ROOTS, RESILIENCE, AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

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This literature review examines the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of Indigenous education in the United States, centering the resilience and agency of Indigenous communities in reclaiming schooling as a space of self-determination. Rather than emphasizing disparities alone, this review highlights how Indigenous peoples have resisted colonial education systems and advanced culturally sustaining models rooted in relationality, land, and community knowledge. Key themes include Indigenous epistemologies, boarding schools and deculturalization, educational justice, intergenerational mentoring, and the recruitment and retention of Indigenous educators. Special attention is given to the role of community-led initiatives and mentoring practices that foster cultural continuity, healing, and identity formation. This review affirms that education for Indigenous communities is not simply about academic outcomes but about cultural survival, sovereignty, and the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations.

Keywords: Indigenous education, educational sovereignty, decolonizing pedagogy, Tribal critical race theory, intergenerational mentoring, traditional ecological knowledge, Indigenous educator recruitment, culturally responsive education

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students has risen sharply, reflecting a deepening educational crisis (M. Lee et al., 2024). In U.S. states such as Alaska, South Dakota, and Nebraska, more than half of AI/AN students were chronically absent that is defined as missing 10% or more of school days during the 2022–23 academic year (Attendance Works, 2024). While overall attendance has begun to recover nationwide, AI/AN students continue to experience disproportionately high rates of absenteeism. In Arizona, for example, chronic absenteeism more than doubled, rising from 22% in 2018–19 to 45% in 2022–23 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a), and California reported a similarly high rate of 43.6% in 2021–22 that significantly exceeded the state average (California Department of Education, 2023). These figures illustrate a widespread pattern in which large proportions of AI/AN students are missing the equivalent of a month or more of school each year, which is an alarming trend with long-term academic and equity implications.

In addition to attendance disparities, AI/AN communities face declining enrollment and a persistent lack of representation in the teaching workforce. Between 2012 and 2022, the number of AI/AN students enrolled in public schools dropped from 534,000 to 449,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). At the same time, AI/AN educators remained severely underrepresented,

comprising just 0.5% of the national teaching force despite AI/AN students making up about 1.0% of the student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a).

This static trend in teacher representation reflects long-standing systemic barriers that have limited access and advancement for Indigenous individuals in the education profession (Sabzalian & Jacob, 2024). While AI/AN teachers made up approximately 0.6% of the U.S. public school teaching workforce in 2003–04, that figure declined slightly to 0.5% by 2011–12 and has remained at or below that level through 2022 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). At the same time, AI/AN student enrollment in public schools declined from approximately 534,000 in 2012 to 449,000 in 2022 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). AI/AN individuals remain significantly underrepresented in the teaching workforce relative to their presence in the student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b, 2023b). These trends underscore the persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous educators and the broader challenges facing AI/AN students.

Multiple scholars have identified key barriers to Indigenous teacher recruitment and retention, including limited access to culturally affirming teacher preparation programs, financial and geographic constraints, and a lack of institutional support and mentorship within schools and universities (Region 16 Comprehensive Center, 2023; Sabzalian & Jacob, 2024). These systemic obstacles contribute to the ongoing disparities in representation and highlight the need for targeted, culturally responsive strategies to support Indigenous educators.

Despite persistent challenges, several U.S. states have implemented culturally grounded interventions that are showing promising results. Oklahoma, for example, reduced absenteeism among AI/AN students to below the state average in 2022–23 by deploying Indian education directors and offering home visits, wraparound services, and student incentives (Attendance Works, 2024; Chang et al., 2025). In Arizona's San Carlos Unified School District, chronic absenteeism among Indigenous students dropped from 76% to 59% following the introduction of cultural success coaches, trauma-informed care centers, and basic-needs supports (A. Lee et al., 2024). Alaska has taken a significant step by launching its first-ever Alaska Native language reading standards, aiming to reconnect students with their cultural heritage and boost engagement (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2024). Meanwhile, Oregon has strengthened its Indigenous educator pipeline through the Sapsik'^{w}ałá teacher preparation program, which is a collaborative initiative between tribal nations and the University of Oregon (University of Oregon College of Education, 2023). These examples underscore the power of culturally responsive, community-embedded education to close attendance gaps and improve outcomes for AI/AN students.

Although federal data sources report using the term "American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN)," this article will use the term "Indigenous" throughout to honor the diversity and sovereignty of Native nations and peoples. Given the enduring disparities and the momentum toward Indigenous nation building, it is essential to examine the historical, political, and ideological forces that have shaped educational access and equity for Indigenous communities. To explore these dynamics, we conducted a comprehensive literature review focused on Indigenous education and schooling in the United States with particular attention to settler colonial legacies, cultural erasure, and resistance through education.

