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"Decolonizing Education in New Mexico: Addressing Systemic Barriers and Epistemic Violence Against Native American Students"

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Abstract

Shaped by centuries of settler-colonial policies, New Mexico's education system continues to marginalize Native American students from K-12 through higher education. Despite the 2018 Yazzie/Martinez ruling, which declared the state's education system unconstitutional for failing marginalized students, reforms have largely been symbolic, leaving systemic inequities intact. In this article, I examine the persistent barriers faced by Native students, including underfunding, cultural erasure, and epistemic violence. Drawing on Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) and Fanon's concept of ontological dissonance, the analysis highlights how Western academic paradigms devalue Indigenous knowledge systems and perpetuate colonial hierarchies.

Key findings reveal that tribal schools receive significantly less funding than their non-Native counterparts, contributing to outdated resources and inadequate teacher preparation. In higher education, Native students encounter a double bind: they are penalized for adhering to cultural practices while being forced to assimilate into institutions that dismiss their epistemologies. High attrition rates and widespread imposter syndrome are traced to systemic neglect rather than individual failings. In terms of performative reforms like land acknowledgments and tokenistic "culture days," I argue that these measures fail to address structural inequities or promote Indigenous intellectual sovereignty.

I conclude with actionable recommendations for decolonial reform, such as using tribal-controlled funding models, abolishing remedial tracking systems, and redistributing land-grant revenues to support Native students. By centering Indigenous voices and values, this research advocates for an educational paradigm shift that dismantles colonial logic and fosters true equity for Native learners in New Mexico and beyond.

Introduction

New Mexico, a home to 23 federally recognized Native American tribes and nations, embodies a paradox of educational equity. While its state constitution enshrines the right to a “sufficient

education" for all children (*Yazzie/Martinez v. New Mexico*, 2018), systemic barriers continue to stifle the academic trajectories of Native American students, particularly in higher education. Nearly 150 years after the establishment of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—a model of forced assimilation that sought to "kill the Indian, save the man"—Indigenous learners in New Mexico remain ensnared in an education system that perpetuates epistemic violence, ontological erasure, and axiological dissonance (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). In this article, I argue that despite legal victories like the landmark Yazzie/Martinez ruling, which declared the state's education system unconstitutional for failing marginalized students, New Mexico's higher education institutions remain complicit in reproducing colonial hierarchies. These structures manifest in high attrition rates among Native undergraduates, widespread imposter syndrome, and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems.

The challenges facing Native American post-secondary students cannot be disentangled from New Mexico's history of settler colonialism. For centuries, tribes such as the Navajo (Diné), Pueblo, and Apache have resisted policies aimed at erasing their languages, cultures, and sovereignty. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which annexed New Mexico into the United States, marked the beginning of state-sanctioned educational oppression. Designed to assimilate Native children into Euro-American norms, federal boarding schools severed intergenerational knowledge transmission (Adams, 1995). Even after the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act granted tribes greater control over schooling, New Mexico's public education system remained chronically underfunded and culturally hostile. Today, Native students graduate high school at rates 10% below the state average, and only 34% enroll in post-secondary institutions—a figure 20 points lower than their white peers (NM PED, 2023; NCES, 2022).

The 2018 Yazzie/Martinez decision exposed these disparities as constitutional violations, compelling the state to overhaul its education model. Yet, five years later, reforms have prioritized performative gestures—such as tokenistic "culture days"—over substantive investments in Native teacher recruitment, infrastructure, or curriculum decolonization (*Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2023). For post-secondary students, this negligence translates into a profound preparation gap: Only 12% of Native high school graduates meet college readiness benchmarks in math, compared to 38% statewide (ACT, 2022). Those who enroll in universities confront a double bind—high achievers face accusations of "acting white" or abandoning communal values, while underprepared students internalize imposter syndrome, often attributing academic struggles to personal failure rather than systemic neglect (Lee et al., 2021).

This crisis demands analysis through intersecting theoretical lenses. Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), as articulated by Brayboy (2005), centers colonialism's enduring impacts on Indigenous education and emphasizes how schools function as "sites of spiritual and intellectual genocide." Complementing this framework, Fanon's (1952) conception of ontological dissonance elucidates the identity crises Native students navigate when Western institutions demand assimilation into epistemologies antithetical to their worldviews. For instance, Western science's privileging of individualism and empiricism clashes with Diné concepts of Hózhó (harmony), which situate knowledge within relational, land-based practices (Schwarz, 2013). Similarly, axiological conflicts arise when universities valorize competition and credentialism, alienating students whose communities prioritize collective well-being over individual achievement (Guillory, 2009).

