construction class is a new outlook for the second year.
Phyllis joined the construction program as part of her employment with a local rehabilitation center, and emphasized the importance of the class’s benefits such as helping her stay sober and provide for her family:

I need this, I need this class. If not, I’m just home—I got nothing to do, I got no goals. I’m just, you know, sitting at home. I need to do something, you know? And then with the thing that’s going on with society, you know, the food and the costs, things not free. You gotta get up and earn it and work. So I’m trying to teach my daughters that too. And, we did grow up with government system—with the help from the programs. And it does help. ‘Cause there’s a lot here that does need help with that. Yeah.

Rodson

Rodson was born and grew up on the reservation, and is interested in automotive mechanics; unfortunately, the program is not offered on the Pine Creek campus, and so he enrolled in the construction program. Rodson initially described his personality before he wondered aloud whether these statements were truthful or not: “…laid back. Just, family-oriented now. And hardworking, I would say. Lying or not, I don’t know.” Rodson lived in a few places on the reservation throughout his life:

Yeah, I’m from here. Grow up on these parts towards the other side, that way. East. The other side east, that way. I grew up with my grandparents and I went to school at [school name] for my high school but it closed down, so I went to [Pine Creek high school] and I graduated in ’08.

Vangie

Like Phyllis, Vangie was born and raised in another town, but she had not spent time in Pine Creek before enrolling in the construction program. Vangie is in her early fifties, and grew up in Haziid, an hour away:

“I live in <Hadziid>, that’s like an hour away from here. And I have six kids, one girl—I mean five girls and one boy…I’ve been a single mother all those six kids. And I wasn’t working until I started working last year, so it’s one year that I’m on this work.
program…. This is my second semester being in college. I’m hoping to get my GED® certificate for doing the construction.”

Unlike the other students, Vangie grew up in a home and community speaking Apache:

“Back then, everybody even the little kids and adults and teenagers, everybody speaked Apache then. And then, I don’t know how about English came around and mostly the new, the new generation mostly talk English now.”

**Vaughn**

Vaughn is Navajo and spoke in detail about being an outsider in the community. Like Kaneisha, Vaughn also worked hard to balance family, class, and work at a gas station about an hour off of the reservation:

I’m taking these construction classes. I work at <gas station> up the hill in <town name off reservation>. I work their graveyards. I’m married with two boys. My wife is actually pursuing her associates in psychology and I’m doing my associates in applied science. I’m going to be finishing the last two construction classes that I need for, you know, this construction program they have at <college name>. And, yeah, and I’m taking the fast-track classes at <other community college name> to get my associate’s.

Vaughn was the only student interviewed that included his ancestorial clans, ending this recitation by describing himself as “from the rocks, from the wind, from the trees.”

**Tabitha**

I am currently a graduate student in Pennsylvania, though in introducing myself to someone I would not say I was “from” the state. I was born in Iowa and raised in Georgia, and though I have been away from it for the past eight years, I look forward to when I can return to the Southwest and bask in the desert sun. I am a bit headstrong, a bit shy and uncertain; I aim to always listen genuinely, as much as possible, rather than wait to talk. I am a nerd that enjoys learning for learning’s sake, except for astronomy and its constellations that never made any
sense. I am a daughter, and little sister; an aunt and godmother; a partner and a friend. Someone who spent much of her childhood wanting to fit in, wanting to be a little bit cool, but also always wanting to be perceived as smart, regardless of whether or not I was. I am a white, middle-class, native-born in the U.S., English-speaking, raised by two educators, college-educated woman—labels that differentiate me from most of the speakers described above.

**Recruitment Procedure**

With permission from the department chair and the classroom instructor, I attended construction classes in March 2020. Though most of the students knew me from an earlier visit in September 2019—when I went to the program to interview Nathan and other developmental services instructors—I re-introduced myself during the first week of classes. In the second class, I talked of my own background (like my experiences working in the department and why I wanted to return to do my dissertation research), the study (why I was researching the topic and what I hoped to learn) and what students’ potential involvement would entail, including the number of interviews I hoped to conduct (three), how long the interviews would roughly last (an hour), the timeline for the interviews (March and May), and what the research would be used for (my dissertation, and for the learning of myself and the other instructors with whom I promised to share my analysis). I then invited students to ask questions.

After a short discussion, I gave instruction on how students could participate. By inviting students who were willing to participate in the study to follow up with me after class and outside the classroom, I hoped to minimize peer pressure to participate. Ultimately, 11 students volunteered to participate in the study and three interviews. Unfortunately, because of travel
limitations during COVID, the interview plan was unable to proceed as planned, and I was able to interview only two individuals the planned three times.

**Procedure for Data Collection**

Data collection for this study used Seidman’s (2006) three-interview format as a foundational resource and I planned to conduct a series of interviews that sequentially focused on participants’ lives. Seidman’s (2006) format is to learn about a person’s past life history (interview one), current experiences of relevance (interview two), and reflections of experiences’ meaning (interview three). Although Seidman’s format concentrates the third interview for more internal reflection questions, I tried to incorporate this line of questioning within each interview. The reasons for this were both methodological and logistical.

First, this strategy better insured that each interview might reach a depth of insight; this was important for interviewing students enrolled within a department of the college that often did not have high retention rates. It is not unusual for students to stop attending classes as the semester progresses. The interview schedule was set to include first and second interviews in March and a return trip to the area, from Pennsylvania, in May. Since I was unsure if the students present in the classroom in March would continue to attend classes in May, I wanted to make sure to open up interview conversations to meaning making and reflection earlier in the interview arc than just in the last interview.

Second, drawing on Clandinin and Connolly’s (2000) work on Narrative Inquiry, each of the interviews conducted in this study tried to incorporate prompts that could explore the four dimensions of NI—inward, outward, backward, and forward. I designed questions meant to elicit personal stories, with follow-up questions meant flush out the space around these stories and the person telling them. Thus, I crafted questions asking about a student’s background to probe the
catalyst for a story’s events (backwards); the ripples of events caused because of the story (forwards); the context of the story’s events and the story’s retelling (outwards); and the thoughts, feelings, and meanings of the stories and its retelling (inward).

One poignant example of this quad-directional questioning is in Brandon’s telling about a place he felt he belonged. In following up on his descriptions of his last visit to the river, and my questions trying to explore each of the four directions of NI, Brandon revealed the visit was significant in that he realized his life would never be something very special. Not only did this story, and discussion of a place to belong, open to a conversation about moving forward in time and in life, but also moved inwards to reveal Brandon’s sense of his self, the image he had of his future self when in childhood, and the deep sense loss for a hope of something different. Thus, though the interview was meant to focus on a single moment of belonging, it also contextualized the space around and within himself at that moment.

I prepared the interviews guides using Siedman (2006) and Clandinin and Connolly (2000) as a departure point. From these sources, I created interview guides, rather than scripts, with the goal that this approach might help “build a conversation,” allowing for flexibility and spontaneity while also maintaining a focus on the areas of students’ experiences I hoped to foreground (Patton, 1990, p. 283). Though there was specific background information I wanted to learn (like educational histories, tribal affiliation, and linguistic background), the rest of the interview was to be open enough to follow a person’s stories wherever they might lead.

As I previously mentioned, this was the planned procedure for data collection though not exactly how data collection happened. As is probably common for graduate students across the world, COVID disrupted my data gathering. Perhaps no research ever proceeds according to plan but contending with a global pandemic made data gathering particularly difficult. Interviews and field notes were meant to occur during two visits during the second half of the Spring 2020
semester. Because of travel restrictions and health concerns, the second round of data, intended to happen in person in April and May, was much more limited and done with distance technology.

This resulted in two main difficulties. First, personal rapport and open conversation often seems to be easier when done in person. In particular, poor Internet and phone service in the more rural areas meant the follow-up interviews were often done with timing delays and service cutting in and out. It is difficult to have a free-flowing conversation in such instances. Second, as proposed to and approved by IRB, contact with students was coordinated around the community college; students could participate in interviews by going to a separate classroom or student-chosen location. I did not have contact information for the students I interviewed in the first two rounds of data collection. Thus, to attempt the third round of interviews, Nathan contacted the entire class via email, and students could then reach out for a third interview. I do not know how many students saw this email, and only three students of students contacted me for another interview (one of these students was not interviewed originally, so the distance interview was our first and only conversation). Thus, the original design of the research, with three distinct interviews, did not happen.

Data instruments

Data for this research was gathered through a series of interviews, each approximately an hour long. Each of the three interviews in this research focused on a different slice of people’s experiences, focusing on life histories, present classroom experiences, and finally, future goals and plans, though as described above, in each interview I tried to contextualize the stories by asking follow-up questions designed to explore Clandinin and Connelly’s four direction of inquiry (2000). I designed questions to explore these experiences by asking about smaller stories that brought the storyteller and listener to specific moments, what Bamberg and Georgakopoulou
characterize as a moment of identity (2008). I did not gather grand life narratives, but the smaller moments of life through that aggregate into our sense of self.

I organized questions into flexible interview guides. My guides used the foundational resources discussed above, and integrated feedback from my advisor, a fellow member of my program cohort, and a work colleague whose dissertation similarly used NI methodology. Interview questions can be found in Appendix C, though it should be noted that these questions were meant to be guides, rather than strict scripts, that could initiate an open-ended interaction with the students.

Data analysis plan

Data analysis occurred in six iterative phases, designed to base all analytical products in the stories of the data:

1) Transcribing: The first step in data analysis was the transcription of interviews. I transcribed some interviews and, to expedite the process, also hired a professional transcriber. I then reviewed all transcripts to check for accuracy.

2) Restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990): In this phase, I restructured interview data and field notes in sequence to better understand the storyteller’s journey of experience, emotion, and meaning making. Before any systematic analysis began, I restoried all participants’ interview data into temporal sequences. To understand important narrative elements, such as context, sequence, and outcome, Whiffen et al. (2014) recommend organizing such sequential data to provide a big-picture understanding of both the individual’s stories and the stories’ commonalities. I similarly organized these sequences in a type of mind map schematic, with certain shapes and colors representing specific
common events, such as leaving school, dealing with the justice system, and having children.

3) Setting up NVivo database: Coding was done with NVivo. The software allows not only for a coding structure, but also for data to be linked to specific cases and an organizing schema. Categories in NVivo must have discrete categories, rather than open-ended options; thus, case categories provide a helpful overview of the data and students interviewed but does not allow for a nuanced picture. I set up each student in the software as a ‘case,’ the NVivo software’s terminology. Using the restorying data from phase one, I created case categories to help assess commonalities between student backgrounds, experiences, and stories. Case categories included town of residence, tribal membership, linguistic background, highest level of education completed, boarding school attendance, and plans for future education. Additionally, because I am inseparable from my own positionality and its inevitable influence on this research and my conclusions, I likewise uploaded my field notes and reflective journal entries into the software and created a case for myself.

4) Creating initial coding schematic: Using the data derived from phases two and three, and with research questions foregrounded in mind, I identified initial coding categories. Common storied events—such as how participants decided to enroll in the construction program and the experience of their first day of class—became the initial point of departure for the coding schema, a strategy based on Saladaña’s motif coding (2013). Although coding of NI data may be seen by some researchers as detrimental to the integrity and cohesion of the narrative (Mello, 2002), other scholars believe coding is acceptable if care is taken to foreground essential narrative elements such as sequence (Lewis, 2018; Whiffin et al., 2014). Using Saladaña’s motif coding (2013) helped keep the constitute elements of narrative central in the analysis stage.
5) Open coding: After coding for narrative-specific elements, open coding as outlined by Lewis (2018) examined participant stories for contextual elements including: narrative processes; language and speech acts, such as metaphors, analogies, or speech acts such as teasing; contextual elements such as the timing of the interviews or the student’s self-described background.

6) Applying theory: the final round of analysis applied theoretical framework, the ecological model of belonging, and findings for relative research to the coding. In this last round of coding, I reviewed transcripts and field notes for links, or absence of links, to theoretical frameworks commonly applied in this area of research—namely adult education, adult basic and vocational education, and theories of belonging.

Assumptions

Implicit within NI as a methodology are key epistemological and ontological assumptions. Regarding epistemology, NI assumes, as do I, that knowledge about an experience, a person, and a people is best acquired and created through sustained relationships with those people, while considering their specific lived experiences. In other words, only through establishing prolonged interactions with individuals, through which a relationship of trust and reciprocity may be established, can the stories of an individual lead to truth and insight. Because of this emphasis on sustained interactions with individuals for better understanding of their lives and stories, I designed my study to spend several weeks with the construction class as a whole and the students interviewed. Unfortunately, COVID prohibited this plan of action. Though I adapted my research plans in response to events of the time (attending some of the online classes and doing either phone or online follow-up interviews), I spent much less with the participants than planned. This unavoidably affected the research. Though I did become familiar with students
over the semester and believe the research findings reported here to still be valid and valuable, I believe that increased time with the class and with the individuals would have deepened my understandings of belonging in general and in the classroom.

In considering the possibility of learning a person’s truths NI assumes truth as being “subjective, numerous and created” (Lewis, 2018, p. 15). Additionally, as Clandinin and Connolly (2000) point out, the researcher(s) is not separate from the research; rather, “we are complicit in the world we study” (p. 60). In the introduction to her memoir, Miranda (2013) writes “…who tells a story is a mighty piece of information for the listeners; you must know what that storyteller has at stake” (p. xvi). Though this might most immediately apply to the stories told to me by the students, I must also consider my own positionality and know what is, for me, “at stake.” Thus, it is not only relevant who I am and where I come from, but the purpose of this research and what benefit arises from it; in short, this study and its conclusions is inseparable from its personal purpose, the completion of my doctorate. It is important to firstly acknowledge this, but also to include my motivations when considering my own positionality. From this perspective, field notes and self-reflection are also key forms of data; without including and interrogating my own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and what’s “at stake” for me personally, the narrative accounts collected and detailed in this project can never represent the entirety of the context.

Further, a key assumption of this research is the importance of the relationship between me and the student storytellers. This relationship is forged, like the research on belonging details, with sustained (positive) interactions that build trust and a reciprocity of disclosure and vulnerability. I attempted to establish trust through a constant affirmation of confidentiality, as well as an opening myself up for the student storytellers to ask their own questions. I have also continued to check in with the class, post-interviews and data gathering, through contact with Nathan, who sends regular greetings to the class and updates me on the students’ progress and life
events. Similarly, with these openings and contained contact, I hoped to establish a degree of reciprocity, however unbalanced. As discussed in the ethical considerations section, in a further attempt to establish reciprocity—to acknowledge the gift of relationship with these phenomenal individuals and their stories, and to give back, albeit in a small way—I donated $100 of canned and dried goods to the food pantry available to the students.

Scope and Limitations

As outlined in chapter two’s literature review, the existing research on belonging in educational spaces primarily focuses on K-12 or traditional college students at four-year colleges and universities. There is little research on belonging for non-traditional adult education students. Further, research examining the experiences of minority students, particularly Native American students, often focuses on Native student experiences at predominantly white institutions. By looking at the experiences of minority, non-traditional students in a vocational and adult basic education program, this research aims to fill in some of the gaps in the literature on belonging and education.

This work, however, is just one small piece of the picture of Native American and minority student experiences in post-secondary educational programs. It is not without limitations. First, there is often a tendency for research on Native American people’s experiences to extrapolate to an entire racial group; the homogenizing of Native American tribal and personal identities into a single racial identity is a facet of white settler colonialism (Brayboy, 2005; Deyhle, 1995; Horse, 2012; Tall Bear, 2013). Therefore, it is vital to note that this research, though addressing a hole in the existing literature, does not represent a generalized group of people. The Native American and minority students graciously participating in this project speak of their own experiences, and not on behalf of all Western Apaches, Native Americans, minority,
or adult non-traditional students. This research should be read in the personalized and individualized spirit with which the participants shared their stories.

Second, as discussed in the data gathering section, COVID massively interrupted this project and required alternative, and further imperfect, interview plans. These interviews, due to technology limitations, were more difficult to schedule and conduct than the intended face-to-face interviews. Interactions with students who had previously been more congenial and open were shorter, often interrupted with technological hiccups, and lacked the free-flowing nature that earlier interviews had. Further, most of the students I interviewed in person did not reach out for a follow-up interview. Because data collection was truncated, I conducted fewer interviews than intended; additional interviews would have provided greater depth and nuance. Nonetheless, I believe the existing interviews answer the research questions and provide new insights into these students’ classroom and educational experiences.

Lastly, as is frequently mentioned in qualitative research methodology, I conducted this research from my own subjective position (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Staller, 2015), that of a white, U.S.-born, native-English speaking, female graduate student who was raised by two educators. The research design, thus, comes from my own subjectivities. I include this here not because I believe it to be a limitation, but rather because it does help define the scope of this research. This is a study on belonging done from my specific experiences, perspectives, and positionalities. These facets of myself inevitably shaped the subject I chose to research, the questions I chose to ask, and the themes and patterns I chose to highlight. Thus, this research is intricately and inextricably connected to my own self and should therefore be read with those subjectivities in mind.
Ethical considerations

Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) write that universities and colleges should consider the “four Rs” of ethical interactions with Native American students and communities: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Though the authors use these components for describing how higher education institutes can make their schools more welcoming and integrative for students, the framework works well for any non-Native and/or person coming from an educational institute. Thus, at each stage of this research I tried to incorporate and reflect upon each of these components. In terms of respect, I constantly sought to respect students’ autonomy, agency, and perspective. For example, in recruiting participants, I emphasized their choice to participate or not, and by removing myself from the classroom and the sight of fellow students and the instructor, I tried to give students full agency, with limited social or academic pressure. I also asked all the students what name they would like to use (their own or a pseudonym), both to respect their confidentiality and their choice of how they wished to associate with their stories.

Regarding relevance, which Kirkness and Barnhardt define as the need to recognize knowledge forms outside of written text, I chose qualitative research and a methodology design, NI, whose foundational principle is the importance of personal story. This is particularly relevant for work within those communities and tribes, such as Western Apache communities, that place great cultural significance and importance on oral tradition, experiential knowledge, and relevance of tribal and local languages and language practices (Basso, 1996; Battiste, 2002; Chavez et al., 2012; Goulding et al., 2016).

Within research with Indigenous communities, many researchers now emphasize the need for reciprocity, a stark division from the traditional extractive and exploitative relationship all too often established between researchers, and settler colonialists generally, and Native communities. Goulding et al. (2016) emphasize that storytelling and sharing must be a two-way
street when doing cross-cultural research. Not only does this require the researcher to share of themselves, but also means they likewise inhabit a vulnerable space with participants—in essence, researchers do not ask of others what they are unwilling to do themselves. Further, the researcher must position themselves in a learner mindset, rather than an outsider expert on a topic. I went to this program and these individuals to learn; they are the holders of their own expertise of experience. By seeking out the people participating in the construction program, I position myself as the knowledge-seeker and strive to remain open enough to learn from the gifts of the stories others graciously share. In keeping a reflective journal and particularly in writing about what I had learned each day helped ground me in this learner mindset.

Lastly, reciprocity is to recognize the gift I am being given by the students and to give back. I tried to do this in two ways. First, Nathan established an unofficial food pantry for the students to use however needed. For many of the students, attending class two or three days a week presents a great opportunity cost in lost wages that may mean some are unable to buy food for their families. I bought $100 worth of groceries as a gift to the class to help support students’ class attendance. Second, I committed to sharing findings with students and faculty in the department in the hopes that this research can help make other classrooms sites of belonging for all that enter.

Lastly, Kirkness and Barnhardt write of responsibility (2001). This is the responsibility of the researcher to meet the students “where they live” (p. 15); to act in good faith to understand their lives, experiences, and perspectives; and to celebrate their contributions. Within the research process, this translates to mindfulness in hearing, documenting, paraphrasing, and explaining the words people share. As a result, throughout this document, I have been careful to use language of respect, thanks, and recognition. For example, I make linguistic choices that emphasize the humanity of each person participating in this study (generally avoiding terms like ‘participant’);
describe research as examining individuals’ *experiences*, not on examining the individual themselves; and try to position this study as one done with the students, rather than on them.

This work could only have been done with the permission of the class and of the individual students; this work would not be possible without the stories and thoughts of these individuals, and their willingness to be vulnerable and open with the deepest aspects of themselves. In the face of such generosity, I cannot be anything other than a thankful learner in awe of each individual I had the honor of meeting throughout this study.

**Conclusion**

Though the goal of this chapter is to detail the research methodology and methods, I have also sought to document the mindfulness with which I approached this study and the consideration, care, and respect deeply felt for all the people I met. I attempted to express these this at each stage of the work. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, our stories are powerful entities that allow us to express our identities, both internalized and lived; construct meanings; and build bridges across those boundaries, imposed by self and society, that so often keep us apart. By asking for and hearing the stories of people whose voices have been historically overwritten by educational and academic systems, and even described as “forgotten” and invisible to social institutions (Masta, 2018, p. 822), my goal was to document, amplify, and celebrate the stories of those people who shared of themselves during our interviews and interactions. Though “whitestream” institutions may not see these students, the people sharing in this work exist and live despite this inattention, and it is to the detriment to the larger world that their words go unnoted. In the ensuing chapters, I attempt to do just this—to recount their stories and learn of their experiences to better understand classroom dynamics and how and when belonging can occur.
Chapter 4

Pathways to Belonging

Drawing on the words and stories of 11 construction students, I examine their examples of belonging to understand what, if anything, they reveal about belonging in general contexts. This chapter addresses my first research question: what do students’ stories of belonging explain about the development of belonging in general? In the following chapter, I address my second research question about belonging in the classroom. Looking across student stories of belonging, I saw three general, sometimes intertwining, pathways through which individuals experienced belonging: connection to a particular place, connection to a people/group, or connection to an activity.

These pathways are notable in their relationship to the concept of narratives, since they are also the three major components of any story (i.e., setting, main characters, and plot). In this, NI is then a particularly well-suited tool for understanding stories of belonging, as the stories offered here relate to the very building blocks of the stories themselves. Perhaps this commonality—this shared reliance on people, place, and action—between belonging and stories should not be surprising; after all, a common refrain found when reading about either topic is how both belonging and stories are elemental to the human psyche (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bell, 2002; Osterman, 2000). Thus, these elements of belonging and stories (place, people, and activity) are the organizing principles used in this chapter to explore the nature of belonging.

The focus of this chapter, then, is to examine how belonging may be forged along three pathways—people, place, and activity—within and across a variety of contexts outside of educational places. This chapter provides the foundational structure for my later analysis of
belonging within the construction classroom. I divide this analysis into several sections. First, I outline the narrative elements common to student stories (people, place/setting, and action/plot) and their connection to pathways for the development of belonging. Second, to emphasize the role the speaker plays in any story’s telling, I introduce the stories in this chapter with the voices of the student storytellers themselves. To provide as accurate a sense of each student as possible (though this inevitably and unavoidably filtered by my role as researcher, interviewer, and writer), I use passages from these student storyteller’s own descriptions of themselves and their lives. Next, continuing to use the mechanics of stories as a parallel, I examine the presence of place/setting, people/characters, and activity/plot across stories of belonging to understand the connection of each element to the development of belonging. Last, I provide a summary of my learning from student stories regarding the idea of belonging and how it can develop in contexts outside of educational places and spaces.

**Belonging and the Elements of Story**

Stories consist of a few consistent elements: the setting, here referred to as place; the main characters, here referred to as people; and the plot, here referred to as action or activity. In discussing their past experiences with belonging, students centered their stories around one or more of these elements. Story elements, like place or people or activity, then, functioned as a kind of pathway to belonging for the storyteller.

This section will examine each of the central elements of storytelling as invoked by the storytellers. In chapter 3, I provided students’ quotations describing themselves to give a better sense of each person I interviewed. In this section, I build off these introductions in discussing the demarcations around various student identities that joined some students together and separated others. Understanding the various social, tribal, and communal groups present in the classroom
lays the groundwork for analyzing why some pathways of belonging are accessible to some and not others.

### Speaker Identities and Social Belonging

...Cause feeling like, if you don’t belong nowhere, makes you kind of feel like worthless or something.

*Brandan*

Going into the classroom, I was very aware of my outsider status. I was nervous. I thought of this in terms of success—would anyone want to participate? I thought of this in terms of comfort and acceptance—would people open up to me? I wasn’t able to think in these concrete terms though, it was this nebulous concern, felt in my stomach and my back, that I would simply fail.

*Journal entry from March 6, 2020*

Perhaps it is inevitable that an investigation of any one phenomenon would also reveal its opposite. In describing their lives and telling stories of belonging, student stories of being outsiders and of not belonging also surfaced. These were stories that were often based in social divisions of difference, such as race, tribal membership, and nationality. Though research and theory might split belonging into two conceptual categories (Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2007), student stories of belonging demonstrate that a sense of belonging connects intimately with the politics of belonging. As the adapted ecological model illustrates, elements of a person’s background and heritage can alter their development of belonging. An individual’s identity is a constellation of elements, internalizing parts of our world such as our race, culture, early experiences of socialization, racial ancestry, and spirituality that then shape how we move in and experience the world (Wijeyinsghe, 2012). The ecological model, particularly Fish and Syed’s (2018) adaptation, helps explain how internalized elements of the systems surrounding us subsequently influence our acceptance within different groups and our ability to belong.
Though this study is not explicitly about race and culture, these identities cannot be overlooked or minimized because they often formed borders of communities that could dictate who could belong and who could not. For many of the students, race, tribal membership, and degrees of cultural/racial attachment, were concepts that could lead to shared identities but occasionally also outsider status. Students invoked various levels of group membership along these lines, very often singling out examples where their lack of group membership translated to a lack of belonging. Jose, for example, described being non-Native and Mexican American. In this he identified himself in two different ways, both what he is and what he is not. In talking about living on the reservation, he often referred to himself as non-Native, though he also frequently mentioned wanting to learn about the Native cultures surrounding him. He often asked others about their clanship, and described these various ancestral lines as divisions that still resided within the larger context of being Native:

So within them, they’re all Native but they have their clans. So some of them are from different clans, some of their clans have fought, some of their clans have wars, some are from different parts. …So it comes back to like, ‘oh, what clan are you? Oh, we’re a clan that didn’t get along.’ …And then they talk and they start talking, and they laugh.

