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ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN THE US IN RAISING AWARENESS OF MMIW

Gunay Agayeva,
Master of Education (Education Management), ADA University (Baku, Azerbaijan)
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-2485-095X

Abstract. This paper examines the significance of schools in raising awareness of the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) issue. The paper uses a qualitative, literature-based analysis to argue that schools are positioned to facilitate empathy, civic responsibility, and cultural understanding during the critical stage of social development. The study suggests several educational approaches to integrate students with local communities, including storytelling projects, community awareness initiatives, symbolic art displays, and the inclusion of authentic Indigenous perspectives in curriculum frameworks.

This study's analysis also indicates that supporting critical thinking and social justice awareness can be achieved by respecting the Indigenous knowledge system. The inclusion of MMIW issues in curricula allows schools to contribute and to engage in meaningful dialogue and actions towards the respect, dignity, and visibility of Indigenous women and girls.

Key words: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), Native American education, culturally responsive education, curriculum integrations, social justice education.

Introduction. According to reports, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) is one of the main crises that affects Indigenous women in North America due to the high rates of violence and systemic neglect over many years (Issues | Indian Law Resource Center, 2017). Research by the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC) (2022) indicates that, for many years, federal legislation has restricted and constrained Tribal law enforcement's ability in the prevention of non-Native crimes.

The National Inquiry's Final Report (2019) shows that the MMIW cause is a result of a combination of societal injustices, cultural and linguistic erasure, and long-standing human rights violations related to historical and persistent violence. In order to comprehend the historical and contemporary realities of American Indian Nations and their women, mainstream American education can be addressed through changes. The necessary adjustments at the national state and national levels can be guided by this two-pronged process of legal reform and cultural reeducation (NIWRC, 2022). Schools can help foster activism and understanding of these concerns through education. As organizations that shape and influence values, educational institutions serve as essential tools for students to understand the nuances of MMIW, develop cross-cultural empathy, and engage actively in justice and equity concerns. Schools are positioned to empower youth by integrating authentic Native American history, voices, and perspectives into curricula, supporting storytelling programs, and supporting community-driven projects.

Literature Review. Most of the research dedicated to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) mainly focuses on systemic gaps, social and political violence against Indigenous people. However, there is very little focus on educational frameworks that could serve as tools for engagement opportunities. Schools' role in this process is not neutral. They can function as sites for developing critical consciousness and culturally grounded understandings of social injustice.

According to Held (2023), Western educational settings, which have long served as a standard, support dominant systems and their curricula, policies, methodologies, and data interpretations, all

of which reflect those biases. Therefore, Native American knowledge systems and sociopolitical issues have been neglected. Scholars McCarty and Lee (2014) argued that the concepts of Culturally Sustaining and Regenerative Pedagogy (CSRP) can serve as an essential strategy for Indigenous learners, positioning Indigenous knowledge not as an alternative but as a fundamental part of education (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy addresses colonial issues and develops community-based educational sovereignty.

According to studies (Heybach, 2016), culturally responsive education, which incorporates students' cultural identities, fosters sociopolitical awareness. Those responses honor Native American history, cultures, and tribal languages. Consistent with Turanovic and Pratt (2017), the MMIW epidemic highlights the importance of education, as the Indigenous youth who were exposed to violence face an increased risk of negative consequences in early adulthood.

Another article about the school in raising awareness about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) epidemic was written by two student activists, Isaacs and Young (2019). They suggest that lived experiences, students, and educators can serve as advocates and raise awareness about this crisis, not only within the school but also outside. Nevertheless, this study is narrow in scope and does not address gaps in the educational context or how learners can raise awareness of MMIW.

Schools can play not only an educational role, but can also shape students' perspectives on sociopolitical patterns. Although the following study does not directly align with the ideology of addressing MMIW in existing papers, it explains how Indigenous students also take initiatives to resist cultural erasure by protest, community mobilization, and cultural expression (Turner et al. 2023).

The following are examples of scholarship that can easily be adapted to an educational setting as well. The REDress project, a public art installation, also aims to raise awareness of the MMIW epidemic (The Guardian, 2019). This project was established by Metis artist Jaime Black, who visually represents the scale of the crisis and emotionally resonates with it. By incorporating installations into schools, educators invite students to engage in critical conversations about gender-based violence, Indigenous cultural erasure, colonial consequences, and fostering awareness that extends beyond the classroom (Davis, 2018). Analogically, the project Walking With Our Sisters (2020) was also established to honor the victims by creating moccasin tops. These projects demonstrate the power of symbolic methods that are oriented to the community for encouraging the recognition of violence against Indigenous women and girls and its outcomes.

Indigenous scholar Waziyatawin (n.d) emphasized the importance of decolonizing education. Although her work and findings are foundational for shaping Native American experiences, there is still a lack of educational provision for implementing decolonial theory in research-driven evaluations of classroom-based MMIW initiatives.

Despite these studies, contributions, and student activists, there are still existing gaps in the educational framework that is dedicated to systemic violence against Indigenous women and girls. However, it shows that pedagogical methods can be used alongside the MMIW situation to confront the colonial violence.

Methodology. This study examines the role of schools in addressing MMIW using a qualitative, literature-based methodology. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that since this method emphasizes understanding the social, political, and cultural aspects of education, it is consistent with qualitative methodology. To identify recurrent themes and gaps, such as the methodical incorporation of MMIW-related content into curricula, the study synthesizes evidence from peer-reviewed literature on Indigenous education, culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy, student and youth activism, and documented school-based initiatives. To understand how schools might promote student participation, empathy, and social justice awareness, the education-based examples were provided.

