

DISSERTATION

FROM COMMUNITY TO CLASSROOM: A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF SURVIVANCE
AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND
ALASKA NATIVE PRESERVICE TEACHERS AT A NATIVE AMERICAN SERVING
NONTRIBAL INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

FROM COMMUNITY TO CLASSROOM: A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF SURVIVANCE AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND ALASKA NATIVE PRESERVICE TEACHERS AT A NATIVE AMERICAN SERVING NONTRIBAL INSTITUTION

Native American and Alaska Native students remain underrepresented in teacher education programs, emphasizing the need for research that centers their experiences. This study explored the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers enrolled at a Native American-Serving Nontribal Institution (NASNTI) in the Southwest. Guided by Tribal Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, and Culturally Sustainable Revitalizing Pedagogy, this study also considered the research process and participant representation. Using the portraiture methodology, this study highlights participants' stories to show how they navigate teacher education while honoring their families, communities, and tribal nations.

Findings show that participants' paths into and through teacher education are often nonlinear and influenced by relational responsibilities like parenting, community roles, and connections to their home communities. They relied on various forms of community cultural wealth, particularly familial, aspirational, and navigational capital, to persevere within institutional settings that do not always support Native students. While NASNTIs offer important access and opportunities, participants also noted tensions between institutional expectations and community commitments. Throughout their stories, participants expressed a strong desire to

serve their communities as educators and to preserve Indigenous knowledge, language, and identity. This study adds to the literature by emphasizing the relational and community-centered aspects of Native teacher preparation and provides insights for programs aiming to better support Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are moments in this journey where time folds in on itself. This year marks my twentieth year in the classroom, and I still find myself saying that out loud with a bit of disbelief. Teaching was not the dream I carried as a young person. At one point, I imagined a different path, one that led toward law. But pathways shift, and realities intervene. As a young mother, the cost, time, and responsibilities I carried redirected me. What began as a practical decision became a calling, and over time, that calling became this work. My educational journey has not followed a straight line. Like the participants in this study, it has been shaped by pauses, redirections, and returns. There were moments when life required me to step away and times when I chose to come back with greater clarity and purpose. This dissertation is not separate from my story. It is rooted in it. My experiences navigating a teacher education program as a first-generation student, a young mother, and someone who often felt out of place shaped the questions I asked and the commitments I carry into this work. This study is, in many ways, a continuation of that journey.

I begin with my family. To my husband, Peter, my partner in life and in education, thank you. Much of our marriage and family life has unfolded alongside this doctoral journey. We moved through our master's program together, learning not only the work but what it means to persist. Over the years, your support has shown up in both big and quiet ways—reading drafts, offering feedback, making me coffee, and reminding me to keep going when I felt stretched thin. You created space for this work, taking on more of the day-to-day responsibilities so I could continue doing work I deeply care about. You made room for this dream, even when it asked more of both of us. This journey may have my name on it, but it has always been ours.

To my daughters, this work belongs to you in ways that words cannot fully capture. I remember asking my oldest daughter, Jordan, what came next after she completed graduate school, encouraging her to pursue a doctorate. She smiled and said eighteen years of school was enough—but then turned it back to me: “*Maybe you should do it.*” In that moment, something shifted. I realized how much we had grown up together. The idea felt distant, almost impossible, but it stayed with me. I also began this journey when my younger daughter, Marley, was in sixth grade, and now we have arrived here together as she prepares to graduate high school and begin her own path. Much of this work was written in the quiet early mornings, before the day began, so I could still be present as a mom, in the car, on the road, and in hotel rooms traveling for tennis. This dissertation was built in those in-between spaces, where life and scholarship had to coexist. You have both been part of this journey from beginning to end, shaping it in ways you may not even realize.

I also carry my brother, Jay, with me in this work. Losing him during the first year of this program changed everything. There were moments when continuing felt uncertain. Still, I move forward with the belief that he has been present in ways I cannot fully explain, watching, guiding, and reminding me to keep going.

To my cohort, who began this journey together in the summer of 2018, thank you for the shared experience of learning, questioning, and persisting. To my sister scholars, Jessica and Claire—your presence has been a gift. Jess, you have been a constant source of encouragement, listening through the hard moments, the frustrations, and the milestones. Claire, watching you finish lit something in me. Your completion reminded me that this was possible and that it was time to finish what I started.

To my advisor, Dr. Ryan Barone, thank you. You stepped into this process and gave your time so generously, even with a full plate. Your support, feedback, and belief in this work helped carry it forward when it felt heavy. To my committee members, Dr. Roe Bubar, Dr. Alex Lange, and Dr. Kara Coffino, thank you for stepping into this journey at different moments along the way. This has been a long process, and the committee has shifted over time. I am deeply appreciative of your willingness to step into these roles and to offer your support, insight, and guidance as this work came together. To my FLC colleagues, thank you for believing in me before the title was finished. You provided not only encouragement, but also the space and flexibility I needed to complete this work. That support mattered more than you may realize.

I also want to highlight a key moment in my journey: my experience at Penn State and the American Indian Leadership Program. Thanks to Dr. Tippeconnic and Dr. Faircloth, I had the chance to earn my master's degree, which also sparked my dedication to Indian education. It was during this time that my interest turned into a clear purpose. This experience didn't just conclude with a degree; it created a pathway that ultimately brought me here.

I also want to acknowledge the Native scholars who came before me, those whose work created space for this study to exist. Their scholarship, persistence, and commitment to community continue to shape what is possible for future generations. And finally, this work is for future Native teachers. For those navigating pathways that were not built with them in mind. For those who carry their communities with them into classrooms. For those who are still finding their way. This work begins in community, and it returns there.

DEDICATION

For the Native students and future teachers
whose journeys are shaped by community, responsibility, and return—
who carry their people, their languages, and their histories with them
into classrooms and back into their communities.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Native students continue to be underrepresented in the teaching workforce, a disparity that shapes educational experiences across K–12 and higher education. The National Indian Education Association (NIEA, 2024) reports that “Native students are less likely than their white peers to have a teacher that shares their racial and ethnic background.” This gap in representation remains a persistent issue in education and reflects broader structural inequities in access to teacher preparation pathways. My own educational experiences reflect this pattern. Growing up in a border town near the Navajo Nation, I recall having only one Native American teacher throughout my K–12 schooling. This lack of representation continued into higher education, where most of my instructors were also non-Native. While individual experiences vary, this pattern is consistent with national trends and highlights the limited presence of Native educators across educational contexts.

The lack of representation is not only a demographic concern; it has meaningful implications for student learning and identity development. Research has shown that students benefit academically and socially when they are taught by educators who share, or are responsive to, their cultural and racial backgrounds (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Perez & Jacobs, 2023). However, the teaching profession remains predominantly white and female¹ (Haddix, 2017; Sleeter, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These patterns are rooted in long-

¹ Gender and sex are often conflated. “Male” and “female” represent a sex binary seen in research and reporting, which I am forced to use. However, I uphold a broader epistemological view of gender influenced by Diné (Navajo) and other Indigenous perspectives.

standing inequities that have shaped who has access to, and success within, teacher education program (TEPs).

This study is situated within a broader sociopolitical context in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are increasingly contested. Recent federal actions aimed at limiting DEI initiatives (Archie, 2025; Moore, 2025) reflect a broader shift that has implications for education. While resistance to equity-focused work is not new, current policy changes intensify existing challenges and create additional barriers for marginalized communities. These conditions make it especially important to examine how educational systems respond to issues of equity and representation. As Baldwin (2008) and Freire (2017) suggest, engaging in this work requires ongoing critical awareness and a commitment to challenging inequitable structures.

TEPs are a critical point of entry into the profession and play a key role in shaping who becomes a teacher and how they are prepared. As such, they are important sites for examining how representation, cultural knowledge, and equity show up in practice (Andrews et al., 2017; Cochran-Smith, 2004; hooks, 2014). Despite this importance, there remains limited research focused specifically on the experiences of Native American and Alaska Native (NA/AN) preservice teachers within these programs, particularly at Native American Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs).

This gap in the literature points to a broader problem: the limited understanding of how Native preservice teachers experience and navigate TEPs, and how those programs prepare them to serve their communities. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening pathways into teaching for Native students and for advancing more culturally sustaining approaches to teacher preparation. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of NA/AN preservice

teachers in TEPs at NASNTIs, with attention to how these experiences shape their preparation and future roles as educators.

Problem Statement

Given the extensive history of trauma in education, many communities of color harbor distrust toward TEPs (Sleeter, 2017), a fact that is particularly true for Native communities. This underscores the need for more culturally knowledgeable teachers who are responsive to the needs of diverse students, families, and communities. To address this need for culturally responsive education in higher education, many tribal nations have reclaimed education through the establishment of NA/AN and Indigenous TEPs at baccalaureate-serving institutions and tribal colleges and universities (Lees et al., 2016; Pavel et al., 2002; Ttepon et al., 2015). These programs are designed to recruit and prepare NA/AN and Indigenous individuals through cultural and community-based educational practices (Kitchen et al., 2013). Culturally responsive programs distinguish themselves from other TEPs by nurturing and centering Native and Indigenous epistemologies through the lenses of decolonization, sovereignty, nation-building, and self-determination (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Brayboy et al., 2015; Castagno, 2012).

Additionally, these programs provide a more authentic approach to culturally responsive instruction through Indigenous methodologies. However, culturally responsive programs face challenges related to institutional and program barriers (Locke, 2004), such as the pressure to conform to Westernized ways of knowing and doing (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012; Whitfield & Klug, 1998) and policies and practices rooted in colonization (Locke, 2004). As a result, these barriers raise concerns that TEPs may not be conducive to the backgrounds and experiences of Native students.

However, NASNTIs, which originated under the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, provide a unique opportunity to diversify the teacher education workforce and to increase the number of Native teachers. The NASNTI designation describes institutions of higher education (IHEs) with 10% of their student population identifying as Native American and qualifying for Title III funding through the U.S. Department of Education (Benally et al., 2020). According to Minthorn (2022), NASNTIs have a responsibility to systemically indigenize their spaces through four foundational areas of practice: 1) Indigenizing Narratives and Landscapes involves institutions reflecting on how their historical narratives affect relationships with Native/Indigenous communities; 2) Indigenizing Leadership ensures the growth of Native/Indigenous faculty and staff into leadership roles, along with having at least one high-level administrator involved in strategic planning and daily operations; 3) Indigenizing Academia aims for Native faculty to be prominent in each department, with a clear focus on recruiting, retaining, and supporting them, including establishing a Native American studies program; and 4) Indigenizing Student Support entails sharing best practices with staff and faculty for aiding Native/Indigenous students, creating a campus-wide support network and making Native/Indigenous students a core part of an institution's core values. According to Minthorn, these four areas of praxes are essential for effectively Indigenizing an institution, thereby, positioning NASNTIs as exemplary models for other institutions in serving Native and Indigenous students. Indigenizing institutions and programs allow NA/AN students to feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their educational settings.

Many studies have investigated student experiences in TEPs, particularly for students of color navigating predominantly White institutions and dominant educational frameworks (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Picower, 2009). Research has also explored the experiences of Native

students in higher education more broadly, highlighting the roles of community, identity, and institutional context in shaping persistence (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Pavel et al., 2003). However, there remains limited research that specifically examines Native students' experiences within TEPs at NASNTIs, where institutional context, mission, and proximity to tribal communities may uniquely shape those experiences. Like Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), NASNTIs have a unique opportunity to offer culturally responsive programming tailored to the needs of their underrepresented student populations. Given that the 37 NASNTIs across the United States (WICHE, n.d.) are geographically located near students' home communities, they are ideal locations for Native American students seeking to further their education. Due to their commitment to remain close to their tribal communities, many Native students prefer not to relocate because of family, ceremonial, and community obligations (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Kitchen & Raynor, 2013; Pavel et al., 2002). The proximity of NASNTIs to Tribal nations and communities, coupled with their growing Native student population, also makes them an ideal context for this study.

Background of Problem

Historical findings from the *Kennedy Report* (United States Senate, 1969), *Meriam Report* (Meriam, 1928), and *Indian Nations at Risk* (Charleston, 1994) show that Native American youth in the K-12 education system have confronted significant and persistent educational inequities—a long-standing concern for tribal communities. Compounding this issue is the ongoing underrepresentation of Native teachers in K-12 and higher education settings (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2015; Tippeconnic, 1991). Additionally, persistent teacher shortages in high-need areas, particularly in rural (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023) and Native reservation communities, further exacerbate the problem

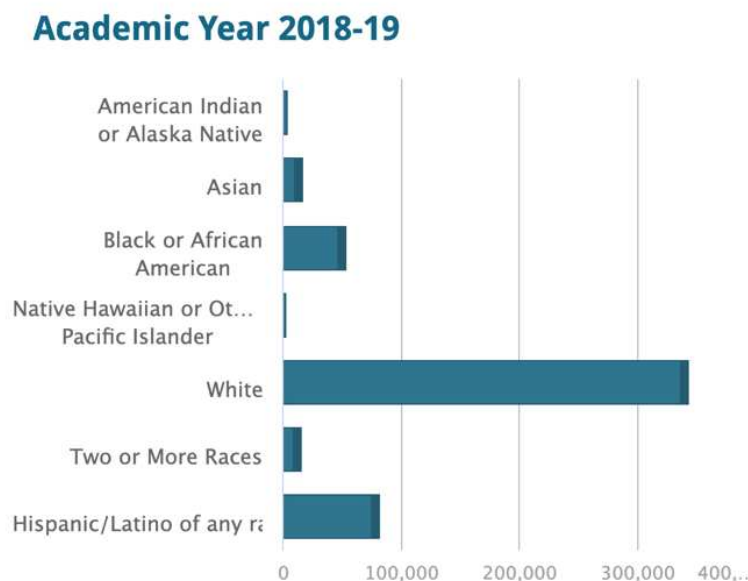
The National Indian Education Association, a national Native-led educational organization, reported that Native American teachers represented a low percentage of educators in schools serving a higher number of Native students (NIEA, 2024). In the Southwest, where the representation of Native American communities is prominent, scholars have noted the invisibility of Native American higher education students in the field of teacher education as explained by Haynes Writer and Oesterreich (2011): “... even though New Mexico’s population is 9.7% American Indian and Alaska Native [U.S. Census Bureau New Mexico, 2010], only 0.025% of candidates in our teacher preparation program are Native” (p. 511). New Mexico has also seen a 20.9% decline in student enrollment and completion rates in teacher education programs since the 2015-2016 academic year (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020). This statewide trend underscores the historical and broader issues related to teacher shortages in TEPs.

Decades ago, Native scholars identified the invisibility and decline of Native American teachers as a critical issue arising from a desire to pursue other, more lucrative fields (i.e., engineering, business), along with various program barriers, such as entrance exams required by TEPs (Reyhner, 1992; Tippeconnic, 1991). These findings indicate that systemic issues persist within TEPs, which hinder the recruitment and retention of Native American students. The lack of Native representation in the teaching pipeline has revealed that K-12 students are more likely to be taught by a white teacher, a disproportionality shown by lower number of Native American higher education students seeking a degree in the field of teacher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The following graphic (Figure 1.1) is from Title II, the most comprehensive data collection initiative for teacher education programs in the U.S., which illustrates that Native

Americans represent the smallest demographic among enrolled preservice teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Figure 1.1

Race Ethnicity Among Preservice Teachers, 2018-2019



Note. Retrieved from *Title II Report* under Title II of the Higher Education Act.

Recent data indicate that teacher shortages in the U.S. have become increasingly alarming (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Between 2010 and 2018, the enrollment of NA/AN in TEPs experienced a sharp decline of over 57%, according to longitudinal data from Title II Reports (Partelow, 2019). This decline is concerning because it shows that barriers exist for the recruitment and retention of NA/AN. This lack of diversity in the teaching workforce prompts an ongoing and urgent need to diversify the profession (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Goe & Roth, 2019; Haddix, 2017; Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015; Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019; Sleeter, 2001). Milner (2008) describes the incongruence of white teachers and racially diverse students as a demographic divide, and Haddix (2017) poses the question, “Where are the teachers of color?” (p. 142). The predominance of white teachers instructing a diverse student population

highlights racial and ethnic disparities that may impact the quality of education for students of color (Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019). Scholars have explored a lack of race representation in the teaching pipeline (Haddix, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2005a, 2005b; Milner, 2008), illuminating that a racial demographic divide is a persistent issue. Research also indicates that racially diverse teachers have an effective and positive impact on the schooling experience of racially diverse students (Sharp et al., 2019; Wallace & Gagen, 2020). As such, a more diversified teaching pool can lead to improved outcomes for students of color, including greater representation, cultural congruence, and culturally responsive instruction (Milner, 2008; Wallace & Gagen, 2020). However, as Haddix (2017) points out, efforts to diversify the teacher education workforce without addressing systemic issues in teacher education may prove to be ineffective.

This problem is further complicated by the fact that many TEPs continue to be foundationally centered on whiteness (Sleeter, 2017). As this study illustrates, TEPs are fundamentally rooted in whiteness, a fact evident in their practices, curriculum, ideology, and faculty composition (Baldwin, 2008; Daniels & Varghese, 2020; Sleeter, 2017). With an overrepresentation of white women in the teaching profession (Goe & Roth, 2019; Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019; Sleeter, 2001), many TEPs systematically tailor their programs to prepare white preservice teachers (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020) for teaching students from diverse races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds (Kasun & Saavedra, 2016; Sleeter, 2001). While TEPs may superficially incorporate elements of multicultural programming, they frequently fail to fundamentally transform their structures to enhance inclusivity (Milner, 2008). As a result, the “whiteness of teacher education” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 1) compels students of color to navigate systems that do not reflect their worldview and are not inclusive of their identities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers enrolled in TEPs at NASNTIs, with particular attention to how these programs prepared students to serve their home communities. NASNTIs are often located in or near Native communities, and many students who attend these institutions intend to return to those communities as educators. Understanding how these programs shape students' experiences and preparation is critical for strengthening pathways into teaching and supporting community-centered education.

This study was grounded in a conceptual framework that informed both the design and interpretation of the research. Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) provided a lens for examining how colonial structures continue to shape educational systems and the experiences of Indigenous students (Brayboy, 2005). Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSRP) emphasized the importance of sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages, cultures, and ways of knowing within educational spaces (McCarty & Lee, 2014). The Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework (Yosso, 2005) guided attention to the strengths, knowledge, and assets that Native students bring to their educational journeys, while the concept of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 2008) highlighted the active presence, resistance, and persistence of Indigenous peoples within and beyond institutional spaces. Together, these frameworks supported an asset-based and relational approach to understanding participants' experiences.

The need for this study is underscored by the continued underrepresentation of NA/AN educators in the teaching profession and within TEPs. As Haynes Writer and Oesterreich (2011) observed in a study at a southwestern university:

...the campus boasts a 23% Native American student population, there are no Native full-time faculty, and the increasing amount of coursework delivered online does not require

professors to know their students, much less their cultural contexts. Native knowledge is virtually invisible. (p. 517)

This lack of representation reflects broader systemic patterns in which whiteness and colonial structures continue to shape teacher education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Haddix, 2017; Milner, 2008; Sleeter, 2017). Historically, TEPs have been designed to serve predominantly white, middle-class women (Haddix, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Sleeter, 2017), often resulting in environments where minoritized students experience limited belonging and support.

Despite the important role NASNTIs play in supporting Native students, there is a lack of research on how NA/AN preservice teachers experience these programs and how they are prepared to serve their communities as educators. This gap is especially significant given the diversity within Native communities, including variations in geography, language, culture, and educational backgrounds. Gaining insight into these different experiences is crucial for creating TEPs that meet the specific needs of Native students and align with community priorities. By highlighting the voices and experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers, this study aims to deepen understanding of how TEPs at NASNTIs can better assist students in navigating their programs and preparing for culturally sustaining, community-focused teaching. The results of this research have important implications for tribal communities, TEP faculty, and institutional practices, particularly in increasing representation, supporting Indigenous knowledge systems, and preparing educators to serve their communities meaningfully and responsively.

Research Questions

Grounded in a commitment to supporting Native students in institutions of higher education and addressing the need for a deeper, more holistic understanding of NA/AN preservice

teachers' experiences in TEPs at NASNTIs, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?
 - a. What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?
2. How does a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?

Significance of this Study

There is a critical need for research that centers the experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers in TEPs at NASNTIs. This study responds to that need by examining how these programs shape students' experiences and preparation to serve their home communities. Given that most TEPs are housed within predominantly white institutions (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012; Kulago, 2019) and remain historically rooted in whiteness (Haddix, 2017; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Sleeter, 2001), it is essential to understand how institutional structures, curricula, and expectations influence Native students' experiences (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Harris et al., 2020; Sleeter, 2012). Gusa (2010) describes this as "white institutional presence," in which whiteness is normalized across campus policies, practices, and culture. Although NASNTIs are designated to serve Native students, many continue to reflect these broader institutional patterns, including a lack of representation among faculty and staff. When educators' racial and ethnic identities do not align with those of the students they serve,

important cultural knowledge, perspectives, and relational understandings may be overlooked. This study, therefore, contributes to a deeper understanding of how NA/AN preservice teachers navigate, respond to, and resist these structures within teacher education.

The significance of this study lies in its contributions to practice, policy, and research. For TEPs, the findings offer insights into how programs can better support the recruitment, retention, and preparation of Native preservice teachers through culturally responsive, community-centered approaches. This study highlights the importance of designing programs that recognize and build upon students' existing strengths, relationships, and commitments to their communities. For institutions of higher education, including NASNTIs, this study offers guidance for faculty and staff seeking to create more affirming and culturally sustaining learning environments. By centering participants' lived experiences and forms of CCW, the findings support efforts to move beyond deficit-based models and toward practices that honor Indigenous knowledge systems, identities, and ways of being. For Tribal nations and communities, this study underscores the importance of preparing educators who are not only academically trained but also culturally grounded and community-connected. Given that many Native educators return to serve their home communities, strengthening teacher preparation has broader implications for educational sovereignty, cultural continuity, and community well-being.

This study also contributes to scholarship by extending TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), CCW (Yosso, 2005), and CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) within the context of teacher education at NASNTIs. Through this integration, the study highlights how Indigenous survivance is enacted through students' navigation of higher education and their commitments to community return. Ultimately, this study affirms the experiences and knowledge of Native American and Alaska

Native preservice teachers while offering actionable insights for transforming teacher education programs to better serve Indigenous students and communities.

Researcher Positionality

Jones et al. (2013) explain that “Epistemology conveys philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge. Some scholars do not refer to epistemology, but those who do define it as the origin, theory, or assumptions about knowledge” (p. 9). Essentially, the term epistemology answers the question, “How do I know what I know?” (Bhattacharya, 2017). My positionality is rooted in my lived experiences as a Diné woman and a practitioner-scholar in teacher education. My interest in this inquiry topic arises from my own undergraduate experience in a TEP. According to Jones et al. (2013), positionality is a strength of qualitative research, as this is where passion for the topic originates: “Qualitative inquiry often requires the researcher to become embedded in a context and responsive to what is happening in that context. There often is, and should be, a relationship between the researcher and the researched” (p. 11). This perspective contrasts with positivist views that researchers should remain objective and disconnected from their study.

Jones et al. (2013) emphasized that it is essential to recognize one’s perspective and position before embarking on a research project. This awareness helps prevent the inclination to interpret results solely through one’s own experiences and assumptions, instead of valuing the voices of the study participants (p. 41). A clear understanding of one’s role is vital for maintaining the integrity, credibility, and validity of the research process. I frame my positionality using the portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002) method through a technique known as the researcher’s perch.

Personal Context: The Researcher's Perch

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), in their portraiture method, it is vital for the portraitist not only to illustrate the contours and dimensions of the setting but also to integrate herself into that context; thus, the portraitist is woven into the story (p. 50). I was born in Fort Defiance, Arizona, located in northeast Arizona near the capital of the Navajo Nation—Window Rock. Once a military post, Fort Defiance now serves as a center for Indian Health Services. According to the Army Historical Foundation (Newell, 2025), “The fort served as the headquarters for Carson’s scorched earth campaign during which he burned Navajo homes and fields and killed or confiscated their livestock” (para. 11). This area was historically marked by multiple confrontations between the Diné and the U.S. Army in the mid-1850s. Like many Native communities, the Diné fought for their ancestral lands. This fight ultimately led to the Diné's surrender and their forced relocation, known as the Long Walk, to Bosque Redondo.

