Leading with Purpose: Storying the Barriers and Strengths of Indigenous Women in K-12 Education Leadership

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Abstract

This qualitative scholarship examines the strengths and challenges encountered by Indigenous women serving as K–12 public school administrators on or near Montana Indian reservations. Guided by Tribal Critical Race Theory and Indigenous Feminism, and grounded in Indigenous principles of relational accountability, this study employed story-based interviews to illuminate the lived experiences of Indigenous women educational leaders. Through these narratives, the research investigated the complexities Indigenous women confront within colonial structures and educational spaces originally established to colonize and assimilate their peoples—systems that inflicted harm upon their ancestors and aimed to eradicate Indigenous identities. Currently, as leaders within these same institutions, participants articulate both the barriers they face and the ancestral strengths, resilience, and relational responsibilities they uphold while leading their school communities. By centering Indigenous women's leadership perspectives, this study advances educational leadership scholarship by integrating Indigenous women into the historical and contemporary narratives of schooling and promoting Indigenous resurgence through education.

Keywords: Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit); Indigenous Feminism; Storywork; Relational accountability; Colonialism; Montana K–12 educational leadershi

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my children. Enyis Lee Colliflower, my firstborn, the one who made me Ina, your journey has not been easy, yet you walk it as a warrior wiya. Kellen Ryder and Jondi Tatum, you have shown quiet strength and resilience, especially during the most frightening moments of your sister's health challenges. You have been my reason to keep going, yet you have often taken a backseat. I'm sorry, but I'm also deeply grateful for your understanding.

To my mom and sisters, your energy and love have guided me to where I am today. You are my cheerleaders and healers.

To my husband, Wade, thank you for supporting me through difficult times that could have defeated many. And yet, we are still here.

To my dad, this doctoral journey has been a healing experience for both of us. Thank you for showing up.

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[1] Logo of Enyis Lee Colliflower. Artwork by Tashon Scheaffer (2022). Reprinted with permission.

To my ancestors, beloved grandparents, uncle-dad Howard, and my mother-in-law Sybil: this work is rooted in you. Your ancestral strength and determination live within me. I carry you with me at every step of this journey.

To that little rez girl from Hays, Montana, I am proud of us.

Pinámáya, Keneihei'aan, Kitahtahmiin

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Indigenous women are leading the way for future generations by demonstrating Indigenous values in educational leadership roles within institutions historically influenced by colonial systems that aimed to suppress Indigenous culture and language and were not originally designed to accommodate Indigenous women as educators or leaders. These women exemplify resilience, perseverance, advocacy, and community care as they represent their Nations within public school systems on Montana Indian reservations, focusing on the welfare of tribal children while managing personal and professional duties. As more Indigenous women assume leadership positions in reservation-based public schools, following generations of marginalization and voicelessness, their narratives must be acknowledged, respected, and disseminated to serve as guidance, mentorship, and inspiration for upcoming Indigenous leaders through storytelling.

Researcher Positionality

My name is Crow Hopping Horse Woman, or Nahááh Naniish'íít'ɔ Suk Iyop Cija Wiya. This designation was conferred upon me during the Nakoda Big Lodge Ceremony held in Lodgepole, Montana. A crow-hopping horse symbolizes movement characterized by spirit and intensity—lively, unpredictable, and energized. Riding one may evoke trepidation; however, it ultimately instills a sense of calm and achievement. This name encapsulates my manner of moving through the world.

I was born as Clintanna Marie Bell to a single mother, Weasel Woman, Bonnie (Rocky Mountain) Mount, Ɔ'ɔ́ɔ́níiinén'i. My father, Warren Bell, a Nakoda man, was absent during my childhood. I am the middle child in my mother's family and the youngest in my father's. I am a life-giver to three children: Enyis, Kellen, and Jondi, and the "Sits Beside" to Wade Colliflower.

My identity is deeply ingrained in these relationships. I carry my roles as daughter, mother, wife, sister, and auntie into every classroom, leadership opportunity, and research conversation.

My ancestors are interred beneath Hays and Lodgepole at the southern extremity of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. I identify as Aaniiih, Nakoda, and Little Shell Chippewa. The Treaty of Fort Laramie (1851) and the Treaty with the Blackfoot Indians (1855), commonly known as the Lame Bull Treaty, have profoundly reshaped my homeland and continue to influence the political and educational realities faced by our communities today (Fort Belknap Indian Community, n.d.). Colonial educational institutions on our reservation are not impartial entities; they function as extensions of treaty histories and policies of assimilation. Our reservation has endured considerable language and cultural attrition due to the presence of two boarding schools situated at its northern and southern boundaries, which have led to significant losses of self-identity and have exacerbated lateral oppression and violence. As an Aaniiih-Nakoda woman, I regard education both as a mechanism of harm and as a domain for resurgence. I was raised in Hays, Montana, on the southern boundary of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The community was characterized by significant poverty, resilient family units, and scenic landscapes. Our sustenance largely depended on commodity rations due to the community's location in a food desert.

Approximately half of the population attended a Catholic elementary school, which historically functioned as a boarding school with the objective of eradicating Indigenous identities. The remainder attended public schooling—an infrastructure developed through extensive advocacy by my ancestors. At the age of 18, I enlisted in the United States Army. The hierarchical structure and discipline observed therein mirrored the institutional control inherent in Catholic education. These experiences provided me with an understanding of colonization not

merely as a historical event but as a persistent and active framework influencing Indigenous lives, leadership trajectories, and educational systems.

As a first-generation college graduate, I initiated my higher education journey without prior familiarity with the academic process. My scholarly skills were initially undeveloped; however, I was sustained by resilience and survivance. I frequently assert that education selected me rather than vice versa. I entered the field of teaching through scholarship opportunities offered by the Office of Indian Education. Subsequently, I was appointed as an elementary school principal at a Title I Indian school that was regarded as "failing." In this role, I experienced inequitable treatment based on race and gender, colonial accountability systems, lateral violence, gender pay disparities, and microaggressions within my community. These experiences were not solely personal conflicts but also symptomatic of the systemic settler colonial structures inherent in Indigenous spaces, where the oppressed can paradoxically become oppressors (Freire, 2010).

As a consequence of these personal experiences, I engaged with Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005), which acknowledges colonization as an integral aspect of society in the United States and emphasizes tribal sovereignty alongside Indigenous knowledge. TribalCrit provides terminologies and insights that allow me, a first-generation Indigenous woman, to understand my relationship with leadership and colonial systems and their influence on me, and to analyze these dynamics from a critical Indigenous perspective, particularly regarding how K–12 educational leadership structures sustain colonial hierarchies, even as Indigenous leaders function within them.

This research is informed by my personal experiences as well as by Indigenous feminism, which recognizes Indigenous women's leadership prior to colonial governance and challenges

patriarchal systems imposed through settler colonialism (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). Indigenous feminism facilitates an exploration of how race, gender and colonialism intersect in the leadership experiences of Indigenous women, while simultaneously respecting Indigenous women's ancestral authority and roles within their communities (Anderson, 2011; Grande, 2015; Starblanket, 2024). The strength of Indigenous feminism resides in its inclusivity; rather, it is grounded in relationality and expansiveness, uplifting not only women but also men, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBQ) relatives, and emphasizing the interconnected relationships with land, animals, and plant relatives (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket, 2024).

My work is further guided by the principles of relational accountability (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008) and Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability recognizes that researchers bear responsibility to all their relations and must conduct research that upholds respect, reciprocity, and accountability to participants, communities, and knowledge systems (Wilson, 2008). In this study, relational accountability informed the methodology by which I established trust with participants, attentively listened to their narratives, and depicted their experiences with a careful sensitivity and regard.

Indigenous Storywork represents a storytelling methodology that respects stories as sources of knowledge and emphasizes principles such as respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and collaboration (Archibald, 2008). In this research, Indigenous Storywork directed the collection, interpretation, and dissemination of participants' narratives as experiential accounts that inform teachings regarding Indigenous women's leadership.

Relational accountability and Indigenous Storywork are fundamental aspects of my identity as an Indigenous individual; therefore, it is fitting that my research incorporates these principles. I was raised within a family of storytellers, where there is always a narrative to share for meaningful reflection, life, and laughter. My mother exemplified the significance of relationships, dedication, and caring for our relatives. As a researcher and an educated Aaniiih Nakoda woman, I am accountable to the women who share their stories, to the communities that nurtured me, and to the ancestors who endured the hardships of colonization and residential boarding schools.

Motivated by frustration and courage, this research is guided by emotions aligned with and supported by what Starblanket (2024) describes as Indigenous Womanhood Madness, a justified response to colonial harm. I intend to direct this energy toward leadership, mentorship, and scholarship committed to healing and resurgence. My identity and perspective are central to this study. I pay tribute to Indigenous women leaders as exemplars of strength, survivance, and sovereignty within systems that were never designed to serve us.

Statement of the Problem

Indigenous women occupying leadership positions within K–12 educational settings on or in proximity to Montana's Indian reservations remain an underexplored subject within scholarly research. Although current literature does not provide a comprehensive account of the lived experiences of Indigenous women in public school administration, data from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1999) indicate that out of 816 administrative personnel in Montana's public schools, only 29 were Native American (p. 26). This disparity is especially significant given the considerable Native student population enrolled in reservation-based and near-reservation educational institutions. Regrettably, the existing data lack disaggregation by

leadership role and gender; consequently, these limitations impede a thorough understanding of the experiences of Indigenous women in leadership roles.

Recent studies conducted in Montana have examined the experiences of American Indian principals and superintendents serving on or near reservations. This research documented both the advancement and ongoing marginalization of Native school leaders within predominantly non-Native educational systems (Henderson et al., 2015). Although this study constitutes a substantial contribution to the literature on Indigenous leadership in Montana educational institutions, it did not specifically concentrate on the leadership experiences of Indigenous women, nor did it analyze the narratives of Indian women leaders through Indigenous women–led or Indigenous epistemological frameworks.

According to Baldy (2018), a legacy of colonial patriarchy has systematically marginalized the leadership, knowledge, and authority of Indigenous women, leading to their erasure from both historical and contemporary accounts (Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Smith, 1999; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Suzack et al., 2010). As Baldy elaborates, “Native women have often been written out of history, their contributions dismissed, their power minimized, or their stories silenced” (p. 6). This persistent erasure continues to be evident within the realm of educational leadership research in Montana, where the voices of Indigenous women have largely been absent from scholarly discourse (Brown, 2004).

A study conducted by Brown (2004) concerning American Indian women in Montana's school administration identified structural impediments, including constrained mobility, insufficient mentoring opportunities, and dominant stereotypes regarding women's managerial capacities. Although this research was pioneering at the time, its methodology, primarily reliant on mail surveys, did not align with Indigenous research principles that emphasize relationship-

building and narrative sharing (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Smith (2021) observes that Western research traditions frequently neglect Indigenous values, practices, and identities. When Indigenous individuals are referenced in academic literature, they often become "barely recognizable" (p. 39). Such research approaches risk entrenching colonial hierarchies that depict Indigenous women through a deficiency perspective, rather than acknowledging and celebrating the resilience and wisdom inherent in their lived experiences (Anderson, 2011; Smith, 2021; Tuck, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this qualitative research is to focus on, document, and interpret the lived experiences of Indigenous women who have served or are currently serving as K–12 educational leaders on or in Montana's Indian reservations. Guided by Indigenous Storywork (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008), Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), and Indigenous Feminism (Starblanket & Green, 2024), this study is further informed by Baldy's (2018) call for the revitalization of Indigenous women's stories, leadership, and ceremonial knowledge that have been disrupted by colonialism and patriarchy (Anderson, 2011; Simpson, 2011).

Employing a relational, story-based approach grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and relational accountability (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008), this research investigates how intersecting systems of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and gendered power influence Indigenous women's experiences in educational leadership within public schools on or near Montana's Indian reservations. Concurrently, it emphasizes the cultural strengths, relational responsibilities, reciprocity, and

community-based knowledge systems that underpin Indigenous women's leadership within and beyond Western educational frameworks.

By sharing Indigenous women's leadership stories, this research positions storytelling as both method and theory, framing these narratives as acts of survivance, resistance, and resurgence. This study seeks to challenge deficit-based and colonial leadership narratives within Montana's public education systems and institutions of higher education, while contributing to Indigenous-centered scholarship that restores visibility and representation, and creates pathways for healing and leadership sustainability for future generations of Indigenous women.

Research Questions

Guided by Indigenous Storywork (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008), Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), and Indigenous Feminism (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024), this study listened to and honored the narratives of Indigenous women who serve or have served as Kindergarten through Twelfth grade (K-12) educational leaders on or near the Indian reservations of Montana. Through storytelling and relational engagement, this research investigates how Indigenous women fulfill their roles as leaders, mothers, aunties, daughters, and community members while navigating Westernized educational systems that frequently do not reflect their cultural, linguistic, or value systems. This study highlights shared teachings of resilience, harmony, and cultural responsibility that influence Indigenous women's leadership as continuous acts of survivance, resistance, and resurgence.

Guiding Question

What are the common strengths and barriers faced by Indigenous women in Montana's

K–12 educational leadership roles, and how do they navigate these spaces within Western educational structures while remaining culturally responsible for their tribal values and sovereignty?

Sub-Questions

1. How do Indigenous women leaders balance cultural responsibilities, motherhood, kinship roles, and professional leadership within colonized educational systems?
2. In what ways do Indigenous women incorporate ceremony, kinship, and community knowledge into their leadership practices to create spaces of belonging, care, and healing for students and staff?
3. What cultural teachings, relationships, and inner strengths support Indigenous women's leadership journeys and resilience over time?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study combines Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous Feminism (Anderson, 2011, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Suzack et al., 2010), and Indigenous Storywork (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021), guided by the principles of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and relational accountability (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). This integrated theoretical and conceptual framework recognizes and respects Indigenous knowledge systems, leadership, and relational dynamics. Collectively, these frameworks challenge colonial narratives, give priority to Indigenous women's leadership and voices, and position storytelling and relationships as vital sources of knowledge.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) provides an Indigenous perspective on how colonial policies, educational systems, and power dynamics continue to influence Indigenous women's experiences in public school leadership. Indigenous Feminism (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024) reestablishes gender balance and relational power by emphasizing Indigenous women's leadership as an act of resistance and cultural resurgence. Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021) functions both as a way of knowing and a methodological approach, guiding respectful sharing, interpretation, and reverence for leadership stories as shared knowledge. Together, these frameworks inform how leadership narratives are collected, comprehended, and interpreted as acts of survivance, responsibility, and dedication to future generations.

Significance of this Study

This study addresses a significant gap within the field of educational leadership by emphasizing the voices, perspectives, leadership practices, and lived experiences of Indigenous women in K–12 public education (Brown, 2004; Pidgeon, 2012; Smith, 2021). Informed by Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous Feminism (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024), and Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021), this research employed a relational, story-based interview methodology that prioritized reciprocity, relational accountability, and ethical responsibility (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Although qualitative interviews constituted the primary research method, these interviews were grounded in Indigenous Storywork (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008), wherein storytelling functions as a theoretical

framework, relationships inform the research approach, and accountability to the community guides the research process.

This perspective aligns with Starblanket's (2024) articulation of Indigenous Womanhood Madness, which characterizes the justified anger, resistance, and refusal that emerge from generations of silencing Indigenous women's leadership, knowledge, and authority. In this study, relational power is articulated through storytelling as a transformative process that channels anger into healing, resurgence, and collective resilience. By elevating Indigenous women's positioning in stories as collective knowledge spaces, this research positions their leadership not merely as resistance to colonial educational systems but as a relational practice embodying balance, responsibility, and care within Indigenous women's educational leadership. As articulated by Suzack et al. (2010), "the spirit is what sustains Native peoples, what inspires us and gives us hope for the future" (p. 29), thereby highlighting the importance of spiritual and relational strength in Indigenous women's leadership and survivance.