Source of Literature

This scoping review draws from a wide range of sources identified through an extensive search across academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, ERIC, and Google

Scholar), institutional repositories, and websites of government and nonprofit organizations. The University library's search tools were instrumental in locating relevant materials as were the bibliographies of foundational texts such as *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality* (Spring, 2016) and Brayboy's (2005) seminal article on tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit).

The review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, books, dissertations, and reports with a particular focus on scholarship addressing Indigenous education, intergenerational mentoring, culturally responsive pedagogy, and Indigenous sovereignty. Government documents and educational organization reports were also incorporated to capture recent data and policy developments. Key search terms included *Indigenous education*, *decolonized education*, *assimilation*, *boarding schools*, *equity*, and *Tribal Critical Race Theory*, which collectively frame our analysis of both historical patterns and contemporary educational practices.

Understanding Indigenous Peoples in Educational Contexts

The International Labour Organization defines Indigenous peoples as "populations which inhabited a country at the time of conquest" and who maintain distinct social, cultural, and political characteristics (Spring, 2016, p. 20). However, indigeneity is not solely defined by historical presence as it also encompasses ongoing relationships to land, language, kinship networks, and collective sovereignty. The imposition of Western education systems through colonization disrupted Indigenous lifeways and contributed to generational trauma, forced displacement, and cultural loss (Spring, 2016). Often framed by settlers as civilizing missions, these educational systems served as instruments of assimilation and control (Grande, 2004). Yet despite these harms, Indigenous communities have long resisted such erasure and asserted their right to self-determined, culturally sustaining education grounded in community knowledge and values.

Rather than existing solely as victims of colonization, Indigenous peoples have actively navigated and challenged the educational systems imposed upon them. For centuries, they have endured policies to suppress Indigenous identities, languages, and knowledge systems, but they have also built powerful movements for educational sovereignty. Education, once weaponized against them, has become a site of revitalization and resistance. Today, many Indigenous communities are reclaiming schools as spaces for language preservation, cultural renewal, and affirmation of Indigenous worldviews (Grande, 2004; Spring, 2016), This ongoing struggle is not just about access to education but is also about transforming education to reflect Indigenous agency, identity, and aspirations.

This literature review explores the shifting landscape of Indigenous education across time and contexts, tracing the ideological foundations of Indigenous learning, the imposed colonial systems that sought to dismantle it, and the enduring resilience of Indigenous communities in reclaiming education. The sections that follow examine themes such as Indigenous epistemologies, deculturalization and boarding schools, decolonizing educational justice, Indigenous educator narratives, tribal nation building, cultural transmission, Indigenous mentoring, and the recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers.

Ideological Foundation of Indigenous Education

Prior to colonization, Indigenous peoples across the Americas engaged in vibrant educational systems rooted in relationships to land, language, community, and spirituality. Learning was holistic, experiential, and deeply relational and guided by elders, family members, and community

leaders through oral storytelling, ceremony, and daily practice. These systems emphasized a profound sense of responsibility to the community and the interdependence of all living beings. Education was not confined to a separate institution but was woven into the fabric of everyday life. As Lawrence (2019) explained, Indigenous education began "*in, of, and through place*" (p. 132), with places themselves serving as repositories of learning and sources of wisdom. The land acted as a living text, reminding people of those who came before and the scientific, cultural, and spiritual lessons they learned. This was their curriculum. Traditional education ensured that a tribe's history, culture, and way of life were preserved and passed down, securing the continuity and survival of the community across generations (Juneau, 2013).

The disruption of these systems began with colonization where Western ideologies and nation-building efforts reframed education as a tool for control. According to Spring (2016), the ideological foundation of U.S. education for Indigenous populations was shaped by the process of deculturalization, which is the systematic use of schooling to erase language, culture, and identity and replace them with those of the dominant Anglo-European group. Education alongside exclusionary laws like the Naturalization Act of 1790 that took away their citizenship and policies like the Civilization Act of 1819 and the Indian Removal Act of 1830 were employed to enforce this erasure. Rather than serving as a site of learning, schools became mechanisms of assimilation, reinforcing racial hierarchies and constructing Indigenous students as deficient subjects to be "reformed" (Spring, 2016; Urrieta, 2019).