It is crucial to highlight this as a key instance of settler colonialism, resulting in the displacement of a whole community. While it's unclear whether my ancestors were involved in this displacement, the long-term trauma, associated with displacement has significantly impacted the Diné community. During the 1970s, my mother experienced relocation through the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP), a type of boarding school program that pairs Native American children with foster families. According to Smith (2023), boarding school programs arose from society’s attempt to assimilate and eradicate the cultural identity of Native peoples. According to Klug and Whitfield (2012), “For a considerable majority ... the boarding school experience of the period was harmful. The children were taught that they and their communities were inferior to Europeans” (p. 32). Likewise, the family my mother was paired with embraced these same principles. She spent a considerable part of her education with the ISPP in Ogden,

Utah, which was part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' assimilation initiatives. The effects of colonization (Brayboy et al., 2015) and cultural assimilation caused my mother to lose her cultural identity and connections with her family. As a result, she suffered years of trauma that directly influenced my upbringing. It was not until I reached adulthood that I could begin to understand the effects of this intergenerational trauma in my own life and recognize how it has manifested.

A significant part of my childhood was spent in various unstable surroundings, with my maternal grandmother, Shimasaní, being the only constant. Most of my cherished moments were during the summer when I felt safe and loved in her presence. It was through these summers that I learned the Diné language. However, my school experience was isolating, compounded by an even more detached home life. As the eldest of four siblings, I took on the roles of caretaker and housekeeper, which consumed my days with the responsibilities of looking after my siblings, cooking, and cleaning while I yearned to participate in after-school activities. I never had the chance to know my biological father, as he passed away when I was less than a year old. My upbringing was largely shaped by my single mother. It wasn't until I turned 12 that my mom met my stepfather. He brought financial stability to our family, but I didn't experience the same fatherly relationship with him that he had with my siblings. For a long time, I saw my family's structure through the lens of the Western nuclear family model, often feeling it was a flaw that I didn't grow up in a two-parent household. However, now that I'm an adult, I admire my mom's resilience and her skill in overcoming obstacles and making the most of the resources available to her.

As a student, I was mediocre, as I did not get the highest grades and did not make friends easily. As an educator, I've come to realize that when a student faces difficulties in the

classroom, it is seldom due to a lack of ability; rather, it usually arises from other life challenges. During high school, I often rebelled, resulting in suspensions, drinking, and ultimately becoming pregnant at 17. Throughout my time in school, I never felt comfortable with the adults around me, as they often judged me and viewed me through a deficit lens. A counselor once told me that my poor grades and pregnancy would restrict my options in life. Throughout my educational journey, I often felt isolated and alone. However, I remained convinced that college held valuable opportunities essential for my preparation for motherhood. According to Yosso (2005), this is referred to as aspirational capital—the ability to sustain hopes and dreams for the future.

As a first-generation college student, I began my education at a community college, where I discovered my potential to excel academically and exceed others' expectations. This perspective drives my strong advocacy for strengths-based frameworks, as I've spent much of my life around people who focused more on my shortcomings than on my strengths (Moll et al., 2006) and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). If a teacher or counselor had viewed me through this lens, the course of my life might not have changed significantly, but I would have undoubtedly felt more accepted, valued, and a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). I often find it amusing and ironic that a significant portion of my life and career has been dedicated to teaching, even though I was a poor student in my younger years.

As a first-generation college student, I used my navigational capital, as conceptualized by Yosso (2005), to successfully maneuver through the college experience, supported by various grants and scholarships. Throughout my undergraduate experience, I was not a standout student or considered a model student by my teachers. However, I managed to achieve decent grades and eventually earned my degree. My teaching experience involved significant trial and error related to licensure testing, student teaching placements, and job hunting. I handled much of this

independently, but I certainly needed support from the TEP. As a mother to a seven-year-old, it became imperative for me to obtain a teaching degree and secure employment to provide for my daughter. I often wondered whether my identities, differing from other undergraduates in the program, would have led to greater acceptance and support from the TEP staff and faculty. At that time, I was in a program predominantly consisting of white women who were not parents and were middle class—perhaps these characteristics mirrored those of the TEP faculty during their younger years, creating a sense of familiarity. This isolating experience makes me ponder whether TEPs are creating opportunities for Native American students who often possess distinct racial, ethnic, and class identities compared to the faculty (Milner, 2008; Sleeter, 2001). I also question how this mismatch affects Native American students as they navigate their educational journeys. My life experiences inspire my research and fuel my passion for improving the educational landscape for Native American students who have frequently faced marginalization.

More than twenty years ago, I was a TEP student at a NASNTI, and today, I am a faculty member at a NASNTI. When I was a student, I noticed that all the faculty were white, and most of my classmates were affluent white women. As a faculty member, I find that most of my colleagues are also white women. This trend mirrors the broader educational landscape, where a significant number of teachers in schools are white women from suburban backgrounds (Milner, 2008; Sleeter, 2001). Currently, I observe Native American students in TEPs that primarily cater to their non-Native peers. I recall some teacher education faculty attempting to approach instruction from a multicultural angle, but they often overlooked critical aspects such as asset-based pedagogy, racial identity, and the challenges of serving minoritized students. This generalized teaching method continues to reinforce stereotypes, a concern highlighted by Haynes Writer and Oesterreich (2011) who write,

Native knowledge and culturally appropriate pedagogy are seldom incorporated into students' coursework; thus teachers, college instructors, and university professors often replicate and impose white normative cultural standards and stereotyping onto Native American teacher candidates. (p. 517)

Reflecting back, I often felt isolated and disconnected in a predominantly white learning environment, lacking a sense of belonging due to the program's disregard for my racial and ethnic identity and cultural knowledge. The program was not culturally responsive to my needs as a Native American student. Therefore, I feel a deep responsibility to advocate for recruiting and retaining fellow Native American students seeking careers in teacher education.

My personal experiences shape my engagement in this study and influence my research process. As a former Native American student in a TEP, I recognize that my insider perspective (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) brings significant advantages; I can relate to and grasp the nuances of my participants' experiences, allowing me to contextualize these insights and foster greater relational accountability (Brayboy et al., 2015). Chapter Three offers an in-depth discussion about how my positionality impacts the study.

Definition of Terms

For this study, the following terms are used:

Native American, American Indian, Native. These terms are used interchangeably to refer to first peoples recognized by both federal and state governments in the U.S. The terms American Indian, Native American, and Native are often used synonymously. When known, the specific tribal nation and decolonized name, such as Diné for the Navajo people, is used.

I intentionally capitalize the term *Native* when referring to Native American and Indigenous peoples. This choice is both scholarly and political, recognizing Native peoples as

distinct political and cultural groups rather than generic descriptors, and affirming tribal sovereignty and nationhood (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2004). Tribal Critical Race Theory further emphasizes that Indigenous peoples hold unique legal and political positions that should be reflected in how they are named. This approach is also supported by shifts in academic writing, including guidance from the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), which recommends capitalizing terms such as *Indigenous* and *Native* when referring to specific peoples. Additionally, Indigenous scholars have highlighted language as a site of power, noting that naming practices should resist colonial tendencies to generalize or diminish Indigenous identities (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). As such, capitalizing *Native* in this dissertation is a deliberate choice that aligns with both scholarly conventions and Indigenous research methodologies, honoring participants' identities and resisting deficit-oriented or colonial framing

Indigenous. The term Indigenous refers to the first peoples from various parts of the world, including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, among others.

Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institution. Also known as NASNTI, this is a federally designated institution where the undergraduate student body is at least 10% Native American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Survivance. This term is a combination of two words with many contexts (Morrill, 2016; Sabzalian, 2019): survival and resistance. This term was developed by Vizenor (2008) to describe Native stories as "an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (p. 11). Although survivance transcends stories, it is used here to describe the experiences and resilience of Native people and communities. Alutiiq scholar Sabzalian (2019) employed survivance storytelling in her book, *Indigenous Children's*

Survivance in Public Schools, to highlight the experiences of Native students, families, and educators.

Teacher Education Programs (TEPs). This term, also referred to as a teacher preparation program, describes a state-approved initiative at a higher education institution or similar organization. These programs provide coursework and guidance for those pursuing a career in teaching. Teacher preparation programs can be classified into traditional and alternative categories (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Summary

In this chapter, I examined the challenges faced by NA/AN students in TEPs and highlighted the importance of studying this issue. While existing research has explored the experiences of students of color in TEPs, there remains a limited understanding of the experiences of Native students, particularly within NASNTIs. This study addressed this gap by examining how NA/AN preservice teachers experienced a TEP at a NASNTI and how that program prepared them to serve their home communities.

Chapter Two presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, drawing on Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2014), alongside the concept of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999). Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding how Native preservice teachers navigate institutional structures while sustaining their identities, communities, and ways of knowing. This chapter also includes a review of the literature related to Native student experiences in higher education and teacher education.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology, including the use of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to explore participants' lived experiences. It

details the data collection process with five NA/AN preservice teachers at one NASNTI, as well as procedures related to recruitment, consent, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, all grounded in relational accountability and the Four Rs of Indigenous research. Chapter Four presents the findings through individual portraits and cross-case themes, highlighting how participants navigated TEPs, drew on multiple forms of CCW, and enacted survivance in response to institutional and structural challenges.

Chapter Five returns to these findings and situates them within the broader literature and conceptual frameworks, offering implications for TEPs, institutions of higher education, and Tribal communities. It concludes by affirming that NA/AN preservice teachers are not only navigating these systems but actively reshaping them through their commitments to community, culture, and future generations. In this way, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to reimagine teacher education as a space that not only includes Native students, but sustains and honors their presence, knowledge, and futures.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by outlining my conceptual framework, which sets the stage for my methodology and offers context for analyzing the literature. I subsequently examine the literature regarding asset-based ideology within education, as well as the effects of settler colonialism on education. Additionally, this literature review provides insights into teacher education programs (TEPs), particularly Native American Teacher Education Programs (NATEPs), that aim to develop Native American and Alaska Native (NA/AN) students. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) and their significance within higher education. Through this review, several research gaps were identified, including a critical gap addressed in this study: the limited scholarship on NA/AN student experience in TEPs at NASNTIs. Given the enduring impacts of colonialism and settler colonialism on teacher education, examining this area remains essential. Additional gaps in the literature are also highlighted.

This literature review was primarily conducted using the university database, ProQuest, EBSCO Academic Search, ERIC, Dissertations, and Theses Global, and Google Scholar. I also consulted state and federal websites, including the U.S. Department of Education, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, and several university sites. The main keywords I searched for encompassed Native American teacher education programs, nontribal institutions serving Native Americans, settler colonialism, colonialism, Indigenous survivance, cultural responsiveness, deficit ideology, asset-based ideology, teacher education, teacher preparation programs, and community cultural wealth. Additionally, I employed a blend of these keywords, typically without filters, as I aimed to examine the historical context. In certain instances, I did

filter the literature to the last five to eight years to focus on more contemporary insights. Furthermore, while my primary focus was on studies conducted in the United States, I reviewed several studies from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada due to their notable Indigenous populations. To establish the foundation for this literature review, the following section presents my conceptual framework. This will be followed by a discussion on the following areas: historical trauma, cultural responsiveness, Native American teacher education programs, and the gaps evident within the existing literature.

Conceptual Framework

This section outlines my conceptual framework, which integrates Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), and Culturally Sustaining Responsive Pedagogy (CSRP). Together, these theories enabled me to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the literature and offer a framework for examining the following research questions:

1. How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?
 - a. What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?
2. How does a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Native American students in TEPs at NASNTIs and to examine how these institutions prepare them to support their home communities. Brayboy and Castagno (2009) assert:

Educators must pay more attention to the ways colonization, racism, and power matter in educational settings and work towards more effective and longer-term pre-service and in-service training that helps educators understand and strategize about their role as agents for social change and greater educational equity. (p. 49)

My conceptual framework served as a foundation for my approach to the literature review and this study. It guided how I made sense of existing research, shaped my methodological decisions, and informed my interpretation of participants' experiences. Throughout this process, I was continually reminded that Native students bring critical insight into TEPs. Their perspectives are not simply data points, but contributions to a broader, reciprocal process of learning. By examining the structures and assumptions within TEPs, there is an opportunity to move toward more collaborative and community-informed approaches to program design and practice.

Critical Race Theory

The U.S. is significantly split over Critical Race Theory (CRT). Opponents view this theory as harmful, arguing that CRT attributes social problems to white people. In contrast, proponents contend that CRT is essential for grasping the significance of racial inequality (Sawchuck, 2021). At the national level, CRT has become sensationalized, with critics manipulating it for political gain, while K-12 schools have enacted bans on CRT and discussions about racism. This criticism of CRT is not based on an academic understanding; instead, it is grounded in political rhetoric and misrepresentations. For instance, the belief that CRT is taught in K-12 schools has led states, including Texas (McGee, 2021) and Florida (Dutton, 2021), to pass laws prohibiting CRT in their schools. Other flawed assumptions suggest that CRT seeks to make the U.S. the enemy and that all white people are racist. This rhetoric has been promoted by conservative politicians and media outlets to portray CRT negatively and to gain favor with their audience (Wong, 2021).

The reality is that CRT serves as a multifaceted framework used in law and education to examine racial inequalities and systemic disparities while also providing a balanced account of U.S. history, including both its positive and negative aspects. In the 1970s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from principles grounded in critical legal studies (CLS) and feminist theory, focusing primarily on examining race and racism in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). With its roots in law and legal studies, Bell (1980) argued that racism arises from structural inequities and systemic racism, noting that the structure of the U.S. is profoundly entrenched in racism. Thus, CRT emerged as a lens to analyze and critique such oppressive structures. CRT also came about during the Civil Rights era to understand and analyze the sociopolitical context of the country during a shifting and volatile time in history.

Prior to the emergence of CRT, legal scholars were offering critiques of the legal system but did not account for strategies and the operationalization of race and racism in social and economic structures. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) outline the following principles of CRT: 1) Race is a social construct, not a biological one; 2) Race is embedded into laws, policies, and societal frameworks; 3) Structural racism influences daily social issues; including income inequality, food insecurity, and the criminal justice system; 4) Storytelling and counter-storytelling are vital for understanding personal experiences and for challenging prevailing ideologies; and 5) Race intersects with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity and class, a concept known as intersectionality. This last tenet is a crucial element of CRT that provides deeper insight into how interconnected systems of oppression shape people's experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These principles offer a framework for examining the systemic issues of race and racism in institutional and organizational structures.

With the introduction of CRT in law, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) extended its application to education, suggesting that systemic racism and structural inequities are also present in that context and that CRT is essential for understanding those inequities within a school setting. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) highlight that racism is structurally evident in policies and procedures related to funding, curriculum, and discipline. Many scholars in education have examined CRT to understand how race and racism function within the educational system and to address these impacts through equitable practices in education. (Brayboy, 2005; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sleeter, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Since the emergence of CRT, critics have argued that this framework is too restrictive and fails to represent the experiences of other marginalized identities; therefore, it cannot fully address their intersectional identities related to race, class, and gender (Yosso, 2005). In response, scholars have broadened the scope of CRT to move beyond the black/white binary and include a diverse range of individual experiences. This expansion has led to the development of additional theories under the CRT umbrella, such as Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), Feminist Critical Race Theory (FemCrit), Latina/o/x Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Queer Critical Race Theory (QueerCrit), and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit).

Tribal Critical Race Theory

To recognize the distinct experiences of Native Americans, Brayboy (2005) proposed the framework of TribalCrit. While Brayboy highlights the importance of CRT, he also articulates that the theory fails to comprehensively address the unique challenges encountered by Native Americans. Brayboy (2005) explained that “While CRT serves as a framework in and of itself, it does not address the specific needs of tribal peoples because it does not address American

Indians' liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization" (p. 428). Focusing on the impact of colonization and sovereignty, TribalCrit was created to enhance the understanding of Native American identity and their unique educational experiences, centered around nine core tenets: 1) recognizing the impact of colonization; 2) acknowledgment that policies exist within white supremacy; 3) the status of native people lies between two areas, often referred to as liminal space; 4) recognition of tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and tribal autonomy; 5) acknowledgment of other ways of knowing and being, through an Indigenous lens; 6) government and educational policies are rooted in assimilation; 7) recognizes the diversity among tribal communities and that culture is central to lived experiences; 8) listening and storytelling are equally valuable theories; and 9) action and activism should arise from both theory and practice (Brayboy, 2005). Since its inception, TribalCrit has gained widespread recognition as a theory that emphasizes the experiences of Native American students. The following demonstrates how TribalCrit has served as both a theoretical lens and an analytical tool.

Masta (2018) conducted a qualitative study involving five eighth graders in a predominantly white school. TribalCrit served as a framework to analyze how Native American students navigate white colonial spaces and the effects of Western schooling. Masta's research was grounded in two key tenets: Indigenous ways of knowing versus Western perspectives and the impact of assimilation on education. Masta provides background on the fraught relations between Native Americans and the U.S. government, along with the effects of assimilation and colonization in education. In another study, Desai and Abeita (2017) used TribalCrit to explore the higher education experiences of Joy, a Native American woman of Navajo, Mescalero Apache, and Comanche heritage. They analyzed her journey through five key aspects: 1) liminal

space, 2) Indigenous perspective, 3) customs and traditions, 4) Indigenous narratives, and 5) the relationship between experience and activism. These two studies demonstrate how TribalCrit can shed light on the educational journeys of Native American students and emphasize the challenges they face in navigating higher education.

Theories help us make sense of experience by opening space for new perspectives and alternative ways of knowing. They also guide how we make meaning and inform decisions within our field of study. My identity and positionality as a Diné woman shaped this research, including the methodological choices I made throughout the study. Parts of my own history and that of my ancestors have been shaped by colonialism and assimilation. For this reason, the principles of TribalCrit resonate with me on both a scholarly and personal level. This Indigenous framework recognizes the sacred and lived experiences of Native peoples while also attending to the ongoing impacts of historical trauma. Alongside TribalCrit, I drew upon Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a complementary framework. This perspective centers the strengths, knowledge, and resources Native students bring with them. It also challenges the deficit narratives that have often shaped the literature.

Community Cultural Wealth

A culturally responsive pedagogical framework known as Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) emphasizes the strengths originating from the families, homes, and communities of students of color. With roots in CRT, Yosso (2005) developed CCW as a response to deficit ideology and “the assumption that Students of Color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies” (p. 70). This framework emerged from Bourdieu’s (1986) social and cultural capital framework in which he postulated that individuals could enhance their status in society through these forms of capital. Bourdieu further argued that the greater the degree of economic,

cultural, and social capital one possesses, the more successful they are in society. In response to Bourdieu (1986), Yosso (2005) argued that this framework was centered on white normative beliefs, thus overlooking the experiences of students of color. Consequently, Yosso (2005) developed six forms of cultural capital that reflect the experiences of students of color; these include the following types:

- Aspirational Capital: This refers to students' hopes and aspirations, enabling them to persist in their endeavors despite encountering challenges while simultaneously fostering their potential in various situations.
- Navigational Capital: This encompasses the skills and agency possessed by individuals, which facilitate their ability to maneuver within environments that are often dominated by social norms and permeated by racism.
- Social Capital: This pertains to the networks of individuals and community resources that assist students in successfully navigating unfamiliar settings.
- Linguistic Capital: This denotes the intellectual strength derived from proficiency in multiple languages, coupled with the capacity to socially navigate environments that predominantly use the English language.
- Familial Capital: The notion of family is expansive, encompassing not only the immediate family but also the community and networks of individuals that offer various levels of support to promote individual agency.
- Resistant Capital: This represents the skills necessary to challenge the status quo and address inequalities within a society that may marginalize people of color. (pp. 77-81)

These six forms of cultural capital shift the perspective of students of color and marginalized groups by emphasizing their strengths instead of their perceived limitations.

In addition to these six forms of capital, Huber (2009) developed an extension of this theory, based on a study with Chicana women, to include a sense of hope and faith through spiritual capital, which "... encompass[es] religious, indigenous, and ancestral beliefs and practices learned from one's family, community, and inner self" (p. 721). Huber found that the women leaned into spirituality as a source of strength and resistance, noting that while spirituality connects to other forms of capital, it was described as something distinct by the women. Park et al. (2020) elaborated on spiritual capital in their literature review, highlighting

the significance of religion and spirituality in CCW. They also reinforced the recognition of spiritual capital as a seventh type of cultural capital.

These various forms of capital are interconnected, and in some instances, they overlap (Yosso, 2005). As described by Huber (2009), CCW is a “... these forms of capital are interrelated and shift and overlap depending on the focus of analysis” (p. 712). CCW was developed largely in response to deficit ideology and dominant structures in our society (white middle-class norms); thus, CCW argues that the varying types of capital mentioned above refer to the assets of students of color. These assets are just as valuable as those that society traditionally values, such as wealth, financial assets, connections, and material possessions.

CCW has been used to better understand the experiences of marginalized communities, including students of color, the deaf community (Johnson et al., 2020), and students in higher education (Jayakumar et al., 2013; O’Shea, 2016). These researchers used CCW to counter deficit ideology, emphasizing the strengths of student experiences and backgrounds. They aimed to address academic perspectives that attribute student failures to personal shortcomings instead of recognizing structural inequities or deficit views. In the development of CCW, Yosso (2005) does not claim that the framework is exclusively applicable to Latinx students. However, a substantial body of research has emerged concerning this community, as indicated by numerous studies (Espino, 2014; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Luna & Martinez, 2013).

To explore the varied applications of CCW beyond education, I discovered doctoral research by Brescia-Peña (2024), who examined the application of the CCW model within the criminal justice system. In this study, Brescia-Peña noted that CCW helped challenge the deficit mindset often associated with these individuals, who are frequently viewed solely as problems while systemic barriers that may have shaped their life paths are neglected. Furthermore, this

study employed Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to depict these individuals as more than mere offenders, focusing on their strengths. Overall, this study effectively illustrated how these theories work together to combat deficit ideology and to highlight the participants' lived experiences.

In addition to CCW, I incorporated two Native-centered theories: TribalCrit, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, and Culturally Sustaining Responsive Pedagogy (CSRP), in order to expand my framework and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Native American students within Teacher Education Programs (TEPs).

Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy

Building on the foundational ideas presented in previous works by Gay (2002), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Paris & Alim (2014), McCarty and Lee (2014) developed a framework called Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSRP). CSRP places significant emphasis not only on sustaining pedagogies but also on revitalization to address the impacts of cultural and linguistic erasure resulting from colonization. While the term revitalizing may suggest that Native culture and language are absent, in many cases they are present and thriving, thus emphasizing the importance of ongoing renewal and life.

The CSRP framework is unique because it focuses on the identities and experiences of Native American students by considering the “sociohistorical and contemporary context of Native American schooling” (Lee & McCarty, 2017, p. 62). Viewing the lived experiences of Native American students through this lens will deepen our understanding of colonization and sovereignty, highlighting their unique challenges compared to non-Native American and/or Indigenous students.

Like TribalCrit, CSRP was developed as a lens to examine the experiences of Native American students and their status as sovereign peoples, as well as the significant losses resulting from colonization. CSRP acknowledges the following:

- ... asymmetrical power relations and the goal of transforming legacies of colonization;
- The need to reclaim and revitalize what has been disrupted and displaced by colonization;
- The need for community-based accountability. (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103)

CSRP also acknowledges the intricate identity that Native American students hold in relation to tribal sovereignty. According to Lee & McCarty (2017) “Indigenous peoples’ desire for Tribal sovereignty are interlaced with ongoing legacies of colonization, ethnocide and linguicide” (p. 62). It is essential to understand the sociopolitical backgrounds of Native American students as well as the ramifications of colonialism.