Indigenous women in educational leadership address multiple, intersecting systems of oppression, including colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and lateral violence, while concurrently bearing profound responsibilities and maintaining relational accountability to their families and tribal communities. Despite their unwavering dedication to students and community welfare, many encounter isolation, burnout, and emotional fatigue within leadership structures that favor Western, hierarchical, and individualistic models of authority. These challenges contribute to leadership exhaustion and uncertainty in reservation public schools, thereby threatening the sustainability of culturally responsive educational practices. Furthermore, the persistent effects of colonization have fractured relational networks among women leaders, diminishing collective support systems vital for community healing and educational advancement. Therefore, uplifting

and honoring Indigenous women's leadership narratives constitutes not merely an act of documentation but also an act of survivance, offering essential lessons in purpose, courage, relational accountability, and resilience crucial for the future development of Indigenous education.

This research is of substantial significance for the revitalization of Indigenous women by emphasizing their leadership narratives as sources of knowledge, mentorship, and guidance within K–12 public education. By disseminating their lived experiences, this investigation promotes Indigenous women's participation in public K-12 leadership and educational initiatives, while also enriching educational leadership preparation programs that prioritize cultural relevance, relational accountability, and Indigenous pedagogical and leadership practices. Accordingly, this study elevates the voices of Indigenous women in the field of educational leadership scholarship, a domain where their presence has traditionally been limited or marginalized.

The findings of this study are particularly significant for Indigenous women who are currently serving in or seeking to serve in K–12 public school leadership positions. The leadership narratives presented serve as mentorship resources, offering guidance, affirmation, and insights into navigating leadership roles while maintaining cultural responsibilities, valuing kinship obligations through community relationships, and emphasizing Indigenous identity.

In sum this research further advances Indigenous-centered educational scholarship by framing Indigenous women's leadership as an act of relational accountability, resilience, and resurgence. By restoring visibility to Indigenous women's leadership experiences and recognizing them as sources of strength, wisdom, and resilience, this study challenges deficit-

based and colonial paradigms within public education and emphasizes the lived realities of Indigenous women leading within their respective school systems.

Conclusion

This chapter emphasizes the marginalization and underrepresentation of Indigenous women's leadership within educational research. It also emphasizes the importance of Indigenous-centered methodologies that prioritize storytelling, relationships, and community accountability, principles intrinsic to Indigenous leadership. Moreover, this chapter delineates the purpose statement and guiding research questions, which examine how Indigenous women navigate leadership roles while balancing familial, cultural responsibilities, kinship roles, and professional expectations within colonial Westernized educational systems. Additionally, it introduces the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, incorporating Tribal Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Feminism, and Indigenous Storywork. The significance of this research lies in its effort to share the lived experiences of Indigenous women in K-12 educational leadership, illustrating how they lead differently, the barriers and challenges imposed by colonial, Westernized education, and their strategies for managing internal struggles and personal obstacles. The study aims to restore visibility to Indigenous women's leadership. Chapter 2 further elaborates on this foundation by reviewing existing scholarship on Indigenous women's leadership, gender inequalities in educational administration, the historical origins of Indigenous women's leadership, and the structural factors affecting Indigenous education. This review situates the current research within a broader scholarly context and identifies key gaps that this study seeks to address.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The review of literature focuses on Indigenous women's leadership, emphasizing persistent structural and gender-based barriers while acknowledging the roles of reciprocity, kinship, relationality, and resurgence that empower Indigenous women to serve as educational leaders within their tribal communities (Baldy, 2018; Grande, 2015; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019). This review identifies critical gaps in current research that the present study seeks to address and offers a narrative of Indigenous women as leaders driven by resurgence within Indian education. The literature reviewed demonstrates the need to investigate the too often overlooked role of Indigenous women's leadership in K–12 public education and educational leadership scholarship (Brown, 2004; Gambrell, 2016).

Historically marginalized and erased through colonial schooling systems and gendered power structures, Indigenous women's leadership has begun to garner increased visibility as more Indigenous educators assume formal administrative positions on or near Montana's Indian reservations (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015). Indigenous Storywork, Tribal Critical Race Theory, and Indigenous Feminism highlight Indigenous scholarship that conceptualizes leadership as relational, culturally grounded, and accountable to community (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Although Indigenous women have always led within their Nations and tribal communities, both historically and today, their narratives as principals and superintendents remain underexplored and insufficiently theorized in the existing literature (Baldy, 2018; Gambrell, 2016; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019).

Despite the fact that Indigenous students constitute a significant proportion of school populations on Montana's reservations and in nearby public schools, Indigenous individuals remain underrepresented in formal public school administrative roles (Brown, 2004).

Nonetheless, Indigenous representation in school leadership has increased substantially in recent decades, particularly within schools serving predominantly Native student bodies. In numerous reservation communities, Indigenous students attend schools where the majority of students are Native American; however, these institutions have historically been staffed and led primarily by non-Native educators (Brayboy, 2005).

Currently, Indigenous women are increasingly assuming leadership roles within K–12 education, thereby transforming school systems that have traditionally reflected colonial and Western paradigms rather than Indigenous languages, values, and relational responsibilities (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015). The growing presence of Indigenous women in school administration signifies both a shift in representation and a resurgence of Indigenous women's leadership in public education, often exceeding the participation of Indigenous men in comparable roles (Brown, 2004; Shotton et al., 2013).

Kenny and Fraser (2012) conceptualize leadership as an embodied, relational act centered in culture, values, and lived experience. Indigenous women scholars from the United States, Canada, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) further illustrate that Indigenous leadership is fundamentally grounded in relationships, responsibility, and reciprocity, rather than Western notions of authority or hierarchy (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). These relational models of leadership are corroborated by broader Indigenous research frameworks that emphasize relational accountability and interconnected ways of knowing (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). This perspective aligns with Baldy (2018), who underscores the revitalization of Indigenous women's ceremonial practices as forms of leadership, and Sabzalian (2019), whose scholarship conceptualizes educational leadership as an act of survivance and sovereignty within colonial schooling systems. Similarly, Grande (2015)

critiques the limitations inherent in Western education and advocates for decolonial leadership founded upon relationality, community engagement, and land-based knowledge. These themes are echoed by Anderson (2016), Battiste (2013), Archibald (2008), and Starblanket and Green (2024). Collectively, these scholars emphasize that Indigenous women lead through community accountability, storytelling, and collective healing. In summary, the scholarly literature demonstrates that Indigenous women's leadership is engrained in relational accountability, cultural integrity, and a responsibility toward community healing, rather than in Western leadership titles or hierarchical structures.

Gaps in Literature

Despite the expanding body of scholarship concerning Indigenous leadership, education, and women's resurgence, significant gaps persist in research related to Indigenous women occupying formal K–12 administrative roles (Brown, 2004; Gambrell, 2016; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Smith, 1999). The prevailing literature predominantly examines Indigenous leadership broadly but rarely investigates how Indigenous women specifically exercise leadership within public school administration, particularly within rural and reservation systems shaped by colonial histories and structural inequalities (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015). Although Indigenous women have historically held leadership positions within their Nations, their roles as principals and superintendents are inadequately studied, insufficiently theorized, and often omitted from mainstream leadership frameworks (Anderson, 2016; Starblanket & Green, 2024). This gap in targeted research echoes Gambrell (2016), who argues that little scholarly work has been conducted concerning contemporary Native leadership from women's perspectives. Gambrell (2016) contends that existing leadership paradigms frequently reflect White, heterosexual male viewpoints and that leadership has "traditionally been studied using masculine

norms as behavioral standards" (p. 293). Additionally, Gambrell argues that cross-cultural research has often minimized or overlooked differences rather than fostering culturally grounded insights into leadership. As a result, Indigenous peoples remain underrepresented in leadership scholarship, with the leadership practices of Indigenous women notably absent from current discourse. Gambrell (2016) explicitly states that "to date, little research has been conducted that has considered contemporary Native leadership from a women's lens" (p. 293).

Although scholarly research concerning Indigenous women's leadership within higher education and community contexts has expanded and is well recognized (e.g., Shotton et al., 2021), limited investigations explore the leadership experiences of Indigenous women within public school systems situated on or proximal to Indian reservations, particularly in Montana (Brown, 2004). These educational systems remain predominantly influenced by Western leadership paradigms, non-Native governance structures, and accountability methodologies shaped by a settler-colonial frameworks. This gap holds particular significance given that K–12 leadership serves as a critical frontline where Indigenous women manage community responsibilities, colonial institutional requisites, and the persistent effects of historical trauma in education (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015).

Existing scholarship on Indigenous education typically focuses on culturally centered, relational frameworks rather than Western paradigms, which often emphasize masculine and white-centric organizational norms. In contrast, the broader field of educational leadership research generally defines leadership through Euro-American perspectives that highlight authority, hierarchy, and managerial control (Brayboy, 2005; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Grande, 2015). Consequently, Indigenous women's relational leadership, centered on community accountability, kinship networks, cultural preservation, and healing, may be overlooked or

undervalued by mainstream standards. Henderson et al. (2015) illustrate how Indigenous leaders must reconcile Western educational leadership training with Indigenous epistemologies, ways of living, and leadership practices. Further research is warranted to examine how Indigenous women navigate this balance within reservation and rural school systems in Montana.

Existing research is also limited in exploring the intersectional realities of Indigenous women leaders, especially how gender, race, community ties, cultural identity, and colonial gender reforms influence their leadership roles and experiences. Studies on gender inequality in educational administration indicate that women remain underrepresented and face systemic barriers to leadership (Bush, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). Nonetheless, these studies often overlook Indigenous women's experiences within racialized schooling systems, where colonial power dynamics coexist with gendered expectations (Anderson, 2016; Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015; Smith, 1999; Starblanket & Green, 2024). These gaps demonstrate the need for more educational research that employs Indigenous feminist frameworks to analyze Indigenous women's roles in K–12 school administration. Baldy (2018) illustrates how Indigenous women have been historically marginalized and written out of dominant narratives, while emphasizing the importance of cultural practices, such as coming-of-age ceremonies, in shaping identity and leadership. This reinforces the need to center Indigenous women's knowledge and experiences in educational leadership research (Anderson, 2016; Smith, 1999; Suzack et al., 2010; Starblanket & Green, 2024).

There exists a significant need for qualitative research that focuses on Indigenous women's leadership, utilizing narratives, relational accountability, and lived experiences, particularly within Montana Indian reservation communities. Much of the educational leadership research depends on conventional Western qualitative methodologies that do not fully align with

Indigenous research paradigms. Indigenous Storywork offers an effective approach to understanding Indigenous women's leadership as an embodied practice and form of knowledge, acknowledging stories as fundamental to theory, pedagogy, and relational accountability (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). In Montana, where Indigenous women increasingly assume roles as principals and superintendents within tribal communities, their narratives provide essential insights into leadership as a means of cultural resurgence, advocacy, healing, and resistance within settler-colonial educational systems (Baldy, 2018; Brown, 2004; Brayboy, 2005; Gambrell, 2016; Simpson, 2017). Accordingly, this research explicitly addresses these gaps by collecting and examining the stories of Indigenous women leaders in K–12 school administration on and near Montana reservations through the perspectives of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), and Indigenous Feminism (Starblanket & Green, 2024). Identified gaps in the literature underscore the importance of employing Indigenous methodologies and frameworks that elevate the perspectives and leadership of Indigenous women as lived experiences within settler colonial educational institutions.

Indigenous Leadership

Indigenous leadership and relational worldviews highlight how Indigenous peoples lead based on their own perspectives, worldviews, and cultural teachings. Kenny and Fraser (2012) clarify that leadership within Native communities has developed through various historical periods, including autonomy, imperialism, colonization, resistance, and resurgence, yet it has consistently remained centered in community and cultural continuity. Currently, Indigenous leadership is directed towards sovereignty, self-determination, and collective well-being, with Indigenous women playing a crucial role in political, educational, and cultural transformations

(Anderson, 2016; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024). Indigenous leadership is fundamentally connected to the land. Kenny and Fraser (2012) describe the earth as our "first embodied concept of leadership," reminding us that "we follow Earth" (p. 3). Indigenous leaders seek guidance from ancestors and elders, who embody the knowledge necessary for ensuring stability, relational harmony, and community integrity. These teachings are often conveyed through stories, which serve as guiding lights, shaping our worldview and our understanding of what it means to live and lead responsibly (pp. 3–4).

According to Kenny and Fraser, stories function as bridges linking our histories, legends, perceptions, practices, values, and ultimately, our sustainability as Indigenous peoples. This perspective aligns with the views of Archibald (2008), Kovach (2021), and Simpson (2017), Wilson (2008), all of whom underscore relationality, storytelling, and land-based knowledge as fundamental elements of Indigenous leadership and epistemologies.

Many Indigenous individuals depict their pursuit of higher education and leadership as navigating two spheres, managing both Indigenous cultural responsibilities and Western institutional expectations (Kenny & Fraser, 2012). This requires the ability to oscillate between Indigenous worldviews and the demands of Western colonial systems while safeguarding cultural identity. Kenny and Fraser elucidate this notion, emphasizing that Indigenous peoples operate within multiple realms, including global and digital domains, often facing tensions between Western expectations and Indigenous values (Battiste, 2013; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Pidgeon, 2012). Such pressures affect how Indigenous women experience leadership as they negotiate the intersections of identity, responsibility, reciprocity, and resurgence (Crenshaw, 1991). Indigenous women leaders hold significant responsibilities toward their families, homes, communities, land, and ancestors, which Jacob (2012) describes as

the “great responsibility that Native people feel to our cultures, to our ancestors, to all the leaders, students, teachers, and healers of the past, and to the students, teachers, and healers who are yet to come” (p. 179). Addressing colonial and gendered expectations embedded within Western educational frameworks constitutes a considerable burden.

Kenny and Fraser (2012) explain that Indigenous leadership differs from traditional leadership models because it focuses on relationships, community responsibility, and collective well-being instead of individual success. Wakshul (2011, as cited in Kenny & Fraser, 2012) articulates several attributes fundamental to Indigenous leadership, emphasizing relationality, communal responsibility, and collective well-being. First, Indigenous leaders are required to understand their community’s values, histories, and cultural relationships, alongside Euro-American systems, as they are anticipated to operate within both frameworks. Second, Indigenous leadership is characterized by a holistic and relational approach, grounded in the interconnectedness of community, culture, and responsibility, whereby leaders are expected to care for and address the needs of the entire community (Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Third, Indigenous leaders originate from communal societies and must navigate the tension between preserving tribal values and engaging with Euro-American structures in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coexist (Wakshul, 2011, as cited in Kenny & Fraser, 2012, p. 5).

Burshia (2025) writes, “Authentic leadership stems from love” (p. 19). Acts of love teach us how to care for others, even when prior experiences of stewardship were mishandled or misunderstood. Many Indigenous peoples draw from acts of love to shape their approaches to leadership. Minthorn et al. (2025) describe this form of leadership as heartwork, defined as “the work Indigenous scholars do on behalf of and with our communities, not expecting or wanting

any payback or rewards. It is selfless and passionate, aimed at helping benefit those whom we hold close to our hearts" (p. 14). Indigenous leadership is also profoundly personal and shaped by lived experience. When individuals are called into leadership, it can become a heavy responsibility (O'Dale-Higgins, 2025). O'Dale-Higgins emphasizes that Indigenous leadership requires listening, understanding, and responding to one's community's needs. Indigenous leadership aligns closely with the principles of Indigenous Storywork, which call for respect and compassion, relevance and planning, responsibility and deep listening, and reciprocity enacted through meaningful action (O'Dale-Higgins, 2025). These values shape how Indigenous leaders care for their communities and uphold relational accountability. Cajete (2015) similarly explains that Indigenous leadership arises from community-based values tied to reciprocity and mutual benefit. He notes that Indigenous communities see all things, including people, relationships, and responsibilities, as having purpose and potential benefits. The qualities of being beneficial and being useful are connected, implying a mutual exchange of support, purpose, and vision (Cajete, 2015). These values, combined with a deep love for our people and a focus on acting for the collective good, form the basis of Indigenous leadership (Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2015; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Kovach, 2021; Pidgeon, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

According to Cajete (2015), Indigenous values cultivated within communities influence the development and expression of leadership. Leadership is a position that must be earned through integrity, humility, and service; it is not an appointment granted by oneself (Cajete, 2015). The community shares responsibility in both guiding and being guided, viewing leadership as a collective rather than solely an individual accomplishment. As individuals harmonize their hearts, minds, and actions with the well-being of others, they progressively assume leadership roles. Therefore, becoming an Indigenous leader requires self-discipline, dedication to upholding

community values, and an ongoing effort to prevent personal interests from overriding the community (Cajete, 2015). When Indigenous leaders exemplify these principles, their personal and communal objectives are aligned.