From Jose’s perspective, lines of demarcation within the tribe existed and were recognized, but were then often transcended through dialogue, commonly with laughing or joking. Jose’s description of himself, however, placed him outside of those clanship lines, outside of that transcending dialogue, and outside of the Native identity altogether which created another “barrier.” As he explains: “it was just a barrier between me being Mexican and them being Native. There’s another, in their world, in their Native world that we don’t comprehend because we’re not them.”

Similarly, Vaughn spoke of the Native identity as one that might theoretically unite people of different tribal memberships but, in reality, felt this was not necessarily true. Vaughn is Navajo; he moved to the reservation with his wife, who is Apache. Before joining the
construction program, Vaughn wanted to go into law enforcement “to better the whole tribe, even though it’s not my tribe.” Vaughn both unites and separates him from others on the reservation: “…we’re still Natives. …we’re still Natives and we should get along, but it’s not really like that.” Later in our interview, Vaughn would go on to reiterate and affirm the differences within the Native identity in explaining the tensions with belonging to a different tribe. Here the ecological system’s macrosystem and chronosystem provide distinctions in who was able to belong in the community and, because of cultural and historical differences, who was not. Vaughn described cultural differences and historical competition as transcending a shared Native identity; these barriers of tribal membership hindered finding connection and dialogue—reaching that point of talking and laughing—that others from different clans but the same tribe might achieve.

Like Vaughn, Chris spoke of his Native identities—having ancestors in three tribes—and how divisions within groupings, both Native racial identity and tribal identities, mark difference. Chris described himself as half Apache, through his father, and listed other tribal identifications through his mother. When he talked about going to school on the Apache reservation, however, he often referred to not being an official tribal member. Despite having kinship through his father, he explicitly said the tribe “won’t accept me,” making his outsider identity something institutionally designated, not just a sociocultural difference. Chris easily talked of feeling at home on the community farm and with his construction classmates, and indicated he had some level of belonging within Apache communities, while he also recalled past experiences that set him apart in his Native and Apache identity. Despite Chris’s connection to the community farm, a place on the reservation that he described as always keeping a part of his heart, his language (they “won’t accept me”) explicitly describes disconnection and not belonging within the tribal community in Pine Creek.

Other interviews demonstrate further lines of demarcation as influencing belonging. Vangie talked quite a bit about being Apache, but also about being from a town an hour away
from Pine Creek. When I asked her about her connection with others in the construction class, she talked of only being comfortable and socializing with people from her town—all of whom dropped out of the program within the first few weeks of the semester. Both Vangie and Lonnie talked of Vangie’s hometown, Hadziid, as being different from Pine Creek. Hadziid is small, by all accounts, and, though reported to differing degrees, Apache is more commonly spoken there. Here the specificity of place is important, with different communities within the reservation representing different contexts. The context of place in Vangie’s story is integral for understanding her classroom experiences in particular, but also her general lack of belonging experiences.

Here dual roles of place are apparent: first, Western Apache connection to particular locales within their homelands and second, the personal nature of being from/of a place. As discussed in chapter two, Western Apache families, groupings, and clanships have historically been defined and named through their connection to specific places within the land (Basso, 1996; Goodwin, 1969). Thus, place becomes both historically (in its relationship to the ancestors) and culturally (in its importance for the Western Apache people) relevant for the community and the individual. Further, as Deloria and Wildcat (2001) explain, connecting to life’s energy in a specific place fosters a personal experience of the universe—experiences that shape our personality. Place is inevitably bound up with an individual’s expression of their identity, intertwined with the other components of their selfhood (Prins, 2009).

Geographic and cultural place inevitably shapes each student’s own sense and enactment of their identities and, by extension, how they interact and identify with others. Perhaps because her hometown Haziid is small or perhaps because of the shared use of Apache—perhaps both of these characteristics or neither of them—Vangie talked of not feeling comfortable with any of the other students in the construction class once all the people from her town dropped out. Potentially compounding this difference, though, is the fact that Vangie was one of a few women in the class
and was much older than most of her classmates. Thus, differences between herself and her classmates that were physically visible compounded on top of any social and/or geographical differences Vangie felt and expressed.

Though racial, tribal, and cultural differences provided a variety of examples of insider/outsider experiences for many of the students, these were certainly not the only things that made some people feel separate and apart from others. Lonnie spoke of her sexual orientation as potentially making people uncomfortable or bothering others; she knew that some people don’t like talking to, like, sexual people like this, you know like bisexual or transgender or whatever. Like, people don’t like—they’re uncomfortable about it. So I won’t say nothing to them until they come to me…I won’t bother anyone until they come to me.

For Lonnie, not only did her sexual orientation make her different but it had the potential to upset and alienate people, instances of which she gave multiple examples including with members of her immediate family. Kaneisha spoke of being “in and out of foster homes” growing up, “just want[ing] a family to keep” her. Even after finally being adopted, she still talked of how difficult it was to fit in growing up. A few other students talked about being involved with the justice system, and its ability to separate them, both physically and symbolically, from their homes, their families, and their communities.

These stories of difference, of being an outsider, stem from when the students were dissimilar from the system norms they perceived around them. Though certainly not the same, some characteristics outlined here are those that made me an outsider from the community, Pine Creek, and the construction students. Being an outsider is not an unfamiliar experience to me, just as it is likely not unfamiliar to most people. Though I have not experienced the racism Jose mentioned, the difference in tribal memberships Vaughn and Chris detailed, nor the homophobia Lonnie has lived through, I have felt the anxiety and isolation that can come from being an outsider.
Most recently, I was incredibly nervous to be an outsider to everyone in the construction classroom, as my journal entry at the beginning of this section described. This experience of outsider status of course had different stakes for me than for the stories shared above; I feared failing in my study if I was perceived as too much an outsider—an outsider position that had, and has, privilege to it. What particularly struck me, though, especially in light of seeing myself as “the” outsider entering the construction class and its cohesive group identity, were all the stories people told of being outsiders despite, to another outsider’s eye, appearing to all belong to at least one shared group—that of the construction class. The homogeneity of that identity, being enrolled as a student in the class, may have tempered other differences in some ways by creating shared class experiences, but the shared student identity could not erase these other differences or keep them from being felt.

The examples in this section reveal that just as people have experienced the comfort and safety that come from belonging, so too everyone spoke of at one time not belonging, of being an outsider. These stories help contextualize the nuances of classroom belonging in the pages that follow. If everyone interviewed felt they belonged, if everyone shared similar identities and no one felt an outsider in any way, then belonging in the classroom might be a foregone conclusion. In reality, most of the students here gave examples of feeling like they did not belong in some way. To foster a sense of belonging for people with such different identities, then, the classroom would have to leverage some factor that could transcend these differences and create a shared sense of belonging for everyone. The stories and examples given throughout the interviews did reveal various levels and types of difference. Most of these divisions were sociocultural; they stemmed from differences in identifications derived from social units and labeling—racial, tribal, cultural, as well as relational, romantic, familial. Despite experiences of not belonging, students were able to speak about where and when they did feel a sense of belonging. The rest of this chapter examines these stories of belonging and the pathways that help foster its development.
Elements of Belonging

Throughout this research, I asked questions meant to elicit stories. I asked people about moments they felt connected to something outside themselves, for stories of how that connection unfolded. In short, I tried to get people to tell stories of their belonging. Throughout these stories, belonging stemming from connection to place, people, and activity—the same building blocks of stories—were common themes. In this section, I examine each of these themes as potential pathways for belonging. The chart below outlines the various responses and stories of each person interviewed and aligns them with the storytelling element that opened their pathway to belonging.

Each of the three pathways parallel the basic elements of any story. Stories of belonging through place mirror the settings that contextualize stories. Stories of belonging through people represent the actors or characters that feature in any story. And lastly, stories of belonging through activity represent the action or plot of a story. The following three sub-sections, then, will address each of these pathways to belonging described within and across the students’ stories.
**Place and Belonging**

**Tabitha:** When is the last time you’ve been able to go down to the river?

**Brandan:** I think it was this month or maybe two months ago. …I just sat there and listened to the river. And look at the flowers growing and what’s in the water, and all the insects. …[I] think about myself and sometimes about nature. Think about the fish that’s in the water. Think about a future. …

**Tabitha:** What did you think about your future? What did you see?

**Brandan:** I don’t think anything’s going to be special, I don’t think my future’s special, nothing like that. I’m still gonna be ok. It was hard to come to accept that, like my future isn’t going to be special. But, I’m okay with it.

**Tabitha:** What had you thought your future was going to be, before you had that realization at the river?

**Brandan:** I thought it was—I wanted to be, I wanted to make music with my friend, but I kind of lost interest.

**Tabitha:** What made you realize this at the river? What was it about being down there
that helped you think about these things?

**Brandan:** I think it's the nature. And just looking at how—the way a tree grows or the way animals are—I don’t know…I think it's the nature that makes me…I wanted to say that—the way a tree grows, it’s like you wonder, like, how can a tree grow like that. Like, what makes a tree bend the way it bends or what makes the tree— How did he get so tall? Or like why is it skinny or like how did he become dead? Stuff like that. Um, I don’t really think about my future when I look at the tree, but like…. [long pause]

**Tabitha:** The tree can make you think about life stories?

**Brandan:** Yeah. [pause] Yeah.

Perhaps of all the elements discussed in this chapter—place, people, and purpose—no element links so closely and intuitively to the concept of belonging to a place. Belonging can spark images of home, of emplacement, of being situated within and being of a place. As hooks’ (2009) describes in *Belonging*, the concept is not only an experience, such as having a “sense of” belonging but also is a place, a meeting of time and place and circumstance. Similarly, in their descriptions of belonging within a community or group, McMillan and Chavis (1986) draw on images of physical place in their definition of belonging as “involve[ing] the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and therefore has a place there” (emphasis added)…” (p. 10) Scott Russell Sanders likewise speaks of connections to place within belonging as when one can “sit still and weave ourselves into a place…so that we feel a bond with everything in sight” (cited in hooks, p. 67-68). Sanders’ language choices signify the potential for connection to place in describing bonding not to people (every*one*) but more broadly to all elements of a place—“everything in sight” (emphasis added).

Just like these writers and researchers draw on notions of place, so too did students talk about connection to places when asked for examples of when they last had a feeling of belonging. Of the 11 students asked about the last time they felt a sense of belonging, six answered with experiences grounded in physical places, including the river and the skate park (Brandan); the community farm (Chris); the adult education classroom (Jose); the mountains (Lonnie); her mother’s home, her childhood home (Vangie).
Stories often centered around one specific pathway, but they also could intertwine with other pathways/elements of the story. For example, Lonnie described going to the mountains (place of belonging) to look for antlers; in her story of connecting to the mountains, she also invoked action/activity (plot) that brought her to the mountain with a group of her family (fellow actors of the story). Her memory of the mountain, though, revolves not around the act of scouring the ground for old antlers or the presence of others. Rather, Lonnie moved on quickly from the act of antler hunting itself to describe the place, situating it away from activity, from stress, from chaos:

We go out in the mountains to look for antlers…and there’s four of us. So that’s another place of where I feel like I belong. Out there with them. So that’s like being in, you know, stressing on…years of school. Taking a nice hike in the mountain in the middle of nowhere. Like fifty, sixty miles out from town. Just in the mountains. Walking. No music, nothing playing. Just nature. Like that, that’s where I feel I belong too, when I’m out there.

Lonnie’s story about going to the mountain reveals several insights about belonging to place. First, she positioned her place as “the middle of nowhere,” further identifying it not with any marker found on a map, such as a town name, nor in any clear terms of distance from town, just an ambiguous notion of several dozen miles away. (Her description of her specific place of belonging as simply being “the middle of nowhere” reminded me of Basso’s (1995) remarking that maps were for white people). Her lack of specificity in known units—such as a particular town and length of measurement—contrasted strikingly with the detail she used in talking about her place of belonging and how she felt there. Lonnie’s sense of belonging can be seen in descriptions of her place as being almost elemental. Lonnie frequently used the signifier “just” to convey its simplicity and downplay any importance an outsider might try to attribute to the place; her place is “just nature” and “just in the mountains.”

Secondly, in talking about the mountain Lonnie used language to position her place of belonging as antithetical to the trappings of town. In town is stress, in town is school, in town is
noise and action. In a follow-up question about the emotions felt while in the mountains, she described the place as relaxing; so relaxing, in fact, that even her young daughter recognizes the peace being out there brings her mom and encourages to “just burlax” (her toddler’s rendering of ‘relax’). The mountains represent a place of relaxation and peace, and a place where Lonnie feels she belongs.

Lonnie’s story about the mountain could also be considered an example of action or activity as a pathway to belonging. In this story, she framed collecting antlers as the reason she and her family go to the mountains in the first place. However, it is in the language about the mountain as a place, and not as a site for activity, that Lonnie is most expressive. Lonnie is not describing the act of antler collecting as a thing of relaxation or peace, but rather that those things come from the mountain itself. For this reason, I view Lonnie’s story as an example primarily of belonging through place, and secondarily of belonging through action—though both have a role to play in Lonnie’s story and therefore in her sense of belonging.

Interestingly, many people spoke of belonging being related to a sense of responsibility, including to an obligation to those places they felt they belonged. Both Lonnie and Brandan spoke of responsibility in their own (re)actions to their places of belonging and their respect for those places. After talking about her last trip to collect antlers, Lonnie emphasized she and her co-collectors only took what they could carry. A single pair of antlers could net a person $500, money that could be helpful for Lonnie and her household of four. After explaining many people go antler hunting because it is lucrative, Lonnie stressed that was not the behavior of her nor her family: “People go out there for that. But me, every year I go out there, I get a pair and a couple little ones. And I’m done.” Lonnie goes on to describe people returning with “truckloads” of antlers as “greedy.” Though it was apparent that such extra money could help her family, Lonnie stressed that she and her family not act greedy up in the mountains, and in this asserted a code of
respect and even responsibility to her place of belonging—she would not take more than she could or should, no matter the payout.

Like Lonnie’s invocation of respectful conduct, Brandan explicitly described actions owed to a place of belonging. When asked about when he had experienced a sense of belonging in the past, Brandan spoke of two places: the river and the skate park. After he finished talking about the places he felt a sense of belonging, I asked Brandan what belonging there meant to him:

**Brandan:** “I think it means you’re part of something. And that you—you can’t leave that. …Like, if you leave it, then you probably betray it or something.”

**Tabitha:** That’s interesting. So that sounds almost like when you belong to something, you have a responsibility to it to not betray it, to not leave.

**Brandan:** Yeah, yeah I think so.

When Brandan reflected on the concept of belonging, he emphasized that one does not leave that place of belonging, equating leaving to betrayal.

Brandan spoke beautifully about going to the river and finding belonging there. Shortly after describing his last trip to the river, the trip that brought about new realizations about his future, I asked Brandan where he saw himself spending his future. Jobs are in short supply on many of the Western Apache tribal lands, and many of the people I interviewed spoke of the difficulty finding employment, particularly future employment in the construction industry. For many people, a long-term job in construction was most likely to happen only if they left the reservation and moved to one of the larger cities several hours away. Despite this short supply of jobs on the reservation, Brandan immediately responded that he planned to stay in his hometown. This becomes less surprising, though, given his statements about belonging to a place—to leave his river and park would be to betray it. In this sense, then, Brandan, like Lonnie, appeared to connect certain actions on their own part as a way of respecting the places most special to them.

In listening to and analyzing Lonnie and Brandan’s stories of the places to which they belonged, my mind continually returned to LaDuke’s (2005) quotation from an Apache elder about the importance of Mt Graham for the Apache people. After explaining the mountain was
the foundation of his people’s culture and the basis for their spirituality, he linked connection to the mountain with respect:

You have tried to change us, you forced me to go to your schools. But I still treat you with respect. I do not go to your church and hold my services. Why do you come and try and take my church and treat the mountain as if it was about money instead of respect? (p.31)

The elder explains that respect for the mountain is the same as respect for the Western Apache people—their culture, their spirituality, and their basic humanity. Given this fundamental connection, then, it is not surprising to see Lonnie and Brandan call on notions of responsibility and respect—correctness of behavior towards their special places—as elements of belonging to that place. Articulating a reaction of responsibility and respect to a place of belonging just as another might react towards other humans, Lonnie and Brandan echo the assertions of so many Native American writers that to be Native is to be of the land of your people (Deloria, 2003; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Horse, 2005, 2012; King, 2012; Momaday, 1994) and that to be Western Apache is to be of the lands around Mt Graham (Basso, 1996; Goodwin, 1969; LaDuke, 2005).

Additionally, these stories’ use of respect and responsibility speaks to the importance of these two elements within belonging and, more broadly, being comfortable in a place. These stories thus invoke the thoughts and feelings of many Native writers, but also the framework of Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) for making higher education equitable and valuable for Native students. This 4-R framework includes respect and responsibility as preconditions for Native American students’ completion and success within higher education. The presence of two of these values also suggests that the 4-R framework is applicable to studying Native American students’ experiences of belonging in educational places.

Though other students did not invoke responsibility per se when describing their places of belonging, connections to place still drove many of their stories and described ways their
places became internalized. For Lonnie and Brandan, their places internalized a sense of duty towards that place. Chris internalized his place of belonging so much that it became a part of his self, his personhood. His connection to the community farm was such that he continuously returned there because it was only there that he felt a sense of wholeness. During our second interview, Chris told a story illustrating how deeply he had internalized his belonging to the community farm. Drawing out an imaginary map on the table between us as he spoke, Chris described a moment that happened after a longer absence away from the community farm and the reservation when he returned from a large city several hours away. Just as the car reached the community farm, Chris described:

“Here’s the entrance. I fell asleep right here and I saw myself leave my body right there, right at the farm. So I astral-projected\textsuperscript{11} or something, but I was awake. So I turned around and looked at myself and I was floating…[I] was moving, looking up at myself. But I wasn’t conscious here [points to the ground], I was conscious up there. And that’s what brought me more to the farm because I left there and so it feels like part of me is still there. It seems like it’s calling, like I have to be there in order to get my full self back. …that moment, it was a big chunk of me leaving. So whenever I go over to the farm, I feel at home, safe. …Those…pieces that I’ve lost while growing up. I couldn’t remember where exactly it happened, it just happens. …I still feel hollow but when I go to the farm, half that piece is still there.”

These descriptions of place all invoke a personal connection so deep it becomes internalized and even synonymous with some notion of a person’s self. Chris, like Lonnie and Brandan, spoke of deep connection to parts of the surrounding landscape—connections not unlike those so often articulated by so many Indigenous people around the world. The Western Apache homelands are integral for the people’s culture, community, and spirituality. In their stories of belonging to specific places, several students illustrate the importance of internalized culture (or the microsystem in the ecological model) for experiences of belonging. Though the ecological model has been exclusively used for unpacking belonging (or not belonging) within a social context, its framework can also provide understanding belonging taking different forms.

\textsuperscript{11} Also known as an out-of-body experience.
For many speakers, talking about places of belonging not only invoked metaphors of internalization but also drew on metaphors based in memories. Like hooks’ (2009) usage of home as a metaphor for place of belonging, so too did some of the students draw on home to signify the comfort and safety of a particular place of belonging. Though a few people described some place as having either the safety, comfort, or feeling of home, Vangie explicitly connected belonging with her childhood home. Unlike her current residence where she talked of feeling constantly on display any time she ventured out of her door, her old home where her mother still lives had a comforting familiarity. As Vangie described it, “it just felt welcome” perhaps because it was where she grew up and she felt freer to do things outside without neighbors “just staring” at her. At her mother’s home, her childhood home, Vangie was able to “kick back.” For Vangie, then, her place of belonging was the home metaphor made manifest.

The majority of stories centering on places of belonging featured outside locations, particular places described as natural (the skate park and Vangie’s childhood home were exceptions); these were places that often contrasted starkly to places in town or inside that did not invoke the same kind of strongly positive reaction. Two individuals, Jose and Vangie, mentioned places inside and more purposefully constructed (by humans) than the locales featured in other stories. Because Jose talked of the classroom as his place of belonging, his response will be detailed more in the next chapter on classroom belonging. For Chris, Brandan, Vangie, and Jose, their connection to specific places engendered a sense of belonging and all the positive (re)actions belonging inspires. Though their stories featured other narrative constructions, such as other actors and actions, it was the setting of their stories that anchored a sense of belonging.
People and Belonging

And it starts like, ‘oh, cool, we’re all supposed to meet here [in the construction class]. And it starts getting pretty cool. Like you don’t gotta worry about your parents being drug addicts, alcoholics. You don’t gotta worry about all that stuff. Like I said, it’s not all right, but once you meet a lot of people that are in the same boat, it’s like ‘oh, it’s okay, I’m not alone.

Jose

I’ve been thinking a lot about support. We all need to feel like someone’s in our corner. The fact that I feel like the interviews have gone so incredibly well is because of having so many people in my corner. Now, and throughout my life. Support feels nebulous, a little like privilege. It’s hard to understand its importance until you see life without it.

Journal entry from March 10, 2020

Vaughn and Jose both spoke extensively about the vital role certain people played in their lives. Describing a difficult life growing up in a large city in another state, Vaughn talked of a person needing to have a group of people, someone to have a person’s “back:” “you got the person’s back or you don’t have no body at all.” Vaughn’s language points to an important distinction of belonging—having a support system is not the same as belonging to a group of people. Vaughn joined a large gang in high school, saying that joining a gang was just “the normal thing.” Life was violent, in a gang or not, and life in the gang meant he knew someone had “his back.” Despite having this group, though, Vaughn realized after a violent fight this was not the life he wanted to live: “the worst one was when I got cut up it was either, that was just like, I realized…if I don’t leave this place, I’m going to die. I’m going to die or end up like my cousins, who are from <gang name>.”

A key element of belonging is positive, conflict-free interactions with others, as well as stable relationships with mutual concern (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Though Vaughn found some measure of safety in the gang—safety precluded when one “don’t have nobody at all”—the interactions and events he described as a member of the gang were anything but positive, conflict-free, stable, or grounded in mutual concern. Vaughn was one student that cited people as
grounding his sense of belonging, but it was not his fellow gang-members, or siblings and cousins in other gangs, that fostered this belonging. Vaughn’s experiences of belonging stemmed from his own family. Vaughn’s language about his experiences of belonging fostered by working in a trade further signaled how much he valued family. Vaughn described fellow tradespeople as being in a “brotherhood” (Vaughn’s experiences with his brotherhood of tradespeople will be further examined in the following section on activity as a pathway of belonging).

Vaughn’s sons in particular grounded Vaughn’s actions. He wanted to have his “boys see…every day” their father working hard and “going to school” to help “them grown into the man I want them to grow into.” As a parent in his family, Vaughn helped ensure that sense of stability for the family unit and established those qualities researchers cite as necessary for a sense of belonging (such as stability and concern). It is with his family, and within this co-fostered environment, that Vaughn felt most “at home.” This group of belonging, his family, is starkly antithetical to so many of the experiences in his life.

Apart from the violence and tumult of his years in a gang, Vaughn spoke of a difficult family life growing up, eventually leaving home at 13 to move in with his brother in a large city several hours away from his hometown. Vaughn described trying to create a different childhood for his sons, revealing plans for his family to move to a major city after he and his wife finished their schooling. Though he did mention the greater availability of employment opportunities in the city, Vaughn first talked about wanting his sons “to see a lot more”—to have more opportunities for activities, learning, and meeting people. This is an example of the different benefits derived from each belonging pathway. In this instance, Vaughn described belonging untethered to a specific place. Because of this and Vaughn’s parental control over family decisions, he was able to move his family elsewhere. In other words, it is possible for some groups of belonging, like families, to move locations in search of the best environments for their
members. This is obviously different from the belonging derived from place, which cannot be separated from its location.

Jose’s and Vaugh’s stories closely resemble each other. Like Vaughn, Jose navigated some of his growing up without parents; his father was deported at one point and his mother returned to Mexico with him. Like Vaughn, Jose left school early to help support siblings, in this case wanting to make sure his younger brother was able to continue his schooling. After dropping out of school, Jose described being among “a lot of lost souls in the streets and stuff” and “a lot of people...depressed or sad because they feel like they messed up their life. They don’t know where to go no more.” Jose also had a transformational moment of clarity that made him realize the need for a change. He described it as “something [that] kind of wakes you up one day or life events happen”—Jose had his daughters all before turning 20 years old. He described his daughters’ birth, as that moment that woke him up, inspiring him to go back to school “to do it for them.”

Like Vaugh, Jose also spoke of his family as being his place of belonging. Stories of his family life—having daughters, bringing them to meet their grandfather, teaching them the languages of their parents (Spanish and Apache)—were all grounded in his belonging to the family he created with his wife and daughters. This marks a difference in how Jose spoke of his family life growing up—a bifurcated family strained by simply surviving, “struggling for the next paycheck.” His daughters’ births, though, were a catalyst in a number of ways. They inspired him to go back to school, but they also instigated moments that helped reunite the generations of his family, if only for an instant:

…my dad got deported and then I didn’t have my daughter’s stuff for her to cross the border. So the first time he met my daughter was through the border bars. And he hugged her and held her through the bars. ...like that was their first time. I think it was like a day or two or something before Christmas. So I drove her down to [border city] and at the border walls, at the border, he was on the other side. And we were hugging through the walls. There’s bars between us. Just hug and talk and spend some time, laugh, try to take pictures. And he’s just holding the baby through like the bars…
External factors, like poverty and the legal status of his parents, meant that while he was growing up, Jose’s family lacked the stability integral for fostering belonging. Jose’s daughters, and his desire to give them something different, inspired Jose to make large changes in his life in pursuit of stability, for a better, positive environment for them to grow up in.

The stories Jose told of life after the birth of his daughters marked a change in his language; talking of growing up seeing “lost souls,” feeling lost himself and “surpassed” by those people that had stayed in school—these were all stories that marked a darker period of Jose being unmoored. It was not until he had his own daughters that a new period dawned for Jose and for his family. His family provided the grounding, the sense of belonging, Jose had not felt before that allowed him to pursue those things he felt unable to do before as well. For both Jose and Vaughn, the families they created for themselves proved to be their first experiences of belonging with a group of people—experiences that inspired and continued to inspire them to push for something different so as to give their children something better and greater than they themselves had.