Current research aims to achieve this by focusing on the distinctive social and political identities of Native American students, highlighting their tribal sovereignty and self-determination (Anthony-Stevens et al. 2020; Lee & McCarty, 2017; McCarty & Brayboy, 2021; McCarty & Lee, 2014), as well as emphasizing educational sovereignty (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Reyhner & Martin, 2024). CSRP has served as a framework in several studies to explore students' schooling experiences by decentering Westernized approaches to knowledge and practice (Bowdon et al., 2025; Howell, 2021; McCarty & Lee, 2014). However, research by Howell (2021) does not examine the impact of colonialism, which is a significant aspect of CSRP.

In a study of culturally responsive leadership, Washington and Johnson (2023) use CSRP as part of a framework to reconceptualize family-school-community leadership. They explain that “adopting a culturally sustaining/revitalizing framework in family and community

engagement centers Indigenous knowledge and positions Indigenous parents and community members as leaders in language and cultural reclamation...” (p. 8). This example illustrates how CSRP can be used to refocus the experiences of Native American students within education. Carter Andrews (2021) describes this as “...a goal is for schooling to counter colonization and work toward Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and nation-building” (p. 420). Through CSRP, Native communities, especially Native American students, are given the chance to strengthen their agency and express their voices within their communities. This empowerment acts to confront the impacts of colonization while asserting their sovereignty and self-determination.

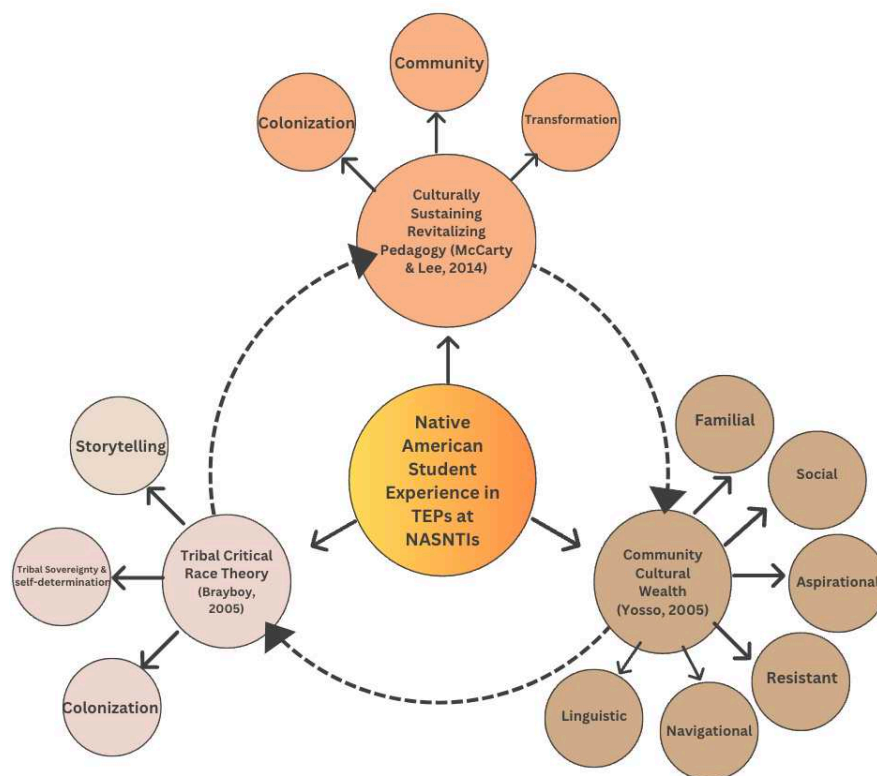
Although a few studies have employed TribalCrit and CCW (Waterman & Lindley, 2013), I have yet to see this combined framework applied in education, specifically with Native education. It is important to recognize the threading of colonization and settler colonialism in learning spaces that are predominantly taught from a Westernized lens. TribalCrit and CSRP both acknowledge the effects of colonization and undertake how colonization influences the educational experiences of Native American students. As an additional dimension to this framework, CCW emphasizes the valuable lived experiences of students by concentrating on the diverse forms of cultural capital they already possess.

The conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) for my study served as a foundational guide for critically analyzing the literature, directing my research design, and helping interpret this study's findings. visually represents my conceptual framework, highlighting the significance of the three frameworks in effectively centering Native American students' experiences. This study aimed to deepen understanding and expand scholarship around these frameworks. It uncovered new insights that could help TEPs customize their programs to better support Native American

students. The section outlined my conceptual framework, which includes TribalCrit, CSRP, and CCW, serving as the theoretical foundation for this research and guiding the literature review. The following part offers a summary of historical trauma in Native education, a crucial context for understanding why I chose these theories in relation to colonization and is vital for grasping the history of education among Native Americans.

Figure 2.1

Conceptual Framework: CSRP, CCW, & TribalCrit



Historical Trauma in Native Education

For decades, Native American communities have encountered educational challenges, resulting in historical and intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart, 2003; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). According to Brave Heart, "Historical trauma (HT) is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive

group trauma experiences” (p. 7). This trauma has resulted in severe loss and genocide within Native American communities. Tippeconnic (1991) explains that after the government's mostly failed attempts to extinguish Native American populations, there was a shift towards civilizing and assimilating these individuals into the dominant culture. In the context of education, this historical trauma has manifested through systemic oppression rooted in colonization, boarding schools, and forced relocation, which aimed to erase cultural and linguistic identity.

The boarding school era (late 1800s to mid-1900s) harmed many families by breaking apart the family unit and causing parents to become uninvolved in their children’s education, among other effects; these consequences have persisted across generations, as intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart, 2003). Many young Native Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and communities to attend boarding schools (Tippeconnic, 1991) experienced neglect, alienation from their culture and language, and physical, emotional, and, in some cases, sexual abuse. Related to boarding schools, Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) explain that “... schools controlled a physical *safety zone* [italics original] in their classroom and playgrounds that could symbolically neutralize the Native languages, religions, economies, politics, family structures, emotions, and lives that seemed to threaten American uniformity and national identity” (pp. 2-3). This quote underscores the purpose of boarding schools, which was fundamentally entrenched in cultural assimilation efforts aimed at eradicating Native American cultural and linguistic identity.

Boarding schools have significantly influenced the current educational circumstances of Native American students (Tippeconnic, 1991), leading to various disparities such as low graduation rates, low standardized test results, negative perceptions and deficit views from educational institutions, and insufficient culturally responsive teaching. Although these elements

play a role in the educational inequality faced by Native American students, this literature review does not concentrate on graduation rates or test scores. Moreover, Tippeconnic highlights a troubling trend in data representation, “When specific minority groups are mentioned, the focus is primarily on Hispanics or Blacks or even Asians, with American Indians too often grouped under the ‘other’ category” (p. 7). This ongoing statistical erasure has historically continued, impeding the development and delivery of educational resources specifically designed for Native American students. Despite these obstacles, Native and Indigenous individuals are taking charge of their educational efforts. This is shown through decolonization, Indigenization, and the exercise of self-determination and sovereignty via initiatives that are led by Native and Indigenous people.

The act of Indigenizing involves decolonizing practices and centering Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Pete et al., 2013). Despite facing challenges and enduring years of trauma inflicted by the U.S. government, tribal nations have shown resilience, self-determination, and sovereignty by emphasizing nation-building (Brayboy et al., 2015), reimagining education through a Native-centered approach (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Kitchen et al., 2013), restructuring educational institutions (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011), and moving beyond the asterisk (Shotton et al., 2013) to reclaim education on their own terms. The phrase "moving beyond the asterisk" refers to the lack of inclusive data regarding Native American populations. An increasing amount of literature discusses Indigenizing programs in higher education in relation to student affairs (Shotton et al., 2010; Waterman, 2007), culturally responsive instruction (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003), and college persistence among Native American students (Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Runner & Marshall, 2003; Waterman 2007). Progress in education for Native Americans emphasizes our growth and

resilience despite ongoing challenges. Furthermore, these areas demonstrate the strength in confronting colonization and assimilation through self-determination and educational sovereignty.

Indigenous Survivance

The Indian education system has historically suffered from widespread assimilation and colonization, as evidenced by mistreatment at boarding schools and harmful practices aimed at eradicating language and culture (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1998). Decades ago, Tippeconnic (1991) shared, “It must also be noted that assimilation, either forced, through persuasion or self-directed, has been the dominant and consistent foundation on which educational policy and practice have been realized for American Indians” (p. 182). Given the historical nature of a flawed education system, Native American communities have worked toward educational equity for their students. In response to these inequities, there has been a long-standing desire for increased representation and autonomy through self-determination. A “renaissance” in education aptly described by Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999) has gained momentum since the Civil Rights Era (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), during which Native communities advocated for self-determination, resulting in the development of many Native-centered programs and schools such as Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities.

In response to the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the term 'survivance' was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999) to describe the active presence, resilience, and resistance of Indigenous communities against racism and colonialism. Combining the terms of **survival** and **resistance**, survivance pushes back against victimhood and highlights the strengths and determination of Native peoples. Sabzalian (2019) discusses her personal use of the term when she writes, “Survivance—Native peoples’ power to refuse colonial scripts of erasure or

victimization, and instead creatively confront, resist, decenter, disrupt, and transform those scripts in various ways, big and small ...” (p. 4). Sabzalian further describes the many ways that survivance is demonstrated in Native students, families, and communities, both in significant and subtle ways. The simple act of their presence disrupts the colonial school structure, and their cultural presence serves as a form of resistance. In this same vein, Veracini (2011) explains that “resistance and survival are thus the weapons of the colonised and the settler colonised; it is resistance and survival that make certain that colonialism and settler colonialism are never ultimately triumphant” (pp. 3-4). Greenwood (2009) elaborates on survivance, stating that “the idea here is that Native survivance is a place-based ‘pedagogy of the oppressed,’ and that survivance can also refer to recovering and maintaining other ways of being and knowing that schooling threatens to eliminate” (p. 3). Considering these multiple, but similar, interpretations, Vizenor (2008) describes survivance as “elusive, obscure, and imprecise” (p. 1) and in a literature review of the term, Wilbur and Gone (2023) in their findings discover that the term “lacks consensus around definition and measurement” (p. 12). Therefore, to frame the survivance of Native American students in TEPs I draw from dual interpretations of survivance as described by Vizenor (1999) and Sabzalian (2019)—both of which accentuate the impact of stories and traditions as a means of survivance.

I used survivance to illustrate how Native American students navigated and challenged Western and white presence in TEPs by their active presence within these structures. Survivance is an integral part of the framing of my research question: *What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?* The incorporation of this term is intentional to illuminate the culturally significant ways in which Native students have navigated schools and programs rooted in whiteness

(Cochran-Smith, 2004; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001, 2017) while also resisting Westernized approaches. In discussing Indigenous survivance, it is also necessary to address the impact of settler colonialism in education, as much of the literature on survivance emerges from efforts to challenge colonial structures.

Settler Colonialism in Education

It is well documented that Native Americans in the U.S. have faced the erasure and eradication of their culture and language at the hands of European colonizers, which has resulted in decades of historical and intergenerational trauma (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lomawaima, 1999). Settler colonialism is when white settlers forcibly take land as their new home as a source of capital (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and exploit internal and external resources despite Native peoples having long inhabited these territories, with the primary focus on acquiring land (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonialism manifests in numerous ways, from Native citizenship to religious conversion, and consistently employs elimination tactics. Wolfe (2006) characterizes elimination as “an ongoing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off [and superseded] occurrence” (p. 388). This means that continued acts of elimination as genocide are repeated in its attempts to destroy. In an education context, settler colonialism manifests through erasure and assimilation of cultural and linguistic identities. This is evident during the boarding school era, exemplified by the infamous assimilationist mottos, ‘kill the Indian in him and save the man,’ and ‘erase to replace’ ideologies designed to erase any remnants of Native identity and assimilate them into white ways of knowing and doing (Klug & Whitfield, 2012; Lomawaima & Ostler, 2018). In the field of education, settler colonialism has manifested in various forms, one of which is the erasure of Native peoples from the curriculum (Lees et al., 2021).

Further unpacking colonialism, Aleut scholar Tuck and Yang (2012) differentiate between external colonialism and internal colonialism. They explain that internal colonialism is “the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora, and fauna within the ‘domestic’ borders of the imperial nation” (p. 4). The examples provided are external acts designed to control people and communities; “strategies of internal colonialism, such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalization, are both structural and interpersonal” (p. 5). The other form of colonialism is external; this

denotes the expropriation of fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings, extracting them in order to transport them to - and build the wealth, the privilege, or feed the appetites of - the colonizers, who get marked as the first world. (p. 4)

External colonialism involves the appropriation of resources, including people as laborers and objects like natural resources. Thus, the aim of settler colonialism is to eliminate Native peoples through genocide and to extinguish Indigenous cultures.

Waganakasing Odawa scholar Lees and colleagues (2024) carried out a systematic review of the literature concerning the reimagining of TEPs by critically examining the concepts of decolonization, settler colonialism, and postcolonial futures. In their findings, they recognize that TEPs encounter obstacles in preparing students to become educators due to institutional and state-level barriers while simultaneously striving to allocate time for more critical engagement with matters related to decolonization. This presents a reality for many TEPs as they work to indigenize their structures and create systemic changes that center Indigenous knowledge. The findings from Lees et al. (2014) indicated that disruption of TEPs with settler colonial reform was only happening in isolated programs, but not on a macro level, which is needed for systemic change to happen. This challenge emphasizes the need to continue examining these systems and using methods that support Native-oriented initiatives.

Nonetheless, scholars have explored the role of settler colonialism in TEPs, including Kulago (2019), who investigates how settler colonialism endures in her work with students. Kulago argues that “... it is crucial that Indigenous teacher education programs exist and are recognized as sites to disrupt the persistence of settler colonialism” (p. 250). Kulago contends that by developing a critical settler consciousness, TEP students can challenge the manifestations of settler colonialism in curriculum and pedagogy. It is not solely the responsibility of Native students to interrogate the impact of settler colonialism; it is also important for non-Native/Indigenous students, especially privileged learners, to understand their position in relation to this (Cannon, 2012). Scholars have also noted resistance from non-Indigenous students regarding the origins of settler colonialism and the role it plays in education (Kerr, 2014). Like Kulago (2019), Kerr (2014) emphasizes the significance of TEP students in grasping the foundation of settler colonialism:

... requiring teacher candidates to engage in a critical practice of questioning their own impositions and priorities and that requiring teacher candidates to engage with Indigenous perspectives is a request to understand the material and discursive aspects of the context in which they desire to teach in - a Settler nation-state - and it should be an essential ethical requirement for any teacher in this context, not something separate. (p. 97)

These scholars underscore the significance of acknowledging the effects of colonialism and settler colonialism in relation to TEP students.

Similarly, it is important to understand how these factors shaped the learning experience of Native students in TEPs, which required a critical examination of program structures and practices. This work also called for challenging and deconstructing the colonial and Western paradigms that continue to shape teacher education. The following section explores the role of cultural responsiveness in education, with particular attention to its significance for Native students.

Cultural Responsiveness

I am reminded of a narrative by Lake (1990), also recognized as Medicine Grizzlybear, in which he advocates for the necessity of culturally responsive teaching practices for his son in the manuscript titled "An Indian Father's Plea." As Lake writes,

Wind-Wolf was strapped in snugly with a deliberate restriction upon his arms and legs. Although you in Western society may argue that such a method serves to hinder motor-skill development and abstract reasoning, we believe it forces the child to first develop his intuitive faculties, rational intellect, symbolic thinking, and five senses. (Para. 6)

In this excerpt, Lake describes the sophisticated nature of cultural teachings that often contradicts Western educational ideology; a similar point was made by McCarty and Brayboy (2021), who highlighted the numerous culturally specific methods Native children have used to learn for generations, also described as Indigenous cultural relevant pedagogy (Indigenous CRP). Similar to the emphasis placed by Lake (1990) on the significance of culturally responsive practices, this section illuminates the importance of cultural responsiveness for students.

Deficit and Asset Based Ideology

This section does not provide an extensive review of the literature on deficit ideology (also known as deficit thinking, deficit view, and deficit perspective); instead, the information presented aims to frame the use of deficit perspectives in scholarship concerning how education has negatively viewed marginalized students and their communities. I draw from Gorski's (2011) definition of deficit ideology, "... a set of assumed truths about the world and the sociopolitical relationships that occur in it" (p. 3). Deficit thinking suggests that students and their families are responsible for educational challenges rather than institutional obstacles (Yosso, 2005); this is noted as a "blame the victim orientation" (p. 121) as described by Patton Davis & Museus (2019). Further, Gorski (2019) argues that "deficit ideology is rooted in the belief that poverty is the natural result of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and other shortcomings in

people who are experiencing it” (p. 381) rather than sociopolitical context or structural barriers (Gorski, 2011), such as lack of equitable access to resources. Viewpoints regarding deficit thinking originate from classist and racist ideologies; furthermore, deficit thinking is anchored in the principles of meritocracy and colorblindness (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019).

According to Yosso (2005), deficit thinking operates from the mindset that “(a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (p. 75). Researchers have observed that earlier scholarship on Native American students was characterized by deficit views (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1998; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999) and framed individuals and their communities as “problems” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 115). Much of this earlier scholarship by anthropologists was “carried out by researchers who do not have a long-term commitment to the community” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 116). Unfortunately, this has established the foundation for the operational ways that schools and educators engage with Native American students. According to Deyhle and Swisher, “At the core of an assimilatory model is the belief that Native languages and cultures are the reasons for Indian school failure” (p. 136). Cultural responsive is a response to these negative foundations, as a way of addressing minoritized students’ rich cultural and linguistic diversity.

Before the rise of cultural responsiveness, a common belief existed that blamed students for their academic failures, educating them primarily from a dominant and deficit perspective, a distorted view held by Westernized and dominant societies. A deficit ideology considers language and culture as barriers to students' education, seeing them as deficiencies (Paris, 2012). Scholars, such as Castagno and Brayboy (2008), Gay (2002), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Paris (2012), provide alternative viewpoints to this perspective through asset-based models.

Asset-Based Pedagogy

To emphasize the necessity for more culturally responsive approaches in TEPs at NASNTIs, this section discusses the origins of cultural responsiveness and its significance in teacher education programs (TEPs), and examine a specific asset-based pedagogy, the community cultural wealth (CCW) model. The discussion in this section is inspired by Ladson-Billings' (1995) definition of cultural responsiveness, "...the term culturally responsive appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture" (p. 467). As a leading figure in culturally responsive teaching, Ladson-Billings (1995) offers an in-depth perspective on this educational approach. This section is further guided by the overarching objective of teaching and learning as described by Paris and Alim (2014):

What if, indeed, the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms but to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their heritage and community practices? (p. 86)

With these guiding concepts from Ladson-Billings and Paris and Alim, it is important to acknowledge that cultural responsiveness stems from the broad framework of multicultural education. This framework aims to highlight students' backgrounds and experiences, using their strengths to foster a more student-centered approach.

Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) are recognized as innovators in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), having laid the groundwork for this educational theoretical model. CRP was defined by Ladson-Billings (1995) as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). CRP also encourages individuals to question power structures in education. Gay (2002), who contributed to this research, emphasized the importance of teaching to students'

cultural strengths, highlighting “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). The framework provided by Gay (2002) concentrates on teaching, while both CRP and CRT focus on centering and affirming the experiences of historically marginalized students and valuing cultural strengths in the classroom. Since then, a significant amount of scholarship has continued to emerge on CRP and CRT (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Paris (2012) enriches and expands the notions of CRP by urging educators to not only adopt cultural responsiveness but also to “... perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literature, and cultural pluralism ...” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88) through the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). In their work, Paris and Alim critique Ladson-Billings’ (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, arguing that simply recognizing CRP is insufficient; it is essential to maintain this ideology. This perspective allows Paris and Alim to expand CSP by critiquing asset-based pedagogy and engaging critically with systemic inequalities, thereby highlighting cultural and linguistic elements while also questioning systems of inequity. Furthermore, Wood (2018) critiques various cultural responsiveness frameworks that pertain to Native students and their respective cultures. Specifically, Wood (2018) examined CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as a significant framework intended to support Indigenous students while also noting that it was predominantly designed to address the experiences of African American students, thereby demonstrating a deficiency in its applicability to Native American contexts.

Cultural responsiveness is crucial in pursuing educational equity and effectively serving all students. Historically, the educational landscape has not consistently acknowledged or

honored the experiences and identities of minoritized students. Consequently, cultural responsiveness reframes the assets that these students possess and contributes to the classroom environment.

Cultural Responsiveness in Native Education

The educational landscape for Native American students has not adequately addressed their cultural, linguistic, and educational needs despite ongoing calls for reform on the state of education (Beaulieu, 2006; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). The following is a lingering question regarding the need for cultural responsiveness for Native American students, “Why is it that scholars are still making similar arguments today that were being made in the early 1980s and even earlier in the Meriam Report?” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 981). It was not until the 1980s that cultural responsiveness and multicultural education saw a surge in scholarship and became part of mainstream reality (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

Federal reports and court cases have documented these educational failures and calls for action since the 1920s. Notable documents include the *Meriam Report*, the *Kennedy Report*, the Indian Education Act, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, *Indian Nations at Risk*, the New Mexico Indian Education Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and the National Education Policy (ASU Indian Law, 2025). These reports highlight ongoing challenges and obstacles in providing equitable education to Native American students and offer recommendations to policymakers and state and federal agencies for potential solutions.

Regarding the treaty relationships between Native communities and the government, Tippeconnic (1991) explains:

...American Indian education has strong ties to the federal government. This connection is based on the special relationship established during the treaty period from 1778 to 1871. Approximately four hundred treaties were entered into between the U.S.

government and Indian nations. One hundred twenty of these treaties had provisions that specifically mentioned education. (p. 4)

Given these treaty obligations, the government has a legal responsibility to Native Americans regarding education. Alongside state and federal reports, court cases also play a crucial role in assisting Native communities in their pursuit of educational equity, safeguarding tribal sovereignty, and developing policies to ensure that Native American students have access to education and equity. Cases like *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (Indian Affairs Committee, 2018) and *Yellow Kidney v. Montana Office of Public Instruction* (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021) highlight educational inequities and the states' failure to meet the needs of Native American students due to insufficient resources and funding. Both cases emphasize the importance of state entities in upholding students' constitutional right to a fair and equitable education for Native American students. This is not a complete list of laws and court decisions, but it highlights the ongoing requests from Native and tribal communities for equitable education. These laws and court cases play a significant role in Native education by establishing a precedent for just educational opportunities for Native students.

In earlier scholarship on cultural responsiveness, Pewewardy (1998) suggests, “to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice” (p. 14); in short, they need to respond to student’s cultural needs as an effective teaching practice. As Ladson-Billings (1995) exclaimed, “... that’s just good teaching!” (p. 159). Additionally, it is emphasized that culturally responsive educators must weave in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of Native American students. A teacher who works with Native American students should adopt the mindset and approach of a critically and culturally responsive teacher by familiarizing

themselves with Indigenous knowledges² and worldviews (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Battiste, 2009; Brayboy & Maughn, 2009; Cajete, 2000; Jacob et al., 2018), embracing a both/and approach (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2014) of knowing and learning Eurocentric and Indigenous ways of knowing and being consciously aware of the unique status of Native students concerning sovereignty and self-determination (Brayboy, 2008; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999).

Culturally responsive teachers also need to be culturally sensitive (Pewewardy, 1998) and commit to a shared responsibility to address the cultural and linguistic needs of Native American students (Beaulieu, 2006; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2014). While teachers are mentioned in this section, it is equally important to recognize that institutions, through their leadership, must show adaptability and take on the responsibility of fostering culturally responsive learning environments (Castagno & Brayboy, 2009). This important responsibility should not fall solely on teachers. Moreover, the development of cultural sensitivities constitutes a lifelong and iterative journey, as it is not a matter of simply completing a task and proceeding onward. Additionally, working with individuals who possess different identities does not absolve one from the responsibility of addressing harm, as this domain requires continuous introspection and reflection.

