

LEADING WITH PURPOSE: STORYING THE BARRIERS AND STRENGTHS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

THIS STUDY CENTERS THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO LEAD K-12 SCHOOLS ON OR NEAR MONTANA INDIAN RESERVATIONS.

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Doctor of Education (EdD) in Educational Leadership

Dissertation Defense

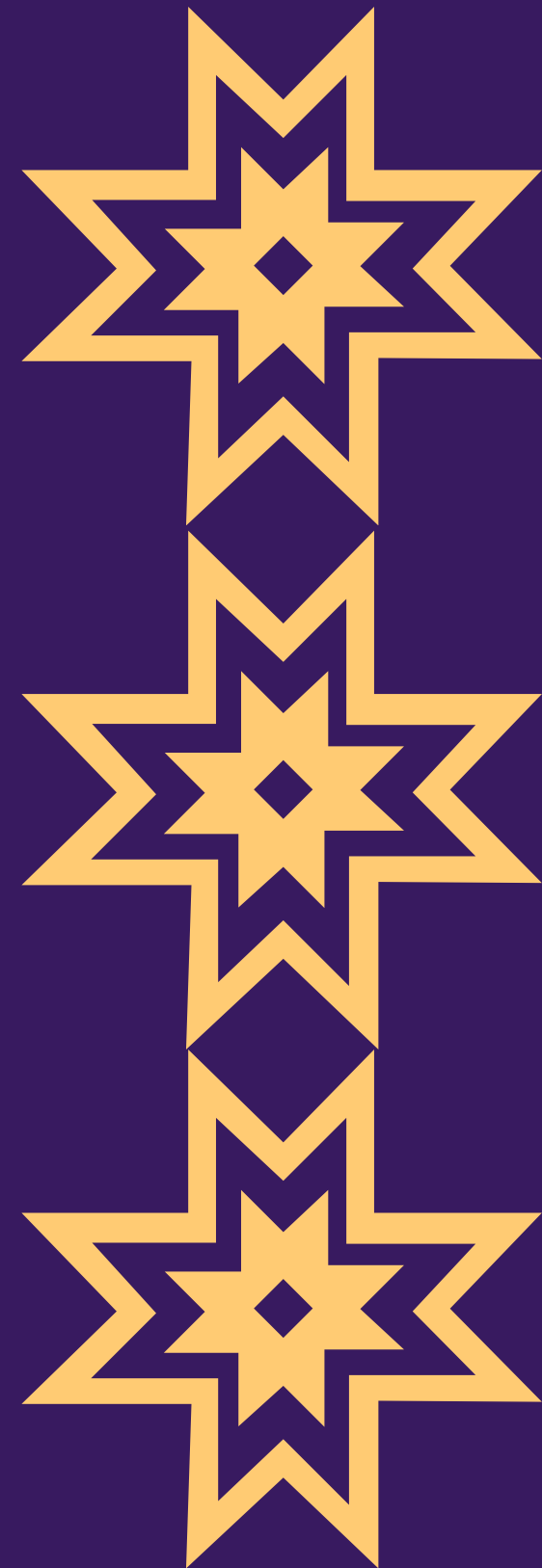
2026

Supervisory Committee

Michelle Montgomery, PhD, Chair

Dawn Hardinson-Stevens, PhD, Co-chair

DeAnn Dillion, EdD, Member



INTRODUCTION



- Indigenous women in Montana are increasingly taking on leadership roles in school districts located on or near Indian reservations.
- They are guiding educational systems that were historically created for assimilation.
- Limited research has focused on the experiences of Indigenous women serving in leadership roles within public K–12 schools.



RESEARCHER

- .Šuk iyópsiksija Wiya (Crow Hopping Horse Woman)
- Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) & Nakoda Tribal member, Fort Belknap Indian Community
- Ancestral roots in Hays & Lodgepole, Montana
- Mother, wife, daughter, sister, auntie, and niece
- First-generation college graduate
- My work is grounded in an Indigenous lens.
- This represents my healing journey.