To understand the ideological implications of these policies, theorists like Grande (2004) and Brayboy (2005) provided critical frameworks. Grande argued that education under settler colonialism functioned as a political and emancipatory project not for Indigenous peoples but for the colonizers seeking to legitimize control. Brayboy's TribalCrit further illuminates how colonization, White supremacy, and educational policy continue to intersect. TribalCrit, while building upon critical race theory, centers Indigenous epistemologies and sovereignty, emphasizing the ongoing nature of colonialism in education. Together, these perspectives underscore that education has not merely been a neutral or benevolent force in Indigenous communities but instead has historically been a central mechanism for colonization. However, Grande and Brayboy also invited a consideration of how education might be reclaimed and reimagined through Indigenous-led teacher recruitment, mentoring, and culturally sustaining pedagogies to support cultural resurgence and community empowerment.

Indigenous Versus Colonial Education

The arrival of European settlers marked a significant disruption to Indigenous educational traditions. Whereas Indigenous education was interwoven with community, land, and cultural practice, colonial education imposed an external system designed not to support Indigenous learners but to assimilate them. Schools became instruments of control, reflecting Eurocentric ideologies that valued conformity, individualism, and Christian morality over relational knowledge and collective responsibility (Child, 1998; Spring, 2016).

Colonial educational policies such as the Civilization Act of 1819 and mandates from the Indian Peace Commission of 1867 sought to systematically replace Indigenous knowledge systems with Western norms. Boarding schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and others across the United States and Canada forcibly removed children from their families, punished them for speaking their languages, and suppressed spiritual practices. These schools did

not simply educate; they disrupted identity, fractured kinship ties, and enacted what is now widely recognized as cultural genocide (Child, 1998; Urrieta, 2019).

Unlike the relational, land-based learning of Indigenous traditions, colonial education emphasized rote memorization, strict discipline, and the erasure of Indigenous identity. Indigenous children were reframed as civilization projects with their cultures deemed obstacles to progress (Spring, 2016). This shift institutionalized racism in schooling, reinforcing narratives of Indigenous inferiority and further entrenching social inequities. The long-term impacts of these colonial practices were devastating. English-only policies led to the widespread loss of Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge, severing ties between generations and disrupting traditional ways of knowing. Educational sovereignty was eroded as communities lost control over how and what their children learned, replacing locally grounded education with rigid, state-imposed curricula.

The experience of abuse, neglect, and cultural dislocation in boarding schools and other institutions gave rise to deep intergenerational trauma and a persistent mistrust of formal education systems. At the same time, Indigenous knowledge systems were marginalized and dismissed as inferior or irrelevant within Western educational frameworks thus further silencing Indigenous voices in the classroom. Yet despite the force of these colonial systems, Indigenous education has endured. The next section explores how Indigenous communities have resisted erasure, preserving knowledge, revitalizing language, and reimagining education on their own terms. Through community leadership, cultural resurgence, and advocacy for self-determined schooling, Indigenous peoples continue to reclaim education as a source of strength, sovereignty, and survival.

Educational Justice and the Restoration of Indigenous Authority

While the harms of colonial education are well-documented, the work of decolonizing education is ongoing and complex. Decolonization requires more than simply acknowledging past injustices as it demands a fundamental reimagining of educational systems through Indigenous worldviews and a redistribution of authority back to Indigenous communities. This process involves dismantling the structures that continue to perpetuate inequality and rebuilding them in ways that affirm Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems, and cultural continuity. Grande (2004) reminded us that settler colonial education was never a neutral enterprise but was a political strategy to legitimize colonial dominance and dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands, identities, and governance structures. Even legislation intended to empower such as the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act carried underlying assumptions of federal oversight. As Bacon and Norton (2019) argued, the act often reinscribes colonial power dynamics by positioning Indigenous self-determination within the confines of federal frameworks. True sovereignty remained conditional and externally mediated.

Efforts to reclaim education must contend not only with these historical constraints but also with the enduring disparities they produce. For example, Indigenous students with disabilities remain among the most underserved in public education. As Yee and Butler (2020) highlighted, these students face compounded forms of marginalization often in schools that lack cultural responsiveness, adequate resources, or an understanding of their intersecting identities. Underfunded schools, standardized curricula disconnected from community realities, and persistent achievement gaps are not just remnants of the past but are also contemporary expressions of systemic neglect.

Historical examples reveal how state-controlled education was wielded as a tool to suppress Indigenous aspirations. In British Columbia, the Wei Wai Kum and We Wai Kai nations sought legal rights to education from 1872 to 1955, not only to access literacy but also to ensure their children could navigate both Indigenous and settler societies. Yet their petitions were consistently denied or redirected to residential schools focused on assimilation rather than meaningful, culturally grounded instruction (Dubensky & Raptis, 2017). These patterns underscored the state's use of education to maintain control while denying Indigenous communities the means to sustain themselves.

Moving forward requires more than symbolic inclusion. Truth-telling initiatives such as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission have outlined tangible paths toward educational justice. This commission's calls to action emphasize the importance of acknowledging historical harms and working collaboratively with Indigenous communities to cocreate education by not merely by adding Indigenous content but by transforming curricula, leadership, and decision-making structures (Kim, 2015; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020).