The following research combined data from multiple sources through a thematic, critical, and pedagogical lens to identify recurring themes, including student activism, cultural symbolism, com-

munity involvement, and curricular integration. Patton (2015) stated that critical qualitative methods emphasize understanding the social, political, and cultural facets of education. Moreover, the study used thematic synthesis to explore how schools may be places of empathy and social justice awareness, and it highlights gaps in the literature, particularly in the systemic integration of MMIW awareness into curricula.

Findings and Analysis.

A. Student Activism and Civic Engagement

School-based activism shows that schools can serve as contentious political settings where students directly engage with social responsibility. According to AP News (2023), one of these examples was the high school walkout in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which protested to raise awareness of social injustices and to show how schools can serve as places of civic education, with students engaging in community lobbying and negotiating institutional authority. However, this walkout was not developed within the educational framework as part of the curriculum or pedagogy, nor was it used as an educational tool. The Sioux Falls walkout remains the act of student activism that was led by a sense of injustice and jurisdictional challenges that frequently prevent prompt investigations into MMIW cases, which show disregard for Indigenous people. Freire (1970/2000) stated that critical pedagogy exemplifies praxis, combining reflection and action to challenge oppressive structures and cultivate social consciousness.

B. Cultural Symbolism at Schools

Some symbolic activities at schools, such as visual and performative rituals, may serve an educational purpose by raising awareness of MMIW issues. For example, during the basketball memorial, Omaha Tribe cheerleaders used red handprints over Indigenous students' mouths to both educate the larger school community about the issue and convey the silencing of Indigenous women (Barron, 2020).

These activities improve students' learning and identity development. As they engage in them, students gain empathy for people impacted by MMIW, interact with Indigenous knowledge systems, and hear collective stories of survival.

C. Curriculum Integration and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Schools can further translate awareness into structured learning by integrating curriculum and engaging in interdisciplinary instruction. According to Indian Education for All (n.d.), every public school in Montana should provide students with education about the state's Indigenous peoples and require a curriculum developed with tribal governments. This is one example of Indigenous-related education reflected in the curriculum. Another example is the Comox Valley School in British Columbia, a high school curriculum implemented by Lees and McMahon (n.d.) that provides information about MMIW. These methods demonstrate how educational institutions can turn complex societal issues into visible learning opportunities.

From an educational perspective, these strategies represent critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, showing how education may be multidisciplinary, action-oriented, and closely linked to students' cultural backgrounds (Heybach, 2016; Freire, 1970/2000).

Challenges and Limitations. Even though school can be a potentially strong tool in raising awareness of MMIW, there are still existing challenges and limitations that can restrict the effectiveness of actions.

Significant limitations can arise when teachers are not trained on Indigenous peoples, and without adequate preparation, they are insufficiently prepared to address the issues of MMIW (Lorenz, 2019). Lorenz indicates that this is a serious problem in classrooms since non-Indigenous educators might be unintentionally engaging in racist macroaggressions at work or even harboring stereotypes when educating Indigenous students.

On the other hand, when Indigenous issues such as MMIW are being told from the perspective of victimhood only, their society will be linked to passivity (Fan, 2024). This statement explains that the

MMIW issue does not occur because of the Indigenous people being victims, but because of the systemic failures. Emily Fan (2024) stated that when Indigenous voices are confined to discussions from a bygone age, the lack of relevant modern narratives about Indigenous people inevitably harms both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Educational curriculum should not be using Indigenous voices of women and girls as an accessory, which is included in ways that serve institutional priorities rather than Indigenous communities.

Another challenge can occur if the school entirely relies on symbolic activities such as murals or any other related art projects that don't make long-term changes in the teaching. When schools focus on what is performative, rather than impactful, the integrations stay absent and the commitments superficial (Gibbs et al., 2023).

Recommendations. McCarty and Brayboy (2021) suggested that schools should respectfully integrate and maintain students' culture and issues. However, it's not just about adding facts about cultures and problems, but genuinely supporting the students' backgrounds. In Indigenous educational contexts, it requires focusing on Native American cultures, languages, and systemic failures that further led to issues such as MMIW (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Second, education policy at the district, state, and national levels should include mandates for culturally responsive curriculum and teacher training programs that would encompass Native American histories, culture, contemporary experiences, including the MMIW crisis.

Moreover, classrooms should collaborate with local Indigenous leaders, advocates, activists, or MMIW survivors. Inviting those individuals to share their stories and perspectives provides students with experiential learning opportunities that would develop empathy and gain a nuanced understanding of the MMIW problem. Tuck and Yang (2012) stated that schools should be using authentic Indigenous voices for developing curriculum and lessons to ensure accuracy.

However, teachers should understand that education about the MMIW problem should be trauma-informed and avoid framing Indigenous people as victims. Instead, the teaching should honor resilience, systemic equity, and human rights across diverse disciplines. Therefore, schools need to be a safe place and respect students' emotional safety by implementing trauma-sensitive pedagogy (Bearhead, 2020).

Another way for schools to raise awareness about MMIW is not to focus on a single subject but to develop a holistic understanding (Indian Education for All, n.d.; Davis, 2018).

In sum, schools that adopt culturally responsive pedagogy, and the Native American community are engaged, can help students to develop an understanding of the social and systemic injustices. Through collaborative classroom practice, students can gain knowledge about the Native American realities as well as the MMIW problems.

Conclusion. Educational institutions can be used as an essential tool in preventing and eliminating violence against Native American women and girls by raising awareness. When schools support student-led activism and Indigenous-centered practices, they contribute not only to awareness but to the development of critical consciousness, civic agency, and collective responsibility among youth. Schools can bring public understanding about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women by bringing empathy, adequate, and culturally accurate teaching. At the same time, this analysis includes challenges that require increased precision and attention to avoid fostering a colonial way of thinking. Therefore, this research would provide evidence-based guidance for educators and policymakers to create inclusive, just-oriented educational environments.

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