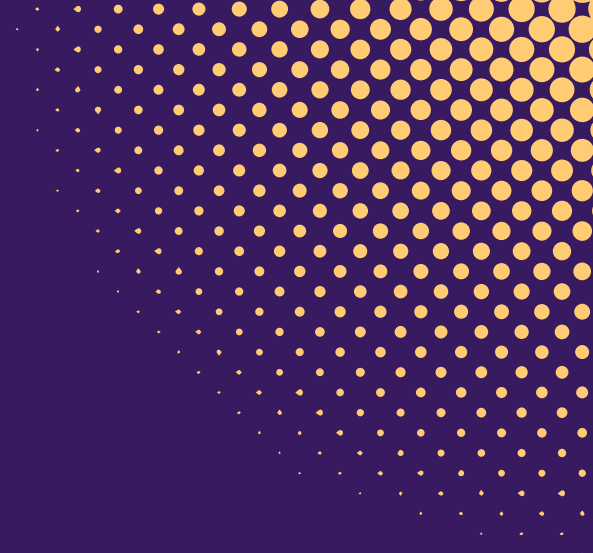
As an Indigenous woman, lifelong reservation resident, former principal, and incoming assistant superintendent, this work holds both scholarly significance and personal meaning. This study has developed from my personal experiences and a commitment to future Indigenous women





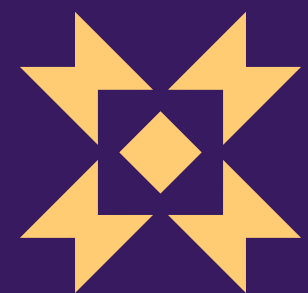
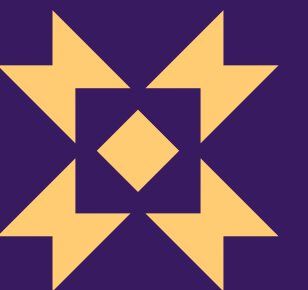
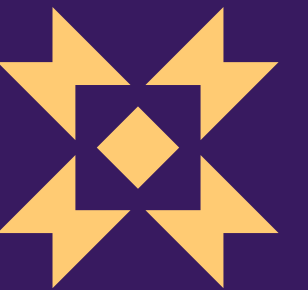
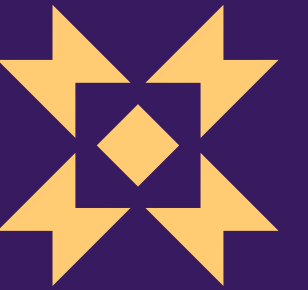
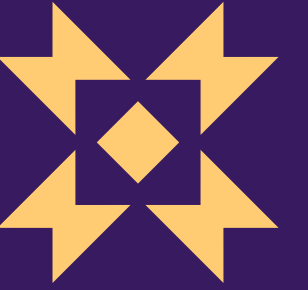
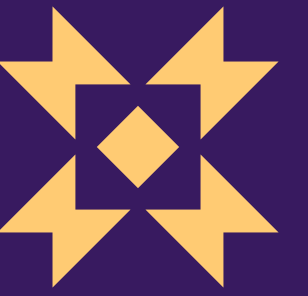
PROBLEM

- Indigenous women are becoming more prominent in educational leadership positions within Montana's reservation communities; however, there is a lack of research exploring their experiences.
- Educational leadership programs frequently overlook the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism, racism, and gender-based inequalities that affect Indigenous women's leadership in K–12 educational systems, which ultimately leaves them unprepared for leadership roles.