Indigenous leadership scholars consistently characterize leadership as a relational practice grounded in land, responsibility, reciprocity, and community well-being (Burshia, 2025; Cajete, 2015; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Minthorn, 2025; O'Dale-Higgins, 2025). Rather than emphasizing hierarchy or positional authority, these scholars present leadership as an embodied responsibility shaped through relationships with people, place, and ancestral teachings. Kenny and Fraser (2012) encapsulate this land-based foundation by describing the earth as our "first embodied concept of leadership," (p. 3) and elaborating that "we follow Earth" (p. 3), guided by cultural values such as respect, reciprocity, compassion, helpfulness, responsibility, and love.

Kenny and Fraser (2012) argue that Indigenous leadership diverges markedly from Western hierarchical models. Unlike Western leadership frameworks, Indigenous leadership develops from stories, ancestors, land-based teachings, and the collective needs of the community rather than formal authority structures. Indigenous leaders navigate multiple worlds while bearing the emotional, cultural, and spiritual responsibilities of serving their communities (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2015; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Pidgeon, 2012; Wilson, 2008). These insights demonstrate that Indigenous leadership transcends a mere role; it constitutes a lived practice grounded in cultural stability, community well-being, and ancestral values. As Kenny and Fraser (2012) observe, "At its core, Indigenous leadership is relational" (p. 7). This perspective contributes a vital understanding of Indigenous women leaders, whose paths are further influenced by gendered colonialism and the responsibilities they assume within their families, communities, and educational institutions (Anderson, 2016; Starblanket & Green,

2024). Collectively, Indigenous leadership scholarship perceives leadership as relational, place-based, situated in responsibilities to people, land, and Nation (Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). It challenges Western paradigms that prioritize individual authority and managerial control.

Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous feminism offers an essential perspective for this inquiry, emphasizing the lived experiences, leadership, and contextual factors that influence the work of Indigenous women within public K–12 educational systems (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Baldy, 2018; Grande, 2015; Starblanket & Green, 2024). While Indigenous leadership theory provides a framework rooted in relationality, land-based accountability, and community well-being, Indigenous feminism further refines this focus to encompass gendered colonial power dynamics and the historical marginalization of Indigenous women's roles and authority by patriarchy (Arvin et al., 2013; Grande, 2015; Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Starblanket & Green, 2024). As Gilio-Whitaker (2019) notes, "Women have always been valued storytellers in their communities, keepers of culture and defenders of their lands, alongside and equal to but different from men, often sharing political power and leadership roles" (p. 111). This enduring authority was challenged by colonial impositions of heteropatriarchy, which systematically targeted Indigenous women's leadership, visibility, and influence within their communities (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Baldy, 2018; Starblanket & Green, 2024).

A meaningful comparison emerges when examining the development of Western feminism in relation to the persistent political and social authority of Indigenous women. Feminism in the United States mainly originated from the experiences of White settler women in the mid-1800s, who were deprived of voting rights, the ability to hold public office, and property

ownership (Anderson, 2016; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). As Gilio-Whitaker clarifies, many early women's rights advocates were also influenced by the freedoms and political authority exercised by Haudenosaunee women. Prior to colonization, Haudenosaunee women held significant economic and political influence: they owned property, participated in farming, engaged in athletic activities, and were not considered the property of men. As clan mothers, they appointed the chiefs of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, thereby exemplifying matrilineal governance structures that sharply contrasted with the patriarchal settler society (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019, pp. 112–113).

This comparison emphasizes that Indigenous feminism did not originate from Western feminist traditions but is instead rooted in pre-colonial Indigenous governance systems where women held significant authority, autonomy, and responsibility (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024). Suzack et al. (2020) further underscore that although Indigenous women do not constitute a homogenous culture, they share a common colonial history that has transformed gender relations across Indigenous nations. They highlight that Indigenous feminism aims to understand how the imposition of patriarchy has diminished Indigenous women's power, material conditions, and social standing (Suzack et al., 2020). Consequently, Indigenous feminism explores not only gendered colonialism but also its intersections with racism, dispossession, structural violence, and the everyday harms inflicted through microaggressions experienced by Indigenous women in educational and institutional settings (Arvin et al., 2013; Grande, 2015). As a theoretical framework, Indigenous feminism affirms the political, cultural, and community leadership of Indigenous women while simultaneously illuminating the colonial structures that restrict their authority within contemporary educational systems (Anderson, 2016; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Grande, 2015;

Starblanket & Green, 2024; Suzack et al., 2010). As Gilio-Whitaker reminds us, “Long before there was ever a concept known as ‘feminism’ within the U.S. settler state, there existed the knowledge of women’s power in Indigenous communities” (p. 112).

Building upon this, Starblanket (2024) characterizes Indigenous feminism as a multifaceted framework interconnected with the diverse histories, material realities, and experiences of Indigenous women. It addresses the interconnected effects of land theft, colonial domination, cultural disruption, and economic and political exclusion (Arvin et al., 2013; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Grande, 2015;). In the everyday lives of Indigenous women, opportunities are frequently constrained by patriarchal and male-dominated systems (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013). Nevertheless, as Starblanket underscores, Indigenous women remain agents of transformation. Green (2001; 2002, as cited in Starblanket, 2024, p. 47) argues that Indigenous women foster spaces for others and initiate change, even when such change progresses gradually. As Starblanket compellingly affirms, “we are warrior women when we need to go to war” (p. 47). This viewpoint exemplifies the perseverance, resilience, and relational responsibility that Indigenous women embody within their families, communities, and leadership roles (Anderson, 2016; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Starblanket (2024) further references bell hooks’ foundational definition of feminism to highlight its collective and transformative potential. As hooks (1984, as cited in Starblanket, 2024, p. 54) states,

> Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit any specific group of women, any race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform all our lives into meaningful ways. (p. 54)

hooks (1984, as cited in Starblanket, 2024) states that feminism is “neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into” (p. 54). Furthermore, Starblanket contends that feminism is not exclusive to any particular group; any individual dedicated to eliminating gender inequality and injustice may participate in feminist pursuits. In this context, both men and women can be feminists. Additionally, Starblanket emphasizes that feminists ought to be among the most steadfast allies of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous feminism provides a comprehensive framework for recognizing, resisting, and transforming the gendered colonial systems that influence the lives and leadership of Indigenous women (Starblanket, 2024, pp. 7–8). Its scope far exceeds the pursuit of equal rights. Instead, it encompasses the complex responsibilities, experiences, and colonial harms that impact Indigenous women, their families, lands, and nations. Indigenous feminist scholars demonstrate that gender inequality within Indigenous communities is fundamentally connected to colonization, land dispossession, and the imposition of heteropatriarchal systems that have undermined the authority of Indigenous women (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024).

Indigenous Women in Leadership

Indigenous women in positions of leadership and authority are often omitted from historical records, leading to an imbalance of influence within both scholarly research and communities. Baldy (2018) notes that “Native women have also been excluded from historical scholarship and regarded as peripheral to their nations, cultures, and societies rather than recognized as essential or holding leadership roles” (p. 1). Tsosie (2010) further underscores that Indigenous women bore essential responsibilities in their nations and communities' spiritual lives. This is exemplified in the feminine aspects of creation present in numerous Indigenous

worldviews, where spiritual life involves fostering respectful relationships with nature and living in harmony (Absolon, 2011; Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). The understanding that male and female energies are complementary is widespread, with women contributing through songs, ceremonies, and spiritual practices that sustain community wellbeing and cultural continuity (Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Simpson, 2017). The marginalization of Indigenous women from academic and community narratives exemplifies broader patterns of colonial erasure that continue to affect the visibility of Indigenous women's leadership within contemporary contexts, including educational administration (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Baldy, 2018; Smith, 1999; Starblanket & Green, 2024). Reclaiming and reaffirming Indigenous women's leadership through stories, ceremonies, and community practices acts as a form of resistance and revival, affirming that Indigenous women have historically exercised political, cultural, and relational authority within their nations (Anderson, 2016; Archibald, 2008; Baldy, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Starblanket & Green, 2024).

Colonialism significantly disrupted the leadership of Indigenous women through policies designed to assimilate Indigenous populations into dominant Western norms (Grande, 2015; Smith, 1999). Tsosie (2010) describes how this assimilation efforts included military-style boarding schools, the suppression of Indigenous languages, the replacement of traditional governance with Euro-American legal and political systems, the promotion of Christianity, and the destabilization of Indigenous economies by fostering dependency (Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005). Furthermore, Tsosie (2010) affirms the gendered aspects of these colonial actions. For example, Tsosie references U.S. Indian Commissioner Medill's 1848 report, which states, "She who had been the drudge and the slave then begins to assume her household duties, to care of her family and children" (p. 34). Tsosie notes how colonial authorities characterized Indigenous

women's land-based labor and economic influence as "slavery" (p. 34), while simultaneously endorsing patriarchal property systems that reduced land and resources under male heads of households (Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Smith, 2005).

These colonial modifications significantly impacted matrilineal Nations, such as the Cherokee. Tsosie (2010) cites Cherokee leader Nancy Ward's appeal to oppose land cessions, sharing,

> We have raised all of you on the land which we now have… Your mothers and your sisters beg of you not to part with any more of our lands… Hold out to the last in support of our common rights. (p. 35)

Historically, Cherokee women exercised authority concerning family affairs, including children, marriage, and divorce. However, missionaries and colonial institutions sought to redefine these roles by imposing patrilineal systems that vested decision-making authority in men (Anderson, 2016; Tsosie, 2010). Currently, Indigenous women leaders continue to contend with the enduring impacts of these gendered colonial legacies (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Starblanket & Green, 2024).

Recent scholarship investigates the leadership roles of Indigenous women within contemporary contexts. Shotton et al. (2021) emphasize Indigenous women's leadership in higher education as expressions of relational caretaking, motherhood, mentorship, and collective accountability. Minthorn and Shotton (2019) underscore that the notion of Indigenous women as leaders is "nothing new to us" (p. 2). They write this as Indigenous women scholars who have "noticed the absence of Indigenous women's stories and our exclusion from leadership scholarship that is dominated by Western narratives" (p. 5). Zeilinger (2016) observes that "Indigenous women in leadership roles exemplify a spirit of resilience" (p. 4), demonstrating

how Indigenous women have persistently led by prioritizing relational responsibilities, cultural knowledge, and community stewardship. Blue Dawn Little (Oglala Lakota) corroborates this enduring authority, stating, “Women were the ones that addressed the issues and came up with the solutions and then men carried that out” (as cited in Zeilinger, 2016, p. 4).

Kehoe (1995) demonstrates that Blackfoot women held significant economic, social, and spiritual authority within their communities. Economically, “women were essential in both the production and processing of necessities of life” (Kehoe, 1995, p. 114). Their labor and skill were so vital, because a woman constructed the family’s home, that the home belonged to her (Anderson, 2016; Kehoe, 1995). Kehoe explains that Blackfoot women who owned property, managed households, worked diligently, and acted with confidence were described as “manly-hearted” (p. 115), a term that signified not masculinity, but the recognition of women whose social power matched or surpassed that of men. These women were respected and, at times, feared; their ability to influence and control social situations reflected the powerful gifts they were understood to possess. “Such women owned property, were good managers and usually effective workers, were forthright and assertive in public, in their homes, and as sexual partners, and were active in religious rituals” (Kehoe, 1995, p. 115). Spiritually, women served as intermediaries between humans and the sacred. During medicine bundle openings, only a woman could unwrap and rewrap a holy bundle, handing the powerful objects to the men (Anderson, 2016; Kehoe, 1995).

While this may appear to be servitude to European observers, Kehoe (1995) emphasizes that the Blackfoot acknowledged women as more powerful than men, who would not dare handle the bundle entirely on their own. Kehoe (1995) argues that within Blackfoot societies, women are believed to bring blessings to the community, and some of the most potent spiritual gifts,

such as the Beaver Bundle and Thunder Pipe Bundle, are associated with women's ceremonial authority. Women are regarded as possessing greater inherent power than men due to their role as life-givers. Conversely, Kehoe (1995) draws attention to the fact that men and women constitute a necessary pair, whose complementary responsibilities sustain community life. This cultural context demonstrates that Blackfoot women, akin to women in numerous other Indigenous nations, including the Haudenosaunee and Navajo, historically held significant economic, social, and spiritual influence well before colonization and the gendered hierarchies imposed by Euro-American systems (Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Simpson, 2017). These insights bolster numerous Indigenous scholars' assertions that leadership among Indigenous women is not a novel phenomenon but has a profound historical presence in pre-colonial governance, responsibility, and relational authority.

Gambrell (2016) conducted a phenomenological investigation examining leadership through the perspectives of four Lakota women leaders. Gambrell's research indicates that Indigenous women's leadership diverges from conventional mainstream leadership theories. Four principal themes were identified: Lakota Way of Life, Get Educated, Bicultural, and Women Held Back; these themes illustrate leadership as a practice rooted in cultural traditions, education, and the impacts of colonial gender inequalities. Lakota women, utilizing their knowledge of Lakota culture, spirituality, and education, contribute to national healing through "persistent and quiet strength" (Gambrell, 2016, p. 299). Furthermore, Gambrell emphasizes the relational and collective responsibilities inherent in Lakota women's leadership, with participants underscoring the significance of serving community needs, particularly the sacred roles of elders and children (Anderson, 2016; Cajete, 2015; Gambrell, 2016; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Pidgeon, 2012;Wilson, 2008).

The theme “Get Educated” (p. 301) reveals a significant tension, as participants in Gambrell’s (2016) study note that returning to the reservation after acquiring an education may be met with skepticism and rejection. One participant remarked, “When the people do get educated and come back [to the reservation], they’re not treated very well” (Gambrell, 2016, p. 301). Concurrently, participants highlighted the importance of bicultural leadership; leaders must understand and navigate both Indigenous cultural systems and Western institutions in order to effectively represent and support the Nation. Finally, the theme ‘Women Held Back” (p. 303) associates leadership inequality with colonization and the imposition of gender roles. Gambrell’s research emphasizes how assimilation policies disrupted Indigenous gender dynamics and generated confusion about roles and authority within tribal families and governance (Anderson, 2016; Arvin et al., 2013; Gambrell, 2016).

Participants in Gambrell’s (2016) study predominantly characterized current reservation leadership as male, with women’s contributions frequently (Gambrell, 2016). Women reported experiencing intimidation, marginalization, and, occasionally abuse despite their leadership capabilities. Nevertheless, Lakota women leaders demonstrated resilience and hope, perceiving leadership as founded on service, humility, and dedication rather than personal gain. Gambrell's (2016) findings emphasize that Indigenous women’s leadership does not entirely conform to conventional Western leadership theories but instead reflects culturally rooted practices, including humility, spirituality, persistence, and silent strength (Anderson, 2016; Archibald, 2008; Baldy, 2018; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019; Pidgeon, 2012; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Wilson, 2008).