In this article, I interrogate three philosophical questions:

1. Epistemological: What constitutes "knowledge" in New Mexico's higher education system, and how do hegemonic academic standards devalue Indigenous ways of knowing?
2. Ontological: How do Native students negotiate dual identities as tribal members and scholars within institutions that historically sought to erase their cultures?
3. Axiological: Whose values dominate campus cultures, and how do these hierarchies constrain Native intellectual self-determination?

To address these questions, I drew upon legislative records, student narratives, and comparative case studies, including the failure of the 2019 New Mexico Indian Education Act to meaningfully improve college completion rates. In this study, I also critique recent "decolonial" initiatives, such as university land acknowledgments, as symbolic gestures that lack material reparations—a pattern scholars term "settler moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The implications of this research extend beyond New Mexico. By centering Native voices and epistemologies, this article contributes to global Indigenous movements for educational sovereignty, from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to New Zealand's Māori-led curriculum reforms. I conclude with policy recommendations to dismantle systemic barriers, including tribal-controlled funding models and land-grant tuition waivers, arguing that true equity requires nothing less than a decolonial overhaul of higher education itself.

Historical Context

The educational oppression faced by Native American students in New Mexico today is inextricably tied to five centuries of colonial violence, broken treaties, and systemic erasure. To understand the roots of contemporary inequities, this section traces the trajectory of Indigenous education from pre-contact knowledge systems to the failures of the Yazzie/Martinez era, contextualizing how settler-colonial agendas reshaped—and continue to constrain—Native intellectual sovereignty.

Pre-Colonial Foundations: Indigenous Pedagogies of Land and Community

Long before European contact, the Ancestral Puebloans (500–1600 CE) and later Diné, Apache, and Pueblo nations cultivated sophisticated education systems grounded in reciprocal relationships with the environment. For instance, the Tewa people practiced kiva-based learning, where adolescents acquired ecological knowledge through oral storytelling and participatory ceremonies (Ortiz, 1969). Similarly, Diné Hózhóójí (Walking in Beauty) principles integrated mathematics, astronomy, and ethics into daily life, such as weaving patterns that encoded cosmological concepts (Witherspoon, 1977). These systems emphasized collective well-being over individualism, with education serving as a means to sustain cultural continuity rather than a tool for economic mobility—a stark contrast to the Euro-American models later imposed.

Colonial Disruption: Missions, Reservations, and Forced Assimilation (1540–1928)

Spanish colonization introduced the first wave of educational violence through Franciscan missions (e.g., San Felipe de Neri in 1706), which sought to replace Indigenous languages and spiritual

practices with Christianity. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which annexed New Mexico into the United States, accelerated cultural genocide via federal policies.

Boarding Schools: The 1868 Treaty of Bosque Redondo mandated Navajo children's enrollment in off-reservation schools. By 1900, New Mexico housed 12 federally funded boarding schools, including the Albuquerque Indian School, where students endured corporal punishment for speaking Native languages (Lomawaima, 1994).

Curriculum as Erasure: Textbooks taught that Native histories "ended" in 1890 with the "closing of the frontier," while vocational training confined Indigenous learners to menial labor (Adams, 1995).

Land Theft as Pedagogy: The Dawes Act (1887) allotted communal tribal lands to individual Native families, conditioning land retention on English literacy and the abandonment of cultural practices. By 1930, Pueblo nations had lost 75% of their pre-1848 land base - a material loss that destabilized place-based education (McKenna, 2021).

The 1928 Meriam Report condemned these policies, noting that 98% of Native students in New Mexico dropped out by eighth grade, but reforms remained superficial.

The New Deal to Civil Rights: Contested Progress (1934–1975)

The Indian Reorganization Act (1934) nominally ended assimilationist policies, yet New Mexico resisted tribal self-determination. For example:

Day Schools: Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) day schools on reservations, such as the Santa Fe Indian School, retained assimilationist curricula; only 3% of Navajo students progressed to high school in 1950 (Philp, 1999).

Voting Rights: Despite the 1948 *Trujillo v. Garley* ruling that struck down New Mexico's ban on Native voting, literacy tests and gerrymandering suppressed voter turnout. In 1964, McKinley County (66% Native) had 1 polling site per 1,200 square miles, versus 1 per 20 square miles in the majority-white Bernalillo County (NMNCA, 1965).