PURPOSE

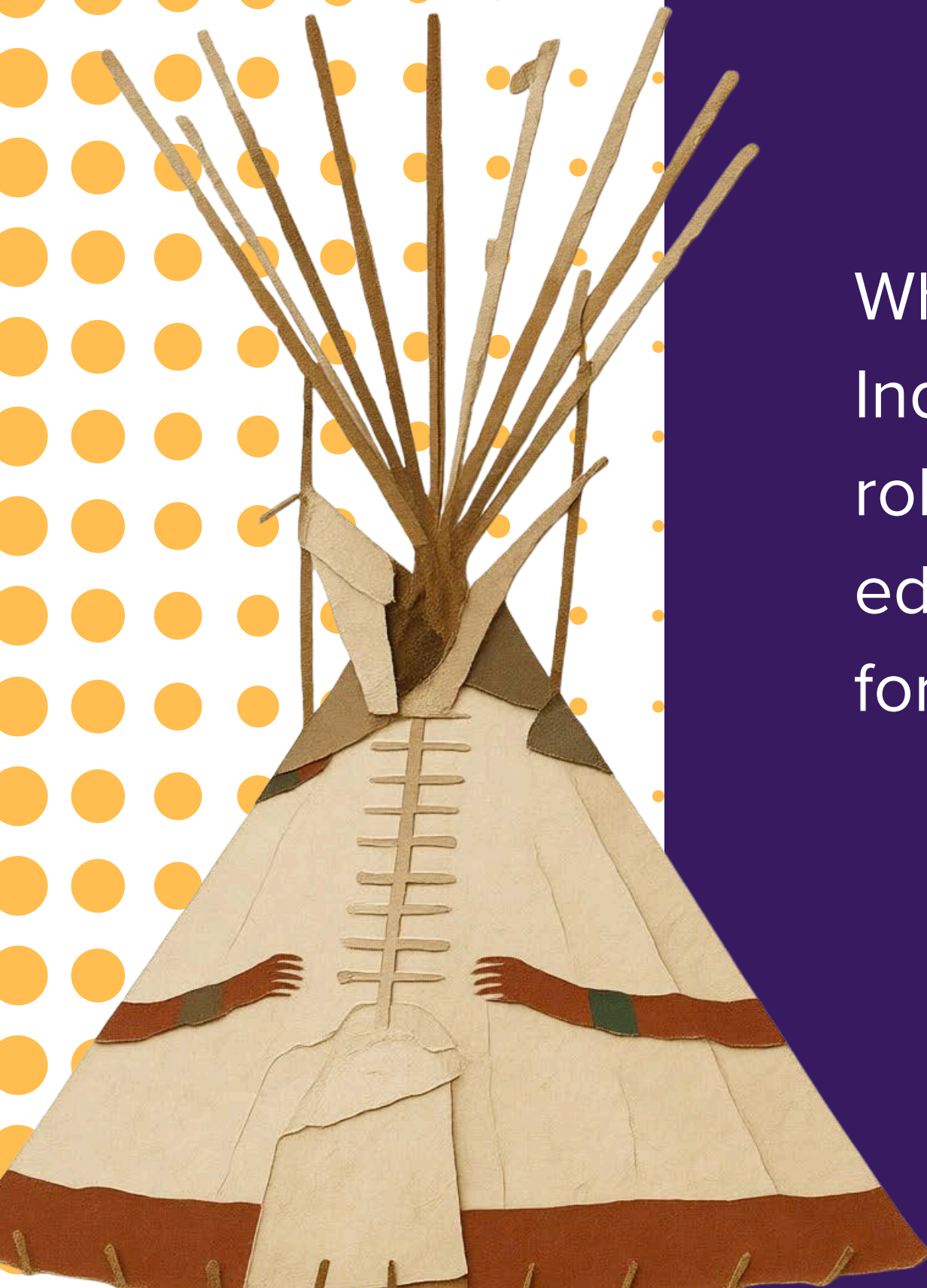
- Center the experiences of Indigenous women
- Document stories of leadership
- Explore strengths and barriers
- Guide future Indigenous leaders
- Establish foundational research for others to build upon
- Help Indigenous women heal



RESEARCH 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 tribal values and sovereignty?



SUB- QUESTIONS

- How do Indigenous women leaders balance cultural responsibilities, motherhood, kinship roles, and professional leadership within colonized educational systems?
- In what ways do Indigenous women incorporate ceremony, kinship, and community knowledge into leadership practices that create belonging, care, and healing?
- What cultural teachings, relationships, and inner strengths sustain leadership journeys and resilience over time?