As Todorova (2016) contended, reconciliation begins by recognizing Indigenous peoples as cocreators of knowledge. Without restoring their authority over curriculum, pedagogy, and educational governance, reform efforts risk replicating colonial dynamics under the language of equity. Educational justice must go beyond access and inclusion to fundamentally shift who holds power in educational spaces. This vision of decolonized education centers on restoring control over teaching and learning to Indigenous communities. It means centering Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and values; addressing the intergenerational trauma caused by assimilationist policies; and creating policies that affirm sovereignty and cultural continuity. It also requires trauma-informed, culturally-responsive practices that support Indigenous students holistically. As Tuck and Yang (2012) reminded us, decolonization is not a metaphor but rather is a material and political process involving land, governance, language, and the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge systems. True educational justice demands a sustained, collective commitment to shifting power so that Indigenous students, educators, and communities are not just included in schools but can lead, thrive, and transform them.

Recognizing the need for educational justice also requires a deep engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems whose ways of knowing, being, and teaching have sustained communities for generations. While much of Western education has historically dismissed or marginalized Indigenous epistemologies, efforts to decolonize education must do more than reform existing structures as they must also elevate and center Indigenous knowledge as foundational and not merely supplemental. The following section explores how Indigenous knowledge is being integrated into educational contexts not only as content but also as a living framework for teaching, learning, and community empowerment.

Reclaiming Pedagogy: Indigenous Knowledge and the Struggle Against Epistemicide

Indigenous ways of knowing offer a fundamentally different approach to education that challenges the dominant paradigms found in mainstream educational systems. While traditional schooling often prioritizes individual achievement, standardized assessments, and preparation for participation in capitalist economies, Indigenous knowledge systems are rooted in communal understanding, oral histories, and the preservation of cultural identity. These systems emphasize relationships with land, ancestors, and community, and operate within frameworks of reciprocity and sustainability.

The integration of Indigenous knowledge into mainstream pedagogy is not merely about inclusion but is an act of resistance against ongoing colonial violence. As Hopkins (2020) argued, true decolonization demands a shift in educational paradigms that privileges Indigenous epistemologies and the sovereignty of tribal nations. He urged that decolonization is not a metaphor but a deliberate, political process of dismantling colonial narratives that dominate institutions, including schools. The insistence on dominant ideologies in education systems, therefore, does more than marginalize Indigenous voices as it actively erases them. This erasure, referred to by Santos (2014) as *epistemicide*, represents the systemic killing of knowledge systems that do not conform to Western, Eurocentric frameworks. In this context, Indigenous pedagogies are not simply alternative approaches but are counter narratives that confront and resist the hegemonic structure of mainstream education.

A key example of Indigenous pedagogy is found in traditional ecological knowledge that is a vast, evolving body of knowledge developed over millennia through intimate relationships between Indigenous peoples and their environments. This knowledge is not static but is responsive to ecological shifts and passed through generations in ways that are inherently pedagogical. Mohd Salim et al. (2023) underscored how traditional ecological knowledge reflects a deep cultural connection between land and identity. For many Indigenous communities, land is not merely territory but rather a living archive, site of sovereignty, and medium for intergenerational communication. Traditional ecological knowledge is grounded in sustainability, biodiversity, and the ethical stewardship of resources. The act of passing this knowledge, then, is not only about teaching but also about ensuring the continued survival of the tribe.

Viewed through the lens of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous knowledge transmission becomes a form of resistance and self-determination. TribalCrit asserts that colonization is endemic to society and that Indigenous knowledge must be seen as foundational rather than supplemental. In this view, sovereignty is not just a legal concept but also a pedagogical one, embodied through the ways communities educate their youth, honor their elders, and maintain their traditions. Maintaining these traditions transferred through oral storytelling amongst older and younger generations is a way to reclaim Indigenous traditions and heal from the violence of colonialism (Chan, 2021).

Indigeneity, then, is not just an identity but also a framework, worldview, and form of cultural and political agency. Bruyneel (2021) framed indigeneity as both a lens of critical analysis and a vehicle for understanding how Indigenous knowledge supports tribal sovereignty and survival. The intergenerational transmission of knowledge through ceremony, story, land-based learning, and community rituals is central to this survival. Unlike Western education that often privileges written texts, Indigenous pedagogies emphasize lived experience, oral tradition, and the sacred responsibility of elders to teach and guide the young.