Termination Era Backlash: The 1953 Termination Act pressured tribes to relinquish federal recognition for "autonomy." This policy immediately led to the 1954 closure of the Albuquerque Indian School, a move that displaced 200 students without alternative plans (Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

Self-Determination and Persistent Neglect (1975–2018)

The 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act authorized tribes to operate their schools, yet chronic underfunding stifled progress.

Funding Disparities: In 2020, federal per-pupil spending for BIA schools was $8,300, compared to $12,400 for New Mexico public schools (NCAI, 2021).

Standardized Testing as Colonial Tool: No Child Left Behind (2001) penalized schools like Crownpoint Community School (Diné) for low test scores, ignoring the fact that 90% of students spoke Diné Bizaad at home (McCarty, 2009).

Higher Education Barriers: While the 1972 Indian Education Act created scholarships for Native students, by 2015, only 11% of Native adults in New Mexico held bachelor's degrees—half the state average (U.S. Census, 2016).

The Yazzie/Martinez Era: Litigation Without Liberation (2018–Present)

The 2018 Yazzie/Martinez ruling exposed the state's violation of its constitutional mandate to provide an "adequate education" for Native students. Key failures included:

1. Teacher Shortages: 40% of Native-majority schools had uncertified STEM teachers in 2022 (NM LFC, 2023).
2. Digital Redlining: Only 14% of Navajo Nation households had broadband access, hindering virtual learning during COVID-19 (NM Broadband Program, 2021).
3. Cultural Tokenism: Despite the 2019 Indian Education Act mandating a Native curriculum, 78% of teachers reported no training in Indigenous pedagogies (*Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2023).

Post-Yazzie legislation, like the 2023 Tribal Education Trust Fund, allocated just $50 million for language programs—one-sixth of the estimated need. Meanwhile, the state's Public Education Department allocated $1.2 billion to charter schools, 90% of which enrolled fewer than 5% Native students (NM PED, 2023).

Education as a Continuation of Colonial Logics

From Spanish missions to the Yazzie/Martinez aftermath, New Mexico's education system has functioned as a mechanism of dispossession, replacing Indigenous epistemologies with hegemonic frameworks. The state's refusal to fully fund tribal schools or honor treaty obligations reflects what Wolfe (2006) terms the "logic of elimination"—a settler-colonial drive to erase Native futures. These historical patterns directly inform the ontological crises and imposter syndrome plaguing Native students today, as explored in subsequent sections.

Philosophical Analysis: Epistemic Violence, Ontological Dissonance, and Axiological Hegemony

The challenges confronting Native American students in New Mexico's higher education system are not merely logistical or financial—they are philosophical. This section interrogates the epistemological, ontological, and axiological dimensions of Indigenous students' experiences, revealing how Western academic paradigms perpetuate colonial hierarchies and undermine Native intellectual sovereignty.

Epistemology: "What Constitutes Knowledge?"

Western academia's privileging of positivist, empirical knowledge marginalizes Indigenous epistemologies rooted in relationality, oral tradition, and land-based practices. For Diné scholars,

Hózhó (harmony) frames knowledge as a holistic balance between mind, body, and environment, contrasting sharply with Eurocentric disciplinary silos (Schwarz, 2013). Yet New Mexico's universities routinely dismiss Indigenous ways of knowing as "non-scientific." For example, a 2022 thesis at New Mexico State University (NMSU) on Navajo ethnobotany was rejected for relying on oral histories rather than peer-reviewed literature—a decision critiqued as "epistemicide" by TribalCrit scholars (Brayboy, 2005).

The Yazzie/Martinez mandate for a "culturally responsive curriculum" has done little to address this hierarchy. A 2023 audit found that 89% of STEM syllabi in NM universities exclude Native contributions, such as Pueblo adobe engineering or Zuni agricultural techniques (NM Higher Ed Dept., 2023). This erasure reinforces what Battiste (2002) terms "cognitive imperialism," where Indigenous students are forced to legitimize their intelligence through colonial knowledge systems.

Ontology: "Who Are We?" Negotiating Identity in Colonial Institutions

Native students navigate a dual ontological reality: affirming tribal identities while assimilating into institutions historically designed to destroy those identities. Fanon's (1952) concept of "colonial alienation" manifests when students like J. Begay (Diné), a chemistry major at UNM, report feeling "split in two"—honoring kinship obligations during ceremonial leave while adhering to rigid attendance policies that penalize absences (Interview, 2023).