Unique to tribal communities and Native education is sovereignty and self-determination. Responding to the unique identities of Native Americans, Brayboy (2005) developed the nine tenets of TribalCrit; especially important to this section are the following tenets: tenet 1) recognition of how colonization impacts society; tenet 3) the status of native people is between two areas - also referred to as liminal space; and tenet 4) recognition of tribal sovereignty, self-

² The plural form of "knowledge" is employed to acknowledge the various manifestations of Indigenous Knowledge. (Jacob, et al. 2018).

determination, and tribal autonomy. Through a TribalCrit lens, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) found that discussions surrounding sovereignty, self-determination, and racism were seldom associated with cultural responsiveness and emphasized the significance of this connection in discourse about “culturally responsive schooling” (p. 947). This ties back to a previous discussion on CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014), highlighting the importance of recognizing the social and political identities of Native American students in relation to colonization, sovereignty, and self-determination. Both McCarty and Lee (2014), along with Castagno and Brayboy (2008), underscore the necessity for educators and educational institutions to consider the social and political identities of Native Americans, as these identities significantly shape their lived experiences.

Community Cultural Wealth in Teacher Education

Building upon the details presented in the conceptual framework section, this section elaborates on the application of CCW as defined by Yosso (2005) in teacher education to address the prevalence of whiteness within TEPs. As previously noted, CCW has been employed to counter the deficit perspective of students of color and marginalized communities. With a significant number of white teachers in the field, this underscores how whiteness is reflected in the literature and how that literature prioritizes white student experiences. In response to this presence, scholars have employed CCW to highlight the lived experiences of teachers of color (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018) and preservice teachers of color (Perez & Jacobs, 2023).

The teaching landscape has gradually evolved, leading to greater representation in racial and ethnic composition. Research indicates that students benefit from having teachers who not only resemble them but also share similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Perez & Jacobs, 2023). However, the teaching profession remains predominantly

white (Sleeter, 2001, 2017) and is based in whiteness, colonization, assimilation, and Western modes of knowing and doing (Castagno, 2012; Kasun & Saavedra, 2016). Thus, minoritized TEP students are compelled to assimilate into these norms (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). Given the dominance of whiteness in teacher education, it is crucial to examine the impact of this power structure within TEPs (Harris et al., 2020; Juárez & Hayes, 2012). Whiteness is normalized across all aspects of teacher education (Haddix, 2017; Sleeter, 2001), further marginalizing preservice teachers of color (Daniels & Varghese, 2020). In a literature review on race-visible teacher education, Hambacher and Ginn (2021) note that “approximately 70% of the articles in this review focused on preparing white PSTs [preservice teachers] to work with students of color” (p. 338). Perez and Jacobs (2023) argue that TEPs should implement asset-based approaches, such as CCW, with students and preservice teachers of color, which could, in turn, validate and honor their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and strengths.

Limited research exists on the CCW model regarding Native American students, Native Education, and Native American students in TEPs. As noted in the conceptual framework section, I found one study by Moeller and Bielfeldt (2011) that used CCW as a theoretical framework to explore how TEP teacher candidates might apply CCW in a workshop with Native American students from a boarding school. The authors did not specify the racial or ethnic identity of the teacher candidates, but it is assumed they are non-Native. This study aimed to examine the use of CCW by teacher candidates during a workshop with Native American students. Findings suggest that the teacher preparation curriculum requires a more intentional integration of CCW. While this study effectively demonstrates CCW in a particular workshop, it overlooks the influence of teacher candidates' identities and positionality on their interactions

with Native American students. It appears the researchers perceived the participants as subjects to be studied rather than as individuals with valuable lived experiences, which contradicts the core principle of CCW.

In another study, Waterman and Lindley (2013) incorporated CCW into their conceptual framework to explore the experiences of Native American women in higher education. They drew comparisons between CCW and Native culture to illustrate how cultural capital manifests in Native American contexts. This study offers a compelling demonstration of a conceptual framework that uses CCW and TribalCrit to highlight the cultural customs and traditions as strengths of Native women in their graduate school journey. In a qualitative study involving 16 Arapaho women, Lindley (2009) explored how these women integrated aspects of CCW into their lived experiences. In a separate study, Garcia (2024) undertook a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of Indigenous students enrolled in a Native American and Indigenous Studies program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Employing a CCW framework, Garcia (2024) emphasized student experiences and the cultural wealth they utilized to effectively navigate their academic program and the institutional environment. Both studies demonstrate how CCW highlights the strengths of Native and Indigenous students in higher education, as well as how the elements of CCW have supported them in their educational journey. Beyond these studies, limited research investigates CCW among Native American students, and even less pertains to Native American students in TEPs; thus, there is a need for further research in this area.

This section on cultural responsiveness reframes asset-based pedagogies to emphasize the strengths of minoritized students, especially Native American students. Considering the historical perceptions of Native American students within educational contexts and the injustices they have faced; it is crucial to be culturally responsive to their needs and identities. The

following section explores how Native American students have both received and lacked support within TEPs

Native American Teacher Education Programs

For this portion of the literature review, I used the following search terms: teacher preparation programs, educator preparation programs, teacher education, and teacher education majors in higher education. I then narrowed the search to include "Native American," "American Indian," and "Indigenous" as keywords. In some instances, I use the term "Indigenous" interchangeably with "Native American," as it was the original terminology found in the literature—a point also noted in the definition of terms section. The research conducted on Indigenous topics revealed a substantial body of scholarship from outside the United States. Therefore, I chose not to pursue this specific area in order to refine the focus of the study, as the term Indigenous encompasses a wide range of communities worldwide, while this study focused specifically on individuals within the United States. I also recognized that the preferred method of reference is to identify individuals by their specific tribal community. Accordingly, in working with participants, I used this form of identification unless participants indicated a different preference.

My review of the literature on Native American Teacher Education Programs reveals extensive focus on teaching K-12 students (Battiste, 2002; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Singh & Reyhner, 2013; Strayhorn et al., 2016), highlighting the importance of TEPs in preparing future educators for this demographic. The review also identified various institutions and programs training Native American students as teachers, known as Native American Teacher Education Programs (NATEPs). However, there is limited research on NATEPs at NASNTIs, with only a few articles addressing teacher preparation at these institutions. This section explores the

experiences of Native American students in TEPs, while also considering the shared experiences of students of color. This broader perspective enhances the understanding of Native American students' experiences in TEPs by referencing literature on how students and teachers of color have been marginalized within the education system.

In teacher education, it is well known that there is an urgent need to diversify the teaching pipeline concerning race and ethnicity; this issue has persisted for decades (Brooks et al., 2012; Carver-Thomas, 2017; Ginsberg et al., 2017; Gist et al., 2021; Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). Multiple studies indicate that teachers of color serve as valuable role models for students of color who share their racial backgrounds (e.g., Boser, 2011; Carver-Thomas, 2017; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Rafa & Roberts, 2020). In fact, Gershenson and Papageorge found that Black elementary students experienced academic improvements when they had at least one Black teacher, contributing to the growing research that highlights the advantages of same-race teachers (Egalite et al., 2015). Furthermore, Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999) asserted, “We believe that a good teacher is a good teacher, but when there is a good Native teacher, the relationship between Native student and teacher is enhanced” (p. 302). This underscores the significance of teachers sharing the same racial background as their students.

Students of color also benefit from seeing teachers of color in various professional roles (Boser, 2011; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018), as they can relate more closely to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of those teachers. The reality is that the representation of teachers of color in the profession is limited, compounded by a lack of first-hand experience that white teachers have with minoritized students (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2005b). An overwhelming percentage of teachers in the profession are white, female, middle-class, and monolingual (Gist et al., 2021; Haddix, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; NCES, 2020).

Additionally, there is a significant number of white students in the teaching pipeline as Sleeter (2017) notes, “Of prospective teachers enrolled in traditional programs, 74% were White; of those enrolled in university-based alternative programs, 65% were White, and in non-university-based alternative programs, 59% were White” (p. 56). This statistic is disproportionately high compared to public schools that primarily serve students with culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2005b). Although countless attempts have been made to diversify the teaching pipeline, such as targeted initiatives at minority-serving institutions and “grow your own” programs, a lack of diversity remains a long-standing issue (Gist et al., 2021; Haddix, 2017; Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). This shortage may stem from the lack of any national policy that addresses recruitment and preparation programs (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999), insufficient program and institutional support for teachers of color (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022), and systemic and institutional barriers in the teaching pipeline that fail to prioritize or uphold diversity initiatives.

In schools that predominantly serve Native American students, it is essential for educators to reflect their students' demographics, as cultural heritage and tribal identity are vital. A significant issue in Native education is the shortage of Native American teachers in K-12 and post-secondary settings (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2015; Tippeconnic, 1991), highlighting the strong need for more Native educators in TEPs (Castagno et al., 2015; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Over thirty years ago, Tippeconnic highlighted the invisibility and reduction of Native American teachers as a troubling issue linked to a trend of pursuing other more lucrative fields (e.g., engineering, business). Native American students need to see Native American teachers in their classrooms who share their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Compounding this problem is the fact that teacher shortages persist in high-need areas of rural and reservation communities

(Ingersoll & Tran, 2023), a persistent issue recognized in federal reports, such as *Indian Nations at Risk* (Charleston, 1994) and the 1969 *Kennedy Report* (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011).

As noted in Chapter One, Native American teachers make up a small percentage of educators in schools that serve a significant number of Native students (NIEA, 2024). This issue is further compounded by the fact that in the Southwest, where this study is located, there is a lack of visibility for Native American students in the field of teacher education (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). Findings from this literature review indicate that TEPs do not consistently represent the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers of color, including those from Native American communities (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020). However, an increasing number of institutions, particularly Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), have established programs specifically designed for teachers of color (Ginsberg, et al., 2023b; Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019), such as the Institute for American Indian Education at the University of New Mexico (University of New Mexico, 2024). Similarly, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) have developed culturally relevant Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) for Native American students (Pavel et al., 2001; White et al., 2007). These programs integrate language, culture, and community culture into their curricula instead of isolating culturally relevant content. One example is the Northwest Teacher Education Program at Diné College—the first tribally controlled higher education institution—which prepares teachers through a Diné-centered lens. Although the focus of this literature review is not on TCUs, it is important to acknowledge the critical work that many TCUs are doing to prepare Native American students for teaching, and they should be recognized as leaders in this initiative.

After years of advocating for increased Native American educators and driven by the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1972), Native communities have

worked to reclaim education by developing NATEPs at baccalaureate-serving institutions and tribal colleges and universities (Lees et al., 2016; Pavel et al., 2002; Ttepon et al., 2015). These programs are designed to prepare Native American students for the teaching profession. They are largely distinct from mainstream TEPs in that they nurture and center Native and Indigenous ways of knowing through decolonization, educational sovereignty, nation-building, and self-determination (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Brayboy et al., 2015; Castagno, 2012). Further, these programs provide a more authentic approach to culturally responsive instruction through Indigenous methods.

In response to the pressing need for recruiting and training Native Americans for classrooms with cultural relevance, several TEPs aimed at Native American educators have been developed. These programs are accessible in both urban areas (Lees et al., 2016) and rural or reservation settings (Ttepon et al., 2015). Further expansion of programs involves developing TEPs from a Native/Indigenous-centered perspective, including the Indigenous Teacher Education Program in Tucson, Arizona (The University of Arizona, 2025), the Native American Teacher Preparation Program in Albuquerque, New Mexico (The University of New Mexico, 2025), and the Sapsik'wala program in Eugene, Oregon (University of Oregon, College of Education, 2025). These initiatives are among several Native-centered programs across the nation aimed at recruiting and retaining Native American teachers in a grow-your-own approach with program design tailored to their cultural and linguistic identities. Ultimately, reclaiming education on their own terms is evident in the establishment of NATEPs aimed at recruiting and retaining Native American teachers; this has been an unfulfilled need dating back to the early 1900s, as highlighted in the *Meriam Report* (Meriam, 1928).

Considering the current state of education and the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education (DiPierro & Fensterwald, 2025), some NATEPs may face a direct threat from the current administration. Funding for these programs comes from various streams of funds provided by state and federal entities. Recent news reported cuts at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas (Sullivan, 2025) and Southwest Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Bennett-Begaye & Abourezk, 2025). Both institutions of higher education are operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), making them more vulnerable to budget cuts by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Sullivan (2025) suggests that these programs are not driven by diversity but rather by treaty obligations. Thus, if these obligations are not upheld, it would lead to yet another long history of broken treaty responsibilities and injustices toward Native American communities. In the realm of teacher education, the effect of these programs remains uncertain. Nevertheless, if they are federally funded or operated by BIE institutions, the impact could be unavoidable.

NATEPs offer numerous benefits but also encounter significant barriers to implementation. These programs face challenges such as the lack of Native faculty (Pavel et al., 2002), institutional racism, and colonization (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011), along with the dominance of white normative knowledge systems (Castagno, 2012; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Ttepon et al., 2015). Further issues stem from short-term funding, as TEPs are largely grant-funded (Castagno, 2012; Ttepon et al., 2015). When the funding for these grants end, the programs often disappear without institutional support. Castagno (2012) pointed out that since funding primarily comes from the federal government and these programs are situated at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), grant outcomes frequently mirror colonized perspectives that clash with Native American and

Indigenous ways of knowing; this has resulted in increased tensions between the two paradigms (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012). Additionally, Native American TEPs face challenges in creating universal programming, as these programs cannot be uniformly adapted to suit another tribe, nation, or community

Furthermore, numerous articles suggest the necessity for enhanced programming to adequately address the needs of Native American students. As Castagno et al. (2015) write, “...the preparation of culturally responsive Indigenous teachers for schools serving Indigenous youth is clearly needed, but this is difficult work given the larger context of assimilation and standardization that still structures our educational institutions” (p. 62). Castagno et al. also note that most of the TEPs that prepare Native American students are situated at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and have federal government oversight. Consequently, it is a challenge for these institutions to employ cultural responsiveness. Findings from a study on various TEPs indicated that participants felt their programs did not adequately prepare them to teach Native American students in a culturally responsive way (Castagno et al., 2015). This calls for greater incorporation of culturally responsive TEPs, especially those tailored to address the cultural and linguistic needs of Native American students.

My review of literature identified two peer-reviewed articles (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012) that explore the role of NATEPs at PWIs, investigating the implications of colonialism and assimilation as structural barriers inhibiting the effective preparation of culturally responsive Indigenous educators to serve Indigenous students. These articles examine the broader systemic and programmatic challenges that hinder the establishment of a Native and Indigenous-centered Teacher Education Program (TEP). A drawback of these articles is that while they offer suggestions for how TEPs and institutions can collaborate to improve support

for Native and Indigenous students, the implications are based on theory. As a reader, I wonder how these insights can be shared with leadership and policymakers in a practical way, without the complications of theoretical jargon, highlighting the broader challenge of translating theory into practice.

In a qualitative study, Haynes Writer and Oesterreich (2011) investigated the recruitment and retention of Native American teacher candidates within a Teacher Education Program (TEP) at a Southwest university. The researchers emphasize the experiences of Native American women and apply three principles of TribalCrit to analyze the institution, the community context, and the TEP processes. These three principles include “the endemic nature of colonization, stories as theory, and work toward social change” (p. 511). This study involved 15 women from two Pueblo communities in the Southwest. Data were collected through collective counter stories from focus groups, along with semi-structured interviews conducted during community visits, via phone, and through emails. The individuals involved in the study are characterized as “mothers and grandmothers ranging in age from their mid-twenties to late fifties” (p. 513). These individuals were all pursuing bachelor’s degrees in early childhood or elementary education while balancing full-time jobs. Analysis revealed several themes, including the difficulties of navigating institutional contexts and processes, the digital divide, and the scarcity of Native educators and culturally relevant pedagogy. Through the lens of community cultural wealth by Yosso (2005), the researchers urge readers to transcend deficit perspectives and recognize family, cultural, and community engagements as sources of resilience and strength. They acknowledge the critical role that relationships and partnerships with Native communities play in institutional success, stressing the importance of relational advocacy and maintaining local relationships. Although the article's concentration on a singular cohort of

women is a notable strength, I am compelled to question why the authors did not integrate feminist theory or an Indigenous framework in their engagement with the experiences of the participants.

In response, NATEPs provide a more authentic approach to culturally responsive instruction through Indigenous methods. Ginsberg et al. (2017) point out that a longstanding issue for TEPs attempting to integrate culturally responsive instruction encompasses two broad aspects of approaches: 1) “a single course requirement that lumps all non-dominant cultures together and/or 2) an elective or special theme which can treat individual cultures in shallow and stereotypical ways” (p. 10). These isolated attempts to be culturally responsive glaze over the depth and importance of cultural and linguistic importance. According to Pavel et al. (2002), “The foundation, of course, is for the teacher to understand the perspectives on the reservation or in the community. This is a key aspect of talking culturally with students and making good connection” (p. 42). This highlights the importance of linking community and traditional knowledge with theory and practice. NATEP’s should strive to work in partnership with tribal communities to help nurture community and cultural ties on behalf of students as these types of connections contribute to holistic health and eventual program success (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). Additionally, Lansing (2014), in her research on early childhood TEPs at TCUs, argues that mainstream TEPs must critically examine how they prepare Native American students to teach in their home communities by focusing on the contexts of their cultural backgrounds; this also needs to be a priority for NATEPs. Emphasizing the significance of self-determination and tribal sovereignty, asserting that TEPs must be culturally responsive by acknowledging the sociopolitical identities of Native American students (Anthony-Stevens et al.,

2020; Brayboy et al., 2015; Castagno, 2012; McCarty & Lee, 2014). It is through a critical awareness of tribal sovereignty that systemic change can be met.

In my examination of the literature on NATEPs, I did not identify any existing studies regarding programs at NASNTIs. However, this observation should not be construed as evidence that such programs are absent within NASNTIs; rather, it reflects a gap in the current literature. The following section examines the role of NASNTIs and highlights the significance of these institutions within the context of this study.

The Role of NASNTIs

This section references MSIs and TCUs to situate the discussion of NASNTIs within the broader context of IHEs. MSIs emerged to address the need for diversity and equitable access to education. These institutions have a significant racial and ethnic population, qualifying them as minority-serving institutions. The MSI category includes NASNTIs, a distinct program authorized under the 2008 Higher Education Act and appropriated in the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act (Rochat, 2015; Samayoa, 2018), which mandates that at least 10% of their student body be Native American. TCUs are also included among MSIs. While both TCUs and NASNTIs serve Native American students, important distinctions exist between these institutions. NASNTIs are not governed by tribal nations, and although Native American students are better represented compared to other IHEs, they still constitute a minority within the student body. In contrast, at TCUs, Native American students comprise most of the student body and are led by tribal leadership. Currently, there is uncertainty regarding the present administration's stance on MSIs, TCUs, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). These institutions face examination regarding their particular programs and mission statements; however, for Native-serving institutions, their political and social identity as

sovereign peoples are separate and distinct from diversity, equity, and inclusion (Weissman, 2025).

A broader body of research focuses on teacher education at MSIs (Colorado, 2024; Ginsberg, 2017), while limited studies have been conducted with TCUs (Ginsberg et al., 2023a), and there is minimal research available on NASNTIs. The existing body of scholarship concerning NASNTIs examines student perceptions regarding COVID-19 vaccinations (Dutta et al., 2023), the instruction of linguistics (McBride, 2023), funding considerations (Nguyen et al., 2022), and published dissertations (Stanek, 2024; Wildcat, 2024). A recurring theme in these publications is that the research was conducted at a NASNTI; however, there is little to no significant discussion on how to improve NASNTIs to enhance the experiences of Native and Indigenous populations. For example, McBride (2023) references their affiliation with a NASNTI but neglects to further emphasize the significance of this institution beyond a cursory mention in the introduction. Additionally, Dutta et al. (2023) quantitatively analyzed Native American students' views on COVID-19 vaccinations at a NASNTI. Their findings indicated that Native American students ages 18-24 had a higher vaccination rate compared to other racial and ethnic groups. While this study does not directly relate to TEPs, its relevance intrigued me due to the scarcity of research involving NASNTIs. These two articles underscore my critique that, apart from NASNTI functioning as the research site, there is a lack of substantial discourse regarding its relevance. Further, research concerning the student experience at NASNTIs is limited, with only one unpublished dissertation study (Dumarce, 2023) focusing on the teacher preparation of Native American students. The most comprehensive data on NASNTIs comes from a series of reports by Falkenstern and RoCHAT (2018, 2021) and RoCHAT (2015). Due to this

gap, this literature review offers limited insights into NASNTIs and highlights the need for more research in this area.

Currently, there are 37 NASNTIs located near tribal communities across the United States (WICHE, n.d.), a number that varies annually as institutions must reapply to maintain their status as NASNTIs (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Numerous NASNTIs are located close to tribal and home communities, which benefits Native American students by reducing their travel distances for education. Native American students prefer to stay close to their respective tribal communities, and many are reluctant to relocate due to family, ceremonial, and community obligations (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Kitchen et al. 2013; Pavel et al., 2002). Funding for MSIs is provided through the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act via the U.S. Department of Education, with NASNTIs receiving 25% of their funding from federal sources (Colorado, 2024). Most funding for MSIs comes from the federal government and has historically been underfunded at both the national and state levels compared to predominantly white land-grant institutions (Colorado, 2024); this funding shortfall has resulted in inadequate student services and programming.

Like Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), the notion of "servingness" at NASNTIs remains ambiguous. Garcia (2019) highlights the challenges in defining servingness at HSIs. This difficulty arises from numerous factors as well as the varied characteristics of each institution, leading them to formulate their own definitions. Garcia et al. (2019) note that since HSIs were established, there has been a lack of federal guidance on defining serving within this context. Serving is much more intricate than its federal designation, enrollment percentages, and student outcomes, which has led to diverse interpretations of the concept.

In their systematic review, Garcia et al. (2019) investigate how the concept of servingness is articulated in the literature about HSIs and Latinx students, ultimately creating a multidimensional conceptual framework. Their research highlights that servingness cannot be defined in a singular manner; instead, it is expressed in various forms and should be understood from multiple perspectives. These findings hold substantial implications for NASNTIs, as they could adopt a similar framework to articulate servingness relevant to their specific institutions. Just like HSIs, NASNTIs also lack a clear or singular definition, compelling each institution to determine its own interpretation. Therefore, the idea of serving and servingness requires a thorough examination at NASNTIs.

The earlier discussion of settler colonialism establishes a context for NASNTIs, which are situated on the ancestral lands of tribal nations that once belonged to Native peoples prior to their forced removal. While some higher education institutions recognize the original stewards of these lands with formal land acknowledgments, the pressing question is: are they taking meaningful actions that go beyond mere words? Red Shirt-Shaw (2020) contends that these institutions must go beyond mere performative actions and either “return land back to Native nations or ...provide free higher education to Native students on their traditional homelands as land-based reparations” (p. 2). The significance of the land transcends mere ownership; it is deeply connected to Native communities and integral to their identities. Considering the aforementioned context and the designation as a NASNTI, it is imperative for these Native-serving institutions to reflect on their responsibilities and clearly articulate what it encompasses to be a NASNTI. Regarding organizational climate, Minthorn (2022) contends that NASNTIs must take responsibility for Indigenizing their environments across four fundamental areas of praxis, as detailed in chapter one: 1) Indigenizing Narratives and Landscapes, 2) Indigenizing

Leadership, 3) Indigenizing Academia, and 4) Indigenizing Student Support. These domains can serve as a foundation for institutions committed to effecting organizational change and enhancing the climate for Native students. Further, a report on NASNTIs revealed that cultural awareness is a barrier to effectively working with students (Falkenstern & Rochat, 2018). Moreover, the findings indicated that institutions desire more professional development to better meet the needs of Native American students, particularly in relation to culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum. There remains a substantial amount to investigate regarding NASNTIs, given their distinct position within the realm of higher education.