In some ways, it is not surprising that Jose and Vaughn would similar “outsider” statuses in the community and tribe and find belonging in similar pathways. Neither Jose nor Vaughn are Western Apache and only moved to the reservation because of their respective partners. Jose and Vaughn were outsiders to the community but also to the place itself, both even being from outside the state. Both men had been more mobile in their lives—moving from one place to another a few times—than many of the other students interviewed. Thus, it may not be surprising that their pathways of belonging were not through connection to places on the reservation (like Chris, Lonnie, and Brandan). Rather, their senses of belonging stemmed from the communities they themselves could create and, even if Jose did not mention plans to do this, in theory were not bound by physical location. Thus, the narratives of Jose and Vaughn’s lives help explain why one
pathway of belonging found accessible by others were not necessarily accessible or used in their own experiences of belonging. In drawing attention to their life narratives, I invoke the ecological model’s inclusion of the chronosystem, or historical factors, as relevant to a person’s belonging development. The stories of these two men show the relevant historical factors at work here were not events recorded in world history, but the events of their own personal histories. Thus, in the description of the chronosystem as historical factors we must consider the scale of the history considered relevant—this history could be at the level of a single individual’s life events, the recorded history of a group of people, or even the geological sense of time that only the land itself experiences.

In hearing stories of split families, the need to support siblings, and in spending formative years in environments of violence, of poverty, of “lost souls” and no one to have one’s “back”, it seemed a magnifying glass was held up to my own experiences, showing me how vast and instrumental the supports of my own life have been. I write my personal reflections into this section because Jose and Vaughn’s stories made me think deeply about my own support system throughout life. In particular, thinking support systems at this moment brings first and foremost to mind my mentor, Eric, deeply significant and important to me. This is because shortly after completing the first round of interviews for my dissertation, Eric passed away after a brief battle with lung cancer. As I traveled to Pine Creek during the first phase of research collection, I stayed in the home of the “surrogate” family Eric and his partner Amy invited me into, a family whose importance I cannot hope to capture in words. Though my own family always supported my studies and introduced me to higher education through their own graduate studies, it was my mentor Eric who first encouraged me to go to graduate school and ultimately helped shape my graduate career. After joining the family for dinner one evening, Eric asked me about graduate school and what schools I might want to go to; I responded with a list of schools with more modest reputations. After a thoughtful pause, he mentioned looking at and applying to a few R1
institutions, ideas quickly supported by his wife, Amy. I remember being shocked, absolutely shocked, that someone thought me capable of getting into and being successful at such competitive schools. Ultimately, I did end up applying to and attending R1 institutes for both my masters and for my doctorate studies, events I never thought possible.

I thought of this evening frequently when listening to the stories of the students in the construction class. I thought of how so many of the people I talked with had to create their own groups of belonging and support system, whereas I came to such groups so easily. I opened this section with a passage from my journal written during my first rounds of interviews, and I end it here with thoughts on how both belonging to a group of people and not having a group of people to belong to are powerful forces in our lives. Regardless of our different backgrounds, for Jose and for Vaughn and for myself, a sense of belonging with a group of people has provided foundational support that allowed us to reach for lives much different than the ones we previously lived. Despite the origins of such belonging—whether created by us or not—belonging with others can be a lifeblood for traveling the life pathways we once might only dream of.

**Activity and Belonging**

I felt I belonged because I felt confident in what I was doing. I felt there was no having to force me to do my job. I enjoyed going to work, I enjoyed doing what I do. I felt like I belonged because I was good at what I was doing as well. And I had people telling me that as well and that just made me, makes me feel even better.

Kaneisha

…I was more happy…when I was working in a trade, because, you know, working in a trade they become your brothers, people you work with become your brothers…

Vaughn

Activity, like the action embedded within a story’s plot, provided a third pathway to belonging for the students I interviewed. Actions mentioned primarily took two forms: learning, in the classroom or elsewhere, and work within a job context. Both Kaneisha and Vaughn spoke
most extensively about this, each within the context of activity within their job or trade. Others that also mentioned the unifying power of action/activity were Beamer and playing sports as in high school; Junior and learning at the farm; and Rodson and the importance of being able to help other people out generally, regardless of who or where.

Vaughn had worked construction as a welder in a major city several hours south of the reservation. As he worked to finish his HSE credential and associate degree, Vaughn was also working as a gas station clerk on the night shift; the two experiences could not have been more different. Vaughn described working “graveyard” shifts at the gas station as work that “[found] him no happiness” and made him “more and more depressed.” In this work, Vaughn spoke of being alone, in stark contrast to his experiences working in construction within which he could find a “brotherhood” of fellow construction workers.

Although this language of a brotherhood might imply Vaughn’s belonging as a construction worker stemmed from access to and interactions with other people, Vaughn repeatedly pointed out the importance of the work for unifying him with his fellow tradespeople. Enrolling in the construction class brought Vaughn an outlet to “relieve myself” not necessarily because of the place or the people, but because of the shared interest in and knowledge about construction. This is further evidenced by the fact that Vaughn spoke of not feeling this brotherhood with everyone in the classroom or everyone in his past worksites. Rather, it was the people “who take construction seriously” and not those that “just sit around and…don’t take it seriously.” This emphasis on serious engagement with an activity underscored the importance of construction as an action that can create belonging. Vaughn felt brotherhood with those who like to work on and talk about construction projects, juxtaposing that potential for belonging with its absence when interacting with those that avoid construction work and instead in engage in just “sitting.” Thus, Vaughn exemplifies the way action can be a pathway to belonging or not
belonging—certain activities foster “brotherhood” and connection while others engender distance and disconnection.

Though Vaughn’s interviews painted an image of the possibility of action as a pathway for belonging, this was most vivid in Kaneisha’s stories about the lack of belonging during her childhood and adolescence. Kaneisha spent her early childhood moving from foster home to foster home; she described this period as one of longing, continuously hoping for “a family to keep me.” Kaneisha’s story of her childhood came out of a comment she made about “proving” her “dominance” about knowing what she is doing, a drive that “brought me to be more open and talkative.” In asking about her need for proving herself, Kaneisha talked of her childhood strategy to try to use actions as pathways for belonging with whoever was around:

Kaneisha: I think it's because, I guess it really all started when I was in and out of foster homes and I just wanted, I just wanted a family to keep me. So I started doing what they told me. I was kind of trying to just, I don't know, just trying to be the perfect kid so I would actually have a family sooner or later. And then later on, I felt like with the family I did end up with, I wasn't doing enough. And my brother was the more athletic one. He was into that. He was good at it. And my parents enjoyed that about him. And then so I felt like, I guess, left out. So I started showing my parents, hey, I'm smart. [laughs] I'm over here too. And I guess that's…

Tabitha: So doing good at school was a way of proving yourself to your parents.

Kaneisha: Yeah. And I guess in a way, it made my stuff feel better about myself. I didn't, I, I knew what I was doing and the scores I was getting on the things I was doing wasn't a lie to me and it was straightforward. You are smart and you can do it.

For Kaneisha, activity was a belonging strategy she adopted early on in her life, though without success. In high school, she described participating in sports as the only place she felt she belonged. Kaneisha lived off the reservation so as to attend a school with better academic and sports opportunities; her family paid her to board with a woman living near the school. At this time, separated from the family that adopted her and the place she had grown up, participation in sports provided her with the only real opportunity for belonging. Even this, however, fell short for Kaneisha who described herself at the time as being “more of [a] loner” with “team friends from the clubs and stuff. They were my friends in the club, but outside of that, I wasn’t important or
relevant.” These past experiences with sports speak to the notion that not all activities—just like not all places or groups of people—are pathways for belonging. Rather, it is a special connection to an activity or action of interest, particularly one that gives the person a notion of validation and capability that are the potential for creating belonging.

Both Vaughn and Kaneisha exemplify this distinction. For both of them it was not until they found some activity with special resonance that they developed a sense of belonging. The students spoke of a mixture of the following characteristics which resonated with them and opened a pathway for belonging: an enjoyment of the work; a sense of talent or special capacity for the work; a larger sense of purpose for the activity; and/or, of particular importance for those that have not had much such validation throughout life, recognition from others of that capacity or talent. Kaneisha’s quotation at the beginning of this section speaks to the importance of these belonging-through-action characteristics: “I felt like I belonged because I was good at what I was doing as well. And I had people telling me that as well and that just made me, makes me feel even better.”

Throughout her description of her work with the federal agency, Kaneisha continued to connect these central characteristics of activity with her own development of belonging. When asked about an experience of belonging, Kaneisha immediately spoke of her work with a conservation agency, both in the past and presently. Kaneisha began enumerating the various projects she had worked on:

… they have me building certain separate things in the building for them. I was able to build like a handrail on one of the buildings, I was able to repair skirting on one of the buildings at <federal agency name>. I got to build like a platform and stuff. I was able to build shelves and closets and stuff.

These were not just simply projects she was asked and able to do, but rather were portals through which she was able to do enjoyable work, and, particularly important, work which reinforced her own notions and the notions of her co-workers of her capacity and talent:
My coworkers enjoy the work that I do. They're impressed by the work that I do. Well, I guess they enjoy having me around. Because I was supposed to be done in September. It was just a seasonal job. I was only supposed to work from April to September and I was supposed to be gone. They let go of like six dozen others and kept me. So I've been, this will be a full year since I've been with them.

Her talent and capacity, she explained, facilitated recognition from her co-workers and superiors as well as enabled her to continue her work, solidifying a relationship between belonging and work that was not only recognized by herself but others. Asked to describe what belonging meant to her as she worked these conservation jobs, Kaneisha succinctly summed up the notion of belonging-through-action: “It felt like people respected me for what I did.”

Vaughn expressed the importance of these characteristics as well. In talking about his enjoyment for construction, and his sense of talent for the work, Vaughn described two sources of validation. First, in attending an automotive repair program, Vaughn had his first realization of having talent for something “going to automotive made me realize that I’m actually good at this…I’m good at welding, I’m good at construction.” This realization, Vaughn describes, is “when my life began.” It is through work he enjoyed and felt a capacity for that he sensed a new life possible. Vaughn went on, though, to describe the importance of external validation as well for furthering his sense of belonging to the trade and his own talents:

I started working in the field, you know, and, you know, people like foremans [sic] and people that were above me told me that I’m a hard worker and they wished they had more people in construction just like me, you know what I mean. So that made me recognize that I’m, I’m good at this, and that’s what I mean when my life really began, you know what I mean. Because, umm, just to find something you’re good at in life, you know—other than just, you know, committing crime and doing bad things to other people, you know what I mean.

This realization of talent and capacity, both on his own and through the recognition of others, opened a new chapter for Vaughn, deviating from his first money-earning experiences from crime to one where his work and talents could be used to enrich himself, his family, and his community.
Junior also invoked learning as the key for belonging at the community farm. Though Junior initially described himself as feeling like he “belonged with that group of people at the farm,” when he further elaborated about his experiences at the farm it was the work and its unified mission that nurtured the belonging: “it’s like we had one mission and we were all trying to successfully do that mission and provide for the community and give back.”

Brandan echoed the importance of learning and knowing about an entity—whether place, people, or action—for belonging. Though he mostly connected learning with his sense of belonging in the classroom (discussed later), Brandan also linked learning and knowing with belonging to a specific place:

**Tabla**: Why do you feel like a part of you does belong there? What is it that makes you feel like you do belong there?

**Brandan**: Because my ancestors. That’s how they survived, was the river, or outdoors. But, so like, yeah, part of me feels like I do belong and a part of me that don't feel like I belong is because I don't know how to hunt or like spot tracks.

**Tabla**: So you wouldn't—the part of you that doesn't feel like you belong there is because you don't kind of know those survival skills?

**Brandan**: Yeah.

**Tabla**: Gotcha. So do you think knowledge and knowing things are really important for having a sense of belonging?

**Brandan**: I think so, yeah.

**Tabla**: Okay, so if you don't have kind of a knowledge of a place or people or something like that, then you don't--you might not really belong?

**Brandan**: Yeah.

Brandan illustrates here why learning can be such a powerful pathway for belonging. Though Brandan had his own personal connection to the river, not knowing the kinds of traditional knowledge his ancestors used meant he simultaneously did and did not feel belonging at his favorite place. The role of learning and knowing plays an important role for classroom belonging, as discussed further in the next chapter.

Like Vaughn and Kaneisha, other students described moments of belonging through activities that unified them with others. Beamer attributed his “love” of school to his participation in sports, which provided him with activities through which he gained recognition—through
medals and trophies he won—and through which he could derive a larger purpose—namely being “to be my best for the school.” For Beamer, sports were not just actions that brought validation for him but could also be invested with a larger meaning for something beyond himself. Brandan likewise saw sports as a pathway for belonging particularly “because I was representing the school.” Further, belonging stemmed not only from his own performance on the team, but from the importance of a group working together: “you need, not just one person, but you need like the whole team to get the job done” (Brandan would similarly use baseball as a metaphor for belonging in the classroom and the importance of working with others). The next chapter further explores the activity pathway and the essential characteristics needed to foster belonging.

Of the various pathways to belonging—place, people, and action—it is the latter that connected most visibly to belonging in the classroom. A variety of students interviewed spoke of learning as an important portal for belonging. Jose embodies this pathway best, perhaps because, as an outsider, learning provides him information about his new surroundings, without which he could not navigate. It is through learning Jose, someone “new to this culture,” might come to “embrace [the culture] and …be part of the people.” Jose explains learning as an action through which he hopes to become part of the community in which he lives, but he also, with other students, spoke of learning as a pathway to belonging within the classroom.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview and explanation of three pathways to belonging commonly featured in student stories of their own belonging experiences. Each of the individuals interviewed gave examples of past experiences of belonging that featured place, people, and/or activity as the portal through which belonging developed. These stories, and the accompanying analysis, create the guiding schematic for analyzing belonging within the
construction program. Just as Brandan found belonging through place (the river), Jose and Vaughn co-created belonging with their families, and Kaneisha experienced belonging through her work, so too have these pathways fostered belonging within the construction classroom.

Having introduced the students of the program and examined their various stories as a baseline for understanding each person’s experience of belonging outside of schooling, I turn now to the applicability of the three pathways for belonging within the construction classroom.
Chapter 5

“Construction. The students. The school grounds”: Pathways to Belonging in the Construction Classroom

Unknown to either of us at the time of the interview, Chris’s answer to what gave him a sense of belonging within the construction program, succinctly described the three pathways students took in developing belonging within the classroom: “Construction. The students. The school grounds. It's a place to be.” Chris thus answered with perfect examples of each of the three pathways: “construction” (activity), “the students” (people), “the school grounds” (place). Though Chris cited each of the pathways as informing his own sense of belonging, other students related to different combinations of these belonging pathways. Just as place, people, and action are general pathways to belonging, so too can they perform these functions in the classroom.

When asked if they felt a sense of belonging with or in the construction program, most students indicated they did have some degree of belonging. Like their stories detailed in the previous chapter, their descriptions of belonging in the construction classroom reflected the three pathways to belonging. In the abstract, the construction classroom, potentially like any other classroom, can act as the center for the three pathways of belonging (people, place, and action). The experiences described by the students make this abstraction manifest as different individuals invoked belonging to the construction classroom specifically through these pathways.

In this chapter, I continue my analysis of the three belonging pathways, focusing specifically on the construction classroom. Thematically looking at student stories through the lenses of people, place, and activity, I explore how belonging developed for students within the construction classroom. In this, I answer my second research question: how might stories of belonging provide a better understanding of how belonging in the classroom can develop?
This chapter has four main sections. In the first three sections, I focus on each of the pathways and how students experienced belonging facilitated through shared action, through people, and through place. I end this discussion of belonging pathways with a story from Jose, examining the interwoven elements place, people, and action indicative of how each element works together to create specific events. After discussing each of the pathways, I then turn to Vangie’s story to better understand lack of belonging for an individual in the classroom (and absent more generally). Last, I offer a brief conclusion to the chapter.

**Through Action: Learning and Doing**

Perhaps the most obvious action pathway to belonging in/to the classroom is learning, as the classroom is the physical site many might see as specifically dedicated to learning. Several students described learning as a great pathway to belonging, both inside the classroom and outside. As described previously, however, not all action can lead to belonging. After a generalized discussion of classroom belonging through action, this section will describe three components necessary for belonging through activity: significance, recognition, and purpose.

Several students connect learning with belonging. As described earlier, Brandan invoked the importance of learning and knowing as the gateway through which he might enhance his sense of belonging at the river. Similarly for Jose, learning about the culture and community to which he recently moved was not only a way to become familiar with those around him, but also to become “a part of the people.” These are explicit examples of action (learning) as a pathway to belonging, for what is belonging but the notion that you are a part of something outside of yourself? As Jose and Brandan illustrate, if knowledge is an important marker of belonging, learning then functions as an important portal to that sense of belonging.
In an ideal world, classrooms function first and foremost as sites of learning, and thus have great possibility for fostering belonging in those who gather there in pursuit of knowledge. Brandan attributes his burgeoning sense of belonging to the construction content specifically, evident when describing (not) belonging in his other college classrooms: “I feel like I didn't belong there. But, once I started going to class, and started learning again, felt like I was getting close to belonging in there. And now, like I want to go back…” In his description of his other college classes, Brandan indicates that learning fosters his sense of belonging. What, then, makes the difference between learning that does not foster belonging, learning that might slowly foster belonging, and learning that more immediately inspires belonging?

Belonging through activity does not happen in a vacuum. In interviews and observations, three key components were necessary for activity to foster belonging. The following subsections explore these components: significance, validation, and meaning.

**Significance**

In using the term significance, I draw on Beswick’s (2017) discussion on the difference between purpose and meaning. Significance shares key connotations with the term meaning, including that both derive from “sequential narrative patterns that hold together around matters of central concern” (p. 285). Here, I interpret “concern” as also including interests, thus the significance of an activity revolves around elements encountered in life that are relevant and worthy of attention or of interest for an individual. (Because of the significant overlap between purpose and meaning, I use the term significance here to avoid confusion with the later discussion of activity meaning).

Similarly, in describing the significance of an action, one key component for activity as a pathway for belonging is the actions’ relationship to a person’s larger life narrative. In short, what
is important in terms of significance is that an activity relates to or builds upon prior life experiences that feature in one’s life narrative. For individuals that emphasized belonging through activity, the activity’s significance often centered one of two key characteristics of people’s past lives: an earlier exposure to or interest in construction and/or enjoying the hands-on learning done, to varying degrees, in each class session in the construction program. In both these two instances, construction as activity was significant to several students for a few different reasons.

Many of the students described an interest in construction that pre-dated the construction program. Chris got his first exposure to construction through helping his dad build a house when he was a child. After injuries kept him from doing forestry work, Chris enrolled in the construction program to get his HSE credential and work towards a construction license. The construction program connected him with some of his first learning experiences and early interests, meaning when he entered the construction program, he was not just learning content he had to learn because someone else deemed it necessary (like, for instance, learning the content to pass a HSE test), but rather was learning new things in a field in which he had a long-standing interest and exposure. This connection to earlier learning meant what was taught in the construction classroom had a firm foundation on which to build, a foundation grounded in Chris’ interests and early life. Like Chris, many of the people in the construction program spoke of an earlier interest in construction, but also of their desire in learning “hands on” (as Lonnie, Phyllis, and Junior all described it) to be able to make and fix things. Thus, the construction content and instruction had earlier experiences and interests on which to build rather than building these things from scratch.
Recognition

Recognition plays an important role in belonging through both action and people. In recognition, a person is affirmed in their actions/beliefs/values and their conceptualizations of self (Lepold, 2019). Recognition, then, is the alignment of “the way in which one is viewed by others and the way in which this corresponds to one’s own view of self” (Hopkins, 2019, p. 1283). Recognition, however, is not value neutral. Summarizing Honneth’s (1996) extensive work on recognition, Lepold (2019) emphasizes the meaning of recognition as affirmation and approval, i.e., in a person recognizing another individual, they subsequently relate positively to that other person.

In examining belonging through activity, when students’ actions lead to recognition from others, the student internalized the affirmation from others that reflected how they saw themselves or how they wanted to be; following Honneth’s (1996) typology of recognition, this affirmation from others informs the individual’s self-esteem and their sense of their own capabilities. Research on adult education has shown recognition to be an important strategy for developing a student’s self-esteem and sense of capabilities, as well as a way to create a community within the classroom (Prins et al., 2009; Prins et al., 2011; Salling-Olsen, 2019; Sandberg, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Seeing the important role recognition can play in fostering belonging through action, this research adds yet another benefit to implementing this classroom strategy.

Lonnie provides a good example of recognition’s importance for developing belonging through a person’s actions. In describing her first day in the construction class, Lonnie said she “had a good day that day” going on to explain that she ended up providing extra help to fellow students, particularly in how to get to the class content hosted through Moodle. She asked Nathan if she could help the students get online, and, getting his permission, proceeded to explain how
she helped her fellow students in great detail throughout that first class. Lonnie continued with examples of students asking her for help, eventually becoming so helpful around the classroom that first class. Lonnie continued with examples of students asking her for help, eventually becoming so helpful around the classroom Nathan asked her to be lab aide. Several times, Lonnie reiterated the connection between her helping other students and being chosen for an important role. This recognition provided important support for Lonnie and marked a stark difference from her earlier educational experiences, which she simply and repeatedly described as her being “bad.” This difference returns to an important tenet of recognition: it is synonymous with affirmation. Lonnie’s recounting of others labeling her and her actions as “bad” in the past is not recognition in that their reactions were not positive reinforcement for her actions. Lonnie earned recognition from others when helping her fellow students because it yielded positive affirmation from others in the classroom.

Lonnie drew on this affirmation when explaining why she thought the classroom was a place of belonging for herself and others:

…feeling comfortable around other people that want to see you, that want to be around you. Someone that's happy to see you. …Me, what makes me happy, is when they asked me, like, Lonnie, can you help me with this? Okay, let's go do it. And I'll stop what I'm doing to go help them.

This quotation speaks to how helping others informed and reinforced Lonnie’s sense of self. Others seeking out Lonnie’s help affirmed her desire to help others and bolstered her sense of her own capabilities. Starting with the first day of class, Lonnie sought to continuously help her fellow students (and by extension help the instructor, Nathan, as well). Lonnie wanted to be of help to others, something she spoke of often within her family life as well, and so she went out of her way to offer help to other students. Students asking her for help illustrated their recognition of her as a helpful person. This, in turn, becomes internalized by Lonnie and informed her sense of self in her ability to inhabit a role she already saw herself as enacting. When asked to talk about why she felt she belongs in the construction classroom, Lonnie offered the above quotation
describing her happiness, and suggesting a degree of self-affirming recognition, when asked to help.

This is also a marked change from Lonnie’s descriptions of her previous educational experiences and being a “bad” kid. Earlier in life, Lonnie described both acting “bad” and then being called bad or “wild” by others. Teachers in particular labeled Lonnie as bad because of her actions. Despite the alignment of Lonnie’s actions and the perceptions of being “bad,” Lonnie never spoke of wanting to be bad, but rather as rebelling against a difficult home life. Thus, despite the fact that her actions and others’ perception of them were similar (i.e. “bad”), this does not constitute recognition for two reasons. First, recognition is inherently positive, and others labeling Lonnie as bad did not positively relate to Lonnie’s sense of self or self-esteem. Second, though Lonnie also saw herself as being bad, this identity was not was not something Lonnie ever aspired to be. This does not connect Lonnie with her sense of self as being a helpful person, a component of her identity interwoven throughout Lonnie’s life both inside and outside the construction program.

Like Lonnie, Jose’s experiences in the construction program gave him his first experiences of recognition from educators, an experience that was the opposite of the messages he heard from teachers growing up. In talking about his earlier educational experiences, Jose mentioned numerous teachers that explicitly told him he would end up in jail. This negative feedback earlier in life made the recognition and validation he earned in returning to school more significant. Jose pointed to this recognition when I asked about his sense of belonging in the classroom:

**Tabitha:** Was there a moment or was there a feeling where you knew not only that you belonged but that others thought you belonged as well?

**Jose:** I think when I started getting weird recognition around here, weird stuff, for helping Native kids on the computer, how to log on, helping them with students, getting them into classes. Little by little. I got a little award that says like, you know, somebody chose you for being employee or staff or something so I got a little award. In my head, I'm like, y'all got the wrong one. Like, this never happens to me. So when it happens, it's
like, yo, there's a mistake. Like, you got the wrong one. The people are like no, accept it, learn how to— And you'd be like, no, this is a gag, this is a joke, you think this is funny. You're gonna go back and all the employees are gonna laugh. Like, you guys got me. You start feeling, because all your life, it's like, there's no way I deserve this. So I started getting stuff like that and I'm just like, whatever. Just started brushing it off. The dean's listing coming out in the newspaper and I was just like, what the heck is going on? Like I would talk to my lady like hey, something weird is going on. There's a glitch in the matrix or something [referring to the movie, The Matrix]. …And then like I got the Honors Society thing [award] and it got even weirder. In my head, I'm still trying to fight not to be ghetto, trying not to be everything, everything what I [was]…growing up.”

Both Lonnie and Jose spoke of others recognizing their learning and work, which in turn affirmed their evolving sense of selves as being smart, capable, good students, and/or good learners. For each of them, this recognition of their actions within the construction program, and eventually beyond, stands in stark contrast to earlier experiences and perhaps because of that renders their current recognitions all the more poignant and powerful.