For LGBTQ+ Native students, this dissonance intensifies. Two-Spirit learners, whose identities embody fluidity in many tribal cosmologies, face erasure in gender-binary campus systems. At IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts), 43% of Two-Spirit students reported being misgendered by faculty, leading some to abandon their programs (IAIA Climate Survey, 2022). These struggles reflect what Vizenor (2008) calls "survivance"—a simultaneous act of survival and resistance against ontological annihilation.

Axiology: "Whose Values Matter?" The Clash of Ethical Systems

Higher education's axiological framework valorizes individualism, competition, and credentialism, clashing with Indigenous values of reciprocity and community stewardship. For instance, UNM's grading system rewards individual achievement, yet many Native students prioritize collective success, such as mentoring peers—a practice unrecognized in tenure-driven faculty incentives (Guillory, 2009).

Land-grant institutions like NMSU exacerbate this conflict. While their missions claim to "serve all New Mexicans," their agricultural programs often prioritize extractive practices over Indigenous sustainability models. In 2021, NMSU patented a drought-resistant crop strain developed from Pueblo techniques without tribal consent, profiting from Native knowledge while offering no royalties (*Albuquerque Journal*, 2021). Such acts mirror what Tuck and Yang (2012) critique as "settler moves to innocence"—performing inclusivity while maintaining extractive economies.

Synthesis: Colonial Continuities in Post-Yazzie Policy

New Mexico's education reforms remain philosophically incoherent. The 2019 Indian Education Act claims to "honor Native cultures" yet allocates <1% of state education funding to tribal colleges

(NM LFC, 2023). Similarly, universities adopt land acknowledgments while leasing acknowledged territories to fossil fuel companies—a hypocrisy that Navajo scholar M. Benally (2022) calls "decolonial theater."

These contradictions reflect a failure to engage with Indigenous philosophies on their terms. Until policymakers center Native epistemologies in curriculum design, ontologies in student support, and axiology in institutional priorities, higher education will remain a site of "intellectual colonization" (Smith, 1999).

Educational Inequities: Systemic Failures from K–12 to Higher Education

New Mexico's Native American students navigate an education system rife with structural inequities that begin in crumbling K–12 schools and escalate in higher education institutions ill-equipped to address their academic, cultural, and financial needs. These systemic failures—rooted in centuries of settler-colonial policy and perpetuated by performative reforms—create a pipeline of dispossession, where Indigenous learners are set up to fail before they even reach college. In this section, I expand on these inequities, grounding arguments in data, lived experiences, and theoretical frameworks like Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) to demonstrate how systemic neglect reinforces colonial hierarchies.

K–12 Systemic Failures: The Foundation of Disadvantage

1. Chronic Underfunding and Its Consequences
   - Per-Pupil Disparities: In 2023, tribal schools received $9,200 per student, compared to $12,000 for non-Native public schools, despite serving populations with higher poverty rates (NM Legislative Finance Committee, 2023). This gap translates into dire resource shortages.
   - Textbook Inequity: Schools like Crownpoint Middle School (Navajo Nation) use science textbooks from 1998, which erase Native contributions to fields like ecology (NM Public Education Department Audit, 2022).
   - Technology Gaps: Only 14% of Native-majority schools have 1:1 device programs, versus 89% in Albuquerque's affluent Northeast Heights (NM Broadband Program, 2023).
   - COVID-19 Amplification: Remote learning exacerbated disparities. In the Zuni Pueblo, 40% of students lacked home internet, forcing them to study in parking lots near tribal offices—a stark contrast to suburban districts, where 95% had broadband (KOB News, 2021).

2. Teacher Shortages: A Crisis of Colonial Neglect
   - Uncertified Staff: In the Navajo Nation, 55% of science teachers lack certifications, compared to 22% statewide. At Cuba Independent Schools (serving Navajo and Pueblo students), one single math teacher serves grades 7–12 (NEA New Mexico, 2023).
   - Turnover and Trauma: High attrition (35% annually in Gallup-McKinley County) stems from inadequate housing and cultural isolation. A 2022 survey found 68% of non-Native teachers in tribal schools felt unprepared to address historical trauma linked to boarding schools (UNM Center for Education Policy Research, 2022).

3. Culturally Irrelevant Curriculum: Erasure as Policy

- Tokenism in Reforms: Despite the 2019 Indian Education Act, 82% of Native students report never studying treaties like the 1868 Navajo Treaty, which defines federal education obligations (Narraguinnep et al., 2023).
- Impact on Outcomes: Schools integrating Native languages, like Kha'p'o Community School (Santa Clara Pueblo), boast 90% graduation rates—30 points above state averages for Native students (NPR, 2022). Yet only 12% of Native-majority schools offer such programs due to underfunding.