Indigenous Education Leadership

A settler schooling system was fundamentally conceived to serve Indigenous education (Brayboy, 2015; Grande, 2004; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Contemporary school systems, educator preparation initiatives, and evaluation frameworks remain within a settler-colonial paradigm, which has resulted in cumulative detriment over time (Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015; Sabzalian, 2019; Smith, 1999). Grande (2015) delineates this historical progression, identifying three principal eras of Indigenous education aligned with dominant systems of power: (1) missionary dominance from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, (2) federal government dominance from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, and (3) self-determination beginning in the mid-twentieth century and continuing to the present (Szaz, 1999; Thompson, 1978, as cited in Grande, 2015, p. 16). Grande (2015) emphasizes, “Perhaps at no other time in U.S. history did the church and state collaborate as closely to promote the common objective of white supremacy as during the period of missionary dominance” (p. 16). This initial phase of Indigenous education was explicitly designed to “save souls and colonize minds” (Grande, 2015, p. 16), thus establishing the foundational principles for educational institutions that continue to influence Indigenous education today.

While missionary-operated schools endeavored to “civilize” (p. 4) Indigenous populations, colonial authorities regarded them as ineffective because students remained affiliated with their families, languages, and communities (Adams, 1995; Battiste, 2013; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Pratt, 1892). In response, the federal government transitioned to residential and boarding schools, thereby removing children from their families' environments. One of the most prominent institutions was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which served as a model for federal Indian boarding schools aimed at assimilating Indigenous children into Euro-

American society (Adams, 1995; Hopkins, 2020; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Pratt, 1892). These institutions enforced strict discipline, manual labor, and military-style regimentation to sever cultural connections.

Richard Henry Pratt[2], the founder of Carlisle, articulated this assimilationist policy through his infamous declaration, “Kill the Indian, and save the man” (Grande, 2015, p. 18), encapsulating the boarding school project as an act of cultural genocide (Grande, 2015). Indigenous children were expected to relinquish their languages, abandon their cultural practices, and develop loyalty to the United States government (Adams, 1995; Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Pratt, 1892).

Following extensive documentation of abuse and failures within the boarding school system, a shift in federal policy occurred. As Grande (2015) writes, the transition to public education ensued after the 1928 *Meriam Report*, which “dealt the final blow to the boarding school experiment” (p. 19) and heralded a new era of reform. However, rather than ending the assimilation process, the strategy was altered. Indigenous students were integrated into predominantly White public schools designed around Euro-American norms and worldviews. According to Grande (2015), “the [Meriam] report not only harshly criticized the existing educational policies of removing Indian children from their homes and communities but also condemned the institutional practices of forced manual labor and severe discipline" (p. 19). Subsequent reforms under John Collier, former Commissioner of Indian Affairs, supervised the implementation of numerous recommendations, including the cessation of allotment, increased religious freedom for Indians, and enhanced tribal self-governance (Grande, 2015). These

[2] Pratt's approach to assimilation extended beyond education; his colonial perspective was rooted in the idea that Indigenous peoples should abandon their culture and language to conform to Euro-American society. As Pratt (1892) remarked, "We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization" (p. 46).

developments culminated in the Johnson O'Malley Act, which authorized payments to states and territories for the education of Indians in public institutions (Grande, 2004).

Grande (2015) wtites that "by the dawn of the civil rights movement, American Indians were more directly voicing their opposition to termination and other oppressive government policies. Such displays of resistance psychologically marked the beginning of the era of self-determination" (p. 20). This period contributed to the establishment of prominent Indigenous-led movements and institutions, including the National Indian Education Association and the American Indian Movement, as well as the development of tribally controlled schools. These developments represented a pivotal shift towards the reclaiming of authority over Indigenous children's education. These developments signified a crucial shift in reclaiming authority over Indigenous children's education (Adams, 1995; Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

Despite these advancements, contemporary Indigenous education continues to reflect the enduring impacts of colonial policies. Numerous reservation and rural schools face persistent challenges related to teacher recruitment, retention, and the necessity for culturally responsive educators (Brayboy, 2005; Landertinger et al., 2020; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Federal investment in Indigenous education, particularly in institutions funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, remains inadequate (Grande, 2015; McCoy, 2020). As emphasized by Grande, "centuries of genocidal and assimilationist policies cannot be undone in a matter of years" (p. 21). In Montana and other states, initiatives aimed at reducing disparities in educational outcomes for Indigenous students often operate within accountability and funding frameworks designed to enhance academic achievement. Scholars have observed that these models frequently neglect the impacts of historical trauma and the ongoing repercussions of colonial schooling systems on

Indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Many reservation and rural schools encounter structural challenges characteristic of rural education, including difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers and limited access to culturally relevant instructional materials (Brayboy, 2005; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). In such environments, school improvement initiatives are sometimes led by external consultants who may lack an adequate understanding of the cultural and historical contexts shaping Indigenous education today (Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Cajete, 2015; Hopkins, 2020; Phillips, 2024; Sabzalian, 2019; Smith, 1999).

Gender Inequities in Educational Leadership

Gender inequality persists in educational leadership despite the recognition of teaching as a predominantly feminized profession. Although women constitute the majority of classroom educators, they remain disproportionately underrepresented in formal school leadership roles, and this disparity widens as leadership responsibilities assume greater authority and political influence (Robinson et al., 2017). This imbalance suggests that such inequality is not solely attributable to workforce composition but also results from structural barriers, culturally influenced perceptions of leadership ability, and institutional gatekeeping that obstruct women's entry into and continuation in school administration (Bush, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017).

Women in School Administration

The principalship functions as both a pivotal leadership position within educational institutions and a significant pathway to district-level administration. Nevertheless, women remain disproportionately underrepresented as principals, despite the predominantly feminized nature of the teaching profession (Brown, 2004; Bush, 2021). Bush (2021) emphasizes that cultural beliefs, biases, and discrimination continue to influence perceptions regarding

individuals considered suitable for school leadership. Women are frequently socially perceived as caring nurturers and protectors of children; however, they may be regarded as less capable of exercising authority or possessing the broader perspective necessary for effective school leadership. These gendered assumptions create barriers that hinder women's progression into principal roles and uphold masculine norms associated with leadership (Bush, 2021).

Bush (2021) further contends that women leaders are subjected to a double standard, characterized as a two-dimensional market that amplifies expectations for women while concurrently undermining confidence and self-efficacy. Such disparities are prevalent within already demanding educational settings, where both pedagogical responsibilities and school leadership entail substantial emotional and professional challenges. Bush indicates that stress, burnout, and morale constitute critical concerns within the education sector, with morale tending to improve when educators receive adequate care and support from colleagues. These observations demonstrate that women's access to leadership roles and their retention are influenced not solely by their qualifications but also by organizational culture, evaluation practices, and relational working environments.

Although women face obstacles at the school leadership level, disparities are considerably more pronounced at the district level. Robinson et al. (2017), citing findings from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Mid-Decade Survey, argue that progress toward gender equity in educational administration remains insufficient despite ongoing efforts. Women continue to be underrepresented in superintendent roles, with women of color encountering even greater limitations, thereby highlighting the intersection of gender and race in district leadership pathways (Robinson et al., 2017). This disparity is particularly notable given that women constitute approximately 75% of teachers, yet the proportion of female

superintendents remains markedly lower (Robinson et al., 2017). Robinson et al. emphasize that this underrepresentation is not solely a matter of fairness and equity but also an issue of educational advancement, as diversity in leadership fosters improved learning outcomes and decision-making, and women's leadership has the potential to positively impact schooling and children's outcomes.

Robinson et al. (2017) also emphasize the longstanding history of exclusion in superintendent roles. Research conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, as cited in Robinson et al., 2017) revealed that only 1.3% of superintendent positions were occupied by women in 1971; this figure slightly declined to 1.2% a decade later. Although the representation of women has increased over time, the authors observe that progress has not been consistent, particularly for minority women. This historical pattern demonstrates that merely increasing credentials and workforce participation has not eradicated the structural barriers present in district leadership systems. Robinson et al. identified barriers that persist and continue to influence women's advancement and sustainability in district leadership. For instance, women superintendents may encounter obstacles related to family circumstances, work–family balance demands, stress, and the persistent influence of exclusionary leadership networks. Notably, Robinson et al highlighted the existence of "good ole' boys" systems (p. 7) as ongoing impediments to women's access to power networks, mentorship, and political support. These dynamics are particularly pertinent in the superintendent role, which is notably politically vulnerable and heavily reliant on relationships with school boards and community members.

Robinson et al. (2017) also suggest that women may face heightened professional and political risks within district leadership. Their findings indicate that women are more likely than

their male counterparts to leave superintendent positions due to health concerns, dismissals, or conflicts with community groups. These findings substantiate the conclusion that women in superintendent roles bear disproportionate burdens and constraints that affect both opportunities and career longevity, thereby perpetuating systemic inequalities within educational leadership (Robinson et al., 2017).

Summary

Bush (2021) and Robinson et al. (2017) identify systemic obstacles faced by women in educational administration, including biased perceptions, double standards, work–family conflicts, political vulnerability, and exclusion from power networks. Gambrell (2016) further emphasizes that Indigenous women's leadership cannot be fully comprehended through Western paradigms alone and should be examined through culturally grounded frameworks that incorporate colonial influences, relational accountability, and community healing. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of prioritizing Indigenous women's experiences and leadership practices in educational research, highlighting not only the barriers they encounter but also their culturally rooted strengths and community-supportive strategies.

Indigenous Educational Leadership in Montana: ILEAD

Henderson et al. (2015) examined American Indian principals and superintendents in Montana who participated in the Indian Leadership Education and Development (ILEAD) program at Montana State University. Employing a phenomenological methodology, the study investigated the ways in which Indigenous leaders integrated Western educational leadership training with Indigenous epistemologies and leadership practices, while also confronting racism within educational institutions. Their findings highlighted identity, relationality, and re-normed practices as fundamental aspects of authentic leadership and the development of culturally

responsive school environments. This research is particularly pertinent to the current study, as both the participants and I have completed the ILEAD program. As an insider to this leadership community, I possess numerous shared professional connections and experiences that have shaped participants' growth as educational leaders. This shared context offers valuable insights into the leadership experiences of Indigenous women within Montana's K–12 educational systems.

Montana Indian Education for All

Montana is a distinguished and distinctive state, recognized not only for its scenic landscapes but also as the residence of seven Indian reservations and twelve tribal nations. Through the resilience, advocacy, and perseverance of Indigenous peoples and their allies, Montana garnered national recognition for its pioneering constitutional provision mandating all residents to learn about the histories and cultures of the state's tribes. Article X, Section 1(2) of the Montana State Constitution states: "The state recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of the American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity" (Hopkins, 2020, p. 15). This constitutional requirement obligates public schools in Montana to incorporate tribal histories and cultures within their curricula (Hopkins, 2020; Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Hopkins (2020) observes that "the constitutional mandate included in the Montana State Constitution was certainly bold for its time" (p. 17). Within a Western colonial framework, this boldness became even more significant when the state formally addressed the mandate in 1999 and subsequently allocated funding for its implementation in 2005 (Hopkins, 2020). Due to the leadership and advocacy of Indigenous women leaders, Carol Juneau, a former Montana State Representative, and her daughter, Denise Juneau, former Superintendent of Public Instruction,

Montana secured state funding in 2005 to develop curricula and professional development initiatives aimed at supporting implementation across all public schools (Hopkins, 2020). This accomplishment marked a significant victory for Montana's tribal nations, driven by a formidable mother-daughter duo—two resilient Indigenous women whose bravery, perseverance, and advocacy transformed educational practices within the state.

Regrettably, certain constraints have resulted in a troubling paradox. Some non-indigenous districts, characterized by greater staffing stability, fewer state-imposed intervention requirements, and increased discretionary time for curriculum development, are better positioned to implement Indigenous Education for All (IEFA) comprehensively than many schools located on or near reservations. This disparity does not signify a lack of commitment from Indigenous educators or communities; rather, it reflects the structural conditions established by state accountability systems, historical inequities, and persistent colonial frameworks that influence educational policy in Montana (Grande, 2015; Hopkins, 2020; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). The historical foundations of Indigenous education, current policies within Montana, and ongoing challenges related to Indian Education for All illustrate the intricate systems navigated by Indigenous women today. These systems, shaped by generations of colonial influence, inconsistent implementation, and ongoing inequalities, create the environment that influences the leadership experiences and practices of Indigenous women in K–12 schools (Grande, 2015; Cambrell, 2015; Hopkins, 2020; Phillips, 2024). Comprehending this broader context is essential to understanding their stories, responsibilities, and relational work. These structural conditions fundamentally influence the environment in which Indigenous women educators exercise leadership within Montana's educational institutions.

Conclusion

This chapter reviews the scholarly literature concerning Indigenous women's leadership, highlighting that leadership has traditionally been anchored in relationships, cultural accountability, reciprocity, and responsibilities towards community well-being, rather than in Western hierarchical models (Anderson, 2000; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Shotton et al., 2021; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Wilson, 2005; Zeilinger, 2016). Indigenous leadership embodies enduring responsibilities to people, place, culture, and future generations (Archibald, 2008; Kehoe, 1995; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). Despite the persistence of these longstanding traditions, Indigenous women continue to be underrepresented in formal educational leadership roles, particularly within K–12 public educational institutions serving reservation communities. Existing scholarly work demonstrates how colonial schooling systems, gendered expectations, and systemic inequities persistently influence Indigenous women's experiences within leadership roles (Brayboy, 2005; Brown, 2004; Grande, 2015; Starblanket & Green, 2024). Furthermore, a considerable portion of the existing literature concentrates on higher education or community leadership, thereby leaving a notable gap in the understanding of Indigenous women's experiences within rural and reservation K–12 educational settings.

This chapter also examined the historical and policy contexts shaping Indigenous education, including the legacy of boarding schools and contemporary initiatives such as Indian Education for All. These structures continue to reflect settler colonial influences that affect Indigenous leadership in public education. To address these gaps, this study centers the stories and lived experiences of Indigenous women leaders in Montana's K–12 public schools, drawing on Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) to understand leadership as culturally grounded and community-centered. Chapter 3 outlines the

methodology guiding this research, including Indigenous Storywork, relational sampling, and thematic analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed to explore the strengths and barriers experienced by Indigenous women serving in K–12 educational leadership roles in Montana. The purpose of this study was to understand how Indigenous women navigate leadership within Western educational systems while remaining accountable to their cultural responsibilities, tribal values, and community relationships. Guided by Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous Feminism (Starblanket & Green, 2024), and Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), this study sought to honor Indigenous ways of knowing while centering the lived experiences and voices of Indigenous women leaders.

This study utilized a qualitative research design grounded in Indigenous research methodologies. The chapter describes the research design, participant recruitment, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and data analysis processes. Interviews were conducted as relational storytelling conversations that emphasized reciprocity, respect, and relationship building. Participants were recruited through relational sampling within Indigenous educational networks (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Consistent with cultural protocol, tobacco ties were mailed to each participant as a respectful request for their time, knowledge, and stories.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify shared patterns and experiences among 10 Indigenous women who currently serve or have served as assistant principals, principals, and superintendents in public school systems (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Within Indigenous research paradigms, stories are not viewed merely as data; rather, they are understood as sources of knowledge, theory, teaching, and lived experience.