Indigenous pedagogical strategies may include storytelling, land-based education, seasonal learning cycles, and apprenticeship with elders all of which center relationships, context, and meaning-making. These practices are inherently holistic that connect mind, body, spirit, and environment and reflect a worldview that cannot be compartmentalized or measured through mainstream educational metrics. Such metrics are directly connected to the land as Indigenous cultural teachings connect the land itself to pedagogy that recenters tribal identity (Jacob et al., 2021). Similarly, McDonald (2023) affirmed that land and placed-based education for Indigenous populations are pedagogical models based on lived experiences and ties to their locality, community engagement, and nature-based settings. However, when focusing on such knowledge, one must avoid reverting scholarly work to the ideologies of Pan Indianism by amalgamating all

Indigenous populations into one category based on their fight against colonialism as this does a disservice to Indigenous populations by negating specific tribal knowledge and traditions (Bauer & Ellis, 2023).

Ultimately, incorporating Indigenous knowledge into educational spaces is not a matter of diversity or inclusion but instead a reclamation of epistemic space. This challenges educators to rethink what counts as knowledge, who decides, and for what purposes education exists. In centering Indigenous ways of knowing, education can become a site of healing, resistance, and transformation not only for Indigenous students but also for all who seek a more just and sustainable world.

Challenges and Resilience in Indigenous Education

Despite centuries of cultural disruption, Indigenous communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in confronting the enduring effects of colonialism in education. While earlier policies actively sought to suppress Indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and governance structures, these legacies continue to shape the present through systemic inequities and mistrust in mainstream educational institutions (Grande, 2004; McCoy & Villeneuve, 2020). These challenges manifest not only in curriculum and pedagogy but also in structural exclusions from educational decision making and limited access to culturally responsive services especially for Indigenous students with disabilities who remain significantly underserved (Yee & Butler, 2020).

In Canada and the United States, Indigenous communities have long advocated for education that affirms their cultural identity and prepares their youth to thrive in both Indigenous and settler societies. Historical examples such as the persistent efforts of the Wei Wai Kum and We Wai Kai nations to secure local educational rights between 1872 and 1955 reveal how Indigenous nations have fought for not simply access to schooling but agency over the education of their children (Dubensky & Raptis, 2017). These efforts were often denied or redirected toward assimilationist systems, highlighting how state power historically undermined Indigenous self-determination in education.

Today, the legacy of these struggles persists in the form of intergenerational trauma, underrepresentation in academic outcomes, and persistent exclusion from policy development (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gordon et al., 2017). Yet alongside these challenges, Indigenous communities have continued to assert educational sovereignty through community-based schools, immersion programs, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Initiatives like Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission have further catalyzed efforts to acknowledge past harms and outline pathways for repair and collaboration (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). As Todorova (2016) and Kim (2015) argued, reconciliation must begin with restoring Indigenous authority in education not only through symbolic inclusion but also by recognizing Indigenous peoples as cocreators of knowledge and decision making.

This dual reality of ongoing structural barriers and enduring resistance underscores the strength of Indigenous educational movements. Rather than framing Indigenous communities solely in terms of deficit or victimization, it is essential to recognize how resilience is enacted through cultural renewal, educational advocacy, and community leadership. These efforts reclaim education not as a tool of assimilation but as a powerful site of healing, empowerment, and transformation.

Stories of Indigenous Educators

Indigenous educators have long served as knowledge keepers, cultural bearers, and advocates for justice within educational systems that were not built to serve Indigenous communities. Their presence in schools is not only important but also transformative. By drawing on Indigenous epistemologies, these educators offer an alternative to colonial modes of teaching and learning, fostering spaces where identity, culture, and community can thrive. Research underscores the powerful role that Indigenous teachers play in promoting cultural identity, socioemotional well-being, and a sense of belonging for Indigenous students (Satterly et al., 2018). Through their presence and pedagogy, they model leadership that is rooted in relationality and community. Their work reflects the foundational Indigenous principle that is often summarized as "we, not me" and prioritizes collective knowledge and shared responsibility (Denetdale, 2015).

The stories and practices of Indigenous educators are critical for reshaping educational spaces that have long excluded Indigenous perspectives. As Tomkins (2002) noted, when Indigenous educators' experiences are shared and validated, they not only affirm the richness of Indigenous knowledge systems but also help to reduce cultural dissonance in classrooms. Their narratives open space for healing, connection, and cross-cultural understanding. Importantly, Indigenous educators also function as cultural translators and bridges between communities and institutions. Drawing from deeply held oral traditions, they bring philosophical and pedagogical advantages that resist the homogenizing tendencies of Western schooling (Woodroffe, 2020). Oral histories, ceremonies, and storytelling become not only teaching strategies but also acts of resistance and reclamation methods for preserving nationhood, identity, and language.