**Purpose**

Lastly, belonging can stem from learning that builds towards larger goal because it is connected to some kind of purpose. Of particular importance here is that in purposeful action there is the notion of being part of something bigger than the immediate moment. In ascribing purpose to an action, an individual conceptualizes their future self and what they intend for that future self to look like (Beswick, 2017). Further, one derives a sense of purpose from what that action signifies to both themselves and others. For some students, then, not only the activity of the classroom but the act of enrolling in the program and regularly going to class signified their transition and commitment to a new life, particularly one that broke from patterns they no longer wanted to inhabit. In this, adult education may foster a variety of outcomes beyond the cognitive and academic realm, but also serve as impetus for various social and personal transformations (Prins, 2006; Tighe et al., 2013).
In terms of purpose for the future self, for many of the students the content learned in the classroom was content that could lead to or be part of something larger. Junior explained this idea when describing the house the construction class built. The final project of the first year is to build a house, up to code and ready for habitation. The house required a lot of teamwork to finish and being a part of that team facilitated a sense of belonging to a bigger purpose, as Brandan points out: “that’s when I felt like I belonged somewhere too because we were working as a team to get the house done and all that.” Drawing on his baseball team metaphor, Brandan described building the house as a product of teamwork, with each person joining in and doing their part working towards a shared purpose. Seeing your own contributions as a small piece that adds to a larger whole can provide purpose for your own learning. Though Brandan’s metaphor also draws on the importance of people for co-creating larger meanings, a component not insignificant, he frames his example of belonging through the on-going project, building a house. This suggests the primary force for belonging stems from the activity (both building but also learning to build) and its common purpose as capable to unify the group together through shared action.

The construction class’s purpose, though, extended beyond the completion of current projects. Many students identified the construction program as a steppingstone to a new life. Vaughn, at the time working graveyard shifts at a gas station, missed the comradery of construction work, but wanted/needed the degrees and certifications from the program to return to full-time employment in the field. Lonnie discovered she wanted to become an electrician, both because of her interest in the work but also the economic opportunities it could afford her and her family. Chris wanted to get his construction license and then a business degree so that he might one day own his own construction business. Kaneisha not only wanted the construction program on her resume and its certifications for her own career, but also because she …want[s] something on paper that says ‘she can do it’ and I don’t want people to just look at me as a woman trying to into the construction field. I want something to prove I should be in the construction field.
For each of these students, then, the construction program represented something larger than just the work at hand. Their participation in the class was also the gateway to their larger goals, both professionally and personally. Thus, participating in the class and learning new skills was not done for the sake of itself, but because invested in the work was the possibility of new opportunities.

Jose also ascribed a larger purpose to his and his classmate’s learning: “…because when we all met, it was just like, everybody's first introduction was like, I'm just trying to get my life together. And that's everybody's main course.” As Jose points out, though construction may be the main topic in the program, the “main course” everyone is taking is getting their lives together. Learning in the construction program not only represents their own development or their ability to work as a team, but also represents learning how to better live their own lives and pursue their goals. Several of the students told stories of being in jail and involved with the carceral system. For many of them, the class represented a chance at a different life. Again, Jose eloquently described this common sentiment:

If you're not in the college, you're in the streets. It kind of makes sense. It's kind of like a safe place here. You're either here or in jail. And it's like, this is your jail, be in college. If you’re gonna be in jail, make sure it's college. Or something. Stay locked down in college. Don't get locked up somewhere you're not gonna do nothing.”

The construction program provided the possibility to do something else, a something else that ensured a person won’t “do nothing.”

Because learning offered a variety of larger meanings, students could draw on those meanings for the inspiration to continue their learning journey. Students could share those larger meanings and thus feel belonging in their shared sense of purpose and mission. It is when learning is characterized with personal significance, recognition, and meaning that it can begin to function as a pathway for belonging.
Through Person(s): Recognition and the Instructor Role

Much of the literature on classroom belonging uses interpersonal relationships and interactions as the gateway for developing a sense of belonging (Baumesiter & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2002; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Tachine et al., 2007). Because the role of people in classroom belonging is better studied and documented, here I will focus on two less common elements: interpersonal recognition and the instructor. Throughout this section, I continue my application of recognition as outlined in the relevant literature as a key component for fostering belonging (Honneth, 1996; Prins et al., 2009; Prins et al., 2011; Salling-Olsen, 2019; Sandberg, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). In this section, however, I consider recognition through its social dimensions, rather than its connection to action and activity. Through the lens of interpersonal interactions, students emphasized the subsequent reaction from others in response to an individual’s actions. In this, recognition becomes an important and interconnected portal for belonging through people and action. Rodson put this marker of belonging most succinctly, finding it in the reaction “oh good thing you’re here” when he shows up somewhere and can be of help.

Both Lonnie and Jose similarly spoke of recognition as a conduit for belonging. They both began their relationship with the community college through the construction program, but eventually their positive experiences grew into jobs at the college. Lonnie began the construction lab aide, and Jose began working in the front office. For both, getting these jobs reflected a recognition of their dedication by staff and instructors on the campus and as a result engendered further recognition as more and more people on campus came to know them.

Lonnie spoke the most about the evolution of her position and her visibility on the campus. For Lonnie, that initial recognition of helping in the classroom snowballed into new opportunities, first a job and then as an ambassador of the construction program:
I've been working here. I feel like everybody knows me now. …I'm being offered to go to different places, you know. And it's paid for. You know what I mean? I must have earned their trust, you know. So I feel like yeah, being here, working here with them. You know, like, [Nathan] has been sending me on these kind of trips to like—'Cause I don't know if I told you or Nathan told you but I'm like the ambassador of the program. …I started my ambassador training last semester. I went down to <nearby city name> and I got ambassador certified.

Not only did these beginning experiences and opportunities beget more opportunities, but it also became a chance for Lonnie to be recognized for her work and expertise on a state level. Here, the focus of recognition is an interpersonal one, closely linked to recognition through action. Lonnie linked her sense of recognition—“everybody knows me now”—with earning trust from the people around her. This is trust from staff on campus, trust from Nathan to represent the program and assist other students, and trust from other students that they can ask Lonnie for help.

There is, however, a flip side to recognition regarding belonging through people, particularly for students that have negative educational experiences in their past. Though Vangie never spoke of getting negative comments from teachers nor described herself as being “bad” as Jose and Lonnie did, Vangie likewise had no positive memories of school to share. She described herself, then and now, as a loner; this intensified when she attended boarding school in another state where she was housed with a foster family and became disconnected from her family, her home, and even her language. Vangie’s descriptions of this time were ones of loneliness and loss. This loneliness and lack of positive validation could not help but inform her experiences in the classroom.

When asked for an example of when she felt a sense of belonging, Vangie had trouble identifying any such experience in the past. Eventually, though, Vangie explained her childhood home was the closest she had come to belonging (it is no wonder, then, that her boarding school years were ones of alienation as they involved her being sent far away from the one place she ever had a sense of belonging). In the construction classroom, Vangie described herself again as a loner not particularly close to anyone in the class. When asked about her classroom experiences,
Vangie mentioned she preferred to stay in the classroom and do computer work as much as possible. She greatly disliked venturing out into the construction area, describing herself as “not the kind of person that works in front of the other people.” This was not just because she was “not a people’s person,” but also because she feared what might happen should she be more visible: “you know like if you make a mistake in front of all these guys and feel all embarrassed.”

Recognition stems from visibility. To recognize and affirm the actions of another, those actions must first be seen, and being seen can make one vulnerable. Vangie feared visibility and its possibility of ridicule. Just as recognition plays an important role in action fostering belonging, the opposite is likewise true. Ridicule, whether it exists in reality or in the thoughts and fears of a person, can quickly block all pathways to belonging.

Though I did not have the same alienating experiences of school as Vangie growing up, sometime shortly after entering puberty, I began to dread school each day in fear of doing, saying, or just being something wrong. Vangie wanting to avoid public mistakes, even at the cost of getting practical construction experiences, resonated with me. In our interviews, Vangie would speak quietly about being an outsider, afraid to join in with class activities, and afraid to make mistakes. At the end of our first interview, after Vangie had mentioned her fear of participation and visibility in the classroom, I empathized, explaining I too had trouble with participating in school for the exact same reasons. I shared with Vangie that fears of being perceived stupid suddenly developed for me in middle school, and that I often felt scared I was going to be suddenly found out and told I didn’t belong—feelings that followed me all the way to graduate school and present day.

I often sat next to Vangie in the classroom while observing the construction class, and always asked how she was doing when I saw her. Shortly after our first interview and sometime in my second week in the classroom, having sat next to her in class, Vangie went to leave for the day and came to find me to say goodbye. Later that day, I realized that was the first time I had
ever seen Vangie say goodbye to someone before leaving. Shortly after, in our second interview, Vangie began to speak more about her educational experiences, particularly the difficult years she was sent away to a boarding school in another state. There could be several reasons Vangie increasingly seemed to open up to me—perhaps this might have inevitably happened over time. In my journal entry after our second interview, though, I reflected about how sharing my own similar classroom fears might have influenced the dynamic between Vangie and myself since in being recognized by others it may be possible to not feel so alone.

Vangie demonstrates the two sides to recognition. When she was afraid to join in the class, afraid for the potential negative outcomes, she did not (or could not) connect to people. In echoing her own fears of being wrong in the classroom and of receiving ridicule, I may have offered recognition in another sense. It was not that I praised something she had done, but rather the recognition stemmed from another person (and another woman, in a classroom dominated by young males) saying “yes, me too” that offered some sense of connection.

Jose spoke to something similar when describing classmates as a pathway to belonging: “but once you meet a lot of people that are in the same boat, it’s like ‘oh, it’s okay, I’m not alone.” Though that is not the same kind of positive acknowledgement and subsequent validation Lonnie and Jose received from others (as discussed above), knowing there are others “in the same boat” is important recognition as well. As each of these individuals illustrate and as some research has shown regarding social support in the classroom (Prins et al., 2009; Salling-Olesen, 2019; Sandberg, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011), recognition by others can be an important component for developing belonging within a group of people.

Beyond the possibility of interpersonal relationships fostering belonging, the instructor also can play a large role in setting the stage for an environment conducive to belonging. Certainly, the instructor is not the sole creator of classroom dynamics; rather, classroom dynamics are co-created by instructors and students. Relatedly, the possibility of belonging within
the classroom, too, is co-created by both instructors and students. Instructors, though, do play a unique role in the classroom, with research documenting how teachers can be vital support sources for students and an important factor for student retention (Comings, 2007; Comings et al., 1999; Prins et al., 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Thus, though previous sections examined the ability of groups of people to foster belonging, here we look at the role of the instructor, particularly because so many of the students identified Nathan as vital for their positive experiences in the construction program.

Students described Nathan in a variety of ways they found particularly important for their own experiences and successes. Nathan’s personality played a large role in students’ perception of him. For example, Jose succinctly described Nathan as “just so positive.” Kaneisha emphasized Nathan’s kindness and compassion:

[Nathan] is awesome. [Nathan] has been a great person. I've only met him last year and he's really caring, giving. He only wants the best for us, for the Native Americans that he's teaching. He's been really good at that's what really gives, what makes me respect him the most is because he doesn't, he doesn't see the color of our skin. He sees us just as we're people that are trying to make it but he understands what we're up against as well. Like the poverty, not having food. And having a teacher bring in something like that for his students is just amazing. He, and it's because like, he really genuinely cares because he's willing to get in trouble for us just to make sure we succeed.

For Jose, like Nathan a racial and ethnic minority on the reservation, he saw Nathan’s knowledge, understanding of, and empathy for others from different backgrounds as a key component for how Nathan interacted with everyone in the construction program:

He understands it. He understands the ghetto. He understands how the living, the setup, the problems. You know, the colorism. He understands it. And he talks freely about it. You know. I think that's what it is. Being honest about it. Not trying to like…sugarcoat anything. …’Cause [he] knows his history. It all comes back to history, at the end of the day, especially within cultures trying to, like a white guy trying to teach Native Americans. So it's kinda like the trying to build the trust barrier, trying to forget about the history, trying to forget about genocides and all that stuff, you know. Trying to throw it all away and just trying to become humans. And teach and interact and connect. …So he kind of, he does a great job building that bridge for everybody. If it wasn't for him, I would've quit a long time ago.
Other students emphasized Nathan’s teaching and classroom practices as important for their positive classroom experiences. In talking about Nathan, Brandan mentioned he thought it was important for him to get to know his instructors; knowing instructors “builds trust.” This was something Brandan saw Nathan do by commonly drawing on his own life to impart larger life lessons. For example, when asked why he liked Nathan as a teacher so much, Brandan said “…he always teaches us about life. And he really wants us to succeed.” When I asked Brandan about the most important thing Nathan taught him, Brandan responded:

When Nathan shared his story about his diabetes. And he said that, um, well, he was like he was going through a rough time and he wanted to quit. But—he did—he just, he didn’t give up. And he has all those awards and those certificates, and he made a house out of adobe. And, I think, yeah, that was the most important thing—is don’t give up.

In this story of Nathan, not only did he impart a lesson that was significant to Brandan, but he did so by talking about his own life. Including his own stories, Nathan helped the students get to know him and, as Brandan pointed out, helped to foster trust.

Kaneisha provided further elaboration on Brandan’s comment in giving examples of Nathan going out of his way to help his students:

We get our tools, get to build our resumes. You get to get a job. He does it by any means necessary. You need a ride, he’ll get you a ride, he’ll find you a ride. You need to get to work, he’ll get you to work. You got court, he’ll help you. It’s by any means necessary. There’s no excuse, no excuse. The only excuse is like if you’re really sick, someone’s dying, your kids. But like, other than that, there’s no excuse. …Tutoring. If he needs to stay late, you stay late. If you need help, he sets you up with another campus. Just sets you up pretty good.

The quotations above are just a few examples of how Nathan set the tone of the classroom. He did a variety of things to make students feel welcome, inspired, and that they can succeed.

Students frequently mentioned two ways Nathan used food as a way to show support for the students. First, most students mentioned the class’s weekly Thursday cookouts. Though people were welcome to bring their own contributions, Nathan always provided the majority of the food. I attended two of these cookouts. For the first, Nathan made pumpkin pancakes for
everyone (and in a moment of brilliant culinary adaptation, this was also the first time I saw the possibilities of a drill with an eggbeater connector) and provided pancake accompaniments (syrup, butter, and drinks). The second cookout had fried chicken, biscuits and gravy, and seasoned green beans, again all provided by Nathan. During each cookout, the students could take a break from working and share the meal together. The week of the pumpkin pancakes, students sat in the classroom talking and joking with each other. The week of the fried chicken, Nathan showed *Smoke Signals*, a 1998 movie that was one of the first major films written, directed, and featuring Native Americans.

The cookout had several functions. First, on the most basic level, it provides a regular meal for everyone, particularly those individuals that often struggle to afford enough food for themselves and their families. Like the food pantry (described next), students could also take-home leftover food from the cookout, meant specifically for “to whoever doesn’t have food at the house” (Brandan). Kaneisha, Jose, Brandan, and Chris all brought up the cookout as an example of how Nathan went out of his way to support his students, and as further evidence of how he just “gets it” (in the words of Kaneisha), meaning he understood how hard life on the reservation and in poverty could be. In this sense, too, the cookouts were relevant to the everyday realities of many students’ lives.

Second, though the cookouts were informal, they nevertheless acted as a kind of ritual, a habitual event students expected. This repetition, as for all rituals, is key in that it focuses attention to a specific action and moment, and that it may continuously (re)invoke memories and emotions of pleasurable past experiences (Bird, 1980). Likewise, the cookouts were a moment and an activity that made everyone stop and gather as a larger group; this is an example of how to create those stable, long-term interactions believed to be the bedrock of belonging in the classroom (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000).
Third, the cookouts opened space and time for everyone to socialize that was unconnected to construction or schoolwork, though talk does often start out around these very subjects. In providing the space and time for the cookouts, Nathan could help foster and nurture the social bonding between the students, continuing to cultivate the supportive classroom so many students mentioned. In this social dimension, then, the cookouts also mirrored the importance of rituals in that participation in such activity is a marker of a defined group or community (Bird, 1980). Those that participate in rituals “allow identification of in-group members” (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016, para. 3). From this perspective, then, just the participation in the cookout-as-ritual and its demonstration of group membership creates the potential for belonging development.

Last, Nathan often used the cookout to showcase Native art or entertainment. During my first cookout, *Smoke Signals* proved to be a big hit. In one scene, the main characters debate which historic Native American would be the best modern day basketball player; Victor, the protagonist, insisted the best player would be Geronimo’s (a well-known Western Apache historical figure). The shout-out to a fellow tribesman generated cheers and laughter in the class. In his inclusion of such Native-produced arts, like *Smoke Signals* or the Navajo comedians James and Ernie, illustrates Nathan’s awareness of and appreciation for the Native communities. Further, the cookouts featuring Native art also demonstrated to some degree what Jose described as building a bridge between Nathan’s white heritage and the Native American students in the construction classroom.

The second food-related strategy Nathan employed that many students referenced was the “unofficial” food pantry he started. When I interviewed Nathan for a previous study, he mentioned the importance of the food pantry for allowing students to continue attending class. The opportunity cost of attending class several times a week was the lost wages that might otherwise be earned in doing odd jobs. Thus, for some attending class precluded earning money
for their families’ food the next day. By keeping a food pantry in the back of the classroom, students could inconspicuously grab whatever food stores they needed at the end of class. Each day I was in the class for those two and a half weeks, at least one person left class each day with some food. Further, the atmosphere Nathan had created in the classroom meant no one appeared to feel any stigma in taking a few items from the pantry; though some students quietly grabbed a few things and left, others would call out thanks across the classroom or even make jokes about the food (one on-going joke was about Jose’s request for lobster in the pantry). By setting up this food pantry, for which he apparently got into some trouble, Nathan showed his care and concern for his students, and his awareness for what the lives of his students really were – in Kaneisha’s words “He sees us just as we're people that are trying to make it, but he understands what we're up against as well.”

Though Nathan’s classroom strategies do not all revolve around food, the food pantry and the cookouts were frequently mentioned as hallmarks of Nathan’s caring, acceptance, and concern for his students. When I asked students for examples of how Nathan showed the attributes they most appreciated and admired (such as his care for students’ wellbeing and his support for their success), the food pantry and cookouts were the most frequently cited examples. They reveal how a person, in this case the instructor of a classroom, can shape an atmosphere that can breed comfort, safety and success—in other words important conditions needed for students to develop a sense of belonging.

Not all students claimed the construction program as something to which they belonged, and for some, their pathways for belonging stemmed more from place or action than connection to people or persons. However, for many students, Nathan and his actions opened an important pathway to belonging.
Through Place: The Significance of the Classroom

The events of 2020 not only provided unanticipated consequences for my ability to conduct research, but also brought the importance of the classroom as place into stark relief. In particular, the switch to distance education due to COVID most immediately showed the importance of the classroom as tangible place. More deeply, though, the classroom also represented the larger purpose of the class, the construction program, and the students’ reasons for enrolling. Further, the positive experiences so many students had in the classroom, for many their first positive educational experiences, imbued the classroom with a larger significance, one that gave several students a sense of purpose and of possibility. Thus, understanding the significance of the classroom as a place requires the analysis of the classroom’s key roles: a physical meeting place and repository of resources unattainable by the students; a common area for students to talk through projects and questions; a showroom for past and current successful projects students displayed with pride; an entryway to education as positive experiences; and a representation of new purpose and goals in life.

Physical Location and Resource Repository

COVID was instrumental in surfacing the essential nature of the classroom as a physical place. My initial rounds of interviews were done on campus, before and/or after students going to class and working on their projects. During my first interviews, discussions of belonging in the classroom centered more on the role of learning and the importance of people—classmates and instructors both—as the key factors in their perceptions of the classroom. For those few interviews done after the Spring Break, when the college made all classes online to hinder the spread of COVID in the communities, though, many of the functions played by the classroom
became more apparent.

I was able to attend two class sessions done remotely towards the end of the semester. By that time, the class had been unable to meet for close to two months. Nathan gave me time to ask the students some questions about their experiences doing the construction class remotely; the word most often used in their responses was “sucks.” As in, “it sucks,” “class online sucks,” and not getting to “go in [to the classroom] sucks.” What had changed in the class going online? The students were still covering and learning the same material, they were mostly able to all attend the Zoom sessions together, though the video and audio feeds often lagged horribly (Kaneisha had trouble attending classes because she had no internet connection at home and so would occasionally drive to a fast-food restaurant and use their Wi-Fi to join the class from her car). The actions, then, were relatively the same, and the presence of most of the class was the same (the people). What was missing was a place for everyone to gather as they had in the classroom. Most explicitly, then, the classroom functioned as a common place everyone gathered at for a common purpose.

If the classroom, though, were just a meeting place, it might be easily substituted for any other location. Students, though, talked about the difficulty in doing work when not physically in the construction classroom. This was for a few different reasons.

The construction classroom had a variety of components to it: a traditional classroom with desks, chairs, and computers; the workshop area where woodworking and smaller projects could be done inside; two large shipping containers that stored much of the larger equipment and materials needed (such as wood, cable, conduit); and the student-built trailer (Figure 5-1). In each of these parts, students could tackle new skills, talk to each other, and ask for help, and build things they had not thought possible before. Additionally, the students had requested and subsequently built a few structures to add on to the classroom. The students worked together to build a large concrete grill, an idea precipitated by their Thursday cookouts, and a picnic table.
Figure 5-1: A map of the construction classroom and its various components

The grill became the offshoot of a lesson on building concrete footers, meaning the permanent structure was a lasting object of students’ developing skills. These additions helped the students make the construction classroom their own; in no other class on the campus had students been so able (and allowed) to permanently shape their own learning environment. Thus, the classroom was a place where students might uniquely interact with their environment and their environment might uniquely shape their learning.

This was especially true of the trailer (a small two-bedroom, one-bathroom) the students built. When asked about missing going to class, Brandan spoke of just wanting and even needing to be somewhere other than home for a while. This comment might be interpreted to mean the significance was not in the classroom because of what it was but rather what it was not. However,
when asked about the trailer, Brandan’s face lit up. Being there, Brandan said, “I just feel great.”

The trailer was something built from scratch by the class. It was the creation of place around which specific actions might also be invested with meaning; through co-creating place, the class worked together for a larger purpose. Throughout interviews, I asked students to walk me through their various projects done in class. The students described a jelly cupboard, a dog house, and then, often with a wide sweeping arm, the trailer. In fact, when I asked students about the things they learned in the classroom and what lessons they liked best, the trailer was always the first mentioned. I was given a few tours of the house during my visits to the classroom, and it was great pride that students showed off the work they had done. The work on the trailer and their ability to be in the trailer together ceased with the advent of COVID. The pandemic had cut off access to this specific place in which many of the students derived great pride. (The significance of the trailer is further discussed in a later section).

Further, the classroom represented more than just what the students had built, it also was the portal to resources students had little or no access to outside of the class. Because of the nature of the class’ subject, the construction classroom contained extensive material resources; the class was able to meet where it did, rather than any other location in the college, because of the equipment and supplies that made it possible. This meant that Nathan could not have simply adjourned the class elsewhere, like an open field where everyone could socially distance, because so many of the items were rooted to the classroom location by necessity: the many, many, tools and materials, too many to fit into a single large classroom that they spilled out into large shipping containers; the trailer; the access to computers and the internet, which many students did not have at home. The classroom, though, was not just the repository for these physical items, but it also represented many students’ first access to the materials they would otherwise never be able to use; by extension, it is through connection with the construction classroom that so many students had, for the first time, access to resources that could help them with their educational and
professional goals, i.e. help students enter what Vaughn called the “brotherhood” of skill.

Figure 5-2 & Figure 5-3: The various resources inside the storage containers

The Workshop: A Place for Dialogue and Support

In talking about the importance of being physically present in the classroom, one reoccurring theme was students’ description of how easily they could talk through projects, questions, and problems with each other. Many students described the desire to help others, whether it was a marker of belonging as Rodson explained, feeling a sense of validation from helping people as Lonnie described, or simply to connect to others as Chris recounted. Even apart from Rodson, Lonnie, or Chris, in asking others how comfortable they felt asking for help, everyone had a person they knew they could turn to ask for assistance; students’ lists usually included Nathan, but they almost always also included a few fellow classmates they knew they could ask for help as well. Being in the classroom helped facilitate an easy support network, but
this atmosphere was integrally connected to people being physically together in a place.

One of the class’s individual projects, a jelly cupboard, illustrated how the classroom (as physical location and environment co-created by people) was integral for students being able to ask questions and get help. During my visit, I received the instructional handout (figure 5-4) for the cupboard. My immediate response was to think I would never be able to figure out those instructions (perhaps unsurprisingly because, although I have done some woodworking on my own, I am obviously not a student in the construction program). Several people, though, echoed my own sentiments. Vangie spoke to the general confusion of the project when she mentioned the handout:

And it seems so complicated, cause you gotta measure the height, the length, and then there’s a little cupboard that’s gotta go in there. And then the doors, I think. And then, it shows a whole bunch of pictures and then you gotta measure the boards and stuff like that. When you just look at the picture, it seems hard.

This sentiment was echoed by Brandan, as well. Brandan explained he was initially confused, like others, when given the handout but was able to make progress with the help of others:

I was kind of confused because when I first started it. …They [classmates] were just telling me what measurements to measure into how much you can cut. And then after I done that, that’s when I looked at the handout. And it was kind of confusing.

During my class observations, students worked in tandem on their cupboards, and the workspace was filled with conversation and consultation on how to go about the building task. Being in the classroom together meant students had several people they could look to and ask for help, and at the same time it fostered a kind of camaraderie in that most people were struggling with the same project. Chris, who often emphasized helping others in the classroom as an important way for him to connect with his classmates, pointed out being there and being able to help was important to him, and likely to his classmates:

That's why I'm not really in a rush to finish it too. Trying to catch everybody up too who needs to catch up with work too. Because some of them are kind of falling behind. And they feel down. But I'm like hey, I'll help you, I'm still working on mine and I know what's the measurements, which tools you need, how far you need to cut, what needs to
be, yeah [laughs]…. just so they have a picture of seeing okay, so this is how it looks and this is what I need. I'm not trying to say I'm better than you. Just, you need help, I can help you with it. I have extra time, free time, I'm not doing anything.

This support, though, was lost once the class went remote due to COVID, and as a result some people were unsure and/or unable to continue. Once the class went remote, Nathan met individually with students so they could pick up their unfinished projects and any tools and materials they would need to complete them. The class continued to meet online a few times a week, which gave students a chance to catch up and ask any questions they had about their projects. The online environment, though, was not nearly as conducive to getting help and figuring things out as when students were able to work together at the same time. I was able to interview Brandan, Junior and Kaneisha after the class went remote, and they spoke of missing being in the classroom together.