Research Design

This research integrates the frameworks of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), and Indigenous feminism (Anderson, 2000; Risling Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Suzack et al., 2010) to investigate how race, gender, and colonialism influence the experiences of Indigenous women in educational leadership. These theoretical perspectives also emphasize strengths, such as cultural grounding, kinship responsibilities, and relational accountability, as well as illustrate how Indigenous women exercise agency and sovereignty within institutions that have been historically shaped by processes of assimilation.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

This research is anchored in Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), which expands Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) by emphasizing the distinct political and colonial realities of Indigenous peoples within the United States. Instead of concentrating solely on racism, TribalCrit asserts that colonization is an omnipresent aspect of society that continues to influence Indigenous experiences through educational institutions and policies (Brayboy, 2005). This framework is particularly pertinent because Indigenous women in K–12 leadership positions navigate intersecting systems of settler colonialism, racialization, gendered power dynamics, and tribal sovereignty. TribalCrit offers a means of examining how these structures shape leadership experiences while also accentuating Indigenous resistance, survivance, and self-determination. Brayboy demonstrates that, for Indigenous communities, stories are more than simple narratives; they function as theory, serve as guides for communal survival, and act as reminders of collective responsibility. As this study employed qualitative interviews as a storytelling method, TribalCrit aligned both the research approach and theoretical framework. Within this context, stories functioned as both data and theory. Although Tribal

Critical Race Theory comprises nine tenets (see below), this study focuses on Tenets 3 and 5. Tenet 3 details how Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space shaped by both political and racialized identities, whereas Tenet 5 underscores that Indigenous perspectives understand culture, knowledge, and power in fundamentally different ways (Brayboy, 2005). TribalCrit enabled this investigation to contest Western conceptions of leadership rooted in hierarchy and authority by recognizing Indigenous leadership as relational, cultural, and community-centered.

Tenets of Tribal Critical Theory

The selection of Tribal Critical Race Theory for this investigation was predicated upon its acknowledgment of the distinctive political, historical, and racialized experiences of Indigenous peoples, as well as the persistent effects of colonization on Indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2005). Brayboy delineates nine core principles of Tribal Critical Race Theory that elucidate the interconnections among colonization, sovereignty, identity, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Although all nine principles inform this research, Tenets 3 and 5 hold particular significance. Tenet 3 acknowledges that Indigenous peoples inhabit a liminal space shaped by both political and racialized identities, whereas Tenet 5 underscores the understanding that culture, knowledge, and power are interpreted differently from Indigenous perspectives. Collectively, these principles offer a foundational framework for comprehending how Indigenous women exercise leadership within public educational systems while remaining anchored in their cultural identities and responsibilities.

TribalCrit offers an Indigenous perspective for analyzing the lived experiences of Indigenous women leaders. Utilizing this framework, this research investigated how K–12 educational systems pose obstacles for Indigenous women administrators, while concurrently highlighting their strengths, cultural knowledge, and relational methodologies.

Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous Feminism further deepened this understanding by underlining how Indigenous women lead in ways that differ from White Western feminist traditions. While mainstream feminism has often focused on rights, recognition, and equality within existing systems, Indigenous feminism centers resurgence, relationality, sovereignty, and the restoration of voices silenced through colonialism. Scholars (Anderson, 2016; Baldy, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Simpson, 2017) emphasize the importance of restoring Indigenous women's traditional roles as leaders, knowledge keepers, caregivers, and cultural stewards while resisting colonial systems that have disrupted Indigenous communities and governance structures.

Together, TribalCrit and Indigenous Feminism offered complementary frameworks that acknowledged both the challenges and strengths experienced by Indigenous women in educational leadership within colonial power structures. They shed light on Indigenous women's experiences of intersecting forms of racialized and gender-based oppression. As Starblanket and Green (2024) elucidate, Indigenous feminism opposes the intertwined forces of racism, sexism, and colonialism while challenging heteropatriarchal systems that centralize political, cultural, economic, and social authority. Instead of concentrating solely on gender equality, Indigenous feminism advocates for restoring Indigenous women's authority, responsibilities, and leadership roles within their communities, nations, and governance structures (Starblanket & Green, 2024).

Together, TribalCrit and Indigenous Feminism offer complementary perspectives for analyzing how Indigenous women maneuver within colonial educational systems, simultaneously drawing on cultural knowledge, relational responsibilities, and community-centered approaches to leadership.

Participants

Indigenous women in educational leadership navigate complex and often undervalued spaces within school systems that were historically designed to assimilate Indigenous peoples and suppress Indigenous cultures, languages, and ways of knowing (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). The women in this study work within predominantly Western educational structures while also serving as members of tribal nations. As a result, they are uniquely positioned to uphold tribal sovereignty while navigating the expectations of both their tribal communities and state educational systems, including the Montana Office of Public Instruction (Brayboy, 2005; Hopkins, 2020). This liminal positioning shapes how they lead, how they are perceived by others, and how they engage with authority within educational settings.

Considering that this research focused on the lived experiences of Indigenous women in educational administrative roles, the participants consisted of 10 Indigenous women who self-identified as Indigenous and who currently or previously held administrative positions within public schools located on or near Montana Indian reservations. These individuals held various leadership roles, including assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. All participants had completed the Indian Leadership Education and Development (ILEAD[3]) program at Montana State University. The purpose of ILEAD is to prepare Indigenous educators for administrative licensure, thereby enabling them to serve in public schools situated on or near Montana Indian reservations. The program was established to address ongoing staff turnover issues and to promote culturally grounded leadership within reservation schools. Since all participants pursued this leadership pathway, their connections were established through professional networks formed during their cohort experience. These relationships highlight the interconnectedness of

[3] See: https://www.montana.edu/education/grad/edlead/ilead/

Indigenous education leadership communities in Montana and served as the basis for the relational sampling method employed in this study.

Participants were recruited through relational sampling, consistent with Indigenous research methodologies grounded in relationship, trust, and community accountability (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Tuck, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Initial recruitment occurred through professional networks, social media outreach, and recommendations shared through community connections, often referred to as the "moccasin telegraph" (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). As an Indigenous educator who has worked and attended graduate school with many Indigenous women leaders in Montana, I was positioned within existing professional networks that facilitated culturally appropriate recruitment. Upon establishing contact with potential participants, I requested mail and email addresses to distribute the informed consent form (Appendix A) and the interview questions (Appendix B).

In accordance with Indigenous research practices and principles of relational accountability, each potential participant was sent a tobacco tie as a culturally appropriate gesture to solicit their time, knowledge, and narratives. A total of 15 tobacco ties were dispatched, resulting in eight responses to the initial outreach. Subsequently, two additional participants were recruited through follow-up communications via text message and telephone contact.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants' geographic dispersion, given that Montana reservations are widely distributed across the state. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom's recording feature. Recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai to generate initial transcripts. The participants and I

reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and completeness before analysis. All digital files, including recordings and transcripts, are password-protected.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were examined through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After a comprehensive review of each transcript, an initial coding process was undertaken, wherein key phrases and responses pertinent to the research questions were identified. These codes were subsequently clustered into broader categories to discern patterns and recurring concepts among participants. This iterative methodology facilitated the emergence of common themes concerning strengths, barriers, and leadership experiences. Consistent with the Indigenous Storywork approach, which considers story both as a methodological tool and a means of meaning-making, the analysis emphasized relational context, interpretation, and respect for participants' narratives, rather than reducing them to discrete data points (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

Human Subjects Considerations

This research was reviewed by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) and classified as Exempt Status (Category 2) under federal human subjects' regulations[4]. This exemption applies to studies involving interviews and educational environments in which participant identities are safeguarded, and disclosure does not reasonably threaten their safety. Although the study was exempt from ongoing IRB (see Appendix C) oversight, ethical standards were upheld. Participants received informed consent instructions (see Appendix A) detailing the study's goals, procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, lack of payment, and

confidentiality measures. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality

Considering the closely-knit and interconnected fabric of Montana reservation communities, further precautions were implemented to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device accessible solely to the researcher. Consent forms and participant contact information were kept separate from the interview data. Any quotations included in presentations, publications, or written reports were anonymized, and participants were afforded the opportunity to review their individual quotations prior to dissemination.

Conclusion

This chapter delineates the qualitative research design and Indigenous methodologies guiding this investigation. Based on Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) and Indigenous Feminism (Starblanket & Green, 2024), the study examined how colonialism, race, and gender impact the experiences of Indigenous women in K–12 educational leadership. These frameworks establish a foundation for comprehending leadership that is culturally centered and influenced by persistent colonial power structures.

This research was guided by Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) as both a methodological and theoretical framework, positioning story as a form of theory and knowledge alongside relational accountability. Participants were recruited through relational sampling within Indigenous educational networks, reflecting the interconnected nature of Indigenous leadership communities. Data were collected through story-based interviews with 10 Indigenous women who are members of one of the Montana Tribal Nations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to strengths, barriers, and leadership experiences. Throughout the analysis process, participants' stories were interpreted within their cultural and community contexts rather than reduced to isolated data points. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and cultural protocols, were carefully and respectfully upheld, and each participant received a tobacco tie in accordance with Indigenous research practices. Together, these methodological choices reflect a commitment to conducting research that is respectful, accountable, and grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored the strengths and barriers experienced by Indigenous women serving as school administrators. Data were collected through interviews with 10 Indigenous Wiyas (women) who currently serve or have served as assistant principals, principals, and superintendents. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were utilized in place of actual names. Participants were designated using the term *'Wiya'* (woman) followed by numbers in the researcher's Nakoda language. For clarity, the pseudonyms are as follows: Wiya Wazi (Woman One), Wiya Numba (Woman Two), Wiya Yamni (Woman Three), Wiya Doba (Woman Four), Wiya Zapta (Woman Five), Wiya Shakpe (Woman Six), Wiya Iyushna (Woman Seven), Wiya Shoknog (Woman Eight), Wiya Napjuwang (Woman Nine), and Wiya Wikjemna (Woman Ten).

To save time and resources and to prevent traveling hundreds of miles across Montana, interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom. Most of the Wiyas participated in a comfortable non-professional environment. Wiya Wazi joined the interview from a home intentionally maintained as a sanctuary of positivity where drugs and alcohol are not permitted. The property included a cabin and is frequently visited by moose relatives. Wiya Numba participated by phone because video connectivity was unavailable. Wiya Yamni joined from a small room at home and periodically attended to a grandchild during the interview. Wiya Doba participated by cellphone from a living room setting. Minor internet connectivity issues occurred when a helicopter flew over the rural area surrounding the home. Wiya Zapta joined from a bedroom where a brightly colored star quilt was strikingly visible. Wiya Shakpe participated by phone from a small corner of the room with stronger Wi-Fi reception. Wiya Iyushina, the youngest of the Wiyas, joined from a bedroom and participated in a comfortable setting. Wiya

Shaknoga joined from a spare bedroom in their mother's home while visiting. Wiya Napjuwung participated from an office. Although staff and students were not present that day, administrative responsibilities continued, creating a more formal interview setting than a home environment. Wiya Wicjemina joined from a kitchen table and appeared eager to reconnect and share updates about life in addition to responding to the interview questions.

The thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) prayer, spirituality, and culture are the heart of Indigenous women's educational leadership; (2) leadership is grounded in relational responsibility; (3) Indigenous women lead through trauma while also engaging in healing; and (4) Indigenous women navigate gendered racism and lateral violence and pay disparities. These themes are illustrated through participants' experiences and narratives. Interview data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. Frequently occurring codes (see Figure 1) included culture (80), community (74), family (60), prayer (35), helping (35), healing (20), relationships (16), trauma (15), listening (14), and responsibility (10). These recurring codes contributed to the development of the four themes presented in this chapter.

Figure 1

Frequency of Initial Codes Identified Across Participant Interviews

Codes			
Ceremony	9	Family	60
Relatives	7	Listening	14
Culture	80	Trauma	15
Pray	35	Relationships	16
Smudging	16	Healing	20
Helping	35	Value	15
Resilience	11	Balance	12
Responsibility	10	Community	74

Data indicate that Indigenous women lead differently. Their leadership is grounded in spirituality, prayer, and relational responsibility to community and to the needs of children. They recognize the lasting impacts of historical and generational trauma within their communities and lead with an awareness of those realities. At the same time, they often navigate leadership with what participants described as “arrows in their backs” caused by lateral oppression and violence, or “crabs in the bucket.” Even amid these challenges, they continue to lead through survivance, resilience, resurgence, and commitment to their people.

Collectively, these themes represent the experiences of Indigenous women school administrators in this study. Findings are expressed through participants' narratives and systematically categorized by themes identified in the data. The following sections present each theme and the participant stories that contributed to the development of these themes.

Theme 1: Prayer, Spirituality, and Culture are the Heart of Indigenous Women’s Education Leadership

Theme 1 suggests that spirituality, culture, and ceremony are not separate from Indigenous women’s leadership; rather, they are foundational to how leadership is understood and practiced. Participants consistently described turning to prayer, ceremony, family teachings, and spiritual practices when navigating the challenges of educational leadership. These findings indicate that leadership for Indigenous women extends beyond administrative responsibilities and is deeply connected to cultural identity, wellness, and relationships.

Linklater (2014) writes, “Indigenous women articulated that resilience is not the disregard of painful events, but the ability to process adversities through relationship with Creator, others, and self” (p. 25). This understanding was reflected throughout the data. Nine of the 10 Indigenous women leaders reported turning to spirituality, prayer, and cultural practices

when faced with barriers and challenges in their leadership roles. Practices such as burning sage or sweetgrass, holding an iniskim (buffalo rock), participating in bundle ceremonies, using crystals, and attending church services served as sources of strength, guidance, grounding, and protection. Spirituality supported participants in navigating the emotional, relational, and political demands of leading within reservation communities and school systems shaped by colonial structures. Prayer, ceremony, faith, and guidance from elders helped participants make decisions, regulate emotions, sustain hope, and remain committed to their responsibilities despite adversity.

Participants' voices further illustrated how spirituality helped them overcome barriers, remain motivated, and continue leading. Wiya Wazi shared, "I get support through smudge and prayers. My cultural elders, they have two bundles, using those things to guide me." Similarly, Wiya Yamni explained, "I pray. I light my sage and sweet grass, I smudge, I pray a lot. I am very thankful." Wiya Doba emphasized the consistency of these practices, stating,

> So many times, I would be in my office, and I would just say a quick prayer. I'd be walking down the hall, and I would be praying. That is what was getting me through the moment. As soon as I wake up, I smudge and pray… I smudge at least two times a day… other times when I'm feeling like something is going on, I will light a smudge.

For Wiya Shakpe, spirituality supported emotional regulation during difficult interactions: "If I have a bad interaction with a parent or a student, I'll go smudge, that's my calmness." Likewise, Wiya Shaknoga described prayer as a constant presence in her daily life, stating, "I pray when I'm coming home. I pray in the car… it's that trust, it's that faith, that's what's got me through." She also shared how enduring breast cancer while serving in leadership tested and deepened her faith:

> I pray for my staff on my way to work. I pray for whatever they may be going through as I drive. After those heart-to-heart conversations in my office, I give everything to God. Then I was truly tested. I was leading while having cancer and going deeper in my faith, but it was always there. I grew stronger, and I gave everything to Him.

Wiya Wicjemina described the role of spirituality and faith in her everyday life, which also contributed to her leadership as a high school principal:

> My parents, my family we are strong in spirituality, we believe in God, Jesus, and we believe in prayer. Having a relationship with God is what's important to me. I was taught to turn to God no matter what, so I push for prayer before we do anything…in the scripture it says you teach your kids about God, then they won't stray from that. Even if they do, they'll come back to what they were taught. I live by that.

Wiya Wicjemina's reflection illustrates how spiritual teachings learned within family and faith traditions continue to guide leadership practices and decision-making.

Theme 2: Indigenous Women's Education Leadership is Rooted in Relational Responsibility

Data revealed that Indigenous women understood leadership as a responsibility to others rather than authority over others. Participants frequently described leadership through helping, serving, supporting, and remaining accountable to students, families, and community members. Many shared stories of learning leadership through family, community, and cultural teachings emphasize service and responsibility to others. The following narratives illustrate how participants understood and practiced leadership as relational responsibility.