NASNTIs provide an intriguing site for research due to their unique role as Native-serving institutions. They occupy a space between mainstream TEPs and TEPs at TCUs. This situation is made more pressing by the fact that limited research exists on the experiences of Native American students at NASNTIs. Within the broader context of TEP literature, most scholarly work pays little attention to Native American preservice teachers and teaching candidates. This perspective underscores the need to amplify the voices and experiences of Native students in TEPs, which drives my research questions. Pavel et al. (2002) noted, "Due to the severe under-representation of Native people in the teaching profession, programs like Oksale [name of the TEP] are valuable because they take on the task of developing, delivering, and assessing Native teacher preparation curricula" (p. 46). Like Oksale at Northwest Indian College, NATEPs play a vital role in shaping the next generation of Native and Indigenous educators. Therefore, they must continue their efforts to dismantle mainstream frameworks associated with white-dominant teaching ideologies and remain committed to developing culturally responsive programs that respect Native knowledge and perspectives. This section highlighted the essential role of NASNTIs in teacher training, prompting a call for further

research in this field. The literature review identified key research gaps that are addressed in the following section.

Research Gaps

The scholarship presented in this section discusses numerous significant facets related to my topic of Native American students, teacher education, teacher preparation, and cultural responsiveness; it is, however, by no means exhaustive. Through this literature review process, the findings indicate conceptual and knowledge gaps in the following areas:

- Current literature rarely integrates the frameworks of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), CCW (Yosso, 2005), and CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014). This study responds by bringing these frameworks together to provide both macro and micro level insights into the experiences of Native students in TEPs.
- While prior research has explored the experiences of Native students in TEPs, there remains a limited understanding of these experiences within NASNTIs. These institutions have a unique position in higher education, often enrolling higher numbers of Native students and being in proximity to tribal communities, factors that may shape how students are prepared to serve their home communities.
- CCW (Yosso, 2005) has been applied predominantly to Latinx student populations to highlight strengths (Espino, 2014; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Luna & Martinez, 2013). In contrast, research applying CCW to Native students remains limited (Waterman & Lindley, 2013), with even fewer studies focusing on Native students in TEPs (Garcia, 2024). This study extends CCW to better understand how Native preservice teachers draw upon cultural wealth to navigate TEPs.

- There is also limited scholarship examining CSRP in the context of Native students in TEPs (Garcia, 2024; Lindley, 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Expanding research in this area is important for understanding how teacher preparation can more intentionally sustain and revitalize Indigenous knowledge, language, and community-centered practices.

Addressing these gaps is important because they shape how Native preservice teachers are being prepared to serve their communities and how educational systems either reproduce or disrupt ongoing inequities. Without this understanding, TEPs risk continuing approaches that are misaligned with the cultural, linguistic, and community contexts of Native students.

This study responds to these gaps by examining how Native students in TEPs at NASNTIs are prepared to teach and serve their home communities. Although existing literature highlights Native students' educational experiences, it also reveals that harm and trauma remain embedded within educational systems. There is a continued need for research that not only documents these experiences but also identifies pathways toward more culturally responsive, community-centered approaches to teacher preparation. This study contributes to existing scholarship by deepening the understanding of Native students' experiences within TEPs.

Summary

This literature review starts by presenting my conceptual framework, which encompasses TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP. I provide details about this framework to set the context for the literature review and to offer an analytical basis for the research findings. Following this, I examine cultural responsiveness in education, emphasizing its significance for Native communities as I address CCW and counter deficit ideology. The discussion includes Indigenous survivance and highlights how settler colonialism manifests within education. By referencing

settler colonialism, I establish the current educational landscape affecting Native American students. The section also identifies the roles of NATEPs and NASNTIs within the context of higher education. This literature review investigates the present state of education for Native American students in TEPs and the broader higher education landscape. The conceptual framework comprised of TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP collaboratively establishes a triad foundation for this study, thereby enhancing the representation of Native American experiences within education. Given the ongoing assimilation and erasure of Native American populations through internal colonialism, it is imperative to emphasize the educational experiences of Native American students in TEPs. The following chapter outlines the methodologies employed in my study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for my qualitative study and details the processes for data collection and analysis. This research aimed to deepen understanding of Native American/Alaskan Native (NA/AN) students' experiences in teacher education programs (TEPs) at Native American Non-Tribal Serving Institutions (NASNTIs) and to gather further insights into their preparation for teaching in their home communities. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?
 - a. What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?
2. How does a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?

To explore these questions while honoring the contributions of my research participants, my approach was grounded in the anticolonial framework of the four Rs of research as outlined by Brayboy et al. (2012) and the concept of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999). This approach aims to avoid damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009) ensuring that deficit perspectives of Native communities and NA/AN students are not perpetuated. To collect data, analyze data, and present my findings, I employed the portraiture method developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) and refined by Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997). Tribal Critical Race Theory

(TribalCrit), Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), and Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSRP) served as the conceptual frameworks for this study, offering both theoretical insights and fundamental analysis for the methodology and results. My research paradigm formed the basis for these methods, which are detailed in the following sections.

Theoretical Perspective

Crotty (1998) describes the theoretical perspective as “the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (p. 3). This perspective serves as the philosophical foundation for this study framed by ontology, axiology, and epistemology. Each of these elements informs and drives the trajectory of the study.

My ontological perspective on the creation of knowledge is significantly influenced by post-positivism and is grounded in social constructivism. This theory suggests that multiple realities arise from human experiences and interactions within social and cultural settings (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Crotty, 1998). Consequently, individuals obtain significance from both their intrinsic selves and their external environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as the environment assumes a pivotal role in the construction of knowledge (Richardson, 2005). This perspective is grounded in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is inherently a social process and that culture plays a crucial role in shaping both learning and cognitive development. (Van Huizen et al., 2005). This perspective significantly influences qualitative research (Bhattacharya, 2017) by facilitating a more profound and comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and unveiling insights that may have been overlooked. My methodological framework draws from social constructivism and aligns with this study's intent

to shed light on the experiences of NA/AN students, enhancing my comprehension of how they build and interpret meaning from their experiences in TEPs.

The perspectives and experiences of NA/AN students are essential in constructing knowledge using interviews, journals, and observations. Beyond merely documenting facts, this study is rooted in a dynamic approach of co-creating knowledge through the lived experiences of both the researcher and the participants. The foundational principles of this study are also committed to honoring and centering the voices and experiences of NA/AN students. I value this belief greatly as demonstrated using a storytelling approach that enhances participants' strengths through CCW. This method emphasized their experiences and narratives using the portraiture technique. Both CCW and portraiture are designed to ensure that participants had a voice and agency throughout the research process. Furthermore, my positionality influenced the knowledge-generation process, as engaged in the active collection and interpretation of data, which was also informed by my own experiences in TEPs.

Four Rs, Survivance, and Desire-Centered Research

Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies influence my research paradigm through the four Rs, desire-based research, and the concept of survivance. Despite historical efforts to eliminate and negate Native and Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous communities have consistently produced profound intellectual contributions (Smith, 2005). It is through this framework that I believe culture is intrinsically linked to both experience and identity. The four Rs operate on the assumption that knowledge generation is designed to serve others and their communities; thus, it is not self-serving and should not be self-motivating (Brayboy et al., 2012). The four Rs represent a research approach centered on the needs of Native and Indigenous communities, as outlined by Brayboy et al. (2012):

- Relationality: This value emphasizes building strong partnerships and relationships with Native and Indigenous communities by highlighting the interconnectedness of living and non-living entities, such as the environment (pp. 436-437).
- Responsibility: This value emphasizes the profound responsibility that researchers bear regarding the impacts their research may have on communities and that research is not self-serving but rather for the benefit of a community (p. 438).
- Respect: This value places the research process at the heart of mutual respect, emphasizing that relationality and responsibility arise from the reciprocity inherent in respect (pp. 438-439).
- Reciprocity: This value reflects mutuality in research that what is being created must be returned to the community and people. (pp. 439-440)

The four Rs provided a macro framework for this study and served as a continual reminder of my profound responsibility to uphold my commitments to the research community. Considering the extensive history of exploitation and ongoing trauma faced by Native communities, it is crucial to approach any research with deep care and respect for those communities. Part of reclaiming education on our own terms, I follow a community of Native scholars who have paved the way for my desire to center an Indigenous research framework (Brayboy et al., 2012; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2019; Tuck, 2009; Wilson, 2008), including knowledge keepers and elders. Brayboy et al. (2012) explained the importance of centering Indigenous ways of knowing by stating, “... indigenous epistemological, ontological, and axiological beliefs have remained and *survived* (emphasis in original)” and “the task is for indigenous peoples to *reclaim* our intellectual lives by developing practices that are based in practices guided by Indigenous beliefs, action, and experiences” (emphasis in original, p. 426). This perspective on Indigenous knowledge informs my own theoretical perspective that knowledge is constructed and shaped by our own lived experiences.

As Aleut scholar Eve Tuck (2009) explained, “...For many of us, the research on our communities has historically been damage centered, intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken” (p. 412) while documenting such pain and loss in research. In

response to damage-centered research, Tuck proposed the ideology of desire-based research, which aims to capture complexity and contradiction to achieve a broader representation. However, Tuck warned that desire-based research should not be viewed simply in opposition to damage-centered research, but “Rather, it is an argument for desire as an epistemological shift” (p. 419). Tuck further proposed that one framework is not intended to be substituted for another, as this oversimplifies the intricacies of existence. Therefore, my intention with this study was to remain conscious of not perpetuating stereotypes and to navigate the research process with care and balance.

My axiological perspective on research ethics and my responsibilities to participants is shaped by the principles of the four Rs and desire-based research. This framing also structured this research study in a manner that honored and respected the communities involved in this study. Included in this perspective is the concept of survivance. As discussed earlier in this study, the term 'survivance' was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999) to describe the active presence, resilience, and resistance of Indigenous communities against racism and colonialism. Combining the terms of survival and resistance, survivance pushes back against victimhood and highlights the strengths and determination of Native peoples (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999). According to Tuck (2009), research based on survivance and desire complements each other, as both emphasize the resilience and richness of Native communities. Instead of a deficit-focused view, I highlighted the participants' valuable backgrounds and rich experiences. I ensured balance throughout the research process by applying these approaches.

This methodology section not only details the research process but also reflects its complexity when engaging with Native communities. The field is continually evolving as researchers expand their studies, deepening our understanding of potential improvements. Much

of Western research forces scholars to identify a problem and then research it. This approach can lend itself to damage-centered research, which encourages viewing communities only through a deficit lens (e.g., statistics highlighting low graduation and poverty rates). As a practitioner scholar, I have perpetuated and normalized this thinking through previous research and discussions about Native communities. In education, the emphasis is often on finding solutions; therefore, without identifying problems, this effort would be in vain. As Tuck (2009) noted, many scholars have built their careers by problematizing Native and Indigenous communities, leading to damage-centered research. In a related manner, my chosen approach of portraiture, as articulated by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), emphasizes highlighting individuals' strengths rather than predominantly focusing on their shortcomings, which is the typical practice in research.

Four Rs as a Guiding Framework

This study was guided by the Indigenous research principles known as the Four Rs of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008). Within Indigenous research traditions, these principles are not simply ethical guidelines but relational and accountability commitments that shape how knowledge is generated and shared. Consistent with Tribal Crit's emphasis on relational accountability and sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005), the Four Rs informed every stage of the research process from participant recruitment and interviewing to analysis and representation. Rather than positioning participants as research subjects, this framework foregrounded relationships, ensuring that the study remained accountable to the Native communities represented within the research.

Respect. Respect guided how participants were approached, engaged, and represented throughout the study. Participation was voluntary and grounded in transparent consent processes, and participants were invited to select their own pseudonyms. Interviews were scheduled

flexibly, often in the evenings or on weekends, to honor participants' responsibilities as students, workers, parents, and family members. Participants were also encouraged to introduce themselves tribally and relationally, reflecting Indigenous practices of identity and belonging. Cultural language and introductions were preserved in transcripts and portraits. In line with portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), respect also meant ensuring that participants' stories were not fragmented or reduced to isolated quotes. Member checking and careful contextual quotation helped ensure that participants' voices remained intact and accurately represented.

Relevance. Relevance shaped the study's purpose and focus. The research questions (e.g., language revitalization, family support) were intentionally framed around issues that matter to Native communities, specifically, how TEPs at NASNTIs prepare Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities. Research on Native students in TEPs remains limited, and this study seeks to contribute to program improvement and stronger institutional support for Native students. The inclusion of online Native cohorts and Alaska Native participants further extends the relevance of the work to groups that are often absent from teacher education scholarship. In alignment with CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014), the study centered community-serving outcomes and examined how institutions can better support Indigenous students who intend to return home as educators.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity required that the research relationship remain mutually beneficial rather than extractive. Participants contributed their experiences and insights, and in return, the study aims to elevate their stories and inform institutional change. Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) functioned as a reciprocal choice because it allows participants' experiences to be represented holistically, emphasizing

strengths, relationships, and context rather than deficits. In this way, participants' narratives contribute not only to scholarly understanding but also to conversations about program improvement and policy responsiveness within NASNTIs. Reciprocity also reflects a commitment to maintaining relationships with participants beyond the data-collection period, recognizing that knowledge creation occurs within ongoing community relationships (Wilson, 2008).

Responsibility. Responsibility shaped how the findings were interpreted and presented. While portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) highlights participants' strengths and aspirations, the analysis also addresses the structural conditions shaping their experiences. Guided by TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) and CCW (Yosso, 2005), the analysis emphasizes forms of Indigenous survivance, relational persistence, and cultural knowledge rather than framing participants through a deficit lens. At the same time, responsibility required acknowledging institutional tensions and barriers that Native students encounter within TEPs. Protecting participant identities and representing their experiences with care remained central ethical commitments throughout the research process. The Four Rs informed multiple stages of the research process.

The Four Rs framework shaped multiple dimensions of the research process. Table 3.1 illustrates how the principles of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility were enacted across the stages of research design, data collection, analysis, and representation. The Four Rs framework guided the research process across design, data collection, analysis, and representation (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008). Analytical practices were also informed by TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), CCW (Yosso, 2005), and Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,

1997), which emphasize relational accountability, Indigenous survivance, and strengths-based representation.

Table 3.1

The Four 4s Across the Research Process

4R	Research Design	Data Collection	Analysis	Representation
Respect	Tribal and relational introductions honored	Flexible scheduling and voluntary participation	Context coding that preserves participant meaning	Portraiture that retains participant voice and story integrity
Relevance	NASNTI-focused research questions grounded in community needs	Community-serving interview questions	Themes connected to research questions and community outcomes	Findings that inform program improvement for Native students
Reciprocity	Transparent consent and relational accountability	Relationship-building interviews and ongoing dialogue	Reflexive memos and collaborative interpretation	Portraits that honor participant experiences and support institutional advocacy
Responsibility	Insider reflexivity and ethical accountability	Confidentiality protection and culturally respectful protocols	Structural analysis informed by TribalCrit and CCW	Counter-storytelling that highlights survivance and challenges deficit narratives

My Conceptual Framework Applied to the Research Process

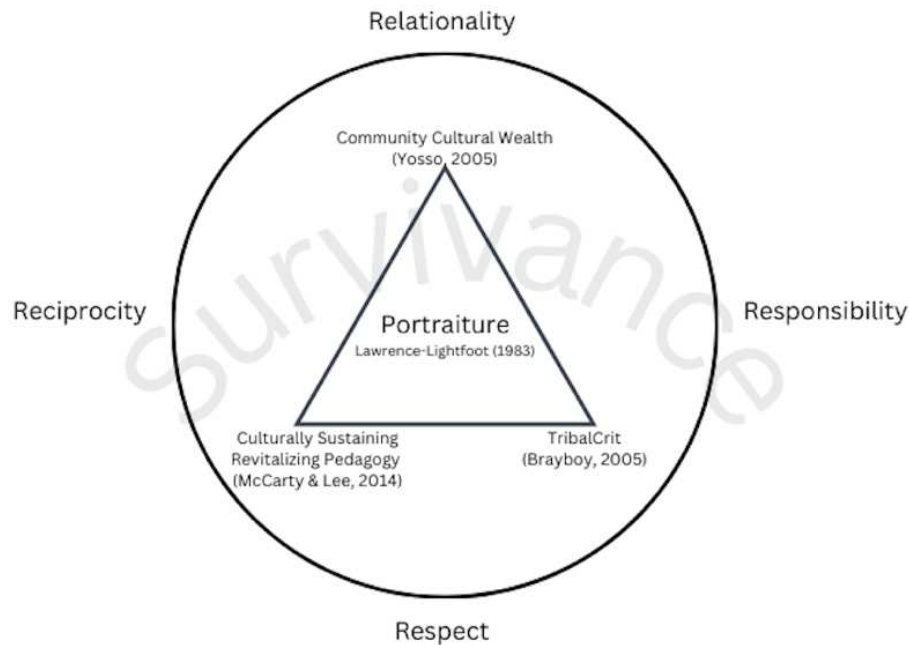
The epistemological foundations of the four Rs and survivance offer a broader context for this study, which is essential in collaborating with NA/AN communities. In this section, I explore how my conceptual framework aided in addressing my research questions and shaped my findings. The triad of TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP is a robust conceptual framework that supports this study, providing both theoretical insights and foundational analysis for the

methodology and outcomes. TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) highlights the impacts of colonization and acknowledges that policies exist within white supremacy, whereas CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) counter these issues by illuminating the strengths of Native American students. CCW emerged mainly as a critique of deficit ideology and the dominant societal structures, particularly the norms linked to the white middle class. Accordingly, CCW prioritizes various forms of capital as valuable assets for students of color. These forms of capital include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, resistant (Yosso, 2005), and spiritual capital (Huber, 2009). Similarly, the CSRP framework (McCarty & Lee, 2014) underscores the importance of sustaining pedagogical practices and revitalization efforts to mitigate the effects of cultural and linguistic erasure stemming from colonization.

Figure 3.1 depicts my methodological framework for this study. The outer circle represents the four Rs, creating a protective boundary for both the participants and the study's integrity. The pyramid at the center illustrates my conceptual framework as a triad of theories that frame the literature and guided my research. The triangular shape emphasizes the three theoretical points. Inside the triangle, the research method of Portraiture was used to reveal the participants' lived experiences. Survivance encompasses the entire methodological framework, underscoring the participants' resilience and determination. This methodological framework provided a guiding structure for addressing the research questions and analyzing the findings. Furthermore, the Portraiture methodology I chose provided significant insights into the rich and nuanced experiences of NA/AN students within TEPs. The following section provides a more detailed examination of Portraiture as the selected research method.

Figure 3.1

Methodological Framework



Methodological Approach

A methodological section in a study outlines the research process and is essential for helping the reader understand how the researcher collects and analyze data, all influenced by a philosophical and theoretical framework perspective. According to Jones et al. (2013), methodology encompasses the approach, action plan, and design. To fulfill the requirements of a high-quality inquiry, the selected methodology must effectively address a clear research question or objective and provide guidance on data collection and analysis methods (p. 48). This structured method ensures clear connections among the research question, data collection methods, and data analysis, thereby ensuring a high-quality study. As an introduction to the discussion regarding my chosen method of portraiture, the subsequent sections offer a concise

explanation of arts-based educational research, which serves as the foundational basis for portraiture.

Arts-Based Educational Research

In the mid-1970s, Elliot Eisner introduced the term "arts-based educational research." McNiff defined it as we understand it today (Pentassuglia, 2017), an inquiry approach that uses artistic expression to communicate human experiences. This method involves various creative techniques aimed at enhancing educational policy and practice (Barone & Eisner, 2012) while also integrating traditional academic research methods (Morris & Paris, 2022). Rooted in psychology and social sciences (Morris & Paris), arts-based educational research (ABER) draws on social constructivism, proposing that knowledge is inherently subjective and shaped through personal experiences and interactions with others (Pentassuglia, 2017). It acknowledges various methods of knowledge creation that go beyond traditional positivist approaches.

Expanding on the definition of ABER, Sinner et al. (2006) describe this research process as "... arts-based research draws from the creative arts to inform and shape social science research in interdisciplinary ways, thus redefining methodological vehicles in the field of education" (p. 1226). These interdisciplinary methods may encompass visual, narrative, performative, musical elements, and, more recently, the integration of digital technology (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). ABER aims to deepen the understanding of individual experiences through a holistic lens, and those who utilize ABER are redefining how research is expressed and presented (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Sinner et al., 2006). Furthermore, researchers employing ABER "...explore alternatives to make research more accessible and satisfying to a larger public and/or more engaging to researchers and participants" (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 10). Thus, ABER enhances the accessibility and

engagement of research for a non-academic audience. In this way, ABER transcends traditional qualitative methods by engaging deeply with participants and the audience. It also expands the limits of data representation while collaborating with participants to build knowledge.

In their research on ABER, Sinner et al. (2006) identified four key themes that emphasize its importance: a commitment to aesthetic and educational practices, inquiry-driven processes, a search for meaning, and interpretative understanding. These themes provide context for how researchers engage with ABER as a crucial mode of inquiry, strengthening this research approach in education and offering a new perspective on it (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

In my research on ABER, I found several studies discussing its relevance in teacher education (Belliveau, 2006; Dixon & Senior, 2009; Gouzouasis et al., 2013). For instance, Dixon and Senior (2009) characterize the bureaucratic process of teacher training as a "linear and sequential programming: entering the course as 'student' teachers, overcoming hurdles of increasing demand, and graduating" (p. 5). They also mention that this bureaucratic journey continues even after individuals begin teaching, evolving from provisional to accredited teachers once they are employed. As a result, this journey, along with traditional academic discourse, can suppress the creativity and artistic elements of teaching, limiting innovative teaching practices. In their critique, Dixon and Senior (2009) contend that ABER can effectively challenge traditional academic discourse and foster new methods for enhancing teacher education and development. The authors resonate with Barone and Eisner (2012), who assert that the "legitimacy of ABER has been questioned by those who have misunderstood this unique approach to educational inquiry" (p. 95). This study illustrates ABER as a methodological framework that weaves artistic and creative expression into educational research. This

integration aims to enrich alternative epistemologies that do not rely on conventional research methods, offering me a fresh perspective in educational research.

In another study, Belliveau (2006) investigated a group of preservice teachers during their teaching practicum as they created a play. Through ethnodrama, which combines elements of ethnography and drama, this form of inquiry enables preservice teachers to creatively explore how they construct meaning throughout the play development process. This research highlights the innovative ways in which scholars are integrating art into learning. This is also demonstrated in a study by Gouzouasis et al. (2013) that involved two elementary preservice teachers reflecting on their experiences in an art pedagogy class within a teacher education program. They utilized autoethnography as a method in teacher education to share their stories and illustrate their learning process. These studies represent a few instances of how ABER is employed as a legitimate form of research inquiry. While this study does not provide a comprehensive overview of ABER, many studies emphasize its significance and growing popularity as a research method. A type of ABER is Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), which is explored in the next section and serves as the chosen research method for this study.

Portraiture Methodology

This study employed portraiture, a blend of art and science, to capture the essence of NA/AN preservice teachers and illuminate their lived experiences. Portraiture is a social science-based research method developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) "... designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (p. 3). Unlike traditional research approaches that often emphasize deficits, portraiture centers participants' strengths and lived experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Portraiture integrates artistic expression with the rigor of social science inquiry. As Dixon et al. (2005) explain, “Portraiture is best described as a blending of qualitative methodologies—life history, naturalist inquiry, and most prominently that of ethnographic methods” (p. 17). In this study, I adopted the term *portraitist* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to describe my role, reflecting the relational and interpretive nature of the research process.

The portraiture method is guided by five essential components—context, voice, relationships, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). These components shaped both the data collection and analysis processes in this study. Context attended to the personal, historical, and institutional factors shaping participants’ experiences. Voice reflected both participants’ narratives and my interpretive presence as the portraitist, including listening for and representing participants’ stories with care. Relationships emphasized trust, respect, and reciprocity, recognizing that meaningful engagement with participants is central to Portraiture. Emergent themes focused on identifying patterns and recurring ideas across data sources. Finally, the aesthetic whole brought these elements together to construct cohesive, narrative portraits that reflected the complexity of participants’ lived experiences. Each aspect of Portraiture is quite sophisticated and in-depth. Each part plays a critical role in developing a holistic representation of the rich lived experiences of participants:

Enriched by carefully constructed *context*, expressed through thoughtfully modulated *voice*, informed by cautiously guarded *relationships*, and organized into scrupulously selected *themes*, the research portrait is the result of a seamless synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an expressive *aesthetic whole*. (emphasis in original, Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 274)

In this study, portraiture extended beyond traditional academic approaches by centering participants’ voices and highlighting their strengths, cultural wealth, and what Lawrence-

Lightfoot and Davis (1997) refer to as “goodness.” Goodness is not limited to positive attributes, but reflects the complexity, tensions, and evolving nature of human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). This orientation aligns with asset-based frameworks such as Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and counters deficit-based narratives often present in educational research (Brooks, 2017; Tuck, 2009).

Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) foundational work, *The Good School: Portraits of Character and Culture*, demonstrated how portraiture reveals the depth and complexity of educational experiences. She described portraits as capturing both a moment in time and a sense of timelessness, noting that participants often feel “seen” in ways they had not previously experienced (p. 5). This perspective informed my approach as I sought to represent participants as complex, multifaceted individuals rather than as subjects of study. Portraiture has also been used in educational research to challenge deficit narratives and highlight the strengths of marginalized communities (Brooks, 2017).

Brooks (2017) notes that “the development of a collaborative approach to research when combined with an aesthetic style of writing may have powerful implications for social justice based research in education, and avoid pitfalls associated with deficit-based educational research” (p. 2241). Similarly, Reyes McGovern (2023) used portraiture to center the experiences of a Mexican American teacher, providing a counter-narrative that emphasized resilience and strength. In another study, Chapman (2007) combined portraiture with Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine classroom experiences, arguing that “portraiture, and CRT should be viewed as tools that can illustrate identifiable strengths of teachers’ pedagogy and student learning in classroom settings” (p. 157). This integration highlights how portraiture can

work alongside critical frameworks to challenge dominant narratives and center lived experiences.

Within the context of Native education, limited studies have employed portraiture (Galaviz, 2021; Holz, 2019; Yazzie, 2002). These studies informed my approach by demonstrating how portraiture can be used to respectfully and thoughtfully represent NA/AN students' experiences. However, no known studies have applied portraiture specifically to NA/AN preservice teachers in TEPs. This study therefore contributes to the field by offering detailed, narrative portraits that highlight the strengths, experiences, and complexities of NA/AN students navigating TEPs.

Connection to Research Questions

In portraiture, participants are central to the research process. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) explains, "With Portraiture, the person of the researcher—even when vigorously controlled—is more evident and more visible than in any other research form" (p. 11). The research questions in this study aligned closely with this methodology by focusing on participants' lived experiences within TEPs. This approach provided a contextualized understanding of how participants navigated TEPs and interpreted their learning in relation to their commitments to community and future teaching practice. The study also drew on asset-based frameworks, including CCW (Yosso, 2005) and CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014), which align with portraiture's emphasis on strengths, relationships, and cultural knowledge. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state, "The researcher who asks first 'what is good here?' is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover the sources of failure" (p. 9). Through this approach, portraiture enabled a deeper understanding of NA/AN preservice teachers' educational journeys, presenting their experiences as complex,

relational, and grounded in community. The resulting portraits reflected participants' voices and perspectives, offering insights that extend beyond deficit narratives and contribute to a more holistic understanding of Native teacher education experiences.

Research Site

The research site for this study is referred to using the pseudonym Southwest Mountain University (SMU). The institution is located in the Southwestern United States on lands historically stewarded by several Indigenous Nations, including the Nuuchiu, Jicarilla Apache, the Pueblos of New Mexico, Hopi Sinom, and Diné peoples. Acknowledging the original land stewards situates the institution within a broader Indigenous context and recognizes the longstanding relationships between place, community, and education.

Purposeful sampling guided the selection of the research site. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants or sites that can provide information-rich insights relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach was appropriate given the limited research examining NA/AN students in TEPs, particularly within NASNTIs. Selecting a NASNTI site increased the likelihood of engaging participants whose experiences could meaningfully inform the study's research questions.

SMU was selected because of its longstanding institutional commitment to serving NA/AN students. The institution has historical ties to federal educational policies directed toward Native peoples and has evolved over time into a public liberal arts university. In the late 2000s, SMU was designated as a NASNTI by the U.S. Department of Education, reflecting its significant enrollment of Native students and its eligibility for federal support designed to strengthen services for this population.

SMU is a small, public liberal arts institution enrolling approximately 3,400 to 3,500 students, the majority of whom are undergraduates, with a relatively small graduate population of about 150 students. The institution is designated as a Native American-Serving Nontribal Institution (NASNTI), reflecting its longstanding commitment to serving Native students. The student body is racially and ethnically diverse, with students of color comprising over half of the total enrollment. Approximately 44–45% of students identify as White, 14–15% as Hispanic or Latiné, and smaller percentages identify as Black, Asian, or multiracial. Notably, NA/AN students represent a significant proportion of the student population.

Based on federal reporting data, approximately 24.5% of students identify as Native American and Alaskan Native (NCES, 2024); however, institutional reporting that includes broader definitions of eligibility and affiliation indicates that this proportion may approach 35–40%. This distinction reflects differences in reporting practices and highlights the substantial presence of Native students at SMU, making it one of the most prominent four-year institutions serving Native students in the United States. The university enrolls students representing numerous federally recognized Tribal Nations and Alaska Native villages from across the United States. As a NASNTI, the institution maintains policies and programs intended to increase access to higher education for Native students. These initiatives contribute to SMU awarding a significant number of bachelor's degrees to NA/AN students compared with many other baccalaureate-serving institutions. Because of this sustained commitment to Native student access and success, SMU represents an especially relevant site for examining Native preservice teachers' experiences within TEPs.

As discussed in Chapter One, scholarship examining the lived experiences of NA/AN students in TEPs at NASNTIs remains limited. This study seeks to contribute to this emerging

area of research by exploring how Native preservice teachers navigate TEPs within such institutional contexts and how these programs prepare them to serve their home communities. Also, consistent with the portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), individual portraits were developed for each participant to contextualize their lived experiences as students at SMU. These portraits highlight participants' stories, relationships, and aspirations while situating their experiences within the institutional environment.

Theoretical Context of Research Site

The institutional context of SMU also intersects with the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. TribalCrit emphasizes that the experiences of Indigenous students in educational institutions are shaped by ongoing colonial structures and policies (Brayboy, 2005). At the same time, NASNTIs can function as sites where Indigenous students draw upon multiple forms of community cultural wealth, including familial, aspirational, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). Within this context, the experiences of Native preservice teachers at SMU illuminate both the opportunities and tensions present in institutions that serve Indigenous students while operating within broader colonial education systems. Additionally, the institutional mission to support Native students aligns with principles of CSRP, which seek to sustain Indigenous languages, identities, and community relationships within educational spaces (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Understanding the research site through these frameworks provides important context for interpreting participants' experiences throughout the findings presented in this chapter.

Data Collection

Portraiture challenges traditional positivist research paradigms by blending systematic inquiry with aesthetic and narrative forms of representation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Rather than positioning participants solely as subjects of study, portraiture invites them

into a collaborative process of meaning-making, where their voices, experiences, and identities are centered. In this study, data collection followed an iterative and relational process informed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) protocols. This included co-constructing narratives with participants, elevating their voices, and incorporating artifacts that provided deeper contextual understanding. Participants were invited to share their experiences in ways that felt meaningful and authentic, reinforcing the study's commitment to honoring multiple ways of knowing. Qualitative research, particularly within portraiture, is inherently relational and reflexive. As the portraitist, I served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Terrell, 2015). This role required balancing attentiveness and intentionality by moving between careful listening and observation, and the more active responsibilities of building relationships, coordinating interviews, and shaping the research process. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe, the researcher's stance evolves from "quiet watchfulness" to more purposeful engagement (p. 187). Within this study, I remained mindful of my dual role: managing the logistical and analytical components of the research while also creating space to listen deeply and learn from participants. This balance was essential in ensuring that the research process remained grounded in respect, relational accountability, and the authentic representation of participants' lived experiences.

Rather than positioning participants solely as subjects, portraiture invites them into a collaborative process of meaning-making in which their voices, experiences, and identities are centered. This orientation aligns with Indigenous research frameworks that emphasize relationality, respect, and the co-construction of knowledge (Wilson, 2008). In this study, data collection followed an iterative and relational process informed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) protocols. This process involved co-constructing narratives with participants,

elevating their voices, and incorporating artifacts that provided deeper contextual insight. Participants were invited to share their experiences in ways that felt meaningful and authentic, reflecting a commitment to *Relevance*, ensuring that the research honors participants' lived realities and community contexts. At the same time, this approach upheld Respect by recognizing participants as knowledge holders whose stories are not extracted but shared within a relational space of trust (Wilson, 2008).

Qualitative research within portraiture is inherently relational and reflexive. As the portraitist, I served as the primary instrument of both data collection and analysis (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Terrell, 2015). This role required balancing attentiveness with intentionality by moving between careful listening and observation and the more active responsibilities of building relationships, coordinating interviews, and shaping the research process. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe, the researcher's stance shifts from "quiet watchfulness" to purposeful engagement (p. 187). In this way, my role was guided by Reciprocity, recognizing that knowledge is co-created and that the research process should offer value not only to the study, but also to the participants and their communities.

Throughout this study, I remained attentive to my dual role: managing the logistical and analytical dimensions of the research while also creating space to listen deeply and learn from participants. This balance was essential to grounding the process in relational accountability and ensuring that participants' stories were represented with care, accuracy, and integrity. In this way, the data collection process reflected the 4Rs of Indigenous research: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility, by honoring participants as knowledge holders, centering the significance of their lived realities, approaching knowledge as co-constructed, and carrying an ethical responsibility for how their stories were gathered and represented (Wilson, 2008).

Participant Recruitment and Challenges

Qualitative research emphasizes small, information-rich samples to gain deeper insights into specific phenomena. Jones et al. (2015) note that sample size depends on the research design, and overlooking this relationship can compromise data quality. In my study, there was no clear guideline for participant numbers in a portraiture study, likely due to the diversity of studies, their purposes, questions, and objectives. Nonetheless, prior research often involved selecting one to three participants for a portraiture study (Chapman, 2007; Reyes McGovern, 2023; Yazzie, 2002), since rich, detailed descriptions are valuable and portraits are time-consuming to create.

For this study, participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a strategy that intentionally identifies individuals who can provide insight into the phenomenon under study (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Terrell, 2015). In qualitative research, purposeful sampling allows the researcher to engage with participants who possess direct experience with the issue under investigation rather than seeking a large or statistically representative sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal is depth of understanding rather than generalizability. For this study, purposeful sampling aligned closely with the research purpose: exploring the experiences of NA/AN students enrolled in TEPs at NASNTIs. Purposeful sampling is particularly useful when researchers seek information-rich cases that illuminate the research questions (Patton, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that selecting participants with direct experience of the phenomenon allows for a deeper exploration of meaning and context. This approach also aligns with the portraiture method, which prioritizes depth, context, and narrative complexity over large sample sizes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture research aims to capture the richness of participants' experiences through detailed narratives that reflect

both individual stories and broader patterns within a given setting. To ensure participants could speak directly to these experiences, the selection criteria included the following: (a) students majoring in education at the undergraduate or graduate level who were 18 years of age or older, (b) individuals who self-identify as Native American or Alaska Native, and (c) students who had recently completed or were currently enrolled in a teacher education course.

The data collection period spanned from June 2025 through February 2026. Recruitment took place over seven months, during which five participants were recruited, and 10 interviews were conducted. In addition to interviews, a classroom observation was conducted for each participant, and participants were invited to maintain reflective journals using predetermined prompts. Scheduling interviews occasionally proved difficult because participants were full-time students managing coursework, employment, and family responsibilities. In two cases, a 2-hour time zone difference required rescheduling an interview to accommodate participant availability.

Recruitment materials included a flyer distributed through the institutions that briefly described the study and eligibility criteria. The revised flyer included a QR code that directed potential participants to additional information about the study and a prescreening survey, created through Microsoft OneDrive. This revision made it easier for students to access study details and indicate interest in participating. The prescreening survey also asked for participants' preferred email addresses so that I could follow up to schedule interviews if they met the study criteria. Several students completed the survey; however, some were not eligible, and others did not respond to follow-up interview requests.

Recruitment posed several challenges that required revisions to my initial sampling plan. Initially, the participant pool was limited to undergraduate students majoring in teacher education. However, recruitment progressed slowly, and the scope was expanded to include

SMU's online student population, which includes both undergraduate students—many of whom were part of a cohort admitted in Summer 2021—and students enrolled in online or hybrid graduate programs. At the outset of the study, online students were not a primary focus. However, because many TEP students at the recruitment site participate in online or hybrid programs, expanding the recruitment pool became necessary. Initially, I chose not to include AN preservice teachers in order to maintain a narrow participant pool, focusing exclusively on NA preservice teachers. However, upon recognizing that I had overlooked a significant segment of our NA community—Alaska Natives—I proceeded with the IRB amendment process to implement several modifications: a) broadening the demographic group; b) including graduate students; c) incorporating online and hybrid students; and d) revising the flyer to declutter study details and add a QR code for easier access to information about the study.

To distribute recruitment materials, I worked with institutional gatekeepers, individuals responsible for controlling access to research sites (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). These gatekeepers included the Dean of Education, the Associate Dean of Education, and the Director of Teacher Education. As previously mentioned, I aimed to collect data at two NASNTI sites, but this turned out to be more challenging than expected. As noted by Jones et al. (2013), “Gaining access to participants or a specific field site can be straightforward or extremely challenging ...” (p. 118). Therefore, this endeavor necessitates careful attention and respect to reduce suspicion and untrustworthiness and to establish credibility. At one institution, my access was restricted by the Director of Teacher Education, who required that all communication be routed through her office. This restriction prevented direct contact with faculty or students. Despite multiple attempts, including requests to share the recruitment flyer and schedule campus or classroom visits, I received no response to several of my communications. At one point,

nearly three months passed without correspondence. This lack of communication likely contributed to the difficulty recruiting participants from that site. Without opportunities to meet faculty or students in person, it was cumbersome to build the trust that is often necessary for research participation. Recruitment during the summer months was also challenging due to lower enrollment.

Despite these challenges, I continued communicating with department leaders and faculty at the successful site and expanded recruitment efforts over time. With a larger student population, a revised flyer, and a broader participant pool, recruitment was ultimately successful. Although this outcome differed from my original plan to recruit across two NASNTIs, this change allowed for a more in-depth focus on participants' experiences within one institutional setting. Despite these challenges, I continued to communicate with department leaders and faculty at SMU and to increase recruitment efforts. By the Fall of 2026, with a larger student population, a revised recruitment flyer, and an expanded participant pool, recruitment efforts were successful. In total, five participants were recruited, slightly exceeding the original goal of four participants. The study's sample size considers the small pool of Native American students majoring in education, reflecting the overall scarcity of Native Americans in the education field (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Partelow, 2019).

Recruitment Process

With five participants from one NASNTI site, I approached recruitment as both a structured and relational process, recognizing that access and participation were shaped by institutional procedures as well as trust and connection within the community. Consistent with the study's sampling strategy, I used purposeful sampling to identify NA/AN preservice teachers whose experiences aligned with the research questions, while also incorporating snowball

sampling to expand participation through existing networks and relationships. This approach ensured that participants could meaningfully speak to the study's focus on lived experiences, navigation of TEPs, and the influence of institutional and sociocultural contexts.

First, in June 2025, I obtained IRB approval (see Appendix A) from Colorado State University, my home institution. Afterward, I initiated the process of securing approval from the participating institution by following its established procedures. This process took approximately six to eight weeks, likely due in part to reduced faculty availability during the summer months. Once institutional approvals were secured, I began recruitment in June 2025 by reaching out to School of Education leadership at the research site. In this initial email, I introduced myself, described the purpose of the study, and requested support in sharing recruitment materials (see Appendix B). These initial contacts were important not only for gaining access but also for understanding the institutional context in which recruitment would take place.

To expand outreach, I developed a recruitment flyer outlining key details of the study (see Appendix C). I shared this flyer with School of Education leadership, who distributed it through department listservs. I also connected with faculty members, who shared the information with students and relevant student groups. In addition, I had several opportunities to briefly present the study within the School of Education and distribute flyers directly. These efforts supported a network-based recruitment process in which faculty and participants could refer others who might be interested in participating (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Faculty also served as important institutional informants, helping me better understand cultural and organizational dynamics that could shape access to participants (Jones et al., 2013).

I also sent a recruitment email to students (see Appendix D). Students who were interested in participating contacted me directly via email. I then asked them to complete a brief

prescreening survey to determine eligibility (see Appendices E and G). If students met the study criteria and provided contact information, I followed up to schedule an initial interview and share additional details about the study. For those selected to participate, I then initiated the informed consent process (see Appendices E and G). After consent was obtained, I coordinated interview scheduling with participants via email. Following the first interview, we arranged a second interview and a classroom observation. At that time, I also shared reflective journal prompts for participants to complete between interviews.

Although I followed these steps in sequence, the recruitment process itself was not fully linear. It required ongoing communication, flexibility, and responsiveness to participants' schedules and institutional timelines. Throughout the process, I remained attentive to building trust and maintaining respectful relationships, recognizing that recruitment in this context extended beyond procedural steps and was grounded in relational accountability.

Participant Consent

After individuals agreed to participate in the study, I provided them with an informed consent form by email (see Appendix F). The development of this document was guided by key considerations outlined by Gachupin et al. (2019) (see Appendix G) for conducting research with Indigenous communities. These considerations shaped both the content of the consent form and the broader consent process.

First, I ensured that the consent form was phrased in clear, understandable language. Because portraiture involves the co-construction of detailed narratives, the form explained how participants' lived experiences and identities would contribute to the study. In keeping with Indigenous research methodologies, I worked to make the language accessible, relational, and free of unnecessary technical complexity (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Second, although the

study was conducted in English, participants were informed that translation or interpretation support in their Native language could be made available if desired. This reflected an effort to honor participants' linguistic identities and support equitable participation. Third, the consent form addressed all major aspects of the project. It provided an explanation of portraiture as a methodology and described how it differed from more traditional research approaches. The form also addressed confidentiality and anonymity, particularly given the narrative nature of portraiture and the possibility that some experiences could be recognizable. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. These rights were also reiterated verbally at the start of each interview. Finally, participants were given time to review the consent form and decide whether to participate. This process was intended to support autonomy and reduce pressure in decision-making.

While informed consent is a foundational ethical requirement, it also operates within broader institutional structures that can reproduce power imbalances. As Jones et al. (2013) note, qualitative research emphasizes relationship-building, reciprocity, and co-construction of meaning, yet formalized consent procedures can simultaneously reinforce the researcher's positional authority. Recognizing this tension, I approached consent as an ongoing relational practice rather than a one-time procedural event.

Data Collection Tools

Once participants were selected through purposeful sampling, data for this study were collected using multiple qualitative tools designed to capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences. In alignment with portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), these tools were selected to illuminate the richness, nuance, and context of participants' stories, while attending to both individual experiences and broader institutional dynamics. Data

collection methods included semi-structured interviews, class observations, and reflective journals.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Appendix H) with self-identified NA/AN preservice teachers at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Consistent with Indigenous research methodologies, I approached interviews not as extractive processes, but as relational and dialogic engagements. Kovach (2021) describes interviews as grounded in “reflection, story, and dialogue” (p. 51), emphasizing their role as a shared space for meaning-making rather than a rigid question-and-answer format. This approach aligns with TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), which centers lived experience as a legitimate and vital source of knowledge.

Accordingly, interviews were conducted as reciprocal conversations that honored participants’ voices, knowledge systems, and ways of storytelling. Each participant completed two interviews. The first interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, and the second lasted up to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom, depending on participants’ program format, location, and preference. Three participants were enrolled in online programs and therefore completed both interviews virtually.

With participants’ permission, I audio-recorded interviews using both a phone recorder and Zoom, when applicable, to ensure that data were not lost if one recording method failed. Recordings were stored as local files on a password-protected computer and backed up on an encrypted hard drive. Participants’ names were removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms co-created with participants to protect confidentiality. I was the only individual with access to the recordings, transcripts, and secure storage devices. Data will be retained for

three years following completion of the study and then deleted in accordance with IRB approval. In addition to audio recording, I kept notes in a reflexive journal to document contextual cues and observations that could not be captured through audio alone.

Class Observations

To better understand how participants navigated TEPs at NASNTIs, observations were conducted within classroom settings, both in person and on Zoom (see Appendix I). From a portraiture perspective, these observations provided important contextual detail and contributed to a more holistic understanding of participants' experiences within institutional spaces. Observations focused on participants' interactions with instructors, peers, and the broader learning environment, as well as the ways institutional practices and norms were enacted. Participants selected the location of their interviews; for those participating remotely, Zoom served as the default platform.

Reflective Journals

Participants were also invited to engage in reflective journaling as an additional means of sharing their experiences. In alignment with Indigenous methodologies that honor multiple ways of knowing and expression, participants were offered flexibility in how they documented their reflections, including written entries, audio recordings, or photography. For written reflections, participants were provided with either a digital or physical journal accompanied by guiding prompts. Participants who preferred audio reflections recorded responses using their own devices, and photographic reflections were also accepted. While these options supported participant choice and accessibility, most participants chose written journaling. Participation in journaling varied, which was not unexpected given that this activity was an additional commitment for students already managing demanding schedules.

Although semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, observations and reflective journals enriched the study by providing layered, contextualized insight into participants' experiences. Together, these methods supported the development of nuanced portraits that centered participants' voices while situating their stories within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Interview Protocols and Relational Practices

Because portraiture depends on relational depth, trust-building was a central component of the interview process. I approached interviews as relational and dialogic spaces rather than purely procedural interactions, emphasizing transparency, respect, and care beginning in the early phases of recruitment and continuing through consent and data collection. As Jones et al. (2013) note, building rapport in qualitative research requires time, intentionality, and sustained attention to relationships.

Each interview began with a relational introduction to establish a connection and situate both myself and the participant within the research space. I shared aspects of my personal and professional background, including my identity as a Diné scholar and my connection to my home community. This approach positioned me not only as a researcher but also as a community member with shared commitments. When participants identified as Diné, I shared my clans and invited them to do the same if they felt comfortable. Within Diné culture, clan introductions situate individuals within a network of relationships and affirm kinship responsibilities through the system of *K'é*. In some cases, clan connections were identified, further reinforcing relational ties and cultural grounding within the interview space.

For participants who were not Diné, I introduced my identity through a brief description of my heritage and ancestral homeland. This provided context for the cultural perspective

informing the study while acknowledging the diversity of tribal nations represented among participants. These relational introductions reflected Indigenous research principles that emphasize interconnectedness, relational accountability, and respect for participants as knowledge holders (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008). Following these introductions, I reviewed the consent process, including the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and permission to audio-record the session. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and were reminded that they could request clarification or rephrasing of interview questions at any point.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix F), which allowed for consistency across participants while also providing flexibility for individuals to expand on experiences that were meaningful to them. The first interview included guiding questions focused on participants' educational journeys and experiences in TEPs, while the second interview included follow-up questions that supported deeper reflection and elaboration. Throughout the interviews, I remained attentive to participants' verbal and nonverbal cues, offering gentle prompts or rephrasing questions when additional clarity or reflection was needed. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to share any additional thoughts and reflect on their experience of the conversation. This closing check-in created space for participant agency and ensured that individuals felt comfortable with what had been shared.

To support deeper reflection, interviews were typically spaced one to two weeks apart. This interval allowed participants time to consider their responses and engage more thoughtfully in the second interview. At times, scheduling required flexibility due to participants' responsibilities as students, employees, and family members. Maintaining this flexibility was an important aspect of relational practice and responsiveness to participants lived contexts.