The distance classes functioned very differently than the in-person ones. Though all three people attended the online classes, they each referred to them more as “check-ins.” The online classes no longer functioned as time for the same kind of collective learning that happened in the classroom. Kaneisha explained she only found the sessions helpful because “It reminded me like hey, you've still got a project to finish.” For both Brandan and Junior, working from home was much more difficult. In explaining his work on the jelly cupboard, Brandan described losing momentum for the project after encountering a few problems with which he needed help. In trying to finish the project alone, Brandan found: “I was stuck on a few problems. I got stuck and, and I wish I could, if we went to class, I would have liked it would have been better, would have gotten help.”

Brandan was one student that regularly attended the online classes and knew he could ask for help; in his English and math classes, he regularly reached out the professors and knew “would give me the answer, just like that.” The cupboard, though, was different.
Figure 5-4: The jelly cupboard instructional handout
Despite the fact that during the in-person class, Brandan easily asked questions of classmates and of Nathan, at a distance, he felt less confident that he could finish the cupboard, even if getting some help during the remote classes. The loss of the physical location, and the easy, supportive atmosphere it hosted, completely changed the dynamic of something (asking questions) he regularly did. Brandan thought he would have finished the cupboard if the class had continued in person, but now with the class gone remote, he was unsure if he would: “I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe…”

Through my interviews, I asked people about and made notes on their willingness to ask questions, seeing this as both an activity integral to learning as well as a good marker of people’s willingness to be open and somewhat vulnerable in the classroom. Examining the differences in willingness to ask for help in person versus online illuminates the importance of the classroom as a physical place wherein people gather for a common interest. Seeking out help in an online environment, with access to Nathan only once a week and limited or no access to helpers like Lonnie and Chris, was difficult. Junior specifically pinpointed the change in interaction with the remote class in explaining he liked the in-person classes much better “cause I had the teacher there. And I will interact better, I will be able to ask questions, better there.”

The classroom as a physical place brought everyone together in an important way that an online class could not duplicate. Asking for help constructing a physical object is much easier to do, whether from the instructor or fellow classmates, when done in person; getting clarifications on instructions for construction projects can be difficult to convey through email. Further, the camaraderie of the classroom with multiple people discussing and working together to figure out how to put something together was absent. Junior referenced both differences when explaining why he disliked remote classes:

Just like not having a teacher in person, you know, and I kind of find. I don't know. I think I kind of thought it was hard to get the motivation to do work sometimes because is like all this in my control to do it, I guess. It was up to me to do.
Junior spoke of the absence of an instructor as making progress difficult, but then also emphasized that the cupboard is just more difficult when done alone. Though Junior here specifically referenced the structure the classroom and instructor provide, it is notable that his sense of working from home, which he feels much more on his own, is starkly different from the cooperative atmosphere the classroom creates.

**Showcase for Individual and Class Accomplishments**

During a break in instruction during my first day with the class, Nathan called out some of the projects students completed (“Vangie, you should show her your planter!” and “Jose, show off the jelly cupboard you’re working on”). Nathan often took the opportunity to spotlight different students’ incredible work. The first day, Vangie showed me a planter wall-hanging she made from a wooden pallet. At first, Vangie did not seem to know what all to say after a brief, “so this is what I made” introduction. I asked Vangie how she went about making the hanging planter, and Vangie started walking me through the steps, from looking at similar products online and drawing her own design up to the final steps of figuring out the correct mechanism strong enough to mount and hold up the heavy piece. As she talked and I asked questions, Vangie became more comfortable. From across the classroom, Nathan called out, “I told her she could probably sell it if she wanted to!” I hastily agreed and shared that, in fact, I had seen something somewhat similar on Etsy a few weeks ago for $150. Vangie seemed startled to hear this, and when I reiterated that, if she did not want to keep the planter, I thought she could easily find a buyer in the larger town just up the road. Vangie asked if I really thought so, saying softly as if to herself, “I didn’t really think I could.” Later, in another exchange the next week, Vangie shared she had not really thought it would be possible to sell her work, despite Nathan telling her otherwise; she had not believed someone would be interested in buying it.
The planter was big and needed to be transported to her home in a larger vehicle, but Vangie got a ride with other students to the class provided by the tribal government. Until she could arrange it get home, it sat in the construction classroom, a proud artefact of her first building project in the class. I do not think Vangie purposefully thought to leave it in the classroom so as to show it off (Vangie certainly did not like lots of attention) nor for others to admire it. Regardless of the reason, though, it was one of many projects students made that could be found throughout the classroom.

In our interview, I asked Vaughn about projects he had done in the program and what he was most proud of making. Without pause, Vaughn responded it was his sons’ cradleboard\textsuperscript{12}. Vaughn described the significance of the board to him personally before detailing how he made it:

I built him a cradleboard and, and I built him a, I guess, a cubby for his, his Infamil and is baby food. And I actually have pictures of this— [laughs] of his cradleboard. And its, and its—that’s my baby. Yeah, he outgrew it in like 4 months, but still, a part of him being Navajo and Apache, I wanted to build him a cradleboard. See, that’s the cradleboard [shows pictures on his phone]. Right there is a river with rocks, I apoxied it, I put blue apoxy right here in the middle, and the top is all apoxy. Then right there, you can’t see it, but it has my last name and its engraved and its apoxied, and the top is live wood. So I made it, see? Its really nice. A person up the hill, when I told him about it, I showed him—I brought it in, you know, it's a pawn shop because I was getting the rocks from tehre and I was getting like the arrowheads and like the hyde, you know, for tying him—I guess, not tying him down, but you know because there’s the overlay to, you know, keep your baby in? So I got all that from that place, and when I brought it in, he wanted to buy it from me. He was offering me $600 for that cradleboard. And I said, it has my engraving on it. It has my name on the back. [laughs]. My last name, you know? But he said, well we can take that off and just put a new one on there. I said, I said, no—I don’t want to build a new one, you know! [laughs] You know, its more, its more, in deep with my family, you know. Cause my family—on my dad’s side, they’re all traditional. You know, so—and my dad, before he passed, he promised you know my oldest that he’s gonna make him a cradleboard. So, I—when I had my son, well, my wife had my son, I found out—I guess I put it on to myself to finish what he said he did, he was going to do. You know what I mean? But, like I said, alcohol—he was addicted to alcohol, but when he said something, he would do it, that was his word, you know what I mean? But, he fell into, I guess, getting sick, he got sick and couldn't finish what he said he was going to do.

\textsuperscript{12} Historically, the Navajo people used cradleboards to carry their children on their backs in a way that kept their hands free; today, cradleboards are still made and gifted in honor of that tradition, but they are more ceremonial than used practically
So, you know, I built him the cradleboard. So I did that for my son…

Though at the time of the interview, Vaughn had taken the cradleboard home to his son, he had left it in the workshop for a time after finishing it. I later asked Nathan about the cradleboard, who praised Vaughn’s craftsmanship and mentioned he often showed it off when visitors came in the workshop. The cradleboard was a great representation of a student’s learning. Beyond that, though, it might also represent exactly what it meant to have a vocational program within a Native American community. Vaughn building the cradleboard, and both his and Nathan’s showcasing the cradleboard as a manifestation of the knowledge and skill developed by students in the program, married together the action of the class with the influence of place (i.e. construction as activity and both construction classroom and also Native lands as place); in other words, the cradleboard was possible because of purposeful activity done in meaningful place.

In addition to individual student projects, the class often worked together to create larger objects. Figure 5-1, the map of the construction classroom and areas, showed three large projects the class made together: a picnic table, a big grill, and the house. Each of these projects were offshoots of classroom content. The house was the class’s final project and featured every subject covered in the class: framing, drywalling, roofing, electrical, plumbing. Once finished, the house would be moved to another campus that housed the police academy and it would be housing for two cadets. During the year, though, the house slowly grew; each new unit of curriculum covered became translated into physical form in the house. Thus, the house was the physical manifestation of all the class had learned, all the skills they possessed, and all the work they were capable of doing.

In talking about the class, many of the students made some mention to the house. It was a place everyone had to learn to work together (it was a nice sized house with two bedrooms, but in the context of several students working together inside, it was somewhat small). It featured knowledge and skills students cited as their favorite class content; for example, Lonnie talked
about learning electrical for the house as a pivotal moment for her deciding she wanted to go into that specialty. It was sometimes the reward for finishing other projects early, offered up to the class as a treat—“who wants to get to work on the house today?” These examples speak to the house’s importance to the class and to the students, both in signaling their own growing skill set but also as a testament to the success of the class and the program.

Figure 5-5 & Figure 5-6: The initial handout for concrete footers (left) that evolved into a much larger class project—the grill; The student-built grill (right), some of the concrete blocks were decorated by students before used in building the grill

Walking back towards the construction area for class each day, the house was a salient feature on the campus. Students heading to other classrooms in the back could not miss seeing it. Students entering the construction classroom had to walk right past the house to enter class. It certainly struck me as a poignant feature. In the construction program, there were many students that did not have positive educational experiences growing up, nor many (if any) experiences they talked of getting positive feedback from teachers they had. Each day, before entering an educational
space—a place that gave many students a new enthusiasm and purpose for schooling—students saw this marker of their own making, this testament to their own potential and possibility.

**A Place for Positive Educational Experiences**

For many students, the construction classroom constituted the place where education first became comfortable, accessible, and possible. People like Lonnie, Vangie, Jose, Phyllis, Chris, and Vaughn all spoke of negative educational experiences growing up, and others, such as Brandan and Junior, spoke of indifferent experiences. The construction classroom marked the first time these individuals entered an educational space and had positive experiences; whether from engaging in material they were actually interested in or learning skills they wanted to use later on in life, from having positive interactions with other students and particularly with an instructor or having their skills recognized and even validated—it was in the construction classroom that several students were able to first relate positivity with formal education.

Chris spoke about this dynamic both with the instructor, Nathan, and with his fellow classmates. Chris saw Nathan as a welcoming figure, someone excited about each student coming to class: “every morning, he says ‘Chris, Chris!’ He's yelling with excitement at me every day when I open a door or he sees me. ‘Chris!’” And it seems like he wants me to be belonging [sic].” As discussed in the section on belonging through people, Nathan played a pivotal role with several students as an accepting, supportive, and positive educator; contrastingly when asked about past teachers in their lives, no one was able to name a single teacher that they felt was a helpful or positive figure. Chris also spoke about the people in the class being incredibly supportive:

Everyone’s really close now and we look out for each other. We always wonder, where is this person? Even if they don’t come into class. So if they don’t come in, we tell them the next day when they come in, like this is what we did yesterday…
Beamer also spoke of the supportive nature of the classroom, learning from both observing and talking with others as they all work together: “But when I get a tool and pick it up and start messing with what needs to be taken out or something, I like to observe that…But now I’m around the people that know about it, so I’m learning with them too.” Though this certainly represents connection to other people through a shared purpose, what is significant here is that Beamer speaking of these interactions in the classroom represent the most positive classroom-based experience he described during our interview. Previously, Beamer connected to school through participation in the sports teams, but had little to say about positive classroom experiences. Further, Beamer was the only student to speak of experiencing racism in high school with a few of his white teachers, with one particularly charged interaction with such an instructor ultimately leading to his expulsion from school. For Beamer, then, the construction classroom was not only a return to school but a real experience of school as positive and productive—a place for learning and support.

For several of the students, the construction classroom became the setting for their most positive, often for the first time, educational experiences. Though a variety of elements made these positive experiences possible, the classroom became a place to represent them. The construction classroom, then, presented students with an educational place where they might feel supported, comfortable, engaged, and welcomed. In this, the classroom represented a steep deviation from past experiences, and so the construction classroom specifically became an important site for education to be transformed from mostly negative pasts into positive presents.

A Place of Purpose

In explaining the significance of the classroom as a place, there is also the importance of
purpose and place. The construction classroom was where the students went to build and to learn and to practice their trade. It was a place that, from the first, was aligned and associated with that purpose, in contrast to people’s homes that were not. In asking about the class while attending their distance sessions, many people remarked that it was simply more difficult to be productive from home. It was as though everyone had to reconstitute their conceptions of home to include the place where they practiced their learning. In explaining further why the remote construction class “sucked,” Brandan also made revealing comments about how the absence of the classroom felt:

**Brandan:** I feel like I am productive, but I sometimes I just don’t feel like being home.
**Tabitha:** You want to be somewhere else.
**Brandon:** Yeah.
**Tabitha:** So when you are in the construction classroom or when you're in the trailer that you guys are working on-- How do you feel when you're at those places?
**Brandan:** I feel, I just feel great.

In another interview, Brandan easily spoke of how good it would feel to build things in class, things he “never did before” that gave him a sense of accomplishment. Though Brandan said little about life at home, his comments about trying to do the same work, despite having all the physical tools and materials needed on hand, indicated it no longer sparked the same sense of joy. I do not suggest that the location on its own was responsible for this change in emotional reaction. Rather, it is what the place represented to him that was important. Doing an action in the classroom brought joy and a sense of pride, but doing the same action away from the classroom, and all the connotations it had, engendered the same reaction as many of the other students expressed in that online class—it sucked.

What appears to be of great importance, then, is the value placed on the classroom itself. As outlined earlier, for many of these students, the construction program provided them with their first positive classroom experiences and their first recognition from others about their potential. Going to class represented not only going to school, but also where each person was investing
their time and how they were choosing to live their lives. As Jose expressed it, school was keeping him from jail and, if he was going to be “locked up” in a particular place, it was better for it to be the classroom where he could do something meaningful with his time.

For several of the students interviewed, school represented the alternative path they were taking in their lives. In this, some students used the construction class as a mechanism for re-orienting their lives into new directions, speaking to the notion that adult education classrooms “are sites where individuals can construct a self”—a self different from their prior lives in significant ways (Prins, 2006, p. 6). The classroom, then, symbolizes a commitment to changes in the students’ lives. Beamer described the construction program as key to his probation but also as a way of keeping him from returning to his former drug use and dealing drugs. Vangie and Phyllis both became involved in the construction program through their work with rehabilitation services; part of their addiction treatment plan was to go to the class and earn their HSE credential. In this way, the classroom was important not only for its own sake, but also because what it explicitly was not. The classroom—being physically there—provided them a safe place wherein they could focus on the new journeys they were beginning in their lives. Again, drawing on the words of Jose, the people in the construction program were often those “just trying to get [their] life together.” By being in the classroom, students could physically enact their choices to be in school and, in that place, they could meet with and forge a community with others kindreds. Jose most thoroughly explained the importance of physically going to the campus and to class as a vital counterbalance to a past he wished to leave:

You feel good to be over there [the classroom] because it's like, positive. …every day you would wake up, like if you wake up every day and as soon as you wake up and negativity is hitting your brain every day and that’s what you're living with every day, it's weird. ‘Cause once you come here, it’s like positivity straight to your brain in the morning. And so your whole day is based off of positive words, positive energy. So instead of waking up hearing all this bad shit that's going on, you're kind of like, you wake up, you come here, and it's positive, good stuff. Hey guys. Get your life together. So it kind of gets you going. Your day gets better, you're still feeling better, you know. Kind of negative stuff wants to come your way to test you. You'll kind
of just be like, thanks to all this positivity already in the morning, it's got your brain running like, all right, cool, I know how to deal with this, I know how to work with this. Control my emotions now. You know, you start thinking clearly, you start thinking better, instead of just waking up thinking bad stuff, bad stuff, bad stuff.

Here the important part is not particularly the interactions, though he does mention the importance of knowing he will have positive exchanges with people in the classroom, and it is not the act of learning or building. Jose emphasizes, rather, that going to the classroom—being in that physical location—is what counteracts life’s negativity—“once you come here, it’s like positivity straight to your brain.” It is in being in the classroom, both the physical space as well as all that it represents, that Jose can focus on the new pathways he has chosen for his life.

The classroom enables so much of what the students spoke of valuing. For Lonnnie (“what makes me happy is when they asked me… ’can you help me with this?’”) and Rodson (“belonging, I was thinking of like some place, some time, people needing help) it was the opportunity to help and be validated as helpers. It gave Vaughn the only exposure he had to his “brotherhood” of tradesman and interaction with those that take construction “seriously.” It gave Jose the ability to “put some action” behind his talk about living a different life. It precipitated the “hands-on” learning Junior, Phyllis, Rodson, and Vaughn most wanted and needed for their learning. It allowed the belonging to a “whole team” (as Brandan phrased it) dedicated to working together for a specific task. And for Beamer, Phyllis, and Vangie, it could be a new place divorced from their past substance addictions.

Though many of these instances are of belonging through people and action, what COVID and remote learning made clear was that a common place was needed for all these pathways to become available. The importance of the classroom can be seen in the words so many of the students chose when I asked them to describe how they felt when in the construction classroom: “great,” (Brandan); “safe” (Rodson); “happy” and “positive” (Jose); “proud” (Junior); “awesome” (Phyllis); “happiness” (Vaughn).
Lacing Together People, Place, and Action

They put the words into the earth and hope that energy comes back down and helps [Nathan], save him. So just holding hands, praying, and you feel how spiritual they are their words.

Jose

Jose in particular spoke at length of the construction program as transformative. As discussed earlier, much of his positive experiences stemmed from his interactions with people, however, the classroom became an important embodiment of those interactions. In one story, Jose gave an example of how people and activity connected with place to invest an event with meaning:

You come to school like this and you start meeting people who feel the same way you feel and it's just like, all right, I belong here. If this is the group of crazies I belong with, then this is-, I'll stay here. Because I feel like our energies touch. Our souls match. It's just connected. And we had an incident with our teacher, he ended up having a little seizure and he fell. He fell and we got scared. And instead of— We just came together. Gathered around him. And all of us, we held hands and we started praying out loud for him. And you just felt this energy between all of us. It was not like, oh, dudes holding hands, that's gay, or nah. They're Native, they're spiritual, they put the words into the earth and hope that energy comes back down and helps [Nathan], save him. So just holding hands, praying, and you feel how spiritual they are their words. And it just felt, you felt like, like when you go to church and you feel like there's God there, the presence of God is there, you feel that. And you're just like, whoa, this is powerful. It's a powerful feeling. …And it's just like, you kinda had to see it to believe it type of stuff. It felt like the prayer did a lot. And our bond.

Jose touches on a lot in this quotation. In several ways, he ties all the different pathways of belonging together. The students (people) prayed (activity), drawing on traditions specifically shaped by lifetimes lived on their ancestral homelands (place). It should be noted that Jose, the storyteller, is the only non-Native student and so potentially ascribed a meaning different than the Native American students might have. Unfortunately, hearing this story in one of my last interviews, I was unable to ask any other students about this experience.
Despite not being Western Apache or from Pine Creek, Jose rightly connects the story with its larger context; had the same events happened in a different place, others may have had a very different reaction. For Jose, though, the individuals and the actions involved intimately and inseparably connected to the place. By this I mean both the tribal lands of a Western Apache community and the construction classroom.

Gruenewald (2003) formulates place as a geographic location ensconced within the social dimension, rooting human life and experiences in the context of place as informed and forming social norms and cultural traditions. In a similar vein, Deloria and Wildcat (2001) write that power and place produce personality, meaning both the universe is a living thing but that it is also “personal and therefore must be approached in a personal manner” (p. 23). What these scholars point to is the importance of place, in all its layers, in shaping personal and communal experiences. Jose’s story exemplifies these larger conceptualizations of place, interweaving them with the people in the story and their actions. Earlier passages in this section detail the importance of the construction classroom as a place itself but layered with that is the fact that the classroom is in a particular community within Western Apache tribal lands.

As Jose explained in an earlier passage, it was in attending the construction classroom that he felt, for the first time, a connection with other students and a sense that others were “in the same boat” as him. The construction classroom facilitated the gathering of these individuals—Nathan and all the students—in shared purpose and in some ways paved the road for the interactions and connections that ensued. Similarly, Chris spoke of the supportive atmosphere co-created by Nathan and the students—an atmosphere unique to this particular classroom for many of the students. Vaughn spoke of the classroom, and its purposeful activity, as capable of fostering a brotherhood, and being a place where he could connect to those serious about construction. For many students, then, the classroom represented a new educational experience,
whether through interaction with the people, the activity, or the place itself. The classroom, though, became the physical conduit for which these connections could take place.

Beyond the importance of the classroom and its representation of positive and unique encounters and connections, so too was its placement within Pine Creek, a Western Apache community on tribal, ancestorial lands. In Jose’s story, he links the importance of the land to the student reactions to Nathan’s seizure: “they put the words into the earth and hope that energy comes back down and helps [Nathan], save him.” Again, this is a non-Native description of the reasoning for the prayers, which may or may not be how the Western Apache students saw their own actions. What is notable, though, is Jose’s apt observation that this reaction was one grounded in the place.

Jose’s story also reminded me of something Nathan had said during my first visit to the construction program. Initially, the program was based in another community about 2 hours away from the Western Apache town, not on any reservation, but rather in a predominantly white town. Nathan mentioned that, after two years in that town, they could not get a sustainable program—the vast majority of students dropped out before making significant progress in the class. After two years, the program moved to Pine Creek and it grew and flourished there quickly. This is a powerful reminder of the power of place to nurture specific endeavors; in both places were the same program and instructor, the same curriculum and instruction, the same overarching goals and yet the outcome was very different. In short, the emplacement of the construction program in Pine Creek yielded very different results.

This reminded me of a professor I had during my master’s degree that always said there were no repeatable, reproducible program solutions; what works in one context (with specific people, place, and actions) cannot be exactly reproduced elsewhere (with different people, place, and even actions). Though each context contains each of these three elements, the strands interact differently depending upon the context, shaping distinct outcomes. In returning to Jose’s story, it
is impossible to know how the students in the construction program the town over would have reacted to Nathan’s seizure; what is certain, however, is that in reaction to the medical emergency, the students in the classroom in Pine Creek joined together in prayer—an outcome shaped by the specific people, place, and actions of that moment and time—an event that Jose ascribed a deeper connection between the members of the class and an example of belonging to a larger context.

**To Feel You Don’t Belong: Vangie’s Story**

Even over here [in this program] I’m still a loner. So, prolly [probably] it’s just like I’m thinking to myself, ‘you don’t belong in there, you belong by yourself.’ You know. Yeah, I guess I’ve been a loner all this time.

Vangie

To understand classroom belonging, its absence must be considered as well. Vangie was the only student who explicitly said she felt no sense of belonging in the classroom, nor did she share any stories of classroom experiences that might indicate even a small level of comfort. As explained earlier, when I asked Vangie about the last time she felt a sense of belonging, only after a long pause did she describe her childhood home. The first time Vangie described leaving that home was when she enrolled in a schooling program through the Mormon church that sent her off to boarding school in another state.

Five students (Brandan, Chris, Junior, Kaneisha, and Vangie) talked about traveling from home for schooling at some point, and for everyone but Kaneisha, these schools were in other states. Brandan, Chris, and Junior described going to larger boarding schools for Native American students, and generally spoke positively about connecting with other students there. Kaneisha described herself as a loner, similar to Vangie, but had a kind of peer group through sports. Vangie’s stories of boarding school are sharply different. Vangie, in her early fifties, attended
boarding school in the 1980s, a different era of boarding school than Brandan, Chris, and Junior experienced (who are all in the early and mid-twenties).

Each year she participated in the program, a big bus of fellow kids from her tribe were driven to the nearby state to stay with foster families and attend nearby schools:

**Vangie:** “…cause once we got to <neighboring state>, the Mormon church and then there’s a lot of different people there, they all, when they got to their foster parents, everybody just went their own way. So, it’s like the only time you get to see them was when you’re heading home, when school is out. …Sometimes it would be lucky that we have like 3 or 4 [people from the reservation] in a close area. I went with my sister and my sister was maybe…a few blocks away from me. …Yeah, but I didn’t really visit her that much cause I was scared to, you know, be on foot in a new place we had never been. So…

**Tabitha:** And the family you were with, they didn’t offer to take you to go visit your sister?

**Vangie:** Yeah, it was only sometimes it was. But not all the time.

**Tabitha:** How did you like living with this different family?

**Vangie:** It was good. But, the two families that I went to, I had to be the oldest one. Yeah, it was kinda boring at times, cause you had to talk English all the time and not your own language. And then I think that’s how, I almost lost my language. Cause there was nobody around to talk to in my language. So, but when I came back from <neighboring state>, that’s when I started to re-learn my Apache language again.

Although Vangie first responds that life with the foster families “was good,” she continues on to describe an isolated life that separated her from those she was most familiar with, from her childhood home that was (and remains) a place of comfort to her, and from her language, surely among other pieces of her tribal culture that she lost access to during the year as well. Shortly after finishing her fourth year in the program, Vangie dropped out of school:

“That’s why it was kinda hard and tiring too. Yeah, so. And I just didn’t bother to come back to school.”

It is not impossible to see Vangie’s experiences with boarding school as alienating. Vangie and her siblings were not offered a choice but rather were “just told we were going,” with no other knowledge as to why they had to go. Not wanting to join the program nor to leave to go so far away from home, Vangie was sent to a school isolated from anyone she really knew. The
foster homes and placements changed each year, meaning there was little chance to form long-term bonds with her foster families, kids in the neighborhood, or classmates. There was no subject in school Vangie specifically enjoyed, nor could she think of any teacher or person at the schools she ever particularly liked or with whom she connected. Further, boarding school separated her from her language; Vangie grew up in a home and community that spoke Apache, not English. In her life, then, school functioned more as a subtractive force—an educational experience meant to take away one’s culture or language (Valenzuela, 1999).

In this and other ways, Vangie represented an outlier from those others interviewed: female, older, from a neighboring town, grew up with Apache as her first language, and did not express an interest in construction prior to joining the program (Vangie enrolled in the program as part of her employment with a local rehabilitation agency). The context of her prior life meant each of the pathways to belonging were unlikely: being a self-described loner, and from different social categories from the rest of the class made connecting through people perhaps more difficult; having no prior interest in the content of construction or building meant the main class activity did not resonate; and leaving her community, in her past and present educational experiences, meant the classroom as a place removed her from her only identified experience of belonging (her childhood home). This last instance is perhaps most salient as her example of belonging is linked to place, and yet schools as physical places continuously required her to travel further from home.