Wiya Wazi shared how leadership and service were taught through family and cultural teachings:

> My people have been of service to our community. Through medicine lodges, medicine bundles, and the tribal council, my mom served as the hospital director and a social worker; she helped many people. My dad was the Dean of Academics at the college; he had a lot of professional leadership connections.

Wiya Wazi also explained that the lessons learned through serving in a teepee during ceremonies have helped her in leading and modeling care for community:

> Learning how to be a head server was really important. It is hard to be a head server in a teepee, figuring out how much food you have to cook, who gets served, and being respectful and doing it in a timely manner… doing it in a humble, quick fashion. So, that's what I do. I help. It's normal for me.

Similarly, Wiya Numba stated, "I kept getting duties assigned to me, and I kept taking on more because that's just how I am. I'm a helper. I have that nurturing maternal role. My instinct is to help others."

Wiya Numba also explained that relationships with relatives came with higher expectations. She shared, "I'm harder on my relatives than I am on any other kids, because I know they can do better. I know they were taught better."

Wiya Yamni reflected on the importance of leading within your own community:

> I can't see myself doing this and having these connections in any other community… It's like when you think about the ground and the roots beneath the ground connect us, this is where I belong, and these are my people.

Wiya Yamni explained that community members know her family and lineage, which creates an immediate bond and trust.

Wiya Shoknoga described how relational leadership shaped her interactions with students who were sent for discipline:

> When I talk with kids each day, I have to connect with them socially and emotionally. I ask them what they were thinking, and then I ask who their parents are… Did you know we're related? You are a descendant of Chief so-and-so. We have to make our ancestors and our name proud.

Wiya Shoknoga also added, "You have to build relationships in order to truly relate to them."

Wiya Doba reflected on relational accountability as a form of nurturing care: "How do these non-Natives stay professional and hands-off, where I feel like I have to mother a lot of these kids?" Wiya Doba also described leadership as selflessness rather than self-serving: "I think you're always trying to see where the good is, what good can we do? How can we help? And being selfless, self-serving stuff is not good." These reflections illustrate how leadership is understood as a responsibility to care for and support others. Rather than viewing leadership as a position of authority, Wiya Doba demonstrated how to help, nurture, and act in ways that benefit the collective well-being of students and communities.

Wiya Zapta noted that community organization is especially important in high-poverty communities, such as our rural reservation communities, where the schools are the heart of the community. Wiya Zapta shared, "We had something going on every single month. We fed them and had prizes." This participant demonstrates how leadership extends beyond school management to create opportunities for relationship-building, care, and community engagement.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that relational accountability can be difficult and demanding. Wiya Zapta reflected on balancing professional obligations and kinship responsibilities: "I was related to a lot of our people. I'm related to everyone, basically. I

neglected a lot of my own family events because my priority at the time was being a school leader. That was a regret." This reflection brings attention to the fact that leadership grounded in relationships can also require personal sacrifice and the importance of balancing relational responsibilities.

Wiya Iyushna described relational responsibility as a commitment to future generations: "I try to be more community-minded and place a high value on kids… We are told they are our future; these are our next leaders." Likewise, Wiya Shaknoga emphasized that Indigenous leadership requires knowing one's community: "You bring in culture, language, and an understanding of how the community works, the community members and their families, where they live, which grandma is raising which children, and what they value." These insights demonstrate the importance participants placed on cultural knowledge, kinship relationships, and responsibilities to their communities. Wiya Shoknoga also emphasized that leadership begins with knowing the people you serve: "Understanding each of your staff members, who they are, their families, who they're related to, because then you know who your team is." This participant added, "You ask them how their baby is doing, or remember their child's name. Relationships go far." These words demonstrate that trust is built through everyday acts of recognition, care, and relational presence.

Wiya Shakpe, who chose to leave education leadership, emphasized that the hardest part of leaving was not the adults, but the students. They shared, "It's hard to walk away from these kids… that was the hardest thing." This reflects how leadership decisions were shaped by deep care for children and community.

Wiya Napjuwang also described leadership as carrying forward the efforts of previous generations: "My aunties and mom didn't get those same opportunities that we did… I carry the

obligation of what they tried to create before me. It is now my responsibility to keep going with that, but to make it my own." Their words depict leadership as a responsibility across generations, honoring the efforts and sacrifices of those who came before us.

Wiya Doba reflected on childhood experiences with a mother who served as an educational leader and the responsibilities that fell upon the eldest child within the household. By the age of 15, Wiya Doba had assumed the role of the "second mom" for the family, caring for younger siblings while simultaneously managing academic pursuits, athletics, and household duties. These experiences influenced Wiya Doba's understanding of the demanding nature of leadership and strengthened a commitment to achieving a more sustainable balance between leadership responsibilities and family life.

Wiya Doba's narrative illustrates the extent to which leadership responsibilities can exceed professional environments and influence family relationships across multiple generations. The narrative underscores the demanding nature of responsibilities associated with being an Indigenous woman, an elder sister, and the eldest daughter. At the same time, such duties may foster the development of future leaders who are committed to serving others. Wiya Doba also reflected on the sacrifices made by a mother who served the community through educational leadership: "My mom gave up all the important things for her education leadership job... loved what was done for the community, but sacrificed family, and family sacrificed too."

Together, these Wiyas showcase acts of relational accountability, providing monthly engagement activities, feeding their community, continuing the legacy of their kin, and emphasizing relationships and connections; a humanized approach to leadership.

Theme 3: Indigenous Women in Education Leadership Lead Through Trauma While Healing

Participants delineated experiences of trauma, recovery, and resilience during their tenure in leadership positions.

Participants described how witnessing the effects of trauma, poverty, and hardship on children strengthened their commitment to remain in education and advocate for their communities. Wiya Doba shared a story that influenced the decision to remain in education:

> I had thoughts of getting out of education at one time… there was a little boy, probably about six or seven, walking in the morning, and he only had one shoe on. It looked like he grabbed any coat he could find and was just walking. I looked at him, and I just thought, no, my job is not done here. I need to help all of these kids so that they know to be self-sufficient, independent, and have skills to do that. I'm always trying to empower children.

Wiya Doba also spoke directly about the trauma of leadership: "The first thing that popped into my mind was the trauma of being a female Native leader, the oppression of dealing with the challenges…the trauma of leading."

Wiya Shakpe shared insight into self-identity and trauma learned while leading:

> We're discussing kids and where they are with their self-identity… about 15% are connected through church. About 15% are connected with culture, and the other 70% are lost. That's where I found myself, within that 70%. I'm working on my own healing journey, still grieving. This conversation started to drive me to really look at the kids. When we talk about trauma-informed, what is it really? And what is trauma enabling?

Wiya Shakpe further described how leadership in a small reservation public school inflicted harm, causing trauma and emotional heartbreak, but found healing through another school district, which was a bigger school.

> I did a lot of self-reflection. I will be honest, I had a lot of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome) after leaving that school, a lot of anger… It took a lot for me to go back into public education, but last year at my new school was a really good school year. I'm thankful I went back. The kids really helped me heal.

Wiya Napjuwung described the internal struggles that were carried while serving in leadership:

> I had thoughts of being adequate enough for the job, competent enough, along with my own self-defeating struggles in healing. I endured all of those… all of the complications behind just being in that role at that time was insanely hard.

Wiya Zapta described serving as the longest-tenured superintendent in the school district's history, remaining in the position for seven years despite considerable challenges:

> I was the longest-tenured superintendent in this school's history. Seven years, I was the superintendent, and that wasn't the easiest time. Their turnover rate is two to three years for leadership. Seven years, I withstood it all and went through some of the cruelest times as a leader… but, in those seven years, I built the best relationships.

Wiya Shoknoga also spoke about the harm caused when Indigenous people are discouraged or pushed away from leadership roles within their own communities. Reflecting on this experience, Wiya Shoknoga noted, "Our own people often drive us away." The loss of Indigenous leaders who understand the culture, history, and needs of their people was described as particularly painful. These reflections highlight the emotional impact of lateral oppression and

community conflict, illustrating how Indigenous women often experience trauma while serving in leadership positions within their own communities. Despite these challenges, participants continued to demonstrate commitment to their people and communities, reinforcing the theme of Indigenous women leading through trauma while healing.

Wiya Yamni explained experiencing divorce, alcoholism, and breast cancer. They persisted in moving forward, reminding themself that "everything that was meant to destroy you, you survived." Their words encapsulate a fundamental insight: Indigenous women leaders are not solely characterized by trauma.

Together, participants described leading while navigating personal, professional, and community challenges. Their stories reflected experiences of trauma, healing, perseverance, and commitment to the students and communities they served.

Theme 4: Indigenous Women in Education Leadership Navigate Gendered Racism and Lateral Violence, Including Pay Disparities

Participants described experiences of gendered racism and lateral violence within educational leadership and reservation community spaces. They described not being heard, not being respected as professionals, and not being recognized as leaders. Several participants shared stories of being undervalued, questioned, or dismissed, while others described tensions within their communities and workplaces, including lateral violence. A common phrase used across the interviews to describe these experiences was "crabs in the bucket."

Wiya Numba's experienced pay disparities relative to their non-indigenous coworker highlights concerns about compensation and recognition in educational leadership. Despite serving as a principal and carrying significantly greater responsibilities than a classroom teacher, Wiya Numba described being compensated at a rate that did not reflect the extent of the position.

In contrast, when a White assistant principal was promoted to high school principal, the individual received a substantially higher salary and additional benefits, including free housing. Wiya Numba perceived these differences as reflecting unequal valuations of leadership roles and qualifications.

Likewise, Wiya Napjuwung shared experiences with compensation barriers as a school administrator:

> When it came to the budget area, I was never offered the opportunity to even look at the budgets or know what to ask for salary-wise. There was a non-Native woman in the dean of students' position making more than I made as the principal.

Wiya Napjuwung also described the gendered challenges of leadership and the struggle to be heard:

> Being a woman and being heard is challenging because you do not have that same male perspective, so just being heard is hard. Like Wilma Mankiller said, 'I've never run into more discrimination for being an Indigenous person than I did for being a woman.' That always stayed with me, and it would make me angry. Why is this so hard? Why does it have to be so hard?

Likewise, Wiya Wazi recalled a comment from an Indigenous male colleague, "He had some issues with me, but we still got along. He made a comment to me and said, 'You know what? Indigenous women are mean, they're bullies.' I had never thought of that at all. But we can be controlling because we get things done."

Wiya Wicjemina described encountering resistance from two non-Indigenous professionals while attempting to provide professional development related to Indian Education

for All: “I get no support from the principals. They say there is no time.” Wiya Wicjemina also described exclusion from professional social spaces:

> I feel like I’m making gains and building those relationships with principals, then another principal asked me if I was going to the Christmas party. I asked, ‘What party?’ She said it was in an admin group text, but I never got a text… They invited everyone but me.

Wiya Iyushna recounted experiences as an Indigenous woman whose voice was often dismissed:

> I feel like my last superintendent, who was a man, didn’t listen, so it made me feel like my voice didn’t matter. You know it does, but trying to intervene in conversations where it is mostly men is challenging.

Wiya Shakpe spoke about gendered racism and lateral violence while leading in a smaller reservation school district:

> As a leader in this school, you weren’t taken seriously in decision-making. It was almost as if people didn’t take you seriously, and you had to get tough and put your foot down before people actually listened.

Wiya Shakpe also described the challenges of working with the school board. “Dealing with the board and the chauvinistic attitudes of our chair, how he treated women, he would not even listen to you, let alone try to work with you or solve problems.”

Wiya Shakpe described workplace discrimination and lateral violence as factors that contributed to leaving a leadership role that had been planned as a long-term position. “Without that, I don’t think I would have quit. I would have kept putting myself through that stress and chaos because I planned to stay there for a long time.” Similarly, Wiya Zapta noted: “If anyone

wants to know why I retired, left, and walked away, it would be because of that lateral violence from my board chair… That's why I'm no longer in leadership."

Wiya Zapta also discussed the experiences of gendered racism and not being seen as a potential leader:

> Our school needed help… I raised my hand and said I would help. Then this man, who was Native American, joined the school that year and was hired. They saw him as more of a leader than they saw me. He was male, older than me, and they chose him over me because he was a man. I had more experience, was more qualified, had been there longer, and I knew the people and the students.

Rather than relying solely on positional authority, Wiya Doba described earning leadership through service, consistency, and relational accountability. These experience demonstrates how Indigenous women leaders may face additional scrutiny when they do not fit dominant expectations of who should hold authority. Their story demonstrates that leadership legitimacy is often negotiated through relationships and trust, while also revealing how age and gender can influence the ways Indigenous women experience leadership roles.

Together, participants' stories highlight the challenges they experienced as Indigenous women in educational leadership, including exclusion, inequitable treatment, and lateral violence. Despite these barriers, they remained committed to serving their students, schools, and communities.

Conclusion

This chapter presents conversations with 10 Indigenous women who currently serve or have previously served as school administrators in K-12 public education institutions located on or near Indian reservations in Montana. Through thematic analysis, four main themes were

identified. Collectively, these themes illuminate both the strengths and challenges articulated by the participants regarding their leadership experiences. The subsequent chapter examines these findings alongside pertinent literature, theory, and Wiya's voices.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study suggest that the strengths and barriers experienced by Indigenous women serving in K–12 educational leadership roles on or near Montana Indian reservations are deeply connected to the ongoing impacts of colonization. Participants described drawing upon ancestral teachings, cultural knowledge, spirituality, and community relationships to navigate the challenges of educational leadership. These strengths were reflected in leadership practices grounded in service, reciprocity, relational responsibility, and commitment to future generations.

Rather than defining leadership through hierarchy, authority, or positional power, participants described leadership as a responsibility to serve tribal children, families, and communities. Their stories revealed a deep commitment to supporting students and creating opportunities for future generations while simultaneously navigating workplace conflict, lateral violence, self-doubt, health challenges, and the demands of educational leadership. Participants also described the ongoing tension of working within Western educational systems while remaining accountable to tribal values, cultural identity, language revitalization, and community well-being.

Consistent with Indigenous Storywork (Archibald 2008), storytelling served as a means of sharing knowledge, reflecting on lived experiences, and making meaning of leadership journeys. Through their stories, participants described leadership as culturally grounded, relational, and community-centered while confronting systemic barriers rooted in colonial structures. Despite these challenges, participants continued to lead with purpose, resilience, and dedication to their communities.

This chapter discusses the findings through the lenses of Tribal Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Feminism, Indigenous Storywork, and relational accountability (Anderson, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Baldy, 2018; Brayboy, 2005; Starblanket & Green, 2024; Wilson, 2008). The discussion examines how the experiences shared by participants contribute to a broader understanding of Indigenous women's educational leadership and the ways Indigenous women continue to lead, resist, heal, and create pathways for future generations. Four interconnected themes guide this discussion: (1) prayer, spirituality, and culture are the heart of Indigenous women's educational leadership; (2) Indigenous women's leadership is rooted in relational responsibility; (3) Indigenous women lead through trauma while healing; and (4) Indigenous women navigate gendered racism and lateral violence, including pay disparities.

Discussion

The findings of this study support existing research on Indigenous women's educational leadership by illustrating recurring challenges, including burnout, isolation, lateral violence, pay disparities, and the demands of navigating colonial educational systems while remaining accountable to community, culture, and family (Brown, 2004; Henderson et al., 2015; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Minthorn & Shotton, 2019). These findings suggest that such experiences are not isolated incidents but reflect broader patterns that continue to influence Indigenous women serving in leadership roles. Consistent with previous research, participants described balancing professional leadership responsibilities with cultural obligations, kinship roles, and commitments to community, often within systems that were not designed to support Indigenous ways of leading (Henderson et al., 2015; Kenny & Fraser, 2012).