As Castagno and Brayboy (2008) emphasized, understanding Indigenous epistemologies is essential for advancing culturally responsive education. Educators who engage with Indigenous perspectives are better equipped to form authentic relationships with students and communities. These relationships, built on trust and mutual respect, are foundational to an effective and just education (Albertson, 2019; Moon, 2014). Culturally responsive pedagogy benefits not just Indigenous students but also all students. Teachers with deep cultural awareness can design inclusive, respectful learning environments that foster curiosity, empathy, and equity (Sleeter, 2011). Moreover, when non-Indigenous students see Indigenous educators in leadership roles such as teachers, principals, or district leaders, it challenges harmful stereotypes and promotes the normalization of Indigenous excellence in public life (Reed, 2007).

Indigenous educators also play a vital role in supporting the academic success and well-being of students through intergenerational mentoring. These mentoring relationships as described by Berger et al. (2016) are central to transferring cultural knowledge and identity to younger generations. This mentoring extends beyond academics and becomes a means of cultural survival and nation building (Hall, 2007; Hiraldo, 2020). Madden (2015) argued that Indigenous education when led by Indigenous teachers becomes a powerful force for community development and self-determination. These educators bring lived experiences that reflect and affirm students' identities. Their work is deeply personal and political, shaped by histories of resistance and the collective vision for a more just educational future.

Indigenous educators continue to face systemic barriers, working in environments where they are culturally isolated, undervalued, or burdened with the responsibility of addressing deeply rooted inequities without adequate support. At the same time, Indigenous American history remains marginalized, distorted, or sanitized in many U.S. schools. While Indigenous communities have led vital efforts to include accurate, tribally-specific, and culturally-sustaining content, these

initiatives now confront renewed resistance. The political backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and the passage of laws that restrict discussions of race, colonialism, and systemic injustice has intensified the pressure on educators to avoid difficult truths.

In this climate of growing political censorship, the tension between educational truth telling and institutional compliance is acute. Yet Indigenous educators persist. Grounded in their communities connected to their ancestors and committed to future generations, they continue to teach, advocate, and resist. Their work is not just about curriculum but also about relationships, worldviews, and the power to shape futures. But persistence alone is not enough. Advancing educational justice requires intentional efforts to recruit and retain Indigenous teachers, ensuring they are not only present in the profession but also fully supported, empowered, and sustained.

Recruitment and Retention of Indigenous Educators

The presence of Indigenous educators in schools is essential not only for cultural preservation but also for educational equity, self-determination, and systemic transformation. Yet, Indigenous teachers remain dramatically underrepresented in the U.S. education workforce. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, less than 1% of all public-school teachers identify as Native American or Indigenous (Spiegelman, 2020). This severe underrepresentation contributes to a lack of culturally sustaining pedagogy and diminishes opportunities for Indigenous students to see their identities reflected in their educators. Despite their low numbers, research shows that Indigenous teachers often remain in the classroom longer especially when teaching in Indigenous-serving schools because of their deep commitment to community and cultural continuity (Fovet & Hall, 2012; Landertinger et al., 2020). Their cultural and relational ties provide a powerful sense of purpose, often acting as a counterforce to institutional barriers and systemic inequities.

To support the recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers, efforts must move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward structural change. Schools and teacher education programs need to actively dismantle barriers that prevent Indigenous individuals from entering and remaining in the profession. This includes recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, supporting culturally relevant teacher preparation, and creating environments that foster community, mentorship, and well-being. Mentoring programs and professional development opportunities designed with Indigenous values in mind can play a crucial role in supporting early-career teachers. When Indigenous educators connect with mentors, particularly other Indigenous teachers, they are more likely to stay in the profession, pass on cultural knowledge, and assume leadership roles in their communities (Berger et al., 2016; Hiraldo, 2020). As Hall (2007) noted, Indigenous teachers often serve as stabilizing figures in schools, ensuring continuity in cultural knowledge and communal learning across generations.

Culturally responsive induction strategies are also critical to recruitment. Carver-Thomas (2018) emphasized the importance of diverse hiring committees, culturally-aligned support structures, and intentional outreach to Indigenous teacher candidates. Districts must ensure that application and hiring processes include demographic data to inform equitable practices (Stohr et al., 2018) while also creating pathways that actively center Indigenous voices and leadership. DeFeo and Tran (2019) found that many teacher candidates were inspired by personal connections, family members, or mentors who modeled what it means to teach with purpose. For Indigenous students, these connections are often deeply cultural and spiritual. Investing in pipeline programs

that recruit high school and undergraduate Indigenous students into teacher preparation especially those with ties to their communities can have lasting impacts on both retention and representation.