In thinking of Vangie, though, my mind often returns to the smile she gave me whenever she sought me out to say goodbye. I see the smallest beginnings of connection blooming between myself and Vangie when I think about our brief interactions. Tracing back through the transcripts of our conversations and the notes I took each day after class, I saw our shared experience with fear and discomfort in the classroom (though they were of course to very different degrees of intensity and impact) as an opening for forging a connection. Perhaps, then, it is through
recognition and validation, derived from shared experiences, that over time a new pathway to belonging might open up for Vangie.

**Conclusion**

My time spent with and listening to the student storytellers described here taught me a great deal about the nature of belonging. Though so much of the literature on classroom belonging focuses on stable, interpersonal relationships sustained over time as the key to belonging, there is so much more in the world that can make us feel a sense of belonging. Just as people can find a home for themselves in a place, with a group of people, or embedded within certain activities, so too can these elements become entrances to belonging within the classroom. In this chapter, I built on the general pathways for belonging identified earlier by examining their presence within the context of a vocational classroom. Throughout the chapter, various student classroom stories presented examples of how activity, people, and place can provide openings for connection and, ultimately, the development of belonging. Thus, from these stories, we have a new understanding for how belonging developed for students in the construction classroom. In my concluding chapter, I draw larger meaning and discuss implications for this new understanding of belonging within a vocational classroom in the hopes that an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon might inform future educational practices.
Chapter 6

Moving Forward: Understanding the Insights Gained

It seems almost impossible that it was only a year ago I was in the southwest conducting my dissertation research. Much has happened in the world to make brief moments of time feel as if they stretch out indefinitely, and the pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home orders have seemingly skewed everyone’s sense of time. More than that, though, is my own incredulity that it was only one year from the time of this writing that I first met students in the construction class and heard their stories. Over the last year, so many of my waking hours have been spent with these individuals foremost in my mind. Perhaps it is all the more difficult to remember that my time in the Southwest was not so long ago—the two-hour drives to the construction program, the hours spent in the classroom and on the college grounds, the conversations with people on the campus—because it represents such a stark difference from being housebound in my little home in central Pennsylvania. At the end of a long, cold winter, even something as simple as the feeling of the Southwestern sun on my face feels like a very distant memory.

Dissertation outlines found across various resources often label this last chapter as being the conclusions of the study; in that, they suggest it is here the story ends—it concludes. After all, what is left to tell after a story concludes? In the context of this research and the individuals interviewed, I hope there is a great deal left to tell in the coming years. My hope is that for each of the people involved in this study, myself included, our stories continue to both unfold and to be heard.

In this last chapter, then, I present a summary of all the things learned in trying to answer my two central research questions about belonging. I link them to the current research in the field, both what is present and what is absent. In particular, I draw on iterations of the ecological model for understanding the three pathways of belonging identified in these findings. Then, I construct a
larger meaning of these stories. Though I do not expect the average adult educator to sit with a
dissertation for some light reading in their time off, I use this space to construct understandings
from this research that I hope to translate into resources that adult educators may find relevant for
their classrooms. I discuss the implications I see in this research, before postulating on work yet
to be done. I end with the study’s conclusions as well as a description of all the lessons learned
throughout my time with the construction program.

**Summarizing the Research Findings**

To better understand the development of belonging within an adult education classroom,
I interviewed 11 students in a construction program within a Western Apache community to
answer two questions: first, what do students’ stories of belonging explain about the development
of belonging in general, and second, how might these stories of belonging provide a better
understanding of how belonging in the classroom can develop. Student stories demonstrated three
main pathways along which belonging might develop: people, places, and actions. In
understanding the various stories detailing each of these pathways for experiences of belonging, I
found certain components were vital for fostering belonging.

When individuals spoke of belonging to a specific place, they described connections to
place so deep they internalized some element of that place into their sense of self. For example,
Brandan spoke of responsibility to place and the duty to not betray it. Similarly, Lonnie spoke of
respect for the mountain in describing her family taking only little bits of what they could use and
leaving the rest for others. Others spoke of places engendering emotional reactions, such as
feeling safety or comfort. For example, Vangie’s only sense of belonging in life stemmed from
her childhood home, a place she knew she could be safe from the prying eyes of others.
When individuals spoke of belonging through people, they drew on examples of connections with others as creating a bond of belonging. On this pathway, recognition is essential. It is through recognition from others that students in the construction program were affirmed in their actions, saw an alignment between their own sense of self and how others saw them, and ultimately gained self-esteem for their own skills and capabilities. Within this pathway, the instructor and the students are essential for recognition in the classroom.

Lastly, some individuals described belonging derived from specific activities. On this pathway, the description of activities that created belonging included important components significance, recognition, and purpose. An action or activity done in the present becomes significant if it connects to something in a person’s past. For some, construction was significant because they had prior experiences in this field, which created an interest for further exposure to construction and thus formed the foundation on which the new experiences might develop. Like the belonging-through-people pathway, recognition within action happens when others see our actions and affirm us as being what we want to be; for example, Lonnie wanted to help others and be perceived as a helper, thus, others asking him for help provide Lonnie’s sense of self vital recognition. Lastly, purpose is an important component for activities that might foster belonging. These are activities that relate to some larger goal or desired outcome. For example, many individuals saw their engagement with construction as a gateway to the career path they wanted, future employment opportunities, and, hopefully, a better life.

Student stories of belonging, both in general and within the classroom, opened a new framework for understanding the phenomenon. In describing their experiences of belonging, students demonstrated the possibility of belonging not only within a social context, but also belonging through connection to place and activity. Not all students found each pathway equally accessible across all contexts, however, and analyzing the interacting dynamics of students’ identities and context provides a better understanding of how belonging does and does not
develop. In this, the ecological model of belonging can elucidate why certain individuals experience belonging along some pathways, but not others. Elements from the surrounding ecological landscape, internalized or external to the individual, are important variables for belonging development.

Belonging in the classroom, though, is largely considered only through the social/interpersonal perspective within the research literature (Albertini, 2009; Kerka, 2005; Lowe, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Shield, 2004; Tachine et al., 2007; Taiaiake, 2004; Tierney, 1999; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Even though place and activity contribute to belonging, they remain largely unexamined within the existing literature on belonging in educational places. In sum, this research suggests that belonging is a complex, multi-faceted concept that can emerge from a variety of dimensions, but that such development is intertwined with context, both internalized by and external to the individual. As such, new models of belonging are needed that consider the role that social dynamics, identity and its expressions, and the environment or context play in fostering or hindering pathways for belonging development within the classroom.

Discussion

To better explore the various components of belonging and its potential development along three pathways (place, people, and activity), in previous chapters I used the adapted ecological model of belonging to explain how various elements of the environment may influence belonging. General application of the ecological model of belonging limits the scope of inquiry to the influence of elements within the environment has on the development of interpersonal belonging (i.e., its use is traditionally limited to the social concept of belonging). What remains missing from much of the existent literature is use of the model to explore belonging as a
dynamic beyond human relationships. My argument from this research, however, is that the ecological model can be used more broadly to understand all three pathways of belonging presented in this study. Further, through examining the various systems levels outlined in the ecological model, educators can gain new insights about belonging within their own classrooms. Of particular help for understanding belonging for the Native students in the construction program was an examination of the chronosystem (both as a system within the individual and as the system encompassing all other sub-systems) and the microsystem. Examining student stories of belonging through these two systems helped explain not only why certain pathways were accessible for certain people within the classroom as well as why certain components of belonging (such as respect, responsibility, and recognition) continuously arose within these stories.

**Applying the Ecological Model**

The adapted ecological model of belonging considers two internalized elements of a situation’s context as integral for belonging development: historical factors (the chronosystem) and cultural factors (the microsystem) of the surrounding environment. Internalized culture and history can be considered important elements of a person’s identity (Horse, 2005, 2012; Peroff & Wildcat, 2002; Russell, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2012). Sharing personal and communal memories, and cultural customs, beliefs, and behaviors link individuals with a group (Peroff & Wildcat, 2002). Connecting these shared elements of personal and communal identities to specific places, such as ancestral homelands and/or reservations, is an essential element of Native identity (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Fish & Syed, 2018; Horse, 2005, 2012; Peroff & Wildcat, 2002). Thus, to understand belonging development within a certain context, an individual needs to learn about the historical factors/chronosystem and cultural factors/microsystem present in the environment.
The Chronosystem

Many of the student stories of belonging illustrate the importance of historical factors for the development of group belonging. Here I offer two examples of the chronosystem’s relevance for belonging development: Brandan’s riverside reflections about his ancestors and Vangie’s experiences in a boarding school.

Considering belonging within a general context, Brandan spoke of belonging through connection to place, in particular belonging to the river. Brandan’s reflection on whether he truly belonged at the river shows the importance of both levels of history—the internal and the external. Brandan spoke of feeling a very personal connection to the river. He thought of his own childhood experiences with the river, growing up going there to swim and to fish. He continued to go there to feel a sense of peace and to reflect on his life. His personal history gave him this connection to the river, making it a place to which he felt he belonged.

The river was the first response Brandan gave when I asked him about a recent experience of belonging. After telling me about his last visit to the river, I asked him why he felt a sense of belonging there. Brandan’s answer was revealed that he both did and did not feel a sense of belonging at the river. He felt he did belong because of his past with the river and his own personal connection to the place—elements of his own personal and internalized history. He felt he did not belong, though, because his experiences of the river were so different from those of his ancestors. His reflections on not belonging to the river drew upon the larger historical narrative of his tribe and their relationship to the river (as Brandan explained, this history was one which his ancestors connected to the land for their very survival—knowledge and experience Brandan did not personally have). Thus, history beyond the personal and on the level of his entire people influenced his sense of belonging at the river. In this example, we see both levels of history/chronosystem brought to bear on experiences of belonging.
Vangie’s personal history as well as the history of the Western Apache and Native Americans in general both influenced the pathways of belonging available to her. Within Vangie’s stories of attending a boarding school, we see both levels of the chronosystem—history both internal and external to individual—merge in their influence on her experiences of belonging. As more briefly mentioned in chapter two and discussed with more detail in Appendix A, the boarding school era of physically separating children from their families and communities began in the nineteenth century and lasted well into the twentieth. This legacy is visible today on the reservations as so many students or their family members experienced trauma from this era. By the time Vangie was in school in the 1980s, what is commonly thought of as the boarding school era was largely over; however, there were still boarding schools and programs operating on the continued belief that Native children could only receive comprehensive education preparing them for the world by leaving the reservation and attending whitestream schooling.

Vangie’s experiences with boarding school were different in some important ways from what is typically described in the boarding school era. In particular, she was not sent to a boarding school for Natives only, but rather was always surrounded by a white foster family at her homestay and attendance at a majority white school. However, the results of attending the boarding school program were similar: separation from her home, family, and community and experience of school as an alienating, subtractive force. Vangie’s personal history with boarding school/program stem from the evolving history of educational policy for Native Americans and thus shows the interconnection between personal history and larger, longer historical narratives.

For Vangie, certain pathways of belonging were obstructed because of both this macro-level history and her personal, lived experience of it. Common classroom activities that were pathways of belonging for students were learning and helping others with class content. Vangie did not develop belonging through these activities; her past experiences of classroom learning were extremely negative, and she was not really interested in construction, making it unlikely she
would find significance in the classroom activity. Further, as discussed in the following section on the microsystem, her feeling like an outsider in the classroom meant she was unlikely to find belonging through helping others with class content because it would require interpersonal contact and interaction she specifically sought to avoid. Belonging through action/activity and through people, then, were not particularly possible for Vangie. By examining Vangie’s story through the interacting levels of the chronosystem, we gain an understanding of how historical narratives can shape and explain a person’s sense of belonging along certain pathways.

In examining Brandan’s and Vangie’s stories through the chronosystem, we can see why certain pathways of belonging were and were not available to them both. As the ecological model posits, historical factors can shape experiences of belonging both through an individual’s life history as well as through the larger historical narratives of a community or people.

**Microsystem**

The microsystem is made of the cultural factors affecting an individual’s capacity to develop belonging. Within the context of the construction classroom in a Western Apache classroom, important elements of cultural back drop include connection to place, spirituality, and language norms. Throughout several student stories there are examples of cultural details influencing their belonging development.

Perhaps one of the most straightforward examples of the microsystem in action is Vaughn. Vaughn’s stories of his life, which included descriptions of his tribal identity, his childhood and adolescent geographic locations, and the sociohistorical context of his ancestry, informed his experiences of belonging in Pine Creek and the construction classroom. Like other Native American tribes, the Navajo culture is grounded within the homelands of the Navajo people. As discussed earlier, connection to place is an important component of Native American
individuals’ and tribes’ identity (Horse, 2005, 2012; Momaday, 1997; Peroff & Wildcat, 2002; Russell, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2012). Both Vaughn’s own life experiences but also his Navajo culture were rooted in places outside of Western Apache lands. As the ecological model points out, these differences in culture contribute to Vaughn’s sense of belonging within the classroom community.

Expanding the scope of the ecological model, though, it is also helpful to understand how Vaughn’s culture and the culture of the Western Apache community also shapes belonging on the different belonging pathways outlined in this research. In particular, the importance of connection to place for a specific tribe and for one’s sense of identity with that tribe helps explain why Vaughn did not feel a sense of belonging to place while living on Western Apache lands. Though not described in great detail earlier, Vaughn did briefly mention a sense of belonging through place as a child when he would ride his horse along the mesas near his home. In that short example, Vaughn did indicate some level of connection to place when living on his ancestral homelands. This suggests that in some contexts, Vaughn has found belonging through the place pathway and thus it is not altogether an inaccessible pathway for him. Within this current moment of his life, Vaughn had felt a sense of belonging through people (his family) and through activity (serious engagement with construction trade), but not with any place in the community or the classroom. By understanding essential elements to both Vaughn’s Navajo culture and the culture of the Western Apache people, we can get a sense of why Vaughn’s current experiences of belonging unfolded along the specific pathways that they did.

Similarly, understanding connection to place within the Western Apache people helps explain why Vangie was not able develop a sense of belonging through connection to place nor people within the construction classroom. Though Vangie is a member of the White Mountain Apache like most of the other students in the construction class, her life has largely been lived in Hadziid. Vangie spoke extensively about feeling different from her classmates because she was
from a different town. After the other few students from her town dropped out of the construction program, Vangie began to avoid interactions with others in the class and somewhat reverted her self-described loner role.

Geography plays a significant role in Vangie’s classroom experiences. In this, both location and its connection to Western Apache culture and history intertwine to create a larger context for Vangie’s experiences. As discussed in chapter two, throughout the documented history (both oral traditions and written record) of the Western Apache people, the mountainous terrain historically meant very little interaction happened between the various larger groupings across the tribal lands (Goodwin, 1969; Greenfield, 1996; Perry, 1993). In fact, cohesion and cooperation through shared governance was not a reality for the Western Apache until more recent population clusters sporadically coalesced to resist encroachment from white settlers (Perry, 1993). Western Apache communities do share many of the same important cultural components such as spiritual belief system, common language, and general social structure, but as a people, the Western Apache’s social cohesion congregates mostly within geographically isolated population groupings. Cooperative and collective action between the various towns and social groups across the Western Apache tribal lands remains a newer, somewhat forced adaptation (due to the encroachment of white settlers on Apache lands and federal encroachment on Apache sovereignty); social cohesion across the entire tribe has historically been more the exception rather than the rule. Thus, the territorially defined groupings of people across tribal lands continues to inform modern-day towns, and many communities within Western Apache reservation continue to be geographically divided (Greenfield, 1996; Perry, 1993).

The cultural context of the Western Apache provides important details for Vangie’s experiences of not belonging in the classroom. Because of the traditionally and historically isolated nature of Apache communities, it is not surprising that Vangie felt so much an outsider to the construction classroom filled with people from Pine Creek. It therefore is also not surprising
that she did not feel a sense of belonging either with the people in the class nor with the class location in Pine Creek. Further, in the previous chapter, I outlined the various roles the classroom as a place takes on—including location of construction resources, representation of a new purpose, and repository for past student projects. Vangie did not experience belonging through the place of the classroom through these roles either because construction was never an activity she was really interested in and thus the roles the construction classroom as a place might play for others were not of any significance for her.

By examining both Vaughn’s and Vangie’s stories of belonging and especially not belonging, the importance of cultural context for belonging development becomes particularly clear. This matters for people wanting to understand belonging along any of the pathways: both the surrounding culture as well as the cultural elements internalized by the individual can often serve to make certain pathways inaccessible for some people. For any educator wanting to foster belonging in their classes or help individual students develop a sense of belonging in their classrooms, learning about the culture of the community and the students is essential for figuring out which belonging pathways might best be leveraged.

The Ecological Model and Components of Belonging

In studying belonging through student stories, it became clear that certain components of belonging were essential for fostering belonging along particular pathways. For example, students spoke of feeling particularly connected to either an activity or a group of people when they received recognition from others. Previous research has also demonstrated the key role recognition might play in helping students feel they are part of a community and develop a sense of belonging (Prins et al., 2009; Salling-Olesen, 2019; Sandberg, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). One component of belonging that was new to me, however, was respect and responsibility within
the context of belonging to something/somewhere. Belonging literature does emphasize the importance of mutual concern and support within a social group as a precondition for belonging and group cohesion (Kerka, 2005; Lowe, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tachine et al., 2007; Taiaiake, 2004; Tierney, 1999; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Respect and/or responsibility towards the people they felt a sense of belonging with were mentioned in student stories, particularly when students spoke of a sense of belonging with their families. Students also mentioned or implied, though, the importance of respect and responsibility within belonging more generally.

Most explicitly, Lonnie and Brandan linked respect and responsibility to their sense of belonging to a specific place. When Lonnie went into the mountains to collect antlers, she stressed a correctness of behavior (associated with not collecting more than her share of antlers) that is important to her experiences in the mountains. Brandan spoke of going to the river; in the same interview, when he reflected on his ideas of belonging to a place, he concluded that to belong to a place meant one has the responsibility to not “betray” the place. In their discussion of these correct behaviors towards place, they both spoke of having a respect for and concern about the place. Vaughn also mentioned respect regarding being serious about construction; having respect for the craft of construction translates to being a member of a brotherhood of tradespeople. (Although Vaughn is not Western Apache, he is Navajo, and the two tribes share many similarities in culture, social organization, language, and spirituality.)

How do these examples of respect and responsibility connect to the ecological model of belonging? In chapter two, I wrote of the Western Apache interconnection of place, identity, and spirituality. In talking about the sacred nature of Mount Graham, one elder spoke of the lessons the mountain taught the Western Apache people: “The Apache relationship with the mountain includes showing respect to the things we have discovered in revelations, or that the mountain has
given to us” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 22, emphasis added). Here, showing respect for the things the land gives to its people is an important element of Western Apache spirituality and culture.

Further, students’ stories referencing respect and responsibility as components of belonging invoke two of the four essential R’s emphasized in Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) schematic for integrating Native American students and Indigenous ways of knowing into the academic world. In this article, the authors explicitly mention respect and responsibly as essential components for truly creating “equal educational opportunity for all” (p. 2). Integrating the 4-Rs not only works towards creating welcoming and equitable institutions for Native American students, but also ensures the “programs and services that are offered must connect with the students’ own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring” (p. 4).

It was only upon the suggestion of my doctoral committee member to return to Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) work on respect and responsibility that I deepened the connection of my research with this framework for Native American higher education. Thus, the 4-R schematic became applicable and important not only in structuring a methodology for research that might generate insights with “instrumental value” for programs with Native American students, but also became an important resource for situating respect and responsibility within an Indigenous epistemology (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 4). As the authors point out, integrating the 4-Rs into various elements and programs within higher education are essential steps to making educational experiences for Native American students both valuable and comfortable. Within the realm of this research, I interpret “comfort” as a construct derived from, among other things, belonging. Though Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) do not explicitly mention belonging in their piece, much of the article does invoke similar research on belonging and, conversely, belonging uncertainty often felt by Native American and First Nation students in higher education (Walton & Cohen, 2007). My research suggests that consciously cultivating respect and responsibility
within the classroom community, and potentially within the entire institution, might create an “experience worth enduring” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 4), but also could create an environment within which students might flourish. As other research on belonging suggests, creating just such a comfortable atmosphere in which students can develop a sense of belonging can provide a variety of positive outcomes for students—from higher educational achievement to higher participation in the class (Kerka, 2005; Prins et al., 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

It was not until I connected my earlier rounds of coding to my notes from various research sources, like Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), that I realized the significance of these mentions of respect and responsibility. I return to them here because they are an important example of a central point. We cannot understand student stories of belonging, nor how belonging might develop, until we understand the interrelated layers of a classroom’s larger context. It is only through investigating and understanding the ecology surrounding the classroom—both the internalized systems and the systems at work in the world at large—that stories of belonging might become clear and illustrative. Further, students may reference particular components of belonging, such as recognition, significance, respect and/or responsibility. Some components, such as recognition, may already be present in existing research literature. Components such as respect and responsibility, though, become particularly significant with an understanding of the surrounding community. In short, the examples of the importance of respect and responsibility for belonging demonstrate the fundamental role historical and cultural contexts play in belonging development.

Throughout their stories of belonging, students invoked elements of both the personal and communal. We can see in many the stories the importance of cultural and historical background for understanding why some pathways foster belonging for some individuals and why other pathways did not. Regardless of the pathway invoked, understanding a student’s background
includes consideration of the individual’s own life narratives, their cultural backgrounds, and the historical narratives of their community or people. As an outsider to the construction program, the communities of Pine Creek and Haziid, and the cultures of the different Native American tribes represented in the classroom, I needed to deeply explore the surrounding ecological landscape of the construction classroom to comprehend student stories of belonging within the classroom. To understand belonging within a specific setting, then, one must explore multi-dimensional aspects of the context (cultural, historical, geographic, etc.) and how these create or obstruct pathways of belonging for specific students.

An expanded conceptualization of belonging is important for understanding how the phenomenon may or may not develop in certain classrooms based in diverse communities. Here, towards the end of this phase of my research, I see the positioning of classroom belonging as a mostly social dynamic as a particularly whitestream framing of the phenomenon because it overlooks the other pathways of belonging, especially place. Given the primary importance of place for Indigenous peoples, excluding and/or overlooking belonging to place from the discussion precludes a potentially important pathway to belonging that educators might leverage for their Native American students, as well as others. A broader, more inclusive notion of belonging is necessary to incorporate a wider array of pathways that can speak to diverse groups of students, cultures, and communities.

If educational researchers want to understand belonging in their classrooms, the concept needs to be further expanded to include how a diverse range of communities and cultures define, perceive, and experience belonging. As chapter two explains, belonging is an important component for the human experience and can have far-reaching consequences for students when it is and is not fostered in the classroom. For the educational system is to serve all students that step through its classroom doors, it needs to consider belonging from a variety of perspectives based within a diverse range of ecological contexts.
Implications

Numerous studies demonstrate the importance of belonging as well as the detrimental consequences that can stem from social exclusion and lack of belonging. Much of this literature spells out the importance of belonging within classroom and educational contexts. Much of this literature, however, focuses on the social dynamics of belonging, within this study the belonging through people pathway (Kerka, 2005; Lowe, 2005; Mellard, et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tachine et al., 2007; Taiaiake, 2004; Tierney, 1999; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Zacharakis, et al., 2011). This research often emphasizes the importance of stable, consistent, and positive interactions within a classroom for fostering belonging as a social component. In this study, though, I add two other potential pathways for classroom belonging: place and activity. All three of these pathways—people, place, and activity—represent important opportunities for educators. Just as educators might and should strive for fostering those stable, consistent interpersonal relationships with students, so too might they use other means to connect with their students and help their students connect with the classroom. In the realm of education, often riddled with so many limitations and obstacles, a wider notion of belonging and its potential lines of development can only enhance educators’ opportunities to foster belonging within their classrooms.

Ultimately, this study advances the notion that educators can leverage three different, yet interconnected, pathways to foster belonging for their students. Student stories of belonging, though, also underscore the importance of identity and ecological context to the accessibility of the various pathways. In seeking to utilize the various pathways, then, educators must pay close attention to who their students are and the context of the place and time, both inside and outside of the classroom. This is particularly important for educators working in new settings different from their own backgrounds. Belonging within the classroom should not just be a matter of
developing a social community but also creating meaning for the classroom as a place and the activities of the classroom that are significant for the students.

In the last chapter, I explored several ways students connected to the construction program and developed a sense of belonging. Some students found a sense of belonging in the classroom as a physical place. Ways students felt particularly connected to the classroom as a place included: access to unique and otherwise inaccessible resources; identification of the classroom as a place to engage in a new, meaningful purpose for their lives; and presence of physical reminders of their growing capacities and skill levels. I list them again here as reminders for how educators might use similar strategies for fostering belonging based on their own resource availability and specific context. Given the vital importance of ancestral homelands for Native American tribal identity, culture, and spirituality, educators working within Native American communities might especially focus on strategies leveraging belonging through place. This could likely take many different shapes depending on the educator, classroom, and community. One strategy might be the integration of materials or activities that mention places important to the community or open time and space for Native students to talk and think about places of importance to them while in the classroom. Research on contextual teaching and learning (CTL), in its emphasis of both how and where an individual learns, may offer additional helpful strategies for tailoring instruction, curriculum, and assessment to local contexts (Knapp, 2010). For educators working within Native American communities, the strategies, practices, and cultural framing discussed in place-based educational research may also be helpful (Barnhardt, 2010; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Gruenewald, 2010).