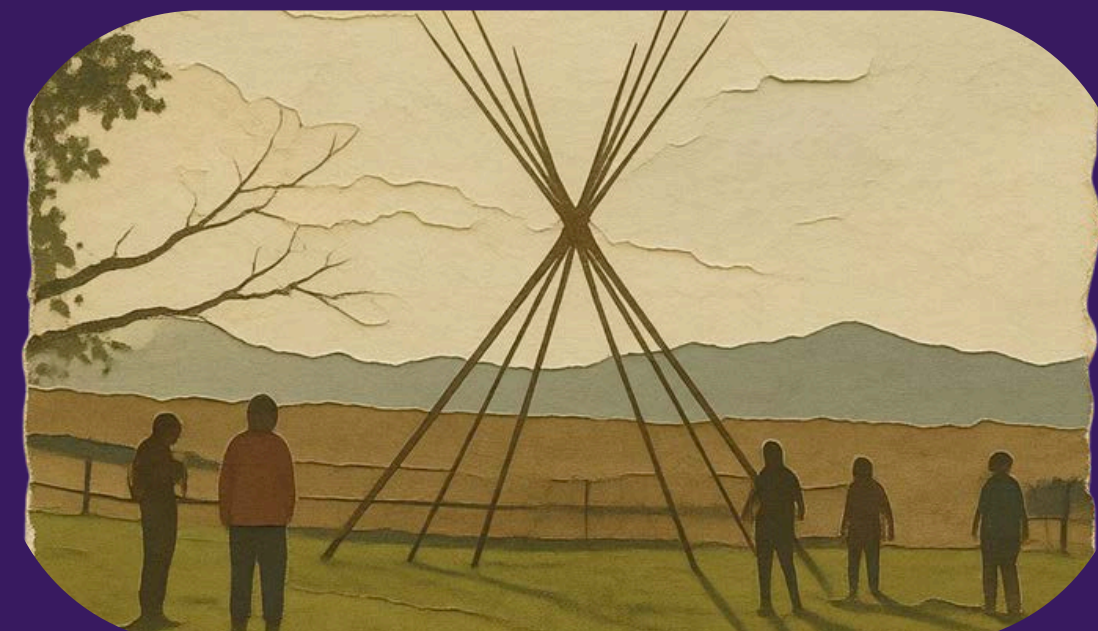
LITERATURE REVIEW

- Indigenous Leadership
- Indigenous Feminism
- Indigenous Education
- Women in Educational Leadership
- Montana Education Context



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Tribal Critical Race Theory (Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2005).
 - Colonization is endemic
 - Indigenous stories as theory
 - Desire for sovereignty, self-determination, self-identity, and self-governance
- Indigenous Feminism (Gina Starblanket & Joyce Green, 2024)
 - Centers Indigenous women's voices
 - Challenges colonial patriarchy
 - Decolonization
 - Intersectionality



★ PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

- Ten women from different Indian reservations throughout Montana who have led or are leading Public Schools
- Tobacco ties, questions, and consent forms were sent out to respectfully request their stories.
- Individual Zoom sessions.
- The interviews were conducted in an unstructured environment.



DATA COLLECTION

- Sampling Methods: Relational sampling
- Data Source: Semi-structured, story-based interviews
- Interview Length: Approximately 60 to 90 minutes
- Format: Zoom
- Recording and Transcription: Interviews were recorded in audio using Zoom and transcribed using Otter A.I., along with note-taking in a journal.
- Participants validated information



DATA ANALYSIS

Research Process Overview

- Reviewed transcripts several times
- Aligned narratives to correspond with the interview questions
- Conducted initial and pattern coding
- Organized codes into distinct categories
- Identified four major themes based on the codes and narratives
- Analyzed findings through the lenses of TribalCrit and Indigenous Feminism

Codes



FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of participant interviews uncovered four interconnected themes that highlight both the strengths and barriers faced by ten Indigenous women from Montana who are currently or have previously been in K-12 educational leadership roles.

Themes

- Prayer, Spirituality, and Culture are the heart of Indigenous Women's Education Leadership
- Indigenous Women's Education Leadership is Rooted in Relational Responsibility
- Indigenous Women in Education Leadership Lead Through Trauma while Healing
- Indigenous Women Navigate Gendered Racism and Lateral Violence, Including Pay Disparities



THEME 1: PRAYER, SPIRITUALITY, AND CULTURE ARE THE HEART OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Prayer, Smudging, and Culture

- Prayer: eased stressful situations
- Ceremony: Offered strength and protection
- Culture: embedded in leadership

Wiya Wazi, "I get support through smudging and praying. My cultural elders have two bundles, using those guide me."