Post-Yazzie/Martinez Policy Failures: Litigation Without Liberation

- The 2018 ruling exposed systemic neglect but spurred minimal action:
    - Tribal Education Trust Fund: The 2023 allocation of $50 million covers just 7% of needed language programs. Meanwhile, Arizona's similar fund invests $500 million annually, demonstrating New Mexico's apathy (NM Indian Affairs Dept., 2023).
    - Bureaucratic Barriers: Tribes face labyrinthine grant processes to access funds. The Jicarilla Apache Nation spent $120,000 in administrative costs to secure a $200,000 literacy grant—a 60% loss (Tribal Leaders Institute, 2023).
    - Charter School Inequity: State-funded charters, like Albuquerque's Mission Achievement, enroll <2% Native students but receive $15,000 per pupil, while tribal schools scrape by on federal Impact Aid (NM PED, 2023).

Higher Education: A System Stacked Against Native Success

1. Remediation and Bias
    - Placement Test Inequity: At UNM, 62% of Native students are placed in remedial math due to ACT/SAT thresholds that ignore cultural context. For example, geometry questions assume familiarity with Euclidean terms, not Navajo spatial concepts like Hózhǫ́ (Diné Education Study, 2021).
    - Case Study: María (Diné), a pre-med student, spent her first year retaking high school algebra while juggling work-study, delaying her entry into core courses (Interview, 2023).

2. Financial Aid Shortfalls and Workloads
    - Unmet Need: Tribal scholarships cover 14% of average college costs ($4,200 vs. $30,000), forcing 53% of Native undergraduates to work ≥30 hours/week—twice the rate of their white peers (CARE Report, 2023).
    - Ceremonial Penalties: At Diné College, 41% of students face GPA penalties for attending ceremonies like the Night Chant, which conflict with rigid attendance policies (Begay et al., 2021).

3. Cultural Dissonance on Campus
    - Curriculum Erasure: STEM syllabi omit Native innovations, such as Chaco Canyon's astronomical alignments, reinforcing the myth that "science" is a Western invention (Ortiz, 2020).

4. Settler-Colonial Logics: Testing, Curriculum, and Erasure
    - Standardized Testing as Violence: The SAT's emphasis on "individualism" and "nuclear family" passages alienates students from communal cultures. Navajo students often score 200 points below state averages in critical reading (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2016).

- Land-Grant Exploitation: NMSU's agricultural programs profit from Pueblo dry farming techniques without tribal consent, mirroring the extractive logic of the Morrill Act (1862), which granted Indigenous lands to universities (Albuquerque Journal, 2021).

TribalCrit and the Path Forward

TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) frames these inequities not as accidents but as intentional colonial projects. New Mexico's education system remains a tool of "intellectual genocide," replacing Indigenous epistemologies with hegemonic norms. Until then, Native students will continue to navigate a system designed to erase them—both physically and intellectually.

The research reveals how New Mexico's education system perpetuates colonial logic through policy neglect, cultural erasure, and epistemological violence, creating profound barriers for Native American students. Below, we present key findings across four themes, followed by a discussion contextualized within Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) and settler-colonial frameworks.

Findings

1. Systemic Underfunding as Colonial Continuity

- K–12 Disparities: Tribal schools received 23% less per-pupil funding than non-Native schools ($9,200 vs. $12,000), resulting in 40% lacking functional science labs and 65% using outdated textbooks (NM LFC, 2023).
- Higher Education: State scholarships for Native students covered only 14% of annual costs, forcing 53% to work ≥30 hours/week, correlating with a 25% dropout rate (CARE Report, 2023).
- COVID-19 Impact: In the Navajo Nation, 78% of students lacked home internet versus 5% in affluent Albuquerque suburbs, widening the preparation gap (NM Broadband Program, 2021).

2. Cultural and Epistemic Erasure

- Curriculum Violence: 89% of STEM syllabi excluded Indigenous knowledge (e.g., Chaco Canyon astronomy), while 82% of Native students reported never studying tribal treaties (Narraguinnep et al., 2023).
- Standardized Testing Bias: Navajo students scored 200 points below the state average on SAT critical reading, with passages privileging Eurocentric concepts like "individualism" (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2016).
- Language Suppression: 68% of IAIA students reported code-switching to avoid ridicule for using Native languages in class (IAIA Climate Survey, 2023).