Trimmer et al. (2018) argued that increasing the number of Indigenous educators is not merely a representational issue but a decolonial one. Indigenous teachers bring worldviews, pedagogies, and philosophies that challenge Eurocentric norms and offer more holistic, relational approaches to learning. Their presence contributes to tribal nation building, strengthens intergenerational knowledge transfer, and supports student success by affirming identity and belonging. Importantly, Indigenous teachers are also leaders in reconciliation and healing. As Battiste and McLean (2005) and Whitinui et al. (2018) explained, Indigenous educators promote not only academic achievement but also emotional and cultural well-being. They model resilience, community leadership, and cultural pride. For Indigenous students, seeing teachers who share their background and cultural knowledge fosters a powerful sense of possibility and place. For non-Indigenous students, it expands the narrative of who holds authority and knowledge in classrooms.

Efforts to recruit and retain Indigenous educators must also recognize the systemic pressures they face including cultural taxation, racial isolation, and lack of institutional support. Schools must create spaces where Indigenous educators are not simply included but valued, supported, and given leadership roles in shaping curriculum, policy, and school culture. Sustainable recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers requires long-term investment, policy support, and a fundamental rethinking of whose knowledge counts in education. By supporting Indigenous educators, schools can become sites of cultural resurgence and justice places where Indigenous students thrive, sovereignty is affirmed, and education becomes a tool not of erasure but of healing and hope.

The Power of Intergenerational Mentoring

Intergenerational mentoring fosters meaningful, reciprocal relationships between older adults and youth through the sharing of life experiences, values, and cultural wisdom. These relationships strengthen social bonds, support emotional development, and enhance learning outcomes across a variety of settings (Cheney, 1999; Rubin et al., 2024). Mentors serve as sources of guidance, helping mentees develop resilience, navigate life's challenges, and form respectful, collaborative relationships (Zucchero, 2011). These connections promote reflection, build confidence, and help youth connect their learning to their lived experiences (Ward, 2011; Zhong, 2020).

The benefits of intergenerational mentoring extend to both mentors and mentees. Older adults often experience reduced social isolation (Yuan & Yarosh, 2019), greater adaptability (Snipes et al., 2024), enhanced generativity (Pinazo-Hernandis & Sánchez, 2024), and increased motivation and satisfaction in professional or community-based environments (da Luz et al., 2024). For mentees, mentoring relationships are associated with improved academic engagement and performance, healthier behaviors, reduced delinquency, and increased likelihood of high school graduation and college attendance (VanderVen, 2004).

In educational settings, intergenerational mentoring facilitates cooperative learning, the coconstruction of knowledge, and the development of critical social and academic skills. Students benefit from acquiring and managing new knowledge through trusted relationships that emphasize shared responsibility and connection (Leon, 2020). This approach to education promotes cultural awareness and has been linked to improved student attitudes toward school and the learning process itself (Newman & Hatten-Yeo, 2008; Satterly et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 1999).

These benefits are especially significant in Indigenous communities where intergenerational mentoring is deeply embedded in cultural knowledge systems. Traditionally, Indigenous ways of knowing are transmitted orally through stories, modeling, and shared experience across generations (Dalbotten et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 1999). Elders play a crucial role in guiding youth in not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of identity, belonging, and cultural pride (Trimmer et al., 2018). These relationships reinforce core values such as respect, reciprocity, and the idea that all individuals can both teach and learn (Satterly et al., 2018).

When integrated into formal or community-based education, Indigenous intergenerational mentoring can serve as a powerful tool for healing historical trauma, restoring cultural practices, and building solidarity within and across communities (Martínez-Roldán & Quiñones, 2016; Swanson et al., 2022). Programs that incorporate life skill pedagogy, community service, and parental involvement have also been shown to support the retention of Indigenous educators and to strengthen mentoring networks between Indigenous communities and academia (Mohr, 2011; Rhodes, 2006). These practices help bridge generational divides while reinforcing the continuity and vitality of Indigenous knowledge, identity, and leadership.

Indigenous Intergenerational Mentoring Programs

Intergenerational youth mentoring programs create opportunities for individuals from different generations to spend quality time together, break down social barriers, and enhance mutual understanding (MacCallum, 2010). For example, an Ojibwe clan operates a summer camp program to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge and traditions by Elders leading oral storytelling and talking circles (Ross, 2016). These stories allow the youth to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and language through direct engagement with the Elders. Other intergenerational mentoring programs have shown positive outcomes for youth facing academic and psychosocial challenges (Raposa, 2019), including improvements in reading comprehension in primary school grades (Sánchez, 2020). These programs help restore the intergenerational circle disrupted by residential schools, allowing youth to engage deeply with cultural teachings, participate in ceremonies, and develop a strong sense of identity and responsibility towards their community. Rowe et al. (2020) found that the transfer of knowledge through intergenerational mentoring is key to healing trauma and the health and well-being of all generations.