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THEME 2: LEADERSHIP IS ROOTED IN RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

I have learned the leadership values of reciprocity and responsibility to my relationships and providing relevant service to the community (Leon, p. 56).

- Leadership is seen as a service, not self-serving
- Leadership is accountability to your community
- Leadership is connected to kinship responsibility
- Leadership is interconnectedness, not hierarchy

Wiya Yamni, “Leadership is not self-serving, It is selfless...Instead of fidelity to the program, we must have fidelity to the students.”



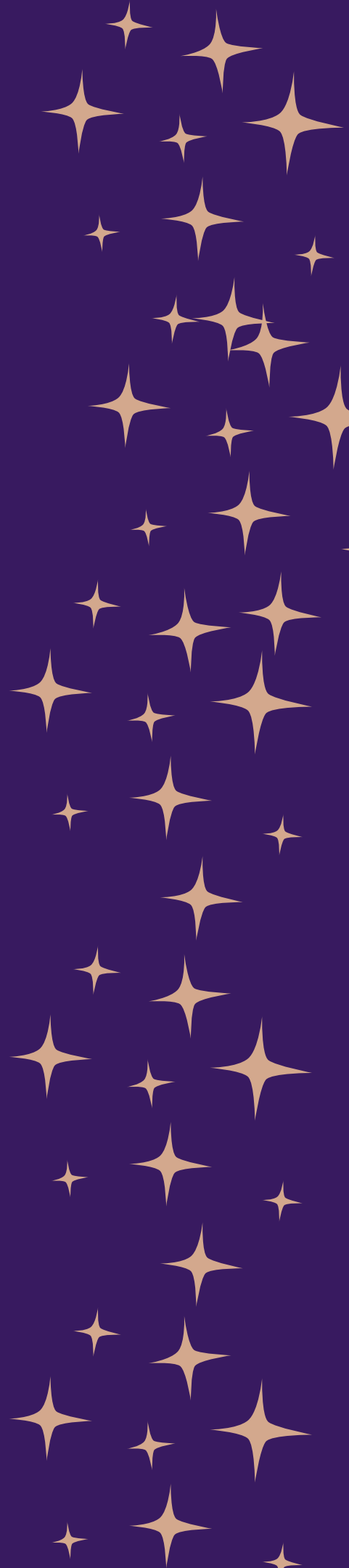
THEME 3: LEADING THROUGH TRAUMA WHILE HEALING

Trauma refers to a person's reaction or response to an injury. Colonization has caused multiple injuries to Indigenous people, and therefore, many Indigenous people experience trauma in a multi-traumatic context; thus, living in and with trauma is a common experience (Linklater, p. 22).

- Colonial trauma affects leadership
- Lateral violence creates barriers
- Healing occurs alongside leadership
- Culture supports resilience

Wiya Zapta, "I was the longest tenured superintendent, 7 years, for those 7 years I endured the cruelest times, but also made the best relationships with the staff and students."

Wiya Shaknoga, "I experienced PTSD, anger, and bitterness, I left education for a few months, then I got a new position at a different school, and the kids helped me heal."



THEME 4 GENDERED RACISM AND LATERAL VIOLENCE, INCLUDING PAY DISPARITIES

Women have been subjected to oppression arising from heteropatriarchy and misogyny in many cultural and political contexts because of the power in which men dominate and hold cultural, economic, political, and social privileges relative to women (Starblanket & Green, 2024).

- Gender discrimination
- Lateral violence
- Isolation
- Pay disparities
- Undervalued

Wiya Shoknoga, “Our school needed help...I raised my hand and said I would help. Then this man, who was Native American, joined our school that year also raised his hand, they seen him 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, I knew the people and the students.”