Beyond connection to place, other students found belonging through connection to a particular activity. Nathan fostered a sense of belonging that combined activity and people by creating a classroom ritual in the Thursday cookouts that featured a full meal and some form of Native-produced entertainment. Educators could likewise co-create ritual activities with their
students around which everyone could come together, look forward to and enjoy, and which connect to some need or interest. Additionally, the various components of the belonging pathways, such as significance, recognition, and purpose, all represent possible strategies for educators to foster belonging. An example of this is how Nathan, seeing the joy Lonnie took in helping others, asked her to be lab aide. Similarly, an educator could take time to learn the goals and larger purposes students have for attending their class and incorporate activities or instruction that give students multiple opportunities to vocalize those goals. There is other research that likewise finds this to be a helpful classroom strategy for a variety of reasons (Prins et al., 2009; Salling-Olesen, 2019; Sandberg, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

Adult education programs with multiple classes should also consider how to best provide the conditions for belonging within their individual classes and across their program. Part of this goal would certainly include allowing educators a certain amount of freedom to develop instruction, curriculum, and class-created activities that best meet the needs of their students. Beyond that, programs must also pay attention to the communities in which they are based. Whenever a program seeks to create culturally relevant materials for their students, they should also consider the cultural relevance of belonging pathways. Just as individual educators in Native American communities might consider integrating important places into classroom curriculum and instruction, so too should programs take this cultural context into consideration when designing its programs. For example, Vangie mentioned that three other people from Haziid dropped out of the program leaving her the only one continuing to travel to Pine Creek for class. By studying the communal histories and culture of Western Apache people, I began to understand why there was such a lack of connection between the people of each town. Programs should make decisions about their offerings given the communal, historical, and cultural context. For example, a program might consider multiple sites for offering classes. For the construction program, there are a variety of reasons why setting up a second location might be difficult. The construction
program could also reach out to groups or organizations based in Haziid to get a larger group of students enrolled in the program; if a larger group of people were to enroll and attend class in Pine Creek, the burden of being from another town might not as easily fall on the shoulders of one person.

Given the contextual nature of belonging, educational considerations from a macro-level may be more difficult to carry out. The largest impact educational agencies and organizations working with adult education programs might have on policy is to give programs and educators the flexibility needed to design their programs to best serve their localities. Too often mandates from government or grant funders enforce norms that make such flexibility and adaptability on the part of programs all but impossible. If nothing else, this research should demonstrate that education is personal and local; fostering the best possible environment and dynamics for adult learners is largely a matter of learning about and adapting to the needs of the students and the cultural and historical contexts of the community’s ecology.

Lastly, my dissertation research was limited to studying a single classroom within a specific Native American community. Given the need for research on classroom belonging that expands the notion and potentially even the pathways to belonging, further research is needed that similarly examines student stories of belonging within other cultures and communities. I offered in this research my own interpretation of the implication of student stories of belonging for understanding the phenomenon and its connection to the ecological systems of the classroom and community. Research on belonging in the classroom can only be further enhanced by studying how belonging develops within different ecological systems—or through applying different theoretical frameworks altogether. The research on and understanding of classroom belonging desperately need more voices to expand how we conceive and perceive students’ sense of belonging.
Limitations

Perhaps the most obvious limitation to this research is the changes in data collection made because of COVID-19. The pandemic cut short my timeframe for interviews and prevented a second trip to the Southwest. Follow-up interviews were difficult to conduct for a variety of reasons, and I was able to get in touch with only two individuals that I had previously interviewed in-person. Further, the remote interviews had specific drawbacks. For example, each remote interview suffered from a timing delay that meant the dialogue was choppy and flowed less easily than in person. The audio difficulties often proved frustrating for both me and the student. These challenges seemed to affect the quality of dialogue, and much of the content utilized in this dissertation come from earlier conversations with students rather than these final interviews.

Another limitation of this research is its focus on one classroom offering a specific kind of instruction (i.e., adult basic and vocational education in the construction trade) at a specific educational institution. Research in other classrooms could also provide additional examples of how students connected to the pathways discussed in this research and what educators did to help facilitate student belonging. Research in other strands of adult education programming may yield different results and potentially other pathways of belonging might be added to the research. Additionally, given the current prevalence of online/distance learning, other research on belonging within adult basic and vocational education is needed to understand how aspatial classrooms might influence belonging development. Further, the findings of this research are specific to the Western Apache community in which the classroom was based; research on belonging in adult education classrooms and programs based within other Native American communities and tribes is greatly needed as it continues to be a topic overlooked within the research cannon.
Lastly, this study utilized NI as the guiding methodology for data collection. NI, particularly in its usage of individualized interviews, emphasizes the individuals’ voice and experiences. This means the stories of belonging recounted here are individualized notions of belonging. Though this is an important step in better understanding belonging in the classroom, other approaches might also further enhance this picture to understand the larger group’s sense of belonging in the construction classroom. Other methods and/or methodologies could also further explore belonging across various levels of the classroom’s ecological system.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research only scratches the surface of the role of belonging and its application in the classroom. Initially, I hoped to include considerations of linguistic background on students’ experiences of classroom belonging. My experiences teaching across a variety of contexts but particularly within Native communities lead me to larger questions of how students’ heritage languages and sociolinguistic practices—huge facets of one’s identity—might also inform and/or shape their classroom experiences and the development of belonging. Ultimately, with my research cut short due to COVID, I did not have enough time with the students and in their classroom to explore this connection. I hope in the future I have a chance to further this research on the role of language in belonging; language is an important component to understand further not only because language and sociolinguistics are such an important part of both our identities and the landscapes that surround us, but also because of the inherently political nature of language patterns and practices. Although much work has been done on the role and politics of language in educational places (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Kroskrity & Fields, 2009; Milroy, 2001; Perez, 2004), future research connecting language to belonging would provide a more detailed picture of classroom belonging.
Second, student stories of belonging, particularly those featuring belonging through place and/or people, and reference respect and responsibility as precursors for belonging are important starting places for expanding conceptualizations of belonging in/to educational places. In their work on creating equitable educational institutions, ones at which Native American students might thrive, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) suggest four components be integrated into the institution at various levels: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance. Future research might explore the presence, or lack thereof, of all four components within ABE programs serving Native American students.

Lastly, this research focused on one Native American tribal community—a Western Apache group. Native American racial identity, like all racial identity really, is an invention of white settler colonialists imposed on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Despite this history, the racial identity has implications today and it is likely to be a category researcher will continue to use in researching student experiences. A better sense of belonging for Native American students in vocational and HSE-prep programs, though, should incorporate the specificity of different tribal identities and their historical and cultural contexts. Thus, research that documents student experiences of belonging from tribes across the U.S. and that seeks to explore the role of the ecological systems surrounding specific classrooms based in different tribal communities might provide a more nuanced picture of general Native American student belonging than would be possible with generalized sampling along racial delineations. In short, we need more research on belonging across various contexts, conducted by diverse researchers, within many Native communities if we want to understand a phenomenon as pervasive and all-encompassing as “Native American student experiences of belonging.”
Conclusions…or To Be Continued

This study taught me a lot, and, in turn, I hope offers others new ideas about belonging and its connection to local ecological contexts. Though at the beginning of the study I hoped to shed new light on belonging in the classroom, particularly belonging for Western Apache adult students, I did not necessarily anticipate my own notions of belonging to be opened so drastically. Previous reading of the literature on belonging often centered on one dimension, such as belonging as a place to call home or as a social dynamic. What I learned, though, was that the various elements of our identities and the ecology of the surrounding world all intertwine to create several pathways through which we might experience belonging. That is, student stories of belonging demonstrated the potential for belonging to form through connections to people, place, or activity. Although all pathways may be viable opportunities for educators to leverage in the classroom, close considerations of the students themselves and the ecological context of the classroom can reveal some pathways as more accessible or appealing than others. As with much of life, then, context, in all its complexity and forms, matters greatly as do the identities of those acting within those contexts. Each of the belonging pathways, then, is never independent of these realities.

Personally, I learned a great deal more. I learned how to make a cradleboard and a jelly cupboard. I gained a new appreciation for what it means to, as Phyllis described it, “grow up real hard;” I heard how these early experiences with extreme hardship and trauma can echo through a person and even a community for eons. Particularly helpfully, I learned Apache words to look out for in public, such as the Apache term for “that white girl.” I saw that seemingly small changes, things possibly inconsequential to the person in action, can create outsized effects. I learned food is a great foundation for forming a group ritual, and, in turn, group rituals can be important events that foster belonging. I gained a new understanding for place and one’s responsibility to it,
including the responsibility to stand by the land and to stay in the places that mean something and matter to you.

There are also moments from this study that are forever imprinted in my mind. I hope to always remember Vangie’s smile to me as she left class. I hope I can always envision Jose’s story of his infant daughter meeting her grandfather for the first time through the bars of a border fence. See Chris draw an imaginary map of the community farm and the moment he knew a part of him would always exist there. Hear Brandan’s reflections from the riverside, filled with both sadness and resignation that his life may not be something really special but that things would nonetheless be ok. Know that stories of people’s lives, even stories the storytellers themselves may not consider very special, are eternal gifts that can forever shape our perceptions, expectations, and how we move in this world.

I therefore title this final section not definitively a conclusion but rather a moment of pause. I finish this dissertation with an understanding that it too is its own kind of pathway. Through this study, and the reverberations it has started in my own life, I see only a portion of my own journey and the journeys of everyone who lent their voices to this work. May our stories continue onward and our abilities to find a place in this vast universe be ever possible.
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Appendix A

Brief Overview of U.S. Education and Native American Peoples

In her writing on the relationship between Native American tribes and the U.S. educational system, Grande (2004) divides the history into three eras: missionary-driven schools, lasting from the beginnings of colonization into the 1800s; the federal government era, roughly lasting from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s; and the era of self-determination, beginning roughly in the mid twentieth century and whose struggles continue into the twenty-first century. Although the dominant actors shift between eras, the driving force for most of the U.S.’s interaction with Indigenous peoples was white supremacy (Grande, 2004), and the concomitant settler-colonizer quest to destroy peoples so as to occupy, and consume, their homelands (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013).

Grande’s (2004) first era of Native American education is that of the missionary school. Though these schools did operate on a mission of proselytizing, with perhaps some abstract notion of religious salvation, the true gospel preached in these schools was one of nationalism, capitalism, and white supremacy (Grande, 2004; Katanski, 2005). Churches established and ran these schools most often with extensive financial backing from the federal government, with the understanding that the schools would inculcate its Native American pupils to the benefits of a Western, white way of life under the dominion of the U.S. government (Grande, 2004).

The treaties of the mid-1800s shifted education away from missionary schools through treaties that guaranteed access to education while removing Native American communities from their homelands to other territories (Grande, 2004). The 1830 Indian Removal Act included provisions for establishing a new sector of U.S. government, Indian Affairs, situated within the U.S. Department of War—a telling organizational placement for understanding how the U.S.
government viewed Native Americans. Though the department has subsequently been renamed
the Department of Defense, a portion of current funding for Native American students still comes
from the DOD (Berry et al., 2003).

For a time, between the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the dissolution of the
Civilization Fund in the 1870s, churches and the government created vocational schools whose
stated mission was to provide Native Americans with the skills and knowledge needed to survive
in the agrarian-dominated economy of the U.S (Grande, 2004). In reality, however, these schools
became profit-driven institutions with money was made from the materials and products created
by its pupils. By the 1870s, the ideology backing federally run schools began to shift away from
manual labor schools located on or near reservations; true assimilation into a white way of life
could not happen, the reasoning went, without removing Native Americans from their
communities (Grande, 2004; McCurtain, 1948). The strategy of removing Native American
peoples from their homelands specifically for educational purposes (as opposed to the forced
exile and relocations that stemmed from the settler-colonialist drive for more land) revealed much
about the differences in educational philosophy between colonizer and the various Indigenous
peoples they sought to “educate.” The educational systems backed by various whitestream
institutions in the U.S. saw educational lessons as transcending place, a perspective in stark
opposition to so many Native communities’ educational ideas “in which place was the grounding
focal point of cosmology, history, and morality” (Lawrence, 2014, p. 288).

By 1889, almost one-third of the estimated 36,000 school-aged Native American children
were enrolled in boarding schools (Katanski, 2005). The 1948 Handbook of Adult Education
lightly glosses over this era’s logic:

Recognizing that the Indian home tend (sic) to perpetuate the Indian way of life through
its influence on the children…educators concluded that if children were to be effectively
taught to access changes…they should be separated from their parents and brought up in
boarding schools where the dominant culture was emphasized (McCurtain, p. 65).
Notable in this passage is the agency of the educators and relative passivity of Native American parents and children: “[Native American children] should be separated.” This passage obscures the fact that many of the treaties tribes signed were done so under duress. Though the treaties did include provisions for educational opportunities, they also contained language allowing for the forcible removal of American Indian children. The 1868 treaty signed by the Diné contained in its passage on education the mandate to “compel their children…to attend school” and deputized federal agents “to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with.” Dozens of such treaties across the U.S. contained similar passages that would set the stage for the forcible removal of thousands of children from their families to be sent off to learn the white man’s road. The first Diné boarding school opened in 1882, and children experienced “military discipline, poor and inadequate food, manual forced labor, and… the strict banning of Navajo and enforced speaking of English” (Spolsky, 2002, p. 143).

The trauma caused by the boarding school era cannot be overstated. These schools worked to kill off any sense of a Native American individual being Native American, to rob generations of their culture, their language, their legacies, and their sense of belonging. Civilization was seen as a continuum, and only by destroying all traces of American Indian identity could a people progress along that continuum from “savagery” to “civilization” (Katanski, 2005). Key to this strategy was language as a weapon of assimilation. Not only were Native Americans to be taught reading and writing in English, as well as the prevailing discourses of civilization that accompanied it, but the schools also sought to destroy all traces of Indigenous language. As a Diné student expressed it: “lessons taught along with the English language insist that Diné culture and language have no place in the classroom and that students should feel same for the crime of speaking Diné” (p. 5). Both physical and psychological punishments were used to reinforce the use of English while simultaneously denigrating and robbing Native peoples of their languages:
It was like a military school where the teachers were strict and hit us if we spoke our tribal language. I hated it there, but I kept going because I thought education would make a difference. I didn't want the White people in town to call me a ‘dirty stinkin’ Indian’ or think they were better than me…I guess I didn't realize that the teachers would also call me a dirty, dumb Indian (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p. 6).

The few sources and quotations provided here a small overview of the boarding school era and federal policies of child separation from their families and communities, as well as the deep trauma the boarding schools inflicted on generations of Native Americans. The documentation of this historic period would not be complete, however, without some consideration of the various ways so many children, families, and communities sought to preserve their culture, language, and identities in response to the genocidal intentions of an ever-encroaching white settler population.

**Resistance**

Despite the horrors inflicted on Native American children in boarding schools, and the various other U.S. educational institutions that so often sought to erase all sociocultural traces of the child’s tribal identity, it would be inaccurate to see the Native students at these institutions as passive receivers of U.S. education ideology. Boarding schools often became places of a new understanding of Native American identity. As children from various tribes were gathered together in unprecedented numbers, boarding schools became the birthplace of a “pan-tribal identity” where children from the various tribes began to develop expanded notions of their own identities (Katanski, 2005). Such identities facilitated the emergence of an Indigenous community within children, separated from their families and communities, might find belonging and acceptance, if only among their peers (Katanski, 2005).

Additionally, often overlooked in the history of Native American education are the schools established by Native American individuals and backed by their tribes. For example, after serving as a maid in a White household and then attending a mission school to learn about the
White American world, Sarah Winnemucca came to believe a tribal-based school that could be “a hub for the Paiute community” was essential for “reconstruct[ing] a Paiute homeland” (McCoy & Villeneuve, 2020, p. 496). Though the school lasted only a few years, it was an important milestone for tribally controlled schools, and marked a stark departure from earlier tribally run schools, that emphasized learning about White American culture. Important innovations of Winnemucca’s school were the teaching of English without mandating English-only curriculum; hiring of Paiute teachers; educating students within their home communities thus avoiding forceable removal; rejecting the military norms enforced in most boarding schools at the time; and allowing, even embracing, students’ cultural markers such as their Paiute names and language.

Like Sarah Winnemucca, Henry and Elizabeth Cloud both attended boarding schools whose main mission was to prepare Native American children for low-wage, manual labor jobs (McCoy & Villeneuve, 2020). The Clouds eventually founded the American Indian Institute in Kansas, a high school for Native children designed to prepare their students for college. Though the school curriculum covered the liberal arts content needed for college preparation, it also included Indigenous “histories, cultures, philosophies and languages” to showcase how such cultures might live side-by-side, rather than one dominated by the other (p. 500).

In addition to the establishment of Native-run schools for Native children, children attending U.S. federally run schools also found ways to resist the harsh, assimilationist environment (Katanski, 2005; McCoy & Villeneuve, 2020). Many students found ways to secretly continue using their languages, practice their culture, and even attempt to escape the schools altogether by running away or “on some occasions, burning down school facilities” (McCoy & Villeneuve, 2020, p. 502). Further, as the boarding school era continued, graduates from these schools eventually joined the ranks of many schools’ faculty; as teachers and staff at these schools, former boarding school students were able to enact some changes in their
classrooms and in the schools that allowed newer generations of students greater leeway in practicing and preserving their cultures. Thus, although U.S. educational institutions sought to erase and destroy Native cultures through education and their legacy of harm cannot be overlooked or ignored, it is equally important to understand the fierce resistance and subversion practiced by generations of Native American students and adults to preserve their own identities and pass along their cultures to new generations.

**Historical Context of Adult Education Practices for Native Communities**

Mission schools and boarding schools for Native American children are the most covered topics within research on the history of Native American experiences in U.S. educational institutions. Very little attention has been paid to the federal government’s attempts to educate/inculcate Native American adults through educational programming. One such example, particularly illuminating, is a chapter in an edition of the handbook of adult education published in 1948.

Perhaps no single book provides better insight into the field’s main areas of focus then the semi-decennial handbooks of adult education first published by The American Association for Adult Education, later renamed the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. The first handbook debuted in 1934 and contained no mentions of Native Americans or Indigenous Knowledges (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 1934). This changed in the next edition, published in 1948, with the chapter “Adult Education of American Indians,” written by an official from the Interior Department’s Office of Indian Affairs. Although the presence of this chapter increased the visibility of the educational needs of and educational opportunities for Native Americans, the language of the chapter reflects the assimilationist and
colonializing drive of education that has haunted Native American communities since the inception of federally-run education in the U.S. McCurtain describes this history in mild terms:

…educational effort was therefore concerned with making the Indian as much as possible like the dominant race…Ultimately it was recognized that Indian education, to be effective, must deal directly with both the child and his parents and be built upon a foundation of respect for, and gradual modification of, the culture complex of the Indian (p. 65).

With these two sentences, McCurtain introduces, describes, and then moves beyond two centuries of historical trauma, violent colonization, and racial genocide to describe the then-modern-day approach as one of a kind of benevolent paternalism; his message, in short, was Native American cultures should be respected and then changed.

McCurtain’s chapter goes on to describe the different initiatives for adult education co-existing with the remaining boarding schools and increasing number of day-schools. These initiatives include access to “school shops, kitchens, laundry, sewing equipment and bathing facilities” (p. 66) as well as a renewed commitment to promoting “Indian arts and crafts” through “instruction in the improvement of design, quality of product, and better marketing procedures” (p. 67). As McCurtain’s earlier passage points out, even when it comes to cultural products, the process of their production by Native Americans must ultimately be changed. Though a singular reference to attitudes towards adult education in Native America, the chapter is reflective of larger themes within education, including the assimilationist goal of education for Native Americans as well as the limited space historically (and currently) dedicated to American Indians within adult education.

**Adult Basic Education (ABE)**

Given the higher rate of k-12 noncompletion and the ensuing negative outcomes lower levels of educational attainment engender, (ABE) programs that prepare individuals for high
school equivalency tests become integral resources for Native American communities. Despite the potential such programs might provide, little information on such programs and the specific literacy and educational needs within Native American communities exists. A first attempt to gather information on adult education and literacy within the U.S.’s Native American population began in the 1970s, culminating in the National Adult Indian Education Needs Survey findings published in 1981 (Brod & McQuiston, 1983). The survey provided the first comprehensive look at Native American adults’ educational attainment and needs, and today offers a snapshot of a transitional moment of Native American history when control of educational institutions began to transition from solely the federal government’s jurisdiction into tribal control. The data, gathered over a three-year period, found that American Indians’ median education level was lower than any other racial category in the U.S., with the former’s median level at less than high school completion and the latter’s median level at some college (i.e. one year or more of college but without a college degree). Looking at the total Native American population, the percentage of high school graduates, 46.8%, was fairly close to the percentage of those without a degree or equivalency, 43.1% (10% of the population at the time had passed the GED® test, the only equivalency assessment at the time).

The study also found a slight difference in the levels of educational attainment between American Indians residing on either side of the Mississippi River, with individuals west of the river having slightly more years of formal education (Brod & McQuiston, 1983). Questioning those individuals that had not finished high school, interviewers asked about enrollment in ABE or GED® programs, with only 21% of responders (i.e. those that did not have a diploma or equivalency) saying they had either enrolled in or attended such a program (Brod & McQuiston, 1983). This even though many Native Americans in the survey expressed the desire for more education. Further need for such programs might be evidenced in the survey’s use of an assessment of knowledge frequently covered in a public-school education (Brod & McQuiston,
The assessment covered ten areas including knowledge about health, community resources, writing, math (computation and problem solving), reading, and the interpretation of facts and figures. Scores were categorized into three levels: level one was those scoring with an accuracy between 0%-50%, level two those scoring between 50%-75%, and level three those scoring 75% and higher. About half of the Native American people surveyed scored level one in writing (49.8%), reading (48.9%), computation (52.7%), and problem solving (48%).

Consideration of these numbers, however, cannot be separated from an understanding of what they actually measure; the assessment measured content commonly covered in the public school system—a system that, as Grande (2004) points out, has always been a “[site] of struggle where the broader relations of power, domination and authority are played out” (p. 6). Given this struggle as well as the great harm enacted by U.S. educational policy towards Native American communities, perhaps the most important part of the survey asked its Native American participants about their experiences in school. Regardless of geographical location, residents expressed dissatisfaction with their education (33%), thought they needed additional education (79%), and would have wanted to have had a different educational experience than the one they had (67%; Brod & McQuiston, 1983). A more accurate takeaway from the 1981 report, then, is not so much that the majority of Native Americans failed to retain much information from their school years, but rather that their schools failed to give them meaningful information, experiences, and skills in the first place.

Though a similar comprehensive survey of such information has not been conducted since the 1981 report, other research gives hints as to the status of educational attainment and performance within the Native American population. For example, since the year the first Native American adult education report began gathering data (1977) the number of post-secondary degrees earned by Native Americans more than tripled (Devo & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Core academic coursework includes the successful completion of four English courses, three social
studies courses, three science, three mathematics and two foreign language courses. In 1982, only 3% of Native American students had completed such a core academic track but by 2005, this number had grown to 36%. The positive growth of these numbers, however, has not yet caught Native American students up with the rate of post-secondary degrees earned by their peers.

**Conclusion**

A variety of resources exist that attempt to document, understand, and educate the public on U.S. educational policy and practices for Native Americans peoples and communities. Governmental reports show the legacy of the disenfranchising and marginalizing educational practices still influencing Native American education (Berry et al., 2003). Other research also documents the continuous failure of federal educational policy for Native American students (Berry et al., 2003; Brayboy, 2005; Chavez et al., 2012; Dehyle, 1992; Nasir & Hand, 2006). In this appendix, I offer only a small piece of this history. I include this historical context in somewhat greater detail here because its influence continues to be felt for so many Native American individuals. In particular, Vangie’s stories of attending a boarding school in another state show first-hand how boarding schools can form and inform an individual’s early educational experiences. Further, in keeping with the ecological model, these early educational experiences can continue inform an individual’s later experiences both within educational places, social groups, and participation in shared activities. Thus, this history of educational policy and practice continues to provide relevant context for understanding many Native American adults’ experiences of belonging (or not belonging) within an adult education program and classroom.
Appendix B

The Western Apache & the Peoplehood Model

Though chapter two provides a few key cultural insights to help contextualize student stories of belonging, here I provide a slightly larger overview of the Western Apache people. I include this extra section for two main purposes. First, it includes more information on the historical and social contexts of the Western Apache people—two facets of one’s identity emphasized by Fish and Syed’s (2018) adaptation of the ecological model of belonging. Second, building off of the first purpose, is the goal that this section emphasizes a key conclusion of this study: namely, that the larger context of an experience cannot be subtracted from the development of belonging within that moment. Here, by outlining some key components of Western Apache culture, society, and history, I offer a more detailed landscape for grounding student stories of belonging.

To provide this brief overview of the Western Apache peoples, this appendix uses an organizing framework in many ways similar to the ecological model. Holm et al. (2003) conceptualization of peoplehood is a group of people sharing four key, interrelated characteristics: language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land. According to the peoplehood framework, it is through examining and learning about each of these elements that a larger understanding of a people might be gained.

The use of this framework in this appendix is two-fold: first it is a schematic for thinking about how I might approach a task as monumental as attempting to summarize a people, their history, and their culture. Secondly, it moves the concept of Western Apache identity away from a notion of race and blood, the racial hallmarks imposed by settler colonialism, and towards the ideas of Native identity and consciousness put forth by many Native American scholars.
Such elements of identity include connection to land, grounding in tribal language and culture, adoption of Native worldview and ways of knowing, and adherence to tribal customs and traditions (Brayboy, 2005; Horse, 2005, 2012; Winter, 2012). The peoplehood model integrates these elements through its four-component framework.

This being said, the role of one’s blood as a defining factor for any Indigenous community is not irrelevant, though one overemphasized in a country with deeply rooted ideas about racial identity such as the U.S. Tribal Crit condemns biological essentializing of all Indigenous people to a single race, particularly through policing racial physical norms, and erasing the tribal identities that connect a people to a culture and place (Brayboy, 2005). This notion of a unified racial group is one imposed upon Native Americans that pushes to the background tribal identity and identification (Tallbear, 2013). As Tallbear (2013) states, Native American ideas of Native America and tribal identity stem from one’s tie to their specific community and “a social grouping based upon biological relationships” (p. 59). Further, Native American identity may evolve from both “the collective and individual,” where certain commonalities create a collective consciousness through which individuals may experience the world to varying degrees (Winter, 2012, p. 28). Thus, identity is both individual and collective. In this appendix, I offer greater detail on the Western Apache peoples to provide cultural and social context identity at a collective level.