Intergenerational programs influence diverse youth as they can work with elders in the community through creative practices (Jarrott, 2011). Typically, these mentors are community elders aged 55 and older though there are exceptions (Karcher, 2006). Such programs enhance children's perceptions of adults and elders and foster mutual respect and understanding (Gualano, 2018). Aiding the youth in cultural awareness and understanding has been shown beyond the typical school-aged student-Elder relationship. In a remote region in Canada, a program was created to aid expectant mothers connect and build Indigenous cultural resiliency through mentoring relations with Elders. Montesanti et al. (2025) found that these expectant mothers felt more empowered and confident in their sense of self with the aid and positive relationship of their Elder mentors. Likewise, older adults' wellness was receiving mentorship from Indigenous Elders.

These mentorship programs also foster awareness and advocacy for Indigenous cultural heritage. Programs like the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Peer Monitoring program increased pride and understanding for Indigenous culture, aiding in the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge and traditions (Trovarello, 2019). Students gain exposure to their mentors'

bicultural awareness that connects family and cultural identity (DuBois & Karcher, 2005) and provides valuable motivation and experiences to support student success (Kaplan, 2001).

Beyond the scope of North America, other programs involving Indigenous intergenerational mentoring fostered similar results. Aboriginal mentoring programs in Australia have shown that connecting youth with Elders and First Nation communities provides a strong sense of pride and identity in their culture (McMahon et al., 2024). Likewise, the Ayta Magbukon School of Living Tradition program led in the Philippians inspired greater self-esteem and confidence of the students through Elders sharing their Indigenous knowledge, culture, and skills (David, 2013).

Workshops led by the Nak'azdli Whut'en, a First Nations community in British Columbia, supported strengthening cultural knowledge by having students interpret and digitally preserve the stories of the Elders while fostering the relationship of the Elders with the youth and community (Freeman et al., 2020). These programs foster strong connections between Elders and youth, facilitating the passing on of traditional stories, skills, and teachings. Programs creating trusting mentoring relationships enable youth to feel strong in their identity thereby supporting the continuity of cultural practices and knowledge among Indigenous communities. By fostering these relationships, there is continued support and cultural awareness beyond these programs, entailing greater success in the preservation of Indigenous culture, skills, art, and traditions.

Indigenous Intergenerational Mentoring Through Relationships

Relationally driven intergenerational learning structures grounded in Indigenous practices such as those implemented in Australia have been shown to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes while simultaneously reinforcing community values (Powell, 2014). These approaches are rooted in Indigenous relational epistemologies where learning is not an individual act but a collective, interdependent process that honors the wisdom of Elders and the responsibilities of younger generations. Such models foster community involvement, cultivate respectful communication, and serve as a moral and social compass through the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and values.

Johnston-Goodstar and Sethi (2013) emphasized the crucial role Elders play in creating environments of acceptance and support where youth learn not only academic content but also relational accountability and cultural survival. Similarly, Shallcross et al. (2006), drawing on research in South Africa, found that Indigenous mentoring relationships advance sustainable practices by embedding ecological knowledge within daily life and learning. Windchief and Brown (2017) further argued that Indigenous kinship structures function as academic and emotional scaffolds for students, contributing to their personal and academic success by affirming cultural identity and interdependence.

These findings align with frameworks such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014) that advocate for educational models that preserve and foster students' linguistic and cultural heritage. Intergenerational learning, then, is not simply a pedagogical tool but a decolonial strategy that asserts Indigenous sovereignty over knowledge systems, ensures continuity of community wisdom, and supports holistic well-being across generations.

Conclusion

This literature review affirms the centrality of communal and familial relationships in the formation of Indigenous identity and the preservation of cultural continuity. It further highlights the critical role of intergenerational mentorship within Indigenous education systems as a mechanism for sustaining tribal resilience and longevity. Collectively, this body of scholarship challenges conventional paradigms that frame education primarily as a means of academic achievement by instead positioning it as a vital site for cultural affirmation, community healing, and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

The findings call for a paradigmatic shift in both research and practice that moves beyond inclusionary frameworks toward approaches grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies. This includes the advancement of community-based educational models, the recognition of Elders and knowledge-keepers as central to pedagogical processes, and the pursuit of policy reforms that uphold tribal sovereignty in educational governance. Ultimately, sustainable and transformative educational systems must be coconstructed by, with, and for Indigenous communities to ensure cultural continuity and support self-determined futures.

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