For Zoom interviews, I used password-protected meetings, conducted sessions in quiet and private spaces, and saved recordings locally rather than to the cloud. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded using multiple methods, including Zoom, my phone recorder, and Otter.ai, to ensure accuracy and provide backup in the event of technical issues. These measures helped support both data reliability and confidentiality in virtual settings. The interviews were later transcribed by me, with Otter.ai used as an initial transcription support tool to assist in generating draft transcripts. I then reviewed and cleaned each transcript for accuracy, ensuring that participants' words were represented faithfully. This process allowed me to remain closely engaged with the data and supported early familiarization with participants' narratives. After transcription, I removed identifying details before moving into analysis. As part of my initial engagement with the data, I organized and coded transcripts using an Excel spreadsheet to begin identifying patterns and emerging ideas. While this step supported early analytic thinking, the full data analysis process is described in detail in Chapter Four.

Consistent with portraiture methodology, interviews were not treated as isolated data collection events, but as evolving relational engagements shaped by attentiveness, reciprocity, and mutual respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). These relational dynamics created a conversational space in which participants felt comfortable sharing personal and reflective experiences, ultimately enriching the development of the portraits. Overall, the interview process emphasized relational accountability, cultural responsiveness, and flexibility, aligning with Indigenous research principles and supporting a research environment in which participants could share their experiences openly and authentically.

Interview Questions

I used a semi-structured interview format that combined a prepared protocol with flexibility to follow relevant lines of inquiry as they emerged. Bhattacharya (2017) explains that formal semi-structured interviews involve preparing questions in advance while remaining open to unexpected but meaningful directions during the conversation (p. 127). This format allowed me to enter each interview with a clear sense of purpose while also responding to participants' vocal tone, body language, and emerging insights in ways that felt more natural and conversational (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

The interview protocol included open-ended questions and follow-up prompts designed to elicit detailed reflection. Guided by my conceptual framework, the questions aligned with the research questions and were informed by Yosso's (2005) CCW framework (see Appendix F). As Bhattacharya (2017) notes, interview questions should be shaped by the researcher's theoretical perspective, research purpose, and review of the literature (p. 132). This alignment helped ensure that the interviews remained conceptually grounded while still allowing room for participants to guide the direction and depth of their storytelling. Building on the relational and iterative nature of data collection, the analysis phase involved a careful and reflective examination of the data to identify patterns, develop themes, and construct meaningful portraits.

Data Analysis Approach

Following the completion of data collection, the next phase of the study involved moving into data analysis. Bhattacharya (2017) explains that "data analysis involves creating processes that would allow for deep insights that reflect how the researcher integrated theoretical and analytical frameworks, previous understandings of literature, and the focus of the research purpose and questions" (p. 150). In alignment with this perspective, this section outlines the

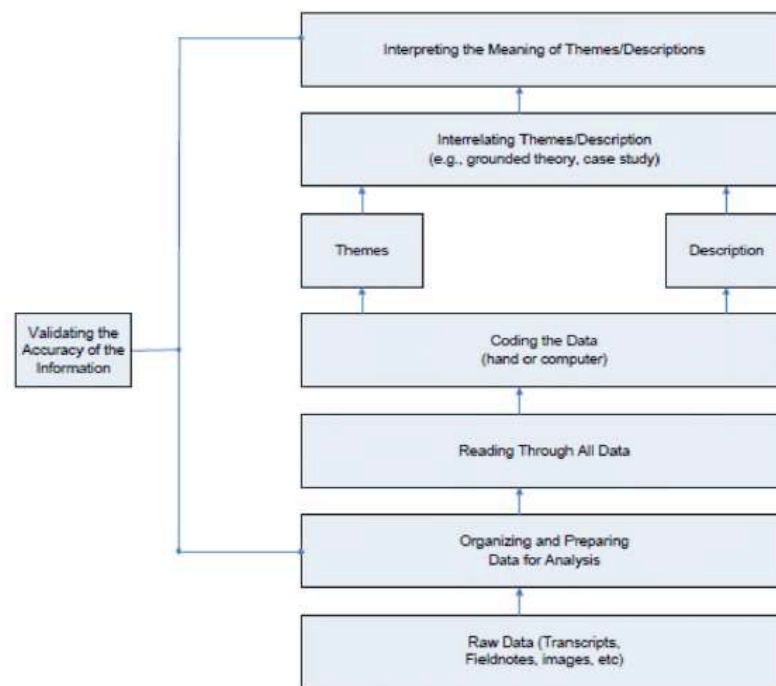
steps and methodological approach used to analyze the data, ensuring coherence with the study's research questions, data collection methods, and overall methodological framework.

A common approach in qualitative research is inductive analysis, which Bhattacharya (2017) refers to as “working up” (p. 150) the data to identify meaning. This process involves systematically engaging with the data through stages such as cleaning and organizing the data, reading and re-reading transcripts, identifying patterns, and developing emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although this process may appear straightforward, inductive analysis is a structured and rigorous approach to drawing meaningful conclusions from qualitative data (Thomas, 2003).

Following these steps, the data were coded to identify patterns and recurring ideas across participants' narratives. This coding process served as a foundation for developing themes that reflected participants' lived experiences and supported the construction of the portraits. Figure 3.2 illustrates the qualitative data analysis process referenced in this study.

Figure 3.2

Data Analysis Process in Qualitative Research



Note. Reprinted from Creswell & Creswell (2018).

Data Coding

Saldaña and Omasta (2016) explain that “coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act by each individual researcher” (p. 122). This perspective underscores that qualitative data analysis is not a linear process, but rather an iterative one that evolves as the researcher engages more deeply with the data. As an emerging researcher, I recognized that the coding process shifted and developed over time in response to the complexity of participants’ narratives.

I began with In Vivo coding, a method that draws directly from participants’ own words and phrases to generate initial codes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). This approach centered participants’ voices and maintained fidelity to their lived experiences. Using participants’ language as a foundation supported a more authentic representation of their perspectives within

TEPs. Following this initial phase, I moved into descriptive coding to identify patterns and group related ideas across participants' narratives. This process involved organizing codes into broader categories and examining recurring concepts that emerged across interviews, observations, and journal reflections. Coding was conducted through careful, line-by-line engagement with transcripts, supported by organized data management (e.g., spreadsheets) to track codes, categories, and emerging patterns. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, while organizational tools can support efficiency, they do not replace the essential analytic work of deeply engaging with the data. Throughout the coding process, I engaged in ongoing analytic writing to document emerging insights, questions, and interpretations. Bhattacharya (2017) describes this process as a way to capture how the data "crystallizes and takes shape" through the researcher's engagement. These written reflections supported an iterative analytic process and allowed me to track the evolution of my thinking over time.

Consistent with portraiture methodology, data analysis remained an ongoing and reflective process aimed at developing rich, detailed representations of participants' experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). After identifying key themes, I interpreted these findings in relation to Yosso's (2005) CCW framework, including aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. During this phase, I examined how participants' experiences reflected different forms of cultural wealth and how these forms of capital supported their navigation of TEPs. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that "with each stage of data collection, at the close of each day, the portraitist gathers, scrutinizes, and organizes the data, and endeavors to comprehend what she has observed" (p. 187). In this way, the portraitist remains actively engaged in both data collection and analysis, continually reflecting on and refining interpretations. This iterative process supported the identification, refinement, and

deepening of themes, ultimately informing the development of nuanced portraits that reflect the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

Data Presentation

The portraiture method employed a range of techniques to construct rich, narrative representations of individuals and their contexts. In a published dissertation examining undergraduate students as global citizens, Wyscaver (2014) developed portraits of five participants by incorporating poetry and self-generated visual elements. The use of poetry and vivid description contributed to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of each participant's experiences.

Similarly, McCarthy (2017) employed portraiture to construct detailed representations of three Indigenous educators and community leaders. While this study utilized comparable data collection methods, such as observations, field notes, and interviews, the portraits relied more heavily on descriptive narrative and did not incorporate the same creative elements found in Wyscaver's (2014) work. In contrast, Galaviz (2021), in a dissertation focused on Navajo students in higher education, relied exclusively on structured and semi-structured interviews to develop participant profiles. Although this approach provided important insights and effectively demonstrated the application of TribalCrit as a guiding framework, the use of a single data source resulted in a more limited depth of representation compared to studies that integrated multiple forms of data.

Building on these approaches, I constructed a portrait for each of the five participants in this study. In alignment with portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and similar studies (McCarthy, 2017; Wyscaver, 2014), I used thick description to develop portraits that captured the complexity of participants' lived experiences. These portraits were co-

constructed with participants and grounded in multiple data sources, allowing for a more holistic and contextually rich representation of each individual.

In Chapter Four, findings are presented through a series of individual portraits, each centered on a single participant and organized to reflect their personal, educational, and cultural experiences within TEPs. Each portrait foregrounds participants' voices while situating their narratives within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Following the presentation of individual portraits, a cross-case analysis highlights patterns and themes that emerged across participants, connecting individual experiences to shared structures and systems. This structure allowed the findings to honor both the uniqueness of each participant's story and the collective insights that emerged across the study.

Trustworthiness: Credibility and Triangulation

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, I employed multiple strategies aligned with qualitative and portraiture methodologies, including reflexivity, member checking, and data triangulation. As the portraiture, I maintained impressionistic records, defined as "...ruminative, thoughtful piece[s] that identif[y] emerging hypotheses, suggest interpretations, describe shifts in perspective, point to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develop a plan of action for the next visit" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 188). These records documented my evolving observations and interpretations throughout data collection and analysis, allowing me to remain attentive to patterns, tensions, and emerging meanings within the data. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note, "Impressionistic Records allow us to become increasingly focused and discerning in our work with the discovery of patterns, the development and dialogue of ideas, and the convergence of phenomena" (p. 188).

In this way, impressionistic records served as an integral component of the analytic process, reflecting the active role of the portraitist in both data collection and interpretation.

In addition to impressionistic records, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. While these tools are related, they serve distinct purposes. A reflexive journal captures the researcher's ongoing reflections on positionality, assumptions, and decision-making processes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016), whereas impressionistic records focus more directly on analytic observations and emerging interpretations within the data. Together, these practices enhanced transparency and rigor by making visible how interpretations developed over time and how my positionality informed the research process.

To further support credibility, I conducted member checking by inviting participants to review their completed portraits and confirm accurate representation (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This process allowed participants to clarify, expand, or revise their contributions, strengthening the accuracy of the findings while supporting relational accountability and ethical representation (Brayboy et al., 2015). In this way, participants were positioned as co-constructors of knowledge within the study.

Finally, I used data triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize the importance of drawing from multiple data sources in qualitative research, while Lochmiller and Lester (2017) caution that these sources must be meaningfully aligned with the study's purpose. Accordingly, this study incorporated multiple forms of data, including semi-structured interviews, researcher observations, field notes, and participant journals. Participant journals provided an additional layer of insight, capturing individual reflections and reinforcing participants' voices and agency within the study. These strategies supported a more comprehensive and credible representation of participants'

experiences. By integrating multiple data sources and reflective practices, this study deepened its analysis while remaining grounded in relational, ethical, and culturally responsive research practices.

Positionality and Consideration of Bias

Before engaging in this research study, it was imperative for me as the portraitist to engage in deep introspection by examining and understanding my role in relation to the study and research participants. Jones et al. (2013) emphasize that

understanding one's standpoint and position before entering into a research project is imperative so as to guard against hearing, seeing, reading, and presenting results that conform to the researcher's experiences and assumptions about self and other, rather than honoring the participants' voices in the study. (p. 41)

Attending to my positionality was therefore essential to maintaining the integrity, credibility, and validity of the research process.

Within studies that draw on portraiture and the underpinnings of Critical Race Theory (CRT), this work became even more important. Chapman (2007) asserts that "Portraitists who use CRT must explore their own race, class, and gender roles in explicit ways that other methodologies and theories do not readily embrace" (p. 158). Since CRT through TribalCrit was integral to my conceptual framework, I intentionally reflected on my own positionality during the research. As previously noted, Chapman (2007) utilized portraiture and CRT to examine the experiences of students in a ninth-grade English class led by a white, middle-class teacher. By emphasizing voice within portraiture, Chapman (2005) examined the educator's experiences within a racially diverse classroom, highlighting the central role of the researcher's voice in the research process. Chapman (2005) stated, "In the methodology of Portraiture, the complex nature of voice must be acknowledged, assessed, and incorporated into the presentation of the data" (p. 34). Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1987) emphasize that the researcher's

voice is present throughout the research process, shaping how data are interpreted and represented. Given the centrality of voice in portraiture, I remained attentive to how my perspectives, assumptions, and positionality influenced the study at multiple stages.

Closely connected to positionality is the practice of reflexivity. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe reflexivity as the process by which “inquirers reflect about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (p. 182). Reflexivity was therefore an ongoing and necessary component of this qualitative study. To support this process, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting my thoughts, reactions, and evolving interpretations during data collection and analysis. This practice allowed me to remain aware of how my experiences and assumptions shaped the research process and outcomes.

As a Diné woman and former TEP student, I brought an insider perspective (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) grounded in both personal and professional experience. Having navigated a similar educational pathway as an NA student over twenty years ago and serving as a faculty member at the research site, I held a deep understanding of the institutional and cultural contexts shaping participants’ experiences. This insider perspective provided valuable insight into the complexities of teacher education for NA/AN students. At the same time, I recognized that this positionality introduced potential bias and required careful consideration of power dynamics. As a former Native American TEP student, I was aware that I would have benefited from greater support and a shift away from deficit-based perspectives within educational settings. Additionally, over the course of nearly 20 years in teaching, I acknowledged that I have at times contributed—albeit unintentionally—to the reproduction of colonizing practices and the

normalization of Western epistemologies in my instructional approaches. These experiences required me to remain vigilant in examining how such influences could shape this study. Throughout the research process, I actively attended to these dynamics through ongoing self-reflection and by working collaboratively with participants to ensure their experiences were represented accurately and respectfully.

My deep connection to the research topic and sites required continuous reflection on my own biases and assumptions. As Jones et al. (2013) caution, “Researchers must also guard against assuming their experiences are similar to those of their participants” (p. 41). Given my professional roles at the research sites, I took intentional steps to minimize potential conflicts of interest and power imbalances. Participants were not recruited from courses I taught, and I maintained no direct instructional or advisory relationship with them during the study. These measures helped reduce the likelihood of coercion or perceived obligation to participate.

I also recognized that this study constituted a form of “backyard research,” in which the researcher examines familiar institutional contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). While this proximity provided a nuanced understanding of the institutional environment, it also introduced the potential for bias and blurred boundaries between the participants and me. This form of inquiry, sometimes referred to as “Me-Search” (Gardner et al., 2017), carries both strengths and limitations. Although insider knowledge can deepen contextual understanding, it also necessitates careful attention to issues of subjectivity and power. Throughout the study, I remained attentive to these tensions and took steps to mitigate their influence.

My interest in studying NASNTIs was grounded in both personal and professional commitments to Native-serving education. As a practitioner-scholar, I found Metz and Page’s

(2002) work particularly relevant in highlighting the challenges faced by researchers balancing professional responsibilities with academic inquiry. They note:

Outside the elite institutions, most graduate students in education simply do not receive enough support to leave their full-time jobs in teaching and administration. Studying their own practice is attractive because they are busy at their jobs during the hours they might study in other schools and, even were the hours flexible, the demands of professional jobs will leave them with little energy for ambitious research projects elsewhere. (p. 26)

This perspective underscores the structural realities that shape practitioner-based research. My positionality as a practitioner-scholar influenced both the selection of the research site and the focus of the study. While this connection strengthened my understanding of the context, it also required ongoing awareness of how my experiences, access, and commitments differed from those of other researchers.

Ultimately, I recognized that each decision within this study was shaped by my positionality and carried ethical implications. Addressing bias was not a single step but an ongoing process that spanned the research. By engaging in continuous reflection and remaining attentive to power dynamics, I worked to ensure that participants' voices remained central and that the research process upheld principles of care, respect, and responsibility. While no study is free from bias, acknowledging and addressing these influences was essential to maintaining the integrity of the research.

Ethical Considerations

Like reflexivity and positionality, "research ethics is not something that you should consider simply while you are collecting or analyzing data. Rather, it is something that must be considered across the research process" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 81). Throughout this study, ethical considerations were not treated as a discrete step but as an ongoing commitment embedded across all phases of the research. Given the extensive history of exploitation and the

ongoing trauma experienced by Native and Indigenous communities, I approached this study with intentional care, respect, and accountability.

Qualitative research extends beyond procedural compliance with IRB requirements. Jones et al. (2013) emphasize that “the ethical imperative to do good, rather than simply doing no harm, in the context of qualitative inquiry significantly increases the obligations of the researcher” (p. 175). In response, I approached this study through the guiding principles of the Four Rs of Indigenous research (Brayboy et al., 2012): relationality, responsibility, respect, and reciprocity. Relationality was reflected in the emphasis on building trust and maintaining meaningful connections with participants throughout the study. Responsibility guided my commitment to representing participants’ experiences with care and ensuring that the research process did not cause harm. Respect was demonstrated through honoring participants as knowledge holders and centering their voices within the research. Reciprocity informed my approach to co-constructing knowledge and ensuring that the research contributed meaningfully to participants and their communities. These principles shaped the ethical foundation of the study, reinforcing a commitment to conducting research that was not only methodologically sound but also relationally accountable and culturally responsive.

Limitations

Several limitations were inherent in the design of this study. As Saldaña and Omasta (2016) note, generalizability refers to “...the assumption that the findings from a particular group of study participants can be generalized to the entire population the participants represent” (p. 99). Given this definition, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized beyond the specific group of participants involved. This study focused on self-identified Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers and therefore does not represent the experiences of teacher education students from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, the

findings are not generalizable to all Native American students across NASNTIs or mainstream teacher education programs, as Native communities are diverse and context-specific.

An additional limitation lies in the study's reliance on self-identification rather than federal or state-recognized classifications of Native identity. This decision was intentional, acknowledging the complex and multifaceted nature of identity, as well as the colonizing implications embedded within this type of formal classification system. While this approach centers participants' self-determined identities, it may be perceived by some audiences as limiting standard forms of verification.

The study was conducted with five participants from a single NASNTI site, which allowed for depth of understanding but limited broader institutional comparisons. Additionally, the timing of data collection, which began in Summer 2025, presented challenges for recruitment due to typically lower student enrollment during that period. Although recruitment efforts were later expanded and ultimately successful, this initial constraint may have influenced the composition of the participant pool.

As with all qualitative research, the findings were shaped by my positionality as the researcher. While steps were taken to address potential bias through reflexivity, member checking, and triangulation, it is important to acknowledge that interpretation is inherently influenced by the researcher's perspectives. Recognizing these limitations strengthens the transparency of the study and provides context for interpreting the findings.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological framework guiding this study, including the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis processes. The study employed the Portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to construct in-depth

representations of participants' lived experiences within TEPs. Additionally, the study was informed by TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Culturally Sustaining Revitalizing Pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2014), which provided both conceptual grounding and analytical direction.

Five NA/AN preservice teachers from one NASNTI site participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and reflective journals, and were analyzed using an iterative, *in-vivo* approach aligned with portraiture methodology. Throughout the research process, attention was given to trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the role of the researcher's positionality in shaping the study. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, qualitative research is inherently emergent, requiring flexibility as the study unfolds. Consistent with this perspective, this study evolved in response to the research context, participant experiences, and analytic insights. The following chapters present the findings of the study, including individual portraits and cross-case themes, followed by a discussion of implications for research, practice, and future inquiry.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings and analysis from five Native American preservice teachers enrolled in teacher education programs (TEPs) at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution (NASNTI) in the Southwest. Using portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to center participants' voices and narrative contexts, alongside pattern coding to identify cross-case themes, the analysis examines how lived experiences shape Native students' pathways through teacher education. Findings illuminate how participants navigate institutional structures while drawing on community cultural wealth, relational networks, and cultural knowledge to persist and prepare for teaching. The major themes emerging from this study include community cultural wealth as survivance; relational persistence; nonlinear pathways and structural navigation; navigating colonial schooling structures; commitment to returning home as educators; gaps in preparation for Indigenous community contexts; and NASNTIs as sites of possibility and contradiction. Together, these themes address the study's research questions by illustrating how Native preservice teachers' lived experiences shape their journeys in TEPs and how these programs prepare them to serve their home communities.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Native students in TEPs at NASNTIs and to examine how these institutions prepare students to serve their communities, as many students return home to teach in their home communities (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Locke, 2004). While previous research has highlighted student experiences within TEPs, few studies have examined student experiences at NASNTIs (Lemley & Lee, 2016; Locke, 2004). With numerous NASNTIs across the United States (WICHE, n.d.), most of which are located near Native

communities, these institutions provide a suitable environment for Native students pursuing higher education. Given many Native students' strong desire to stay close to their tribal communities because of family, ceremonial, and community responsibilities (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Kitchen & Raynor, 2013; Pavel et al., 2002), NASNTIs deserve further study and serve as an ideal context for this study.

Research Questions

This study was prompted by the need to better understand Native American student experiences in TEPs at NASNTIs and focused on exploring the following research questions:

1. How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?
 - a. What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?
2. How does a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?

Conceptual Framework

As outlined in Chapter Three, this study was guided by a conceptual framework consisting of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005), Community Cultural Wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2005), and Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSR/P; McCarty & Lee, 2014). These frameworks shaped both how I understood participants' experiences and how I interpreted the findings presented in this chapter. Rather than operating as separate lenses,

they worked together allowing me to examine both the structural conditions participants navigate and the strengths they bring into those spaces.

TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) provides a critical lens for understanding how colonization remains embedded within educational systems and policies. It centers the ongoing impact of settler colonialism and recognizes that schooling in the United States is not neutral, but situated within broader structures of power, including white supremacy. In contrast, CCW (Yosso, 2005) and CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) shift the focus toward the strengths, knowledge systems, and cultural practices that Native students bring into educational spaces. CCW challenges deficit-oriented narratives by highlighting multiple forms of capital, including aspirational, navigational, social, familial, linguistic, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005), as well as spiritual capital (Huber, 2009), which support students' persistence and success. Similarly, CSRP emphasizes the importance of sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages, cultural practices, and ways of knowing within educational contexts, particularly in response to the historical and ongoing effects of cultural and linguistic erasure. Collectively, this triad allows for a more complete understanding of Native preservice teachers' experiences. TribalCrit foregrounds the structural realities participants must navigate, while CCW and CSRP illuminate how participants draw on cultural wealth and community knowledge to persist and envision futures grounded in their communities. This balance between critique and strength is central to how I approached both the analysis and representation of participants' stories.

This conceptual framework is also grounded in an Indigenous epistemological orientation that centers relationality, responsibility, and community accountability. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Four Rs—respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991)—guided the ethical and relational commitments of this study. These principles shaped

not only how I engaged with participants but also how I interpreted their narratives and represented their experiences. Knowledge, in this context, is not treated as detached or objective; it is relational and carries obligations to the communities from which it comes (Wilson, 2008).

My epistemological stance directly informed the methodological framework of the study. As illustrated in Chapter Three (Figure 3.1), the Four Rs formed the outer boundary of the research process, ensuring that the work remained grounded in relational accountability. Within this structure, the conceptual framework served as the analytic core, guiding how data were interpreted and understood. At the center of this framework is portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), an arts-based methodology that aligns with this relational orientation. Portraiture allowed me to center participants' voices, attend to nuance and complexity, and represent their experiences in ways that honor both individual stories and shared themes, whereas the concept of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999) extends across the entire framework. Survivance captures the active presence, resilience, and resistance of Indigenous peoples within systems shaped by colonization.

This study provides a way to understand participants' persistence not simply as survival, but as a continuation of cultural identity, community responsibility, and Indigenous presence within teacher education spaces. In this way, the conceptual framework and epistemological orientation were not separate from the methodology; they were embedded within it. They shaped how this study was designed, how participants' experiences were interpreted, and how their stories are carried forward in the chapters that follow.

Research Community

The findings presented in this chapter draw from in-depth interviews with five Native preservice teachers enrolled in a TEP at a NASNTI in the Southwestern United States, referred

to here as Southwest Mountain University (SMU). Consistent with the relational commitments embedded in the Four Rs framework (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008), participants are referred to as members of the research community rather than simply research subjects. This language reflects the relational orientation guiding this study and acknowledges the shared responsibility between researcher and participants in the process of knowledge generation.