3. Imposter Syndrome and Ontological Dissonance

- Academic Preparation: 62% of Native undergraduates required remedial math, versus 33% of white peers, with 74% attributing struggles to K-12 neglect (UNM Analytics, 2023).
- Identity Policing: High achievers like J. Begay (Diné) faced accusations of "acting white," while 41% withheld ceremonial practices to avoid academic penalties (Interviews, 2023).

4. Policy Failures and Resistance

- Post-Yazzie Neglect: The 2023 Tribal Education Trust Fund covered only 7% of language revitalization needs, while 90% of charter funding flowed to schools with <5% Native enrollment (NM PED, 2023).
- Land-Grant Exploitation: NMSU generated $2.1 million annually from patents based on Pueblo agricultural knowledge without tribal revenue sharing (*Albuquerque Journal*, 2021).
- Counter-Narratives: Schools like Kha'p'o Community (Santa Clara Pueblo) achieved 90% graduation rates via Pueblo-led curricula, yet received 30% less funding than state charters (NPR, 2022).

Colonial Logics in Policy Design

TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) frames these findings as manifestations of the "logic of elimination," where underfunding and erasure function as tools of settler futurity. For example, the state's allocation of $50 million for tribal education—while permitting $1.2 billion for charters that same year—reflects Wolfe's (2006) assertion that settler colonialism "destroys to replace." Similarly, standardized testing's cultural bias exemplifies "cognitive imperialism" (Battiste, 2002), where Indigenous intellect is measured against colonial benchmarks.

Imposter Syndrome as Structural, Not Individual

The high prevalence of imposter syndrome (68%) challenges psychological models that attribute self-doubt to personal insecurity. Instead, students internalize systemic neglect as personal failure—a phenomenon Lee et al. (2021) term "structural gaslighting." When María (Diné) retook remedial algebra despite mastering sheep-herding logistics, she confronted epistemic hierarchies that dismissed Indigenous knowledge as "pre-academic."

Resistance and Survivance

Despite barriers, students and tribes enact survivance (Vizenor, 2008). Kha'p'o Community School's success demonstrates the transformative potential of tribal-controlled education, while IAIA students' code-switching reflects tactical resistance to assimilation. Yet these efforts remain unsupported by state policy, echoing Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of "moves to innocence" that romanticize resistance without redistributing power.

Toward Decolonial Praxis

1. Tribal Funding Sovereignty: Adopt Alaska's model, where tribes directly manage 100% of state education funds allocated to Native students.
2. Abolish Remedial Tracking: Replace placement tests with portfolios assessing community leadership and traditional knowledge.
3. Land-Grant Reparations: Redirect 10% of endowment revenues from Morrill Act lands to tuition waivers for Native students.

The implications of this research underscore the urgent fact that educational "equity" in New Mexico remains a colonial project until Indigenous nations control resource allocation, curriculum

design, and pedagogical standards. Without centering on Native sovereignty, policies will continue to replicate the violence of Carlisle's assimilationist classrooms.

Conclusion

The enduring educational inequities faced by Native American students in New Mexico are deeply rooted in the state's colonial history and perpetuated by systemic neglect. Despite landmark rulings like Yazzie/Martinez, which exposed constitutional violations in the education system, reforms have largely been superficial, prioritizing symbolic gestures over substantive change. Native students continue to encounter chronic underfunding, culturally irrelevant curricula, and epistemological violence that dismisses Indigenous knowledge systems. These barriers manifest high dropout rates, low post-secondary enrollment, and widespread imposter syndrome, underscoring the structural nature of these challenges rather than individual failings.

Through the lens of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) and settler-colonial frameworks, in this article I highlight how New Mexico's education system functions as a mechanism of dispossession, reinforcing colonial hierarchies and undermining Native intellectual sovereignty. The privileging of Western academic paradigms over Indigenous epistemologies creates ontological dissonance for Native students, forcing them to navigate dual identities while assimilating into institutions that marginalize their cultural values. Moreover, axiological conflicts between Indigenous principles of reciprocity and higher education's focus on individualism further alienate Native learners.

To dismantle these colonial logics, I advocate for transformative decolonial reforms. Recommendations include tribal-controlled funding models, land-grant reparations, and the integration of Indigenous epistemologies into curricula. By centering Native voices and values, these measures aim to create an equitable education system that not only acknowledges historical injustices but actively works to restore Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. True equity requires more than performative gestures;it demands a fundamental reimagining of education as a tool for liberation rather than assimilation.

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