As an Indigenous woman who previously served as a principal, I recognized many of these experiences within my own leadership journey. The findings reinforced that the challenges

associated with educational leadership are often shared among Indigenous women and are shaped by ongoing colonial structures and expectations. At the same time, the findings revealed important sources of strength and resilience, including spirituality, cultural identity, relational accountability, community responsibility, and ancestral teachings.

The following discussion examines the four themes through the lenses of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous Feminism (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Starblanket & Green, 2024), Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). These frameworks help explain how Indigenous women navigate leadership within colonial educational systems. Tribal Critical Race Theory recognizes that colonization is endemic and continues to shape educational institutions (Brayboy, 2005), while Indigenous Feminism centers Indigenous women's leadership as an act of resurgence and decolonization (Anderson, 2011; Baldy, 2018; Starblanket & Green, 2024). Indigenous Storywork and relational accountability are intertwined and underscore the importance of relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility. TribalCRT, Indigenous Storywork, and Relational Accountability are sources that guide Indigenous research methodologies (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

Theme 1: Prayer, Spirituality, and Culture are at the Heart of Indigenous Women's Educational Leadership

From an Indigenous knowledge perspective, spirituality served as a key source of guidance, resilience, and stability. While participants followed various spiritual traditions, including traditional Indigenous ceremonies, Christianity, or spirituality through crystals, breathing exercises, or a combination, they all viewed spirituality as a source of leadership in times of stress, conflict, and uncertainty. This indicates that Indigenous women's leadership relies not only on professional skill but also on spiritual and cultural forms of understanding.

The narratives revealed an ongoing effort to maintain stability across the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental dimensions of leadership. These findings suggest that Indigenous women's leadership is inherently linked to spirituality. Rather than defining leadership in terms of hierarchy or authority, participants described it as serving their community, living ethically, caring for others, and upholding relational responsibilities to family, community, and future generations.

Prayer and spirituality also align with the principles of relational accountability, which is covered in Theme 2 of this study. Wilson (2008) emphasized that research and relationships should begin and end in a good way, often through prayer, ceremony, and the sharing of food. Similarly, Archibald (2008) described teachings from Elders that stress the importance of opening gatherings with prayer or song and seeking guidance from the Creator. As Archibald (2008) explained, "It is not shameful to pray to the Creator for guidance, especially with this kind of work" (p. 50). These teachings reflect Indigenous understandings of accountability that extend beyond human relationships to include responsibilities to ancestors, future generations, the spirit world, and the Creator.

The findings also align with TribalCrit's Tenets 3, 4, and 5 (Brayboy, 2005). Participants occupied spaces shaped by colonial educational systems while simultaneously maintaining responsibilities to their tribal communities, cultures, and identities. Through the incorporation of language, prayer, cultural teachings, Elders, and ceremonial practices within schools, participants created opportunities for Indigenous students to see themselves reflected within educational environments that have historically marginalized Indigenous ways of knowing. These actions represent more than cultural activities; they reflect acts of survivance, cultural continuity, and tribal self-determination.

The findings further support TribalCrit Tenet 5, which recognizes that culture, knowledge, and power are understood differently from Indigenous perspectives. Participants rarely described leadership through authority, control, or hierarchy. Instead, leadership was understood through spirituality, service, cultural responsibility, and relationships. The centrality of prayer and spirituality throughout participants' stories suggests that Indigenous women's leadership is grounded in cultural knowledge systems that continue to shape leadership practices despite the ongoing impacts of colonization.

Kehoe (1995) provides an important historical and cultural lens for understanding Indigenous women's leadership. Kehoe described Indigenous women as spiritual intermediaries whose responsibilities extend beyond family and community to include sacred obligations. As life-givers, women hold important cultural and spiritual responsibilities that connect them to the Creator and to the continuation of Indigenous ways of life. Kehoe further discussed the role of the Blackfoot holy woman and the spiritual responsibilities associated with ceremonies such as the Sundance, where women undertake significant commitments of fasting, prayer, and service (p. 116). These examples demonstrate that Indigenous women's leadership has long been connected to spirituality, responsibility, and service rather than positional authority.

The findings of this study reflect these teachings. Participants consistently described prayer, smudging, ceremony, and spiritual guidance as foundational to their leadership practices. Leadership was not discussed primarily in terms of authority or control but through responsibilities to students, families, communities, and future generations. Kehoe's work helps contextualize these findings by illustrating that spirituality has historically been intertwined with Indigenous women's leadership roles. The participants' reliance on prayer and spiritual practices suggests that leadership is understood not only as a professional responsibility but also as a

relational and spiritual commitment. In this way, Theme 1 reinforces the understanding that prayer and spirituality are not separate from leadership but are at the heart of Indigenous women's educational leadership.

An unexpected discovery was the significant role that fathers played in the leadership journeys of the participants. Seven out of 10 participants identified their fathers as crucial sources of support, guidance, and encouragement. This finding challenges the notion that Indigenous feminism predominantly focuses on women's interactions with other women, thus distinguishing Indigenous feminism from the Western conception of feminism. Instead, the participants' accounts affirm that leadership is bolstered through balanced, mutually respectful relationships with both women and men. From an Indigenous feminist perspective, these findings suggest that Indigenous women's leadership is rooted in relationality, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, rather than in gender opposition.

The findings suggest that spirituality is not separate from Indigenous women's leadership. When viewed through a critical Indigenous lens, leadership and spirituality go hand in hand. Participants described leadership as a responsibility grounded in prayer, cultural teachings, relationships, and service to others. These findings demonstrate that Indigenous women's leadership is inherently relational, providing a foundation for the next theme, Indigenous women's leadership as relational responsibility to community, culture, and future generations.

Theme 2: Indigenous Women's Education Leadership is Rooted in Relational Responsibility

The second theme revealed that relational responsibility is central to Indigenous women's educational leadership. Participants described leadership not as a position of individual authority but as a responsibility tied to tribal identity, Indigenous ways of knowing, and accountability to

students, families, relatives, communities, and future generations. Their stories demonstrated that leadership decisions were guided by relationships, reciprocity, and collective well-being rather than personal advancement or hierarchical power.

These findings align with Indigenous scholarship indicating the importance of relationships within leadership and community life. Archibald (2008) explained that establishing collaborative relationships requires trust, respect, and open communication (p. 110). Similarly, Wilson (2008) suggests that relationships are foundational to Indigenous ways of knowing and being, while Leon (2012) affirms that listening to and honoring Indigenous perspectives is necessary for overcoming historical injustices through leadership. McCloud (2012) further described First Nations women's leadership as grounded in caring, sharing, reciprocity, and service to the collective good. Collectively, these scholars illustrate that Indigenous leadership is relational, community-centered, and embedded in responsibilities to others.

Findings reflected these principles in practice. Participants described beginning and ending school events with prayer in the tribal language, sharing meals with families during school activities, promoting Indigenous pride and self-identity, and incorporating cultural teachings through activities such as ribbon skirt making and beading. These actions demonstrate how relational responsibility is enacted through everyday leadership practices that strengthen connections among students, families, schools, and communities.

Several participants emphasized the importance of building relationships with staff, students, and community members. Effective leadership within Indigenous communities requires an understanding of kinship networks, community values, and shared responsibilities for raising children. This relational accountability distinguishes Indigenous women's leadership from many Western leadership approaches.

Theme 2 aligns closely with TribalCrit Tenets 4, 5, and 7 (Brayboy, 2005). Participants described their leadership as a relational responsibility grounded in service to students, families, communities, and future generations. Through their leadership practices, Indigenous women created space for tribal values, cultural teachings, and community priorities within educational systems that have historically marginalized Indigenous ways of knowing. In doing so, participants exercised forms of tribal self-determination and autonomy that reflect TribalCrit's fourth tenet.

The findings also support TribalCrit's fifth tenet, which recognizes that culture, knowledge, and power are understood differently from an Indigenous lens (Brayboy, 2005). For the women in this study, educational leadership was not simply employment to earn a salary. Instead, leadership was understood as helping others and serving the community. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly described themselves as helpers. Statements such as "I'm a helper," "that's who I am," and "that's what I do" emerged across multiple stories, suggesting a shared understanding of leadership grounded in service to others.

As Wiya Doba explained, there are many jobs available to pay the bills; however, the work of Indigenous educational leadership is about making a difference for tribal children and communities. Participants often spoke about stepping forward to help when needed, supporting students and families, mentoring staff, and carrying responsibilities that extended beyond their job duties. This finding suggests that Indigenous women understand leadership not primarily as a position, but as an opportunity to help others, to make a difference in their tribal communities. Their stories reflect Indigenous values of reciprocity, responsibility, and community care, where leadership is measured by one's contributions to the well-being of others rather than by title, status, or compensation (Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Finally, the findings align with TribalCrit's seventh tenet, which emphasizes the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future (Brayboy, 2005). Participants described leadership as guiding our future as Indigenous people. For example, Wiya Iyushna stressed the need to invest in children, who are the future leaders of tribal communities. Wiya Iyushna also underscored the importance of being community-oriented, recognizing that educational leadership supports not only children's academics but also the community's overall well-being.

Similarly, Wiya Numba described how students with special needs hold a special place within Indigenous communities. As a special education teacher, Wiya Numba explained that Indigenous people often place a high value on children with disabilities because they are seen as having a unique purpose on earth. This perspective reflects Indigenous philosophies and inherent values. Together, these stories demonstrate how Indigenous women leaders draw on cultural teachings when envisioning the future for their communities.

Participants focused on children, community, and future generations, embodying TribalCrit's seventh tenet and demonstrating how Indigenous educational leadership is shaped by ancestral knowledge and the collective well-being of their people (Brayboy, 2005; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Indigenous educational leaders often prioritize relational responsibility, focusing on building trust through strong connections with staff, students, and the community. These relationships provide strength and purpose but also come with emotional burdens. The next section discusses how Indigenous women maintain leadership while dealing with trauma, burnout, and colonialism's lasting effects.

Theme 3: Indigenous Women in Education Leadership Lead through Trauma While Healing

The third theme affirms that colonization remains endemic and continues to influence the educational and community environments where women assume leadership roles. Participants articulated how lateral oppression, violence, and division can disrupt trust, collaboration, belonging, and relational accountability.

Overall, the women in this study suggest that leadership can become a source of trauma when experiencing exclusion, resistance, or a lack of support from within their own communities. Viewed through TribalCrit, these dynamics can be understood as manifestations of colonialism's enduring effects on Indigenous communities, disrupting traditional values of kinship, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. The trauma caused by colonization remains endemic, as TribalCrit outlines through Tenet 1: Colonization is endemic to society. Linklater (2014) shares how colonialism, manufactured by settlers, caused a great deal of damage to the spirits of Indigenous peoples. Colonial violence was created and enforced by governments and legislations (p.20). Linklater (2014) continues by helping us understand trauma through an Indigenous lens.

Linklater illustrates the impacts of colonization, which has caused a majority of indigenous people to live with trauma, and for many, it is multigenerational. It is also reproduced and reinvented in various forms. This is where leading with trauma while healing becomes Theme 3. Indigenous women in this study faced barriers in their leadership caused by trauma; they were healing their own generational trauma while being inflicted with more during leadership. Unfortunately, trauma comes with the duties of leading on Indian reservations. As Linklater (2014) underscores, colonization has caused multiple injuries, and people experience

trauma in a multi-traumatic context. Living in and with trauma is a common experience for Indigenous women in this study (p. 22).

When we look at TribalCrit Tenet 5, viewing from the lens of Indigenous women's leaders who lead on or near Indians reservations illustrates one of the barriers they face. Trauma was not solely a response to community experiences; it was also perpetuated within educational leadership environments themselves. One participant described how initiatives aimed at enhancing student outcomes were hindered by adult conflicts, lateral violence, and conflicting personal interests. Describing the situation metaphorically as "crabs in the bucket," the participant noted that leadership became preoccupied with interpersonal tensions rather than maintaining a unified focus on the best interests of students. Furthermore, the participant recounted experiencing substantial emotional distress as a consequence of these conflicts, which rendered the healing process challenging long after departing from the role.

Examined through the lens of TribalCrit, this finding indicates that leadership may serve as a domain where colonial styles of division, competition, and harm are perpetuated. Instead of exemplifying traditional Indigenous principles rooted in reciprocity, collective responsibility, and community care, these dynamics exemplify how colonialism persists in disrupting relationships and weakening collaboration. Conversely, the participant's reintegration into leadership exemplifies resilience, healing, and an unwavering dedication to serving Indigenous communities, notwithstanding the experience of considerable professional trauma.

Participants also depicted the emotional impact of experiencing public criticism and being undermined while in leadership positions. One participant observed that ongoing rumors, critique, and suspicion fostered feelings of stress and isolation, demonstrating how lateral

violence can evolve into a source of trauma for Indigenous women leaders even as they persist in serving their communities.

Another significant finding was that leadership transitions could become sources of trauma. One participant described losing close relationships with colleagues after being promoted into a leadership position, resulting in feelings of isolation and exclusion. Professional advancement was sometimes met with resentment rather than support. This finding suggests that trauma in educational leadership is not limited to external barriers or formal job responsibilities but can also emerge through the loss of belonging and sisterhood relationships.

Viewed through TribalCrit, these experiences may reflect the ways colonial conditions disrupt collective responsibility and reciprocity, replacing them with competition, division, and lateral violence. For Indigenous women leaders, advancement can therefore create both professional opportunities and unexpected social isolation. These experiences demonstrate the challenges faced by Indigenous women leaders, who often bear emotional burdens stemming from gendered racism, internal conflicts, questions of belonging, impostor syndrome, lateral violence, and attacks on their leadership. Despite these obstacles, they are expected to lead and support their communities. While it is reasonable to assume that Indigenous women and leaders understand these difficulties, they frequently encounter lateral oppression and violence from fellow Indigenous individuals, including both men and women, as well as from non-Indigenous entities. Such detrimental dynamics threaten to be transmitted to future generations, thereby perpetuating colonial patterns of division, lateral violence, and intergenerational trauma, instead of fostering traditional values of reciprocity, respect, and collective healing.

As participants reflected on their trauma, they also shared experiences of healing, resilience, and their determination to continue serving their communities. From a TribalCrit

(Brayboy, 2015) perspective, participants' stories reveal both the ongoing impacts of colonialism and the resilience of Indigenous women who continue to take on leadership roles within systems shaped by that history. The trauma experienced in these educational settings also fuels lateral violence and other inequalities faced by Indigenous women in education leadership, prompting us to explore Theme 4: how Indigenous women navigate gendered racism and lateral violence, including pay disparities.

Theme 4: Indigenous Women in Education Leadership Navigate Gendered Racism and Lateral Violence, Including Pay Disparities

Theme 4 highlights the ways Indigenous women navigate gendered racism, age-related biases, pay inequities, and challenges to leadership legitimacy. Viewed through Indigenous Feminism and TribalCrit (Anderson, 2000; Baldy, 2018; Brayboy, 2005; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Starblanket & Green, 2024), these findings suggest that colonial and patriarchal structures continue to influence how authority, leadership, and expertise are perceived within educational systems (Brown, 2004; Bush, 2021; Gambrell, 2016; Robinson et al., 2017). Participants described barriers that their male and non-Indigenous counterparts often did not face, illustrating the intersecting impacts of gender and Indigeneity on leadership experiences.

Theme 4 features overlapping frameworks that incorporate both TribalCrit and Indigenous feminism. The barriers discussed in their interviews pointed to gendered racism, with men seen more as leaders, white counterparts receiving higher salaries and better benefits than those offered to Indigenous women with the same education and from their communities. Age gaps and women being silenced and not being seen as legitimate leaders.

