Positionality Statement
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I am an Indigenous woman with multiple ancestries spanning Central and North America. I think about the irony of being born in a country that granted US citizenship to American Indian peoples in 1924. That history sits with me—not as a distant fact, but as a reminder that my very existence is shaped by numerous federal policies designed without my ancestor's best interests in mind.

My father, a first-generation Mexican man worked in construction and later mining industries to support our family starting in Wind River, Wyoming. The Indian Relocation Act of 1956, another form of federal termination, and lack of employment led my parents to move to southern Arizona in 1959. They both wanted more for their children eventually acquiring a small brick, track home on the south side of Tucson while instilling a spiritual foundation centered on family. Obedience to God and parents were absolutes in our household. We spent school years in Arizona and summers in Wyoming at my grandmother's insistence. My mother, an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Nation was fluent in our traditional language, English, and later learned to speak Spanish. Although my siblings and I are enrolled members of the tribe, we were deliberately not taught Spanish although we were surrounded by it at home and in the neighborhood. Public school opinion at that time was "you live in America, speak English". White America didn't value our languages, and the connections between language and culture. I now know what linguicide is and its impact on my own identity journey.

My mother also wanted us to dream bigger than our circumstances and saw education as a vehicle to grow out of Tucson. Every Saturday morning, she drove us to the mobile public library to check out books for the week. She closely monitored each of us through elementary school reading to us, reviewing homework, and visiting teachers. While I was navigating high school, she was also navigating community college and later the University of Arizona School of Education. Her journey was more than an achievement, it was a lesson to me; education is not a straight line or a privilege reserved for some—it is a commitment to oneself, to one's family, and to the future of our people.

My political awareness as a woman of color took shape in the years following the civil rights movement. From an early age, I felt the impact of public-school inequities shaped by our zip code, classism, and the limited job opportunities available to working-poor families. I witnessed relatives, neighbors, and friends endure open discrimination because of their accents or the color of their skin. Federal American Indian education funding eventually opened doors for me, allowing me to earn my BS and MSW degrees while juggling multiple part-time jobs. My MSW concentration in community organization planted an early understanding in me that meaningful social change begins with a passion, recognizes challenges, and works through a collective effort. It took me several years working in non-profit organizations to realize that larger structural forces limit true change on micro and macro levels.

In 2002, I completed a Ph.D. in Policy Analysis and Management only owing $10,000 in student loan debt thanks to a fellowship award and an anonymous donor grant. My dissertation committee members were extremely influential in my growing interest in social welfare, education, and community-based participatory research (CBPR). They shepherded me through a CBPR design evaluating the quality and effectiveness of an American Indian Program. I was at an eastern, ivy league institution when, for the first time in my life, I recognized that I was simultaneously privileged and oppressed. There were about 19,000 students and 73 (10 Grad and 63 UG) or .2% American Indian applicants my first year.

I am also one of those statistics that describe North American Indian or Indigenous Peoples as "less than 1%" of the total US population" or approximately 2 million people and not worth noting because the percentage is so small that it has no impact on data sets. By 2013, there were "less than 1 percent of all doctoral degrees conferred going to American Indians" (Lum, 2011). Data from the 2020 Annual Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Survey reported 5,616 full-time faculty in US accredited programs. Of this number, Indigenous faculty represented 1.0% or 56 individual faculty members that identified as Indigenous. I have been a faculty "minority within minority serving institutions" at several universities. I am currently the only Indigenous faculty member with tenure in a School of Social Work at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and was the only Indigenous tenure-track faculty member at my former institution, an HBCU. It was not easy moving through the ranks to become a full professor.

Being an ethnic and statistical minority has also contributed to my perspectives on the marginalization and stigmatization of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) women in academia. This lack of visibility in higher education impacts how how women faculty of color "face isolation, racial and gender-based antagonisms, the devaluation of their research interests and achievements, insufficient mentoring and support mechanisms, and ambivalence about their academic authority … facing double forms of marginalization in terms of race and gender" (Duggar, p. 120). I lived through those academic systems experiences with the support of a few BIPOC women on similar journeys. I do not speak for all Indigenous peoples or BIPOC women and my voice is my own in spite of those structural challenges. And I do hold my spiritual foundation as the anchor through these experiences. I am here because of the strength and resilience of my ancestors – and I have an obligation to heed their voices.

Throughout my entire professional practice and now as a faculty member, I teach students about the value and merit of social justice; cultural competency and humility; and participatory decision-making in theory and practice or praxis. Praxis embraces social justice emphasizing everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities. Social justice is defined as "... promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity." It exists when "all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community resources." (https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/social-justice/27378).

These values are also in alignment with the ongoing Martinez and Yazzie Consolidated Lawsuit (2018). This lawsuit is a concerted effort that challenges the NM Public Education Department which has historically neglected providing an "adequate" educational program for all students. Educational sovereignty, from an Indigenous lens, is through praxis with social justice as an end

goal. I am an ally and participant of the NM Tribal Alliance Framework representing the plaintiffs' demands that the NM Public Education Department provide a comprehensive remedial action plan for serving PK-12 and college students based on the lawsuit's complaints.

Reflecting on my career in equity work, my lived and professional experiences in social justice closely align with the developing Good Futures Project (GFP). Promoting a "good future" requires addressing the structural, systemic, and historical forces that marginalize diverse communities. Indigenous and Hispanic students and families in northern New Mexico deserve, at minimum, positive educational experiences and improved learning outcomes. The GFP offers a chance to rethink what and how students are taught so they gain a strong foundation for further education or the workforce. Through challenges, I have learned—and now teach—resilience, pride in multiple identities, connection to family, and perseverance. My mother was right: education and my connection to my ancestors can transform personal circumstances and drive broader social change.

References

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