Four key interrelated elements create a peoplehood: language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and land (Holm et al., 2003). Just as Basso (1996) found that the language of place names reflects sacred histories within a specific homeland and reinforces the community’s language, so too does a people’s sacred history ground the community to the places from which they descend. In turn, these sacred histories can serve as reminders for the right way to exist in the world while also invoking the sacred and their ceremonies according to adherence to the prescribed actions.
These ceremonies, in turn, happen in or evoke a specific landscape with meaning derived from their sacred history and often expressed in Native tongue. In short, all the elements interweave together to create and sustain a peoplehood.

![Diagram showing interrelated elements of peoplehood](image.png)

**Figure B-1: The interrelated elements of peoplehood (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003)**

**Place & Territory**

The homeland of the Western Apache provides important grounding for insight into many of the people’s cultural practices. The homeland of the Apache provides a touchstone for both communities but also for individuals’ identities. The importance of the land can easily be seen in many of the statements those interviewed made connecting a sense of belonging to physical place. Momaday (1994), like many other Native writers, describes the interconnection between the land in general, a people’s homeland, and identity:

> From the time the Indian first set foot upon this continent, he centered his life in the natural world. He is deeply invested in the earth, committed to it both in his consciousness and in his instinct. The sense of place is paramount. Only in reference to the earth can he persist in his identity (p. 1)

In his book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso (1996) also makes explicit the connection between place, connection to the past, the Western Apache language, and conceptualizations of
the world, through examining Western Apache place naming. Western Apache place names, as well as the names of many clans, stem from specific locations throughout the land and invoke a sense of the landscape as it was first encountered by the ancestors. The names are meant to invoke places as they were, allowing, as one Apache elder told Basso, “your mind [to] travel to that place and really see it” (p. 86). Examples of these place names tell the story of the first ancestor contact with each locality, such as “Water Flows Inward Under a Cottonwood Tree” and “White Rocks Lie Above in a Compact Cluster.” Many of these names exist not on official maps of Apache lands, an unsurprising fact as another Apache elder informs Basso that such maps are for white people only. Rather, they exist most commonly in speech, meaning that in calling out the name of a place, the name given to a place by the ancestors, modern speakers literally quote their forebearers and allow their own minds to travel to the places in both past and present.

Today, the Western Apache lands are defined within in the U.S. American Southwest. Because of its mountainous areas, its sparse resources for life (such as land more difficult for sustained farming) and its distance from major trade routes, the Western Apache are one of very few Native tribes whose reservation eventually came to exist on some small portion of their ancestral homelands (Greenfield, 1996; Perry, 1993). In Cortes’ early encounters with the Western Apache, he also noted the “natural layout of the terrain [is] such that they can barricade and defend themselves against their enemies (Perry, 1993, p. 69). The landscape and the mobile societal structure of the Western Apache allowed them to resist much of the early white settler encroachment that decimated other Native tribes, and it was not until the Civil War ended in the East in 1865 that the U.S. sent soldiers en masse to finally end the Apache Wars (begun in 1861); these troops provided muscle behind the 1864 resolution of the Arizona Territorial Legislation that advocated killing all Apache (Hutton, 2016; Perry, 1993). Carving out specific lands for the Apache people, however, was not suggested until significant mineral resources were found in the area. These resources would be too difficult to extract during all-out war and thus made it more
profitable to make some kind of peace with the Western Apache rather than exterminate them (Hutton, 2061; Perry, 2013). The original lines drawn for the Western Apache people were in areas technically part of traditionally Apache lands, but rarely featured any long-term habitations; as one Apache man explained about one settlement a few decades later “That was the worst place in all the great territory stole from the Apaches. If anybody had ever lived there permanently, no Apache knew of it” (Perry, 1993, p. 119). Eventually these lands were slowly whittled away to benefit white settlers; copper-rich areas were placed in public domains and much of the Apache farmlands were flooded to provide water for irrigation for agriculture further south (Goodwin, 1969; Perry, 1993). Of the estimated 14 million acres that are the Western Apache ancestorial homelands, the various Western Apache reservations now encompass less than 4 million acres (Welch & Riley, 2001).

Language

Language is another element of tribal identity that whitestream norms, as well as federal institutions, have historically tried to erase from the Western Apache peoples. This “speaks” to the integral role language plays in both individual and collective identity. In her writings on linguistically diverse students in the U.S. educational system, Perez (2004) emphasizes language as “a highly visible marker of culture” (p. 10). Not only does language convey a particular identity when spoken, but it also shapes the speakers’ conceptualization of the world, one’s place within it, and the communities one may or may not join (Delpit & Dowdy, 2001; Horse, 2001; Perez, 2004; Winters, 2012). It is no wonder, then, that it is featured component in Holm, Pearson, and Chavis (2003) peoplehood model.
Etymology

Around 3,000 years ago, small groups of people migrated from Asia to North America, the largest portion of which spoke languages in the Nadene family: Tlingit, Eyak, Haida, and Athabascan (Dutton, 1983). Athabascan languages were the most spoken within this family and continue to be one of the largest North American language phylums of Indigenous peoples today (Perry, 1993). Southern Athabascan languages spoken by various Indigenous groups in the U.S. include Kiowa Apache, Navajo, and the Western Apache languages of the various Southwestern bands (see figure B-2). Though these are all considered different languages, they are often not unintelligible from each other for modern speakers; this is particularly true for Western Apache and its closest linguistic family member, Navajo (Dutton, 1983; Perry, 1993). Further, as Goodwin (1969) points out in his detailed examination of Athabascan clans, many clan names for both Western Apache and Navajo are related.

The word Apache enters the historical record via non-Apache people. It first appears in Spanish accounts of the Southwest in 1590 (Goodwin, 1969). The history of the Apache name—where it came from and who first used it—is important. The act of naming of people is inherently political as “the namer isolates the named, explains them, contains them, and controls them” (Ndebele as cited in Norton, 1997, p. 424). The etymology of the word Apache is unclear, but

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**Figure B-2: Southern Athabascan languages (Gordon, Potter, Dawson & de Reuse, 2001, p. 417)**

![Diagram](image-url)
there is evidence that, like many other tribal names used today, the term stems from what white settlers heard neighboring communities call another tribe, which was then recorded into history (Greenfeld, 1996; Pauls, 2008). Though the term Apache cannot be definitively traced back to one community, the most common hypothesis is it is of Zuni origin (Greenfeld, 1996). The Western Apache call themselves Ndeeé, which can translate to singular man or people (Bray, 1998).

**Linguistic demographics**

The continued presence of the Apache language differs in each community and by age, though the extent of the variation can be difficult to accurately grasp. Current demographic data broken down by towns on the reservation is not available, only data for the reservation in aggregate has official tallies. The percentage of 5–17-year-olds speaking only English is about 78% while the percentage of people over the 65 that speak only English is 14% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). References to community language preferences were made by a few people interviewed for this research, with two individuals drawing a distinct difference between the main city, Pine Creek and Hadziid: English was the main language used in former town, while Apache was still often heard in the latter community.

**Names and Naming**

Basso (1996) writes “we are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine” and because place-worlds reflect a people’s culture and language, it is through language that a further glimpse into the sociocultural world of the Western Apache might be possible (p. 7). The connection between place and language can be seen in many of the clan lines of the Western Apache, whose names
often derive from the places Apache familial groups settled (Goodwin, 1969). For example, the 
*t’üdilxili* clan translates as the Black Water People, named for those people whose territory was 
along the Black River (*t’üdilxil*). This clan is also sometimes called the *t’ühànà-né*, or “across the 
water people,” the name which originated from an interaction between two initially different 
groups:

One time, long ago, they say there were *t’üdilxìlì* people living on one side of the river. 
Opposite them lived some other people. They called across the river to them, ‘you will be 
our relatives’ and they became so. They called these other people *t’ühànà-né*, and that is 
why the name is sometimes used for the *t’üdilxìlì* (Goodwin, 1969, p. 601).

Not only does place-naming and the origin of clan names reveal the link of the Apache 
language to their homelands, but it also provides a link between the spoken words of these places 
and their history of a people (as well as the importance of stories for linguistic and cultural 
preservation). In using the traditional names for clans and places, the speaker is seen as invoking 
their ancestors in “repeating verbatim—actually quoting—the speech of their early ancestors” 
(Basso, 1996, p. 10). The language invokes the place, in turn invoking the history of it in the 
collective memory and connecting past and present together. Throughout the Western Apache 
language, then, it is easy to see the woven strands of names, place, and ancestorial history 
combining to form the on-going threads of Apache peoplehood.

**Speech**

Continuing to show the connection between each of the peoplehood elements, (Holm et al., 
2003), the main categories of speech (regular talk, prayer, and story, as seen in Figure B-3) show 
the connection between language and both place stories and Apache spirituality. The emphasis of 
these three categories as specific types of Apache speech relays the importance of each category 
to the culture.
For example, as briefly summarized above, both the language of place names and clan names are drawn from stories of the ancestors, demonstrating the deep embeddedness of these elements to Western Apache culture. Likewise, classifying prayer as its own category of speech conveys the prominence of spirituality within Western Apache culture. Of particular significance within this category are the specific linguistic norms for raiding parties or war excursions (Goodwin & Basso, 1971). During such events, a specific set of rules were generally enacted when the party crossed over the boundary line of their traditional lands and were strictly maintained until they crossed back into their recognized territory upon their return. This often centered on using the sacred names for elements in the surrounding environment:

there were sacred names for many things, and a man had to know these names and use them, for if he didn’t something bad would happen to him and to all the other men that were with him (p. 264-265).

This is just one example of how language intertwines with the spiritual and becomes expressed through specific actions of Western Apache people. Further discussion of Western Apache spirituality and its expression through prayer continues in the following sections.
Sacred History

This section examines the sacred histories of the Western Apache peoples through its interconnection with the tribe’s cosmology/spirituality and homelands. In particular, the link between Western Apache spirituality and the places of their homeland cannot be overstated. The controversy over the newest international observatory (belonging to University of Arizona) built on Mount Graham provides a recent example of how these two facets of Apache culture continue to intertwine in the lives of the tribe today. After the Vatican issued an official statement justifying the continued use of their large telescope on the mountain, the response of one Apache elder illustrates the interconnection between spirituality, sacred history, and place:

If you take Mt. Graham away from us, you will take our culture. …You have tried to change us, you forced me to go to your schools. But I still treat you with respect. I do not go to your church and hold my services. Why do you come and try and take my church and treat the mountain as if it was about money instead of respect? Nowhere else in the world stands another mountain like the mountain you are trying to disturb. On this mountain is a great life-giving force (as cited in LaDuke, 2005, p. 31).

Though the sections below detail certain entities and ceremonies important in Western Apache spirituality, their connection to the specific homelands of the Western Apache is a fundamental component of the tribe’s cosmology. In particular, the entities described below, such as Yosn and Gahan, are entities that exist within and are linked to a specific landscape. Thus, connecting to and remaining within that land is an essential part of connecting to the spiritual world and honoring a people’s sacred past.

Apache Spirituality

In Apache cosmology, the universe is a living entity given life by Yosn (Perry, 1993). Though in comparison to their neighbors the Navajo and Hopi there is little recorded history of many of the sacred stories of the Western Apache, this should not be interpreted as their
unimportance to Apache life. The land of the Western Apache has long been resource-scarce compared to other regions in North America and spirituality played a vital role in the survival of the people throughout their history (Goodwin, 1969). The world was and is a place of capricious spirits that could either help or harm people, and as such were often treated with specific, respectful behaviors to merit the spirit’s kindness. For example, the cattail’s yellow pollen may be collected and carried with people because of its benevolent powers (Perry, 1993).

The presence of specific speech patterns specifically for prayer further indicates the integral nature of spirituality within Western Apache culture (Basso, 1996). Prayers may be part of specific ceremonies, such as the girl’s puberty ceremony, the ceremony most commonly practiced today, but it could also be invoked in everyday life (Dutton, 1983; Nevins, 2000). In this sense, prayer is a way of aligning the self with the larger universe, or

as a way of dissolving the boundaries of the person by subordinating all these different kinds of human action to the original, inceptive, and ongoing act of prayer that makes life itself possible (Nevins, 2000, p. 150).

In her dissertation on Apache women’s higher education experiences, Goklish (2005) too specifically centers the importance of spirituality and those spiritual acts that might remind one that “embodied in Native spirituality is the concept of interconnectedness” (Heavy Runner and Morris, 1997, as cited in Goklish, p. 16).

The following subsections are elements of Western Apache spirituality presented more broadly. Here, I detail some specific entities and sacred histories from various Apache storytellers recorded by white settlers post-contact. Entities such as Yosn, Changing Woman, and the Gahan all exist within the Apache histories, passed down through generations, and represent the way cultures shift over time. These stories are not meant to invoke a single notion of the traditional or the “authentic” version of Apache spirituality or culture. In the minds of many white settler colonizers, there is a tendency to see historic and traditional Native Americans as more authentic and frozen in the time (Deloria, 1969; King, 2012). Large concepts such as a people’s culture,
spirituality, or social practices must be perceived with the understanding that these things are “not particularly stable, nor [are they] a matter of absolute consensus among members of a population” (Perry, 1993, p. 21).

**Life-Giver**

Yosn or Usen is the entity the Western Apache call the life-giver (Dutton, 1983; Perry, 1993). Since creation, however, Yosn had little direct contact with humanity itself, though through supernatural powers at work in the universe could still exert strong control over events in the world (Dutton, 1983). Because other supernatural spirits could alter elements of survival, most rites and ceremonies were meant to appeal to them, with Yosn usually only invoked in opening ceremonial prayers. Though Yosn appears to be significant in Western Apache origin stories, the idea of an individualized spirit and a single life-giver seems to first appear in Apache cosmology post-Spanish contact (Dutton, 1983; Perry, 1993). Yosn’s incorporation into Western Apache cosmology is a good descriptor of how European Christianity has gradually been integrated into pre-contact practices:

> Apaches appear to have good understanding of and appreciation for the Christian religion…They are able to respect and practice the traditional Apache customs. They simply understand Christianity from within the Apache view…sees his faith through the eyes of his own environment and culture (Mails, 1974 as cited in Goklish, 2005, p. 16)

The integration of European and Christian practices into Western Apache culture serves as an important reminder that many of the beliefs, practices, and perceptions detailed here represent a dynamic culture long evolving and continuously (re)constructed in numerous ways.
Changing Woman

Changing Woman is a common sacred figure in several Southwestern sacred histories, most notably perhaps the Navajo (Dutton, 1983; Perry, 1993). The story of Changing Woman and In Charge of Life is the story of humanity’s rebirth and the rise of the Apache people. The following story was told in 1933 by Joseph Hoffman, a respected octogenarian storyteller in Western Apache communities, to Dr. Harry Hoijer, an early anthropologist who recorded the stories of many Athabaskan peoples (Basso & Tessay, 2010). The story begins with Changing Woman sitting inside a hollow tree, protected from a flood that wipes out all of humanity. After discovering she is the only human left, Changing Woman desires a child. She is tested by different supernatural beings until, in despair of ever becoming a mother, she prays to In Charge of Life. After a ceremony lasting four days (the length which is still the same for many Apache ceremonies today), she becomes pregnant by the sun. Her child is born under In Charge of Life’s protection, a son named He Triumphs Over Evils. It is through Changing Woman and He Triumphs Over Evils that the world is made anew, and the Apache people flourish. Although In Charge of Life is represented as the most powerful deity in the story, and in turn in Western Apache cosmology, at no point in my research has there been any indication that In Charge of Life and Yosn represent the same power.

Gahan/Gahé/Gaan

Gahan are mountain spirits, still commonly featured in the ceremonies most often practiced by Western Apache peoples today. Four is a sacred number in Western Apache cosmology, and there are four main mountain spirits to correspond with the four cardinal directions, each with their own color: the Black Mountain Spirit of the East, the Blue Mountain
Spirit of the South, the Yellow Mountain Spirit of the West, and the White (sometimes Grey) Mountain Spirit of the North (Dutton, 1983). These spirits once lived with the Apache ancestors long ago but left to find a place where they might achieve immortality (Goodwin, 1969). Though they no longer live on the human pane of life, they might still be found in certain sacred locations and continue to be called upon in various Apache ceremonies.

**Coyote**

Again, like other Southwestern peoples, Coyote features in many stories of early Apache peoples (Hutton, 2016). Coyote is a trickster, and often slips from benevolent friend of people to mischievous manipulator depending on the story. In one story, competing against other animals in a great game to see if humans must live in darkness, Coyote wins and gives to the Apache fire and light.

**Ceremonial Cycle**

There is not a seasonal calendar for Western Apache ceremonies; rather, there are generally three types of Apache ceremonies, those that: invoke the help of a supernatural force, remove an evil influence, and conjoin an individual to a spiritual force (Markstrom, 2008). Traditionally, the ceremonies most practiced by Western Apache peoples were meant to be either protective or curative and therefore done when the need arises (Dutton, 1983). These ceremonies commonly use a community’s spiritual leaders, those that have supernatural powers most often granted by Gahan. Within most of the curative ceremonies, masks and body painting are used to represent the Gahan of the cardinal directions. The spiritual leader and the Gahan representatives may proceed with the ceremony in different ways according to the ill they are addressing, but
often included are ceremonial smoking, offering pollen to each of the four directions, praying, singing, and dancing.

The most important and commonly practiced ceremony today continues to be the female puberty ceremony, often called the Sunrise Dance (Markstrom, 2008). This ceremony marking a girl’s transition to adulthood “like many other aspects of Apache life, connects young women, and indeed a people, to an ancient history” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 19). Within the ceremonial typology, the Sunrise Dance is meant to enjoin the newly adult female into the supernatural female spirit of the Western Apache—Changing Woman (Markstrom, 2008). Just as men on hunting exhibitions or raiding parties used specific language to call upon the sacred for their protection, the Sunrise Dance calls upon Changing Woman in the hopes that a young woman’s joining the spiritual mother entity might ensure good health and long life.

The ceremony invokes the story of Changing Woman in several ways. Recalling Changing Woman praying for a child for four days, the female puberty ceremony lasts for four days (Dutton, 1983). This also speaks to the importance of the number four in Western Apache cosmology, a number that appears throughout both the ceremony and stories of Apache spirituality (Dutton, 1983; Goodwin 1969; Markstrom, 2008). These ceremonies are large affairs. Historically, in addition to preparation for war raiding parties and victory celebrations, the Sunrise Dance represented one of the few times various bands of Western Apache groups might all gather (Goodwin, 1969). As the celebrations for success raids and war victories have subsided over time with increased settler colonialists, the visibility of the Sunrise Dance is all the more notable. Today, it continues to be one of the strongest communal evocations of traditional Western Apache practices (Markstrom, 2008).

Unlike many of the other Southwestern peoples, the Western Apache had few seasonally set ceremonies compared to the frequency of ceremonies that might be held in response to specific needs or ills as they arise (Goodwin, 1969). Of note, though, are the ceremonies for
protection against lightening and snakes in June, and the lightening dances for rains and crops held from June to August. The continuation of these particular ceremonies and their purpose of calling for help in an unpredictable world speaks to the wider Western Apache cosmology wherein the everyday might be spiritual, but where too the spiritual might be every day.

**Conclusion**

In a short space, I attempt to provide some cultural and social details for the setting of this research and the landscape of student stories of belonging. Through short descriptions of the Western Apache homeland, language, ceremonial cycle, and sacred history, my goal has been not only to provide additional context to this study, but to also celebrate and honor the Western Apache tribe as well as the students that offered up their voices and stories that made this research possible.
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview #1: Introductory Interview

Thank you so much for sitting down with me for this interview. I want to quickly explain that you can skip any of the questions you do not want to answer and can end the interview at any time. To maintain confidentiality of others, make sure to not include any other names in your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) Just to start, what name would you like to go by for this study, to help protect your privacy? You can choose any name you want.
2) Intro: To begin, would you start by just telling me a bit about yourself?
   a. If further prompt needed: How would you describe yourself to a stranger?
   b. What are a few words a good friend would use to describe you?
3) Where are you from? Can you tell me a bit about <location>?
4) Languages: I’d like to know more about what languages you know and use.
   Follow-up questions (as needed):
   a. What languages do you know? (Can you speak/write/hear?)
   b. How did you learn <each language>?
   c. Do you have any family or close friends that regularly speak <each language>?
   d. What’s an example of when/where you would speak <language>?
5) What kinds of things do you do for fun?
   a. Can you tell me a bit about the last time you did <activity>?
6) Schooling: Where did you go to school growing up?
   Follow-up questions (as needed):
   a. How would you describe yourself as a student growing up?
      i. If further prompt needed: in high school, what kind of student were you?
   b. How did you like school growing up?
      i. What things about school did you like or not like?
   c. Can you describe a class or grade you had that you particularly liked? What did you like about the class or the grade?
      i. What a memory you have about that grade or class about which you feel particularly positive?
   d. Did you feel comfortable in school? Why/Why not?
   e. Did you have many close friends or family members that went to school with you? Can you tell me a bit about your friend group in school? What things did you like to do? Where you in classes together very much?
   f. What’s something that you learned in school, before the construction program, that you remember clearly today? Can you tell me about how you learned it?
   g. How did you decide to leave school? Can you walk me through making that decision?
7) Belonging: I would like to know what the concept of belonging means to you.
   a. When is the last time you felt a sense of belonging? Can you tell me a bit about that moment?
   b. Thinking about that experience, what do you think it means to have a sense of belonging?
8) Program context: Can you describe the construction program to me?  
   *Follow-up questions (as needed):*  
   a. How long have you been in the program?  
   b. What is your goal with the program?  
   c. What do you want to do after you complete the program?  

9) Joining the program:  
   a. Had you ever taken classes at <the college> before?  
      i. If so, what?  
      ii. Why did you enroll in those classes?  
      iii. What was a typical day like for you when enrolled in <class>?  
   b. How did you first hear about the ABE program?  
   c. Did you know anyone already in the program? What did they say about their experiences?  
   d. How did you decide to enroll in the construction program?  
   e. Can you tell me about how you went about enrolling in the program?  
      i. If further prompt needed: Did you call someone at the college to ask about the construction program or did you come in and visit? What information did they tell you? What was the process like getting enrolled?

Interview #2: Current Content

Thank you so much for participating in a second interview. I want to remind you that you can skip any of the questions you do not want to answer and can end the interview at any time. To maintain confidentiality of others, make sure to not include any other names in your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) What are you working on now in the class?  
   *Follow-up questions (as needed):*  
   a. What is the content you are learning in the classroom?  
   b. What is the current project you are working on?  
   c. When you started this <content>, how familiar with it were you?  
   d. In working on this project/content, have you asked anyone for help? What did you ask and who did you ask for help?  
   e. What materials have you used in class to learn about <content>? Did you find one material more helpful than others?  

2) Optional: ask follow-up questions about something observed during class  

3) Can you talk to me a bit about your first experiences in the construction program?  
   *Follow-up questions (as needed):*  
   a. What did you expect the classes to be like?  
   b. As you were getting ready to start the class but before you went to your first class, how were you feeling about starting the class?  
   c. How did you feel about being a student again? Where do you think that <emotion> was coming from?  
   d. If you remember back to when you first entered the construction classroom, what were you feeling?  
   e. What do you remember about your first day in the construction classroom?  
   f. Did you know any of the other students in the classroom?
g. What interactions did you have with people at the beginning of the class? Do you remember talking to your fellow students? Did you ask questions in class? Did you talk with the instructor one-on-one?

4) When did you first get to meet the construction class instructor? Can you remember that first meeting? (ask follow-up questions as needed to get story of that first meeting)
   a. Before you met the instructor, what were you expecting him to be like? Why did you have those expectations (follow-up as needed if there’s a link to their previous educational experiences or other relevant lead)
   b. What’s something new that <instructor> has taught you in class? How did you learn that information/skill?

5) Who is in the class with you? Who would you say you are closest to in the class?
   a. How did you get to know this person?
   b. Are there people in class that you meet up with or talk with outside of class? If yes, what are some examples of how/when you hang out?

6) In our first interview, I asked you about belonging.
   a. When you were in school growing up, did you feel a sense of belonging at school? Can you give me an example of a time in school that you felt a sense of belonging?
   b. Do you feel like you belong in the construction classroom?
   c. Looking back on your experiences in the construction classroom, can you give me a couple of examples of when you got a sense of belonging?
   d. Thinking about that experience of belonging in the classroom, what does belonging mean to you?

**Interview #3: Final Interview**

Thank you so much for participating in this final interview. I want to remind you that you can skip any of the questions you do not want to answer and can end the interview at any time. To maintain confidentiality of others, make sure to not include any other names in your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) What are you working on now in class?
   **Follow-up questions (as needed):**
   a. What is the content you are learning in the classroom?
   b. What is the current construction project you are working on?
   c. When you started this <content>, how familiar with it were you?
   d. In working on this project/content, have you asked anyone for help? What did you ask and who did you ask for help?
   e. What materials have you used in class to learn about <content>? Did you find one material more helpful than others?

2) What is the last unit or project the class did that you did not understand something?
   a. How did you learn the new material?
   b. Did you ask anyone for help? The instructor? Fellow students?

3) What do you think is the most important thing you’ve learned from the class?
   a. Follow-up questions as needed to hear story of their learning

4) How close do you feel to your fellow students? Do you feel like you know some of the others in the class well? Do you think they know you well?

5) Do you think the students are supportive of each other? Why or why not?
a. What are some ways the students in the class support each other?
b. Can you tell me about a time when a fellow student helped support you?

6) Do you think the instructor is supportive of the students?
   a. What are some ways the instructor has shown support?
   b. Can you tell me about a time when the instructor helped support you?

7) In our previous interviews I’ve asked you about belonging.
   a. Is there a time in your life where you felt like you did not belong? Can you tell me a bit about that time?
   b. What do you think it means for someone to “belong” in a classroom?
   c. Do you think it makes a difference to a person if they have a sense of belonging in the classroom? Why/Why not?
   d. What do you think your experience would be like in the construction program if you did/did not have a sense of belonging (phrase according to answer to answer to question #4b in previous interview)?

8) Before we end our interview, is there anything I haven’t asked you about in our interviews that you think would be helpful for me to know to understand you and your experiences in this class?
VITA

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Publications


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