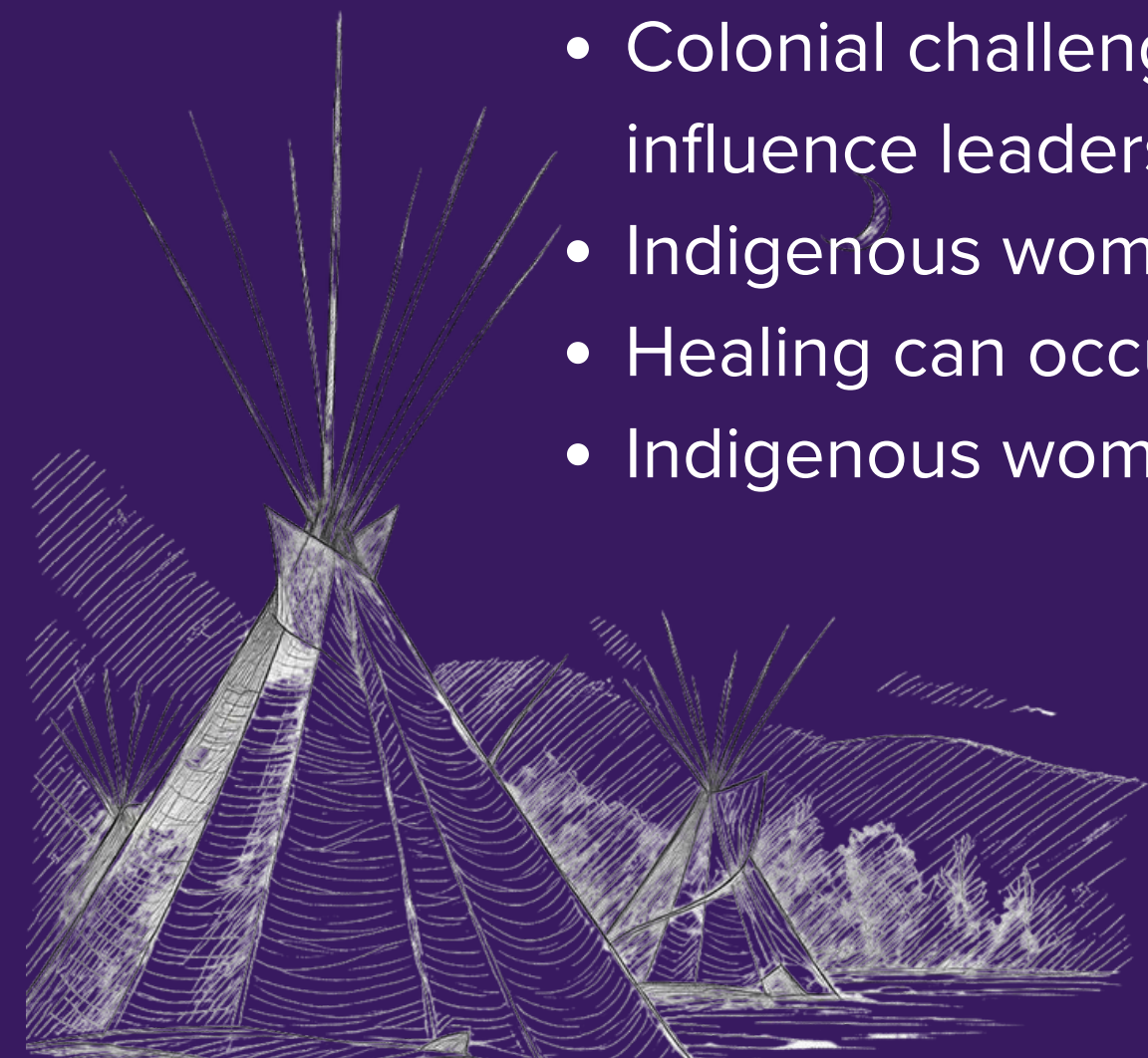




DISCUSSION



- Indigenous women's leadership practices embed prayer, culture, and spirituality.
- Their leadership is rooted in relational responsibility and service to the people, not hierarchical, never self-serving
- Indigenous women's educational leadership can cause further trauma through lateral oppression and violence, which stems from colonialism that created dysfunction in indigenous communities
- Colonial challenges such as gendered and internal racism, lateral violence, and inequities influence leadership experiences.
- Indigenous women work towards resurgence through self-determination and self-identity.
- Healing can occur through leadership practices
- Indigenous women turn adversity into strength and lead with purpose.