Tenets 1 and 5 are evident throughout this study, with barriers stemming from the ongoing effects of colonization. Tenet 5 helps readers view these issues from an Indigenous

perspective. The overlap between TribalCrit and Indigenous feminism is reflected in the endemic impacts of colonization. Indigenous people face marginalization, which is compounded for Indigenous women, creating intersecting barriers. Not only are they women, but they also belong to Indigenous communities, adding additional obstacles they must overcome.

A distinctive challenge articulated by Wiya Doba pertained to her experience as a younger Indigenous woman occupying a leadership role. Although they garnered respect within her community, overseeing staff members considerably older than herself posed difficulties concerning authority, credibility, and leadership expectations. Wiya Doba explained that sustaining trust required consistently honoring her commitments, diligently fulfilling her responsibilities, and treating others with respect despite these obstacles.

Wiya Zapta recounted being overlooked for a leadership opportunity despite possessing greater experience and a more comprehensive understanding of the students and community. When both Wiya Zapta and a Native male colleague expressed interest in the dean of students position, the male colleague was initially chosen. Reflecting on the situation, Wiya Zapta believed that gender significantly influenced the decision. Instead of accepting marginalization, they advocated for themself, and ultimately, both individuals were appointed to part-time administrative positions.

This finding underscores the reality that Indigenous women often encounter additional obstacles to leadership advancement, despite possessing the requisite qualifications, experience, and community knowledge necessary to serve as effective leaders. From the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, Wiya Zapta's experience exemplifies how patriarchal assumptions persist in shaping perceptions of authority and leadership. Their narrative indicates that Indigenous women are frequently obliged to demonstrate their competence repeatedly, in ways that their

male counterparts are not required to do. Concurrently, their refusal to accept marginalization exemplifies the resilience and determination articulated by many participants. As Wiya Zapta stated, “I will not be second to anyone. I am going to be equal.” Their words embody the strength Indigenous women draw upon as they navigate gendered barriers while consistently pursuing leadership opportunities.

Wiya Yamni detailed how modifications in the composition of leadership affected the culture within the school. Initially, leadership roles were predominantly occupied by men, and the district was colloquially termed the “Good Old Boys,” indicative of a culture wherein authority was linked to male dominance. Over time, leadership transitioned, culminating in a Tribal woman assuming the role of superintendent, with all administrative leadership positions thereafter held by Tribal women.

This transition was characterized as more than a mere change in personnel. According to Wiya Yamni, leadership has become more embedded in Tribal values, language, cultural knowledge, and community relationships. From an Indigenous Feminist perspective, this finding implies that Indigenous women leaders provide distinct strengths to educational leadership by emphasizing relationality, cultural continuity, and community accountability. Additionally, it underscores the significance of representation in leadership roles, as leaders with robust cultural and community ties may be better equipped to understand and address the needs of Indigenous students, families, and communities. These conclusions affirm the role of Indigenous women as custodians of cultural knowledge who contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural teachings across generations.

Together, these findings suggest that Indigenous women persist in navigating leadership roles within systems still influenced by colonial and patriarchal assumptions regarding authority,

credibility, and leadership. Participants articulated barriers related to age, gender, pay, and perceptions of leadership legitimacy, often being compelled to demonstrate their competence and worth in ways that their male and non-Indigenous counterparts were not. From the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, these experiences illustrate how colonial gender hierarchies continue to shape educational leadership spaces and impact perceptions of leadership capability.

Implication for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for educational leadership preparation programs, school districts, Tribal communities, Indigenous leaders, and policymakers. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of mentorship, cultural grounding, relational accountability, and wellness in sustaining Indigenous women in leadership roles. As a result, leadership preparation programs should intentionally incorporate Indigenous epistemologies, Indigenous leadership models, and the experiences of Indigenous women leaders into their curricula. Future leaders should be prepared to navigate challenges such as gendered racism, lateral violence, burnout, and the complexities of leading within colonial educational systems while remaining accountable to their communities and cultural values.

School districts and school boards serving Indigenous communities should recognize and support Indigenous approaches to leadership. Participants described leadership as anchored in service, cultural knowledge, relational accountability, and responsibility to future generations. These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness should be evaluated through a broader lens than traditional Western models that prioritize hierarchy, compliance, and managerial authority. Districts should invest in mentorship opportunities, equitable compensation practices, culturally responsive professional development, and leadership structures that value relationship-building and community engagement.

These findings also highlight the importance of wellness and sustainability in Indigenous women's leadership. Participants frequently discussed the challenges of balancing leadership responsibilities with family, caregiving, community obligations, and personal well-being. Supporting Indigenous women leaders requires more than professional development; it also requires creating environments that encourage healthy boundaries, self-care, cultural engagement, and opportunities for healing. Such supports may reduce burnout and improve the recruitment and retention of Indigenous women in educational leadership positions.

Finally, these findings suggest that mentorship is critical for future Indigenous women leaders. Participants emphasized the value of guidance from experienced leaders who understand the unique realities of leading within Indigenous communities and public educational systems. Leadership development efforts should create opportunities for Indigenous women to learn from one another, strengthen cultural identity, and develop the confidence necessary to navigate leadership roles. The stories shared in this study demonstrate that Indigenous women leaders draw upon ancestral teachings, cultural knowledge, and community relationships as sources of strength. Supporting future leaders in cultivating these connections may contribute to stronger schools, stronger communities, and stronger Indigenous futures.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine how state accountability systems, funding mechanisms, and school improvement requirements influence the leadership experiences of Indigenous women serving in public schools on or near reservations. Participants described the ongoing challenge of balancing Western educational expectations with relational accountability, cultural responsibilities, language revitalization, and community well-being. Additional research may

provide deeper insight into how Indigenous women navigate these competing demands while remaining grounded in Indigenous values and leadership practices.

Future studies should also explore how colonialism has influenced leadership experiences within Indigenous communities and educational systems. Participants described challenges related to lateral violence, burnout, and community conflict, suggesting a need for research that examines how traditional Indigenous values, cultural teachings, and community relationships can support healing, leadership development, and community well-being.

Comparative research examining the experiences of Indigenous women and Indigenous men in educational leadership may provide a deeper understanding of how gender shapes leadership experiences, opportunities, and barriers. Such studies could explore differences in leadership expectations, family responsibilities, work-life balance, and the ways Indigenous leaders navigate community and professional obligations.

Finally, future research should investigate the distinct characteristics of Indigenous educational leadership compared to dominant Western leadership models. Participants consistently described leadership through relationships, reciprocity, cultural knowledge, and responsibility to future generations. Additional research utilizing Indigenous methodologies may further illuminate how Indigenous leadership practices contribute to educational success, community well-being, and tribal self-determination while generating knowledge that directly benefits Indigenous communities.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study included 10 Indigenous women participants. While their stories provided rich and meaningful insights, their experiences do not represent all Indigenous women leaders, all Tribal

Nations, all reservation communities, or all geographic regions. Second, Indigenous communities are diverse, and leadership experiences vary across tribal histories, cultures, governance systems, and local contexts. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as universal to all Indigenous women in educational leadership.Third, participants were drawn from Indigenous educational networks within Montana and served in leadership positions on or near Montana Indian reservations. The experiences described may differ from those of Indigenous women serving in urban settings, non-reservation communities, or other regions of the United States. Additionally, because Indigenous communities are often closely connected, complete anonymity can be challenging despite the use of pseudonyms and efforts to protect participant confidentiality. Fourth, differences in school district size, available resources, community demographics, and organizational structures may shape leadership experiences in distinct ways. Participants leading in smaller rural districts, larger systems, or differently resourced communities may encounter unique opportunities and barriers. Finally, as a qualitative study grounded in Indigenous Storywork and relational methodology, the purpose of this research was depth of understanding rather than broad generalization. The findings are intended to offer insight, resonance, and possibilities for future research rather than statistically representative conclusions.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on Indigenous educational leadership through the lived realities of Indigenous people. Despite increasing attention to Indigenous education, there remains limited research focused specifically on Indigenous women serving in K–12 educational leadership positions, particularly within reservation and tribal community contexts. Indigenous peoples have historically been represented through the voices and

interpretations of others (Smith, 1999; Tuck, 2009). This research centers on the importance of honoring Indigenous women's stories by validating their experiences, knowledge, and perspectives on leadership.

These findings revealed that Indigenous women's educational leadership extends beyond traditional Western conceptions of school administration and authority. Participants described leadership as deeply connected to prayer, spirituality, culture, relational responsibility, healing, and service to their community. Leadership was not viewed as an individual quest but as a collective responsibility grounded in relationships with students, families, communities, ancestors, and future generations.

The stories shared by participants also demonstrated the lasting impacts of colonization, gendered racism, lateral violence, and inequitable treatment within educational systems. Yet, despite these challenges, the women in this study continued to lead with strength, purpose, and commitment to their people. Their stories reflected survivance, resilience, and a determination to create educational spaces that support Indigenous students and communities.

This study further reflects the importance of wellness in leadership. Linklater (2014) described care, compassion, and healing as essential components of Indigenous wellness. Participants emphasized that leadership requires attending to spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental well-being. Indigenous women's leadership is not sustained by sacrifice alone but by maintaining a healthy balance and remaining grounded in cultural teachings and community relationships.

This study also responds to Tuck's (2009) call to move beyond damage-centered narratives that portray Indigenous communities as damaged. While the participants in this study shared experiences of gendered racism, lateral violence, inequitable treatment, and the ongoing

impacts of colonization, their stories were not stories of damage alone. They were stories of strength, prayer, service, healing, survivance, and commitment to future generations.

Indigenous peoples have historically been studied and written about from outsider perspectives, often telling stories focused on deficits. This study contributes to Indigenous research that centers Indigenous voices and experiences, enabling Indigenous women to tell their stories and define leadership through their cultural understandings and lived realities. By sharing these narratives, the participants challenge deficit-based beliefs and demonstrate the strength, wisdom, and resilience that continue to sustain Indigenous communities.

The stories shared by these women are not just recollections of stories; they are teachings for future generations of Indigenous leaders. Their voices remind us that Indigenous women have been leaders, knowledge keepers, caregivers, and changemakers. Their stories deserve to be heard, honored, and preserved not only as acts of resistance but also as expressions of Indigenous resurgence, healing, and hope.

Finally, the stories shared in this study demonstrate that Indigenous women's leadership do not lead alone, they lean on the Creator and spirituality for strength. Their leadership is driven by relational accountability, their stories serve as healing, and they become warrior women, a service to their communities. Despite being historically marginalized, their stories serve as reminders that Indigenous leadership is not simply about holding positions of authority but about being responsible to their communities, their ancestors who came before, and creating pathways for future generations of Indigenous leaders.

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Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: *Leading with Purpose: Storying the Barriers and Strengths of Indigenous Women in Education Leadership*

Principal Investigator: Clintanna Colliflower
Institution: University of Washington – EdD in Educational Leadership
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Michelle Montgomery

Introduction and Purpose

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study focusing on the lived experiences of Indigenous women in educational leadership. The aim of this study is to investigate how Indigenous women manage leadership positions in public K–12 schools, especially within systems influenced by Western educational frameworks, while upholding cultural values and community obligations.

This research uses storytelling as a means of respecting and sharing knowledge, employing conversational interviews, journaling, and thematic analysis within Indigenous research frameworks.

Procedures

If you choose to participate, you will engage in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Depending on your preference, this interview can be conducted in person, over the phone, or through a virtual platform such as Zoom.

During the conversation, participants will be encouraged to share their leadership experiences, addressing topics such as identity, motherhood, challenges, community, cultural teachings, and sources of strength. Storytelling and guided prompts may also be used to reflect on these topics, in accordance with Indigenous knowledge-sharing traditions.

With your consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis. You retain the option to skip any questions and may terminate the interview at any point without any repercussions.

Voluntary Participation

Participation is completely voluntary. You can decline to take part or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, without facing any consequences.

Confidentiality

A pseudonym will be assigned to ensure your privacy, and no identifying details, such as your name, school, or tribal affiliation, will appear in any written or published materials. All data will be securely stored and only accessible to the researcher. Any quotations utilized in publications or presentations will be anonymized and made available to you for review upon request.

Risks and Benefits

Participating in this study entails minimal risks. However, discussing personal experiences might evoke strong emotions. You are free to skip any question or terminate the conversation at any point. The benefits of participation include contributing to the expanding field of Indigenous scholarship, mentoring future Indigenous leaders, and engaging in a research process that validates cultural identity, community values, and the significance of storytelling.

Use of Information

The insights from this study could inform the researcher's dissertation, academic presentations, and publications. The findings will be shared in a manner that safeguards participant confidentiality and respects cultural values.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, please contact:

Clintanna Colliflower (Principal Investigator)
Email: Clintanna@outlook.com
Phone: 406-390-6574

Michelle Montgomery (Faculty Advisor)
Email: montgm2@uw.edu

Consent Statement

____I have read and understand the information above.
____I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
____I permit my interview to be audio recorded.
____ I understand that I may withdraw at any time.

Participant Name (printed): _____
Participant Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____
Date: _____

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Indigenous Storytelling

Identity and Leadership Journey

1. Please share how you came into your leadership role in the field of education.
2. Which aspects of your identity—such as your family, community, culture, or teachings—have contributed to shaping you as a leader?
3. Have there been occasions during your leadership journey where identifying as an Indigenous woman influenced perceptions of how you were perceived or treated?

Cultural and Community Influence

1. In what ways have your tribal values, traditions, or language guided your leadership approach?
2. Please share a time when cultural teachings helped you navigate a challenge within your role.
3. What is the significance of leading and prioritizing kinship as well as assuming responsibility towards the community?

Challenges and Tensions

1. What specific challenges have you encountered as an Indigenous woman occupying a leadership position within your community or in the broader school or institutional setting?
2. Have you experienced instances of lateral violence or internalized colonial pressures? How have you responded to or healed from these experiences?
3. How do you balance expectations from both Western education systems and your own cultural responsibilities?

Resilience and Sources of Strength

1. Who or what provides support to help you remain grounded and maintain your focus and stability in your professional endeavors?
2. Which spiritual or relational sources do you turn to when the work gets hard?
3. Please share a story about a time when you felt strong, supported, or empowered in your leadership role.

Future Vision and Legacy

1. What teachings or advice would you offer to young Indigenous women who aspire to take on leadership roles?
2. What do you hope your leadership story teaches others regarding Indigenous strength, resilience, education, and healing?

Appendix C

IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
HUMAN SUBJECTS DIVISION

DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

December 10, 2025

Dear Clintanna M Colliflower:

On 12/10/2025, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Leading with Purpose: Storying the Barriers and Strengths of Indigenous Women in K-12 Education Leadership
Investigator:	Clintanna M Colliflower
IRB ID:	STUDY00024437
Funding:	None

Exempt Status

HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Category 2). This determination may or may not be based on the Limited IRB Review process.

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.
- **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your research. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to approach possible subjects or conduct research procedures in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department).**
- HSD does not make determinations on behalf of other institutions. If other institutions are involved in the research, they may need to make their own determination or they may decide to be guided by our determination.

Only certain types of changes to exempt research require that you submit a modification in Zipline. For information about what changes require a Modification, refer to the guidance on Exempt Research. If you are unsure if your proposed changes require a modification, contact your HSD team before preparing the modification.

HSD does not review or approve consent plans and consent materials for exempt research. Researchers are still responsible for providing subjects with information about the research prior to their agreement to participate. Refer to the guidance on Exempt Research for details about what information should be provided. You may wish to use the optional Exempt Consent Template as a guide.

4333 Brooklyn Ave. NE, Box 359470 Seattle, WA 98195-9470
main 206.543.0098 fax 206.543.9218 hsdinfo@uw.edu www.washington.edu/research/hsd

Thank you for your commitment to ethical and responsible research. We wish you great success!

Sincerely,

Greg Wallace, CIP
IRB Administrator - Committee D
206.221.7973 – gkw@uw.edu