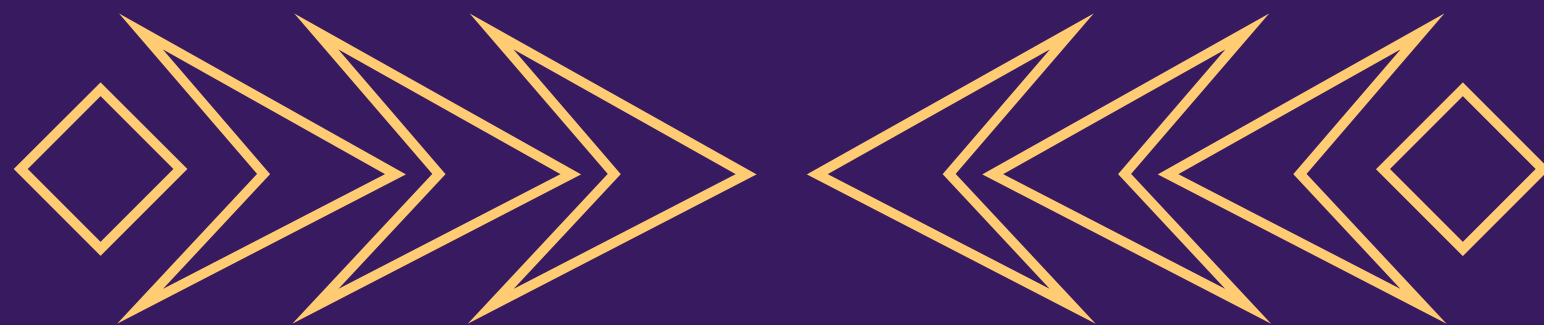
TRIBALCRT

- Colonization remains present in reservation schools and communities.
- Indigenous women in this study worked towards sovereignty, self-determination, and self-identity.
- Indigenous worldviews in this research captured the lived experiences and intersecting challenges indigenous women endure while leading in their communities public schools



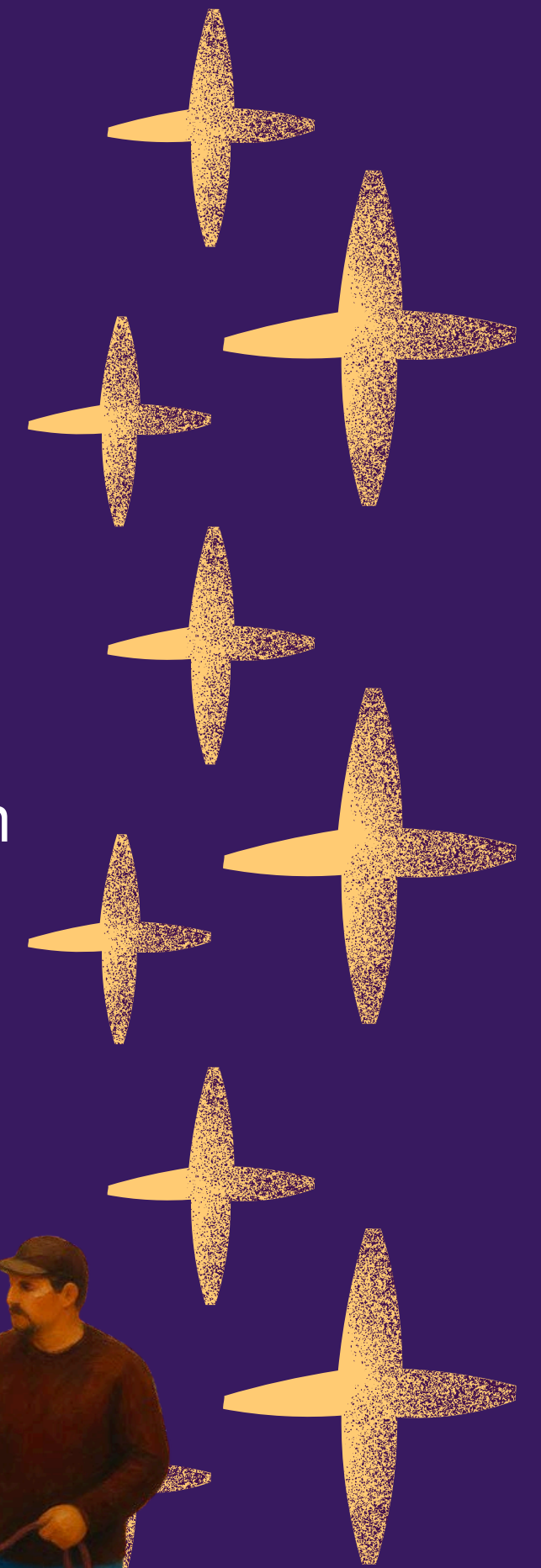
INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

- Indigenous women uphold their traditional roles as cultural bearers, caretakers of children, and community leaders.
- Colonial patriarchy undermines this role by failing to recognize or value women as leaders.
- The leadership of Indigenous women is connected to kinship responsibilities and the principle of reciprocity.
- The Indigenous women featured in this study symbolize a resurgence of their cultural identity.
- A significant number of women in this study had also reported turning to their fathers as places of support and strength.



IMPLICATIONS

- Mentor Indigenous women in leadership roles.
- Address salary disparities and discriminatory practices.
- Young Indigenous girls' resurgence leadership cohort.
- Educate stakeholders on the historical impacts of marginalization on Indigenous women.



LIMITATION

- Montana geographical location only
- Small sample size of 10 participants
- Schools located on or near Montana Indian Reservations





FUTURE RESEARCH



- Investigating the strengths and barriers faced by Indigenous men and women in educational leadership.
- Analyzing the unique strengths and challenges encountered by Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous women in school leadership roles.
- Examining health-related issues affecting school leaders.
- Expanding the geographical scope to include Indigenous administrators globally in order to identify common strengths and barriers.



CONCLUSION

Leading with Purpose

- Indigenous women embody leadership through culture, spirituality, and prayer.
- Leadership is expressed as a relational responsibility and a service to their community and people.
- Indigenous women confront trauma, gender-based racism, and lateral violence while engaging in healing.
- Their leadership showcases survivance, resilience, and a dedication to future generations.

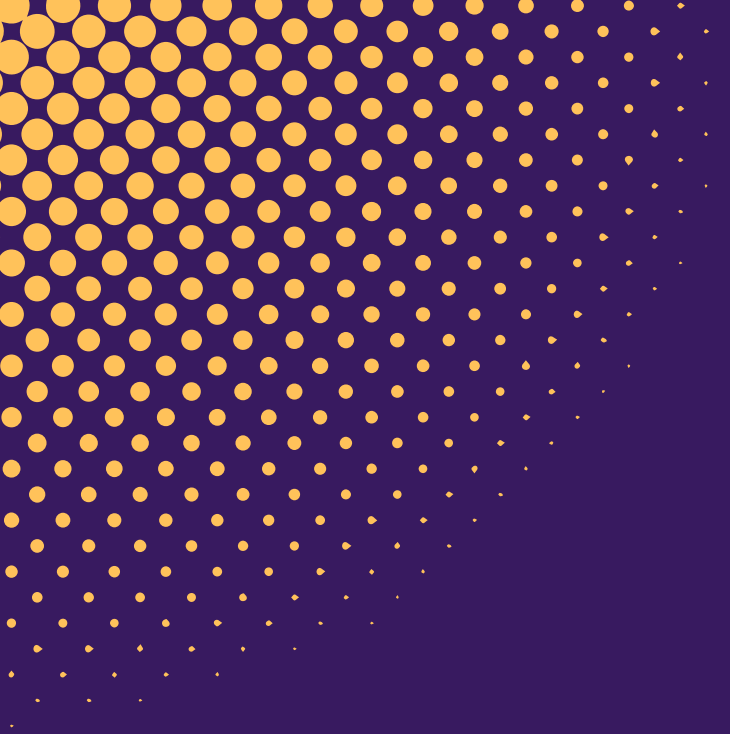


**A tree will not survive without its roots!!!
#selfidentity It's a spiritual connection,
remember who you are!!**



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QUESTIONS

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