Participants represent diverse tribal nations and lived experiences, including Diné and Alaska Native communities. While each participant's story is distinct, their experiences collectively illustrate the complex ways Native preservice teachers navigate TEPs while maintaining strong commitments to family, culture, and community. During the 2025–2026 academic year at SMU, participants balanced multiple responsibilities alongside their coursework, including parenting, employment, and community and family obligations. These commitments highlight the relational dimensions of persistence, as frequently described in Indigenous education scholarship (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Waterman & Lindley, 2013), where educational pathways are closely tied to responsibilities to family and community rather than to individual advancement alone.

Participants also entered teacher education through nonlinear educational pathways. Several participants returned to higher education after time in the workforce, navigated geographic distance from their home communities, or transitioned into teacher education from other academic fields. Such pathways reflect patterns documented in research on Indigenous students in higher education, where persistence is shaped by relational accountability, community obligations, and culturally grounded motivations for pursuing education (Brayboy, 2005; Waterman, 2019; Wilson, 2008). Within this study, these pathways can also be understood

through CCW (Yosso, 2005), as participants drew upon aspirational, familial, linguistic, and navigational forms of capital to navigate their educational journeys.

Despite these varied backgrounds, participants shared a common commitment to becoming educators who could serve and give back to their home communities. This motivation aligns with principles of CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014), which emphasize the role of education in sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and community relationships. In this way, participants' aspirations to teach reflect broader commitments to community well-being and Indigenous survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999).

The characteristics presented in Table 4.1 reflect both the diversity and shared commitments across the research community. Tribal Nation or Indigenous affiliation is self-reported by participants, and in some cases, regional identifiers are used to protect anonymity while honoring Indigenous sovereignty. Variations in age, entry pathways, and program trajectories highlight the often nonlinear nature of Indigenous students' experiences in higher education. Despite these differences, participants shared a strong orientation toward community. Their educational journeys were closely tied to roles within their families and communities, including caregiving, mentoring younger relatives, and engaging in language and cultural practices. While three participants identified as parents, all described forms of relational responsibility that extended beyond individual roles. These commitments reflect the presence of familial and social capital as described by Yosso (2005), illustrating how Indigenous students draw on community-based networks of support to persist in teacher education programs.

Table 4.1*Overview of Research Community Participant*

Participant ID	Identity Tag	Tribal Nation/ Indigenous Affiliation	Home Community/ Village	Gender	Age	Entry Pathway	Community Role	Year in Program	Area of Study
P1	The Community-Rooted Educator	Navajo-Diné	Navajo Nation	Woman	20	Traditional undergraduate pathway	Auntie; Sibling; Language Learner	3rd year	Secondary English Education
P2	The Returning Math Educator	Jicarilla Apache	Jicarilla Apache Nation	Woman	27	Returning Adult Learner	Matriarch; Family Caregiver	4th year	Secondary Math Education
P3	The Poet Scholar in the Classroom Educator	Navajo-Diné	Navajo Nation	Man	23	Graduate License pathway	Student Teacher; Youth Mentor	2nd year graduate school	Master of Arts in Education w/ Teacher Licensure
P4	The Matriarch in Motion Educator	Alaska Native (Northwest Coast Nation)	Southeast Alaska/Rural Alaska Village	Woman	36	Returning Adult Learner	Matriarch; Family Leader; Language Leader	5th year	Elementary Education
P5	The Relentless Path-Maker Educator	Alaska Native (Northwest Coast Nations)	Southeast Alaska/Rural Alaska Village	Woman	38	Returning Adult Learner	Matriarch; Family Leader; Language Leader	5th year	Elementary Education

Additionally, participants' aspirations to become educators within or in service of their home communities further underscore the relational motivations shaping their pathways. Rather than viewing education as an individual achievement, participants framed their goals in connection to broader responsibilities to family, community, and future generations. These patterns highlight how CCW operates across participants' experiences, supporting persistence while also reinforcing commitments to return, serve, and sustain their communities.

Research Community Pseudonyms

Consistent with portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and with the goal of protecting confidentiality within Native communities, participants are identified using descriptive identity tags in addition to conventional pseudonyms. These identity tags emerged through careful engagement with participants' narratives and were developed to capture central dispositions, commitments, and strengths reflected in their stories. Rather than relying solely on anonymous identifiers, the tags honor the relational identities participants brought into the research process and help situate their experiences within broader cultural and community contexts. This approach aligns with the principles of respect and responsibility within the Four Rs framework, which emphasize representing participants with care and maintaining the integrity of their stories throughout the research process (Brayboy et al., 2012; Wilson, 2008). The portraits that follow provide a narrative introduction to the research community and offer context for the thematic findings that emerge later in this chapter.

As described in the previous section, the participants in this study represent a diverse group of Native preservice teachers enrolled in a TEP at SMU. Although participants varied in age, program pathways, and community roles, their experiences reflected shared commitments to family, community, and future generations of Native students. Several participants balanced

parenting and caregiving responsibilities while completing their coursework, while others described mentoring younger relatives, supporting siblings, or maintaining close ties to their home communities. These relational roles reflect forms of familial and social capital documented in scholarship on CCW (Yosso, 2005) and are often central to Indigenous students' persistence in higher education.

Participants also described entering teacher education through nonlinear educational pathways. Some returned to school after time in the workforce, while others navigated geographic distance from their home communities or transitioned from other academic fields into teacher preparation. These pathways illustrate how educational persistence is shaped not only by individual determination but also by relational responsibilities and commitments to community well-being. TribalCrit highlights how Indigenous students frequently navigate institutions that operate within broader colonial educational structures while simultaneously maintaining connections to their cultural communities (Brayboy, 2005). Participants' narratives reflected this tension, describing learning to navigate between institutional expectations and community responsibilities while remaining grounded in their identities and aspirations.

Across the portraiture, participants consistently framed their pursuit of teaching as a commitment to community rather than solely a personal career goal. Many spoke about returning to their home communities, supporting Native youth, or contributing to the continuation of cultural knowledge and language. In this way, teacher education was understood not simply as a pathway to professional advancement but as part of a broader responsibility to future generations. Their stories illustrate how higher education can function as a space where Indigenous students draw upon CCW, navigate institutional structures, and envision themselves as educators who serve their communities. The Portraiture discussed later in this chapter

illuminates these experiences in greater depth and provides a narrative foundation for the thematic analysis.

Reflexivity and Analytic Memos

As a Diné scholar and faculty member within the NASNTI context, I entered this study as an insider. This positionality mattered. Shared cultural references, tribal affiliations, and institutional knowledge created an ease in conversation that likely would not have been present with an external researcher or perhaps even a non-Native researcher. Participants did not have to over-explain kinship systems, community obligations, or the significance of returning home to teach. In many cases, they simply spoke, and I understood. Berger (2015) suggests that insider status can strengthen trust and depth in qualitative inquiry.

At the same time, insider research can be quite rewarding but also challenging, requiring a lot of discipline. When you're very familiar with a topic, that familiarity shapes how you listen, interpret, and respond throughout the research process. Creswell and Poth (2018) remind us that reflexivity, being aware of our own influence, should always be part of the process, especially when shared backgrounds might lead us to overlook certain assumptions. In this study, familiarity impacted both data collection and analysis. For example, there were moments where I understood meaning without needing to probe further; a researcher with less familiarity may have asked additional questions or sought clarification in different ways. I found myself naturally connecting with some stories, especially those about grief, family responsibilities, or navigating predominantly white spaces, because they echoed my own experiences. For instance, when Cyndi talked about losing her brother, it made me think of the loss of my own brother in 2019 and how I almost considered stepping back from my doctoral studies because of family duties.

Similarly, when Joan and Debbie shared their journeys as single parents, I remembered my own experiences juggling college as an undergraduate and being a young mom.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in reflexive journaling and impressionistic records, as described by Bhattacharya (2017) and Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) to document immediate reactions, emerging insights, and moments of tension. After each interview, I noted where I felt emotionally moved, protective, or inclined to interpret generously. Pillow (2003) reminds us that reflexivity extends beyond acknowledging bias; it requires examining how positionality and power shape interpretation. In practice, this meant returning to transcripts and asking: What is explicitly present in the data, and what might I be filling in because of familiarity?

Analytic memos served as a link between coding and interpretation. As outlined by Saldaña and Omasta (2016), I wrote memos during initial coding sessions to document emerging patterns, tensions, and questions. Some were brief, a few lines highlighting recurring language like "circle back" or "family is everything." Others were more extensive reflections that connected participant stories to CCW (Yosso, 2005) or TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005). Lochmiller and Lester (2017) highlight that memo writing can slow the analytical process constructively; I witnessed this firsthand. Memoing helped me identify when a theme was developing across multiple cases rather than within just one story. For instance, I recognized how relational persistence was a common trait among all five participants, despite their different locations. Though this understanding did not come from a single transcript, it evolved gradually through the comparison of memos. This reflexive practice was especially important when participants described perseverance. It would have been easy to frame their stories solely as resilience. Instead, I situated their experiences within broader structural contexts shaped by colonization,

institutional barriers, and systemic inequities, consistent with TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005).

Reflexivity helped me resist romanticizing endurance and instead examine how CCW (Yosso, 2005) functioned as a response to those conditions.

Analytic memos served as a bridge between coding and interpretation. Following Saldaña and Omasta (2016), I wrote memos during initial coding to capture patterns, tensions, and questions. Some were brief, such as highlighting recurring phrases like “circle back” or “family is everything.” Other memos were more developed reflections connecting participant narratives to CCW (Yosso, 2005) and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005). As Lochmiller and Lester (2017) note, memo writing can productively slow analysis; I experienced this firsthand. Through memoing, I began to see patterns develop across cases. For example, relational persistence emerged gradually, not from a single transcript, but through the accumulation and comparison of memos across participants.

Memos also helped guard me against deficit framing. When participants discussed addiction, academic gaps, challenges within the cohort, or lack of institutional support, I paused to ask: What assets are present here? What forms of navigational, familial, or resistant capital are operating? This questioning was grounded in Yosso’s (2005) framework and helped ensure that struggle was analyzed as structural navigation rather than personal failure.

Finally, interpretation was continually checked against the transcripts themselves. Before drafting each portraiture, I reread the full interview to confirm that the selected excerpts accurately reflected the tone and context. Portraiture, while narrative in form, remained anchored in the data. As Lochmiller and Lester (2017) note, rigor in qualitative research depends not only on transparency of process but on clear alignment between evidence and interpretation. Ultimately, reflexivity and memoing were central to my approach. They enabled me to respect

the complexity of participants' stories while examining the institutional factors influencing them. These practices enhanced the credibility of the study and ensured the analysis adhered to the principles of respect and responsibility integral to Indigenous research methodologies (Wilson, 2008).

Data Analysis

The analytic process unfolded in a recursive and relational manner, rather than through a rigid sequence of steps. Coding, memo writing, and Portraiture construction continually informed one another. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, qualitative analysis rarely proceeds in a straight line; instead, researchers move back and forth between the data and interpretation as insights develop. In this study, theoretical framing, participant voice, and emerging patterns remained in constant conversation throughout the analytic process.

The analytic process began with cleaning and organizing the interview data. Interviews were recorded using Zoom, Otter.ai, and a phone recorder as backup. Although Otter produced an initial transcript, each interview transcript was carefully reviewed while listening to the original recording to ensure accuracy and correct transcription errors. This step ensured the integrity of the data prior to coding and interpretation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

During transcription and analysis, Indigenous language used by participants was preserved whenever it appeared in the interviews. Words or phrases spoken in tribal languages were retained in the transcripts rather than translated into English, as many Indigenous terms carry cultural and relational meanings that cannot be fully conveyed through direct translation. As McCarty and Lee (2014) explain, language is deeply connected to cultural knowledge, identity, and community continuity; preserving Indigenous language, therefore, aligns with

CSRP approaches to research. Transcripts generated through Otter.ai were carefully reviewed alongside the original recordings to ensure the accuracy of Indigenous terms. When participants provided explanations or contextual meanings for specific words during the interview, those interpretations were included in the transcripts to preserve participants' intended meanings.

Maintaining Indigenous language in the transcripts also reflects principles of Indigenous research that emphasize respect for participants' knowledge systems and ways of communicating (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Rather than standardizing all language into English academic conventions, this approach allowed participants' voices and linguistic identities to remain intact while supporting analysis of how language reflects identity, community relationships, and cultural continuance within teacher education experiences. Preserving Indigenous language in the transcripts also reflects the recognition of linguistic capital, a form of CCW that highlights the knowledge, communication styles, and cultural expressions present within Indigenous communities (Yosso, 2005).

Once transcripts were verified, they were organized (raw and cleaned) and prepared for analysis, consistent with the analytic process described in Chapter 3 by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Bhattacharya (2017) describes data analysis as a process of developing procedures that enable researchers to integrate theoretical frameworks, prior literature, and guiding research questions to generate meaningful insights (p. 150). Following this guidance, transcripts were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to create a color-coded analytical matrix, which enabled early comparison across participants and interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Organizing the data in this way helped me identify patterns while maintaining visibility of each participant's narrative.

Consistent with the inductive analytic process described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the next stage involved carefully reading and rereading the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the data. Bhattacharya (2017) describes this stage as “working up the data,” a process in which the researcher moves gradually from raw transcripts toward meaning and interpretation (p. 150). During these readings, I also wrote analytic memos (as described in a previous section), documenting initial observations, emerging questions, and moments that appeared particularly significant within participants’ narratives.

Following this process, I began first-cycle coding using an *in vivo* approach. This initial coding informed the inductive phase of analysis, allowing participants’ language to shape early codes before integrating deductive frameworks. Deductive codes were drawn from the study’s conceptual framework, while inductive codes emerged directly from participants’ language and experiences. This approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in theory while still honoring participants’ voices (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

Deductive codes were informed by the study’s theoretical frameworks. TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) directed attention to the ways colonial structures shape educational institutions, how sovereignty and self-determination appear in participants’ narratives, and how Indigenous identity is negotiated within teacher education programs. CCW (Yosso, 2005) guided analysis toward forms of capital often overlooked in dominant educational discourse, including aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) informed attention to themes related to language, cultural continuance, and commitments to community return.

I carefully went through the transcripts line by line, which helped me see how the participants’ lived experiences reflected these theoretical frameworks. For example, references to

returning home to teach were coded through both aspirational capital and familial capital, while descriptions of navigating financial barriers were coded as navigational capital and examined through a TribalCrit lens of structural constraint. These overlapping codes reflected the interconnected nature of participants' experiences.

At the same time, I remained attentive to what emerged from the data beyond the theoretical framework. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) emphasize the importance of allowing categories to emerge inductively from participants' own language. Several inductive codes surfaced repeatedly across transcripts, including grief as a turning point, sobriety and recovery as motivation, motherhood and schooling as intertwined responsibilities, cohort accountability, NASNTI ambivalence, quiet resistance, and teaching as a moral obligation. These codes did not originate from the conceptual framework but instead arose organically from participants' stories.

After completing first-cycle coding, I began clustering related codes into broader analytic categories. Overlapping codes were merged, and patterns across participants became more visible. This stage of analysis involved comparing experiences across participants to distinguish between individual narrative elements and broader structural patterns. For example, I compared the experiences of an Alaska Native cohort with those of students navigating more traditional in-person pathways in teacher education. This cross-case comparison highlighted both shared experiences and important contextual differences in how participants navigated their programs.

During the second cycle of analysis, I engaged in pattern coding, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe as a shift from descriptive coding toward analytic themes. At this stage, the analysis moved beyond cataloging experiences to asking what those experiences signified in relation to the research questions. Codes related to family support, mentorship, and cohort accountability, for instance, were grouped under a broader theme of relational persistence.

Similarly, codes related to financial struggles, academic inequalities, and institutional misunderstandings were grouped under the categories of structural navigation and institutional friction.

Throughout this process, portraiture remained central to the analytic approach (see Figure 3.1). As previously mentioned, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) describes portraiture as a methodology that blends systematic inquiry with narrative representation, seeking to illuminate complexity and identify moments of “goodness” within human experience. As themes developed, I returned repeatedly to full transcripts to ensure that thematic categories did not flatten participants’ stories or remove them from their narrative context. The portraits were therefore not written after analysis was complete; rather, they were part of the analytic process itself. Writing the portraits allowed each participant’s individuality to remain visible even as cross-case themes emerged.

Ultimately, the analytic process shifted from a detailed line-by-line examination to a broader thematic synthesis. Deductive frameworks provided a conceptual foundation for interpreting the data, while inductive coding ensured that participants’ voices remained central to the analysis. Pattern coding then linked participants’ lived experiences to the research questions guiding the study.

Categories to Themes

Through this iterative process of coding, memo writing, and portrait construction, several cross-case themes began to surface across participants’ narratives. These themes did not emerge from a single stage of coding but developed gradually as patterns became noticeable across interviews, observations, and reflective journals. As Bhattacharya (2017) notes, qualitative

analysis involves moving from fragments of lived experience toward broader meaning, allowing patterns to crystallize through sustained engagement with the data.

While each participant's story remained distinct, shared experiences began to emerge across cases. Participants consistently described drawing upon CCW as survivance, relying on familial, linguistic, and relational forms of capital to persist within their programs. Their narratives also revealed relational persistence, where family members, mentors, cohort peers, and community networks played a central role in sustaining their educational journeys. Participants' pathways through teacher education were rarely linear. Instead, their experiences reflected nonlinear pathways and structural navigation, as they balanced schooling with family responsibilities, financial realities, and institutional expectations. At the same time, their narratives illustrated how students navigate colonial schooling structures, often negotiating spaces that were not originally designed to center Indigenous knowledge or community priorities.

Across portraiture, participants also expressed a strong commitment to returning home as educators, framing teaching as both a professional goal and a responsibility to their communities. However, their stories also revealed gaps in preparation for Indigenous community contexts, highlighting tensions between institutional teacher preparation and the realities of teaching in Native and Indigenous communities. Finally, participants' experiences illustrated how NASNTIs function simultaneously as sites of possibility and contradiction, offering important opportunities for access and support while still reflecting broader structural limitations.

The section below presents the findings through Portraiture narratives of each participant, followed by a cross-case thematic analysis. In keeping with the Portraiture method, the participant portraits are presented first to center the individuality and complexity of each

participant's experience before moving to broader thematic interpretations across cases (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraits and Counter-Storytelling

The following portraits illustrate the lived experiences of Native preservice teachers at SMU. Each portrait highlights the relational, cultural, and educational contexts that shaped participants' journeys through teacher education. Instead of just using thematic coding to present findings, this section starts with Portraiture to respect the integrity of each narrative and the relational contexts they come from (Brayboy et al., 2015; Wilson, 2020). Through portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), participants' stories serve as powerful counter-stories (Brayboy, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that challenge negative narratives about Native preservice teachers. Their stories show not educational weakness, but goodness, such as relational strength, the ability to navigate structures, and a deep commitment rooted in community. Portraiture as a methodology helps keep the full complexity of lived experiences visible (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). By using portraiture, the study preserved the richness, relational context, and narrative depth of each story.

Instead of breaking participants' stories into isolated themes, portraiture helped me highlight their wholeness, agency, and human dignity. Each story reflects not only personal educational paths but also the broader historical, cultural, and political influences shaping Native students' involvement in higher education. Their narratives shed light on how teacher education is experienced at the intersection of tribal identity, family responsibilities, institutional context, and community accountability.

Portraiture 1: Cyndi, The Community-Rooted Educator

Cindy is 20, Diné, and from Northwest New Mexico, where community is not something you visit—it is something you carry. She arrived with a smile already forming, the kind that settles a space before she speaks. Her laughter followed easily, bright, and contagious, but beneath that ease was a steadiness shaped by responsibility, relationship, and memory. When she spoke about her life, she did not begin with herself alone. She began with her family. “I come from a large family,” she explained, “and they’ve always told me they are my teachers.”

In her telling, teaching does not begin in school buildings. It begins at home, in the quiet and constant guidance of aunts and uncles who remind her what is right, what is wrong, and how to move through the world. In her family, relationships are not neatly categorized. Aunts are mothers. Cousins are siblings. These are not metaphors; they are lived structures. Her grandmother insisted on it: “That’s not your aunt. That’s your mom.” Within this system of relationality, *K’é*, identity is collective, and responsibility flows outward. Even now, she moves through the world with that understanding. She checks in on others. She listens before speaking. She carries herself in a way that reflects what she was taught early: “You don’t know what someone else is going through, so you treat people with care.”

Her earliest memories of school are marked by both tension and possibility. As a left-handed child, she was forced by a teacher to write with her right hand—her left physically held down as she learned to comply. What followed were emotional outbursts, moments that were nearly interpreted as a disability. “I couldn’t function,” she recalled. “They thought I was on the spectrum.” But what appeared as struggle was, in fact, misrecognition. A different teacher saw something else—something more. She recognized Cyndi’s advanced thinking and advocated for her placement in a gifted program. That moment remains foundational, not because it changed

her academic track, but because it changed how she understood teaching. “She’s the reason I want to do this,” Cyndi said. Even now, she returns to that teacher’s classroom, volunteers her time, and calls her when she needs guidance. The relationship did not end when she left third grade. It extended, evolved, and became mentorship.

Cyndi carries that same attentiveness into her own classrooms. She participates quickly but thoughtfully, often helping move discussions forward. There is a gentleness in how she engages others—offering clarification, checking in, and encouraging rather than correcting. Her presence is not loud, but it is steady. It reflects someone who understands that learning is shared.

Her story is also shaped by moments of quiet intervention. In high school, she experienced a serious eating disorder, one that her family, shaped by older ways of understanding hardship, did not fully recognize. “We all get past it,” she recalled them saying. Fortunately, a coach noticed. He paid attention to her fatigue, her eating patterns, her declining health. Without drawing attention to it, he intervened by adjusting her meals, introducing smoothies, helping her access care, and eventually bringing in her aunt to support her. “That changed everything,” she reflected. It was not only about health. It was about being seen when she felt invisible. That experience now shapes how she imagines her future classroom: as a space where teachers notice what others might miss.

Her college journey has not been linear, but it has been sustained. When her parents withdrew financial support—despite her academic success—she found herself at a breaking point. “I was on the Dean’s List... I didn’t understand.” What followed was not individual resilience, but collective response. She reached out, and her community responded. A clan-relative, someone she barely knew, simply asked, “How much do you need?” “You’re my little sister,” he told her. “I’m going to take care of you.” Her aunts also stepped in. Her uncle offered

support without hesitation. Scholarships appeared at just the right time. Each act reinforced something she already knew—that she was not alone in this journey. This is how she understands support—not as charity, but as obligation, as care rooted in relationship.

Grief also shaped her time in college. The loss of her older brother altered how she experienced campus. Buildings became reminders. Spaces held memory. “I don’t like slowing down,” she said quietly. “Because then I have to think.” Her response has been to stay busy, to keep moving, studying, working. But even in grief, she is not alone. Her uncles spoke to her directly, reminding her what was at stake if she left school. Her boyfriend sat with her in silence, helped her eat, helped her study. Her family called her home for ceremony. When she returned, she felt different - not healed, but held.

Language threads through her story in subtle but powerful ways. She identifies as Diné and speaks Navajo at what she describes as a “beginner to almost intermediate” level. She reads it more confidently than she speaks it, joking about how she remembers spelling the Navajo Language through “the pretties on top and the poopies on the bottom.” Her humor carries learning. Language also creates connection. On campus, she recognizes other Navajo students not just visually, but through ways of speaking, through cadence, through what she calls a shared “list.” “I heard your list,” another student told her once. “You’re just like me.” Moments like this create immediate bonds. They do not require explanation. They are felt. She imagines language as part of her future classroom—not only as communication, but as relationship, as identity, as something that helps students see themselves and one another. Her connection to home remains constant. She chose her college in part because it was within driving distance. When her family calls, she goes home. “You can’t say no,” she explains. “If they call you home, you go.” This is not inconvenience; it is responsibility. It is what it means to belong.

She described her home community with familiarity and affection—the gas station workers, the grocery store, the elders, even the unhoused community members who greet her by name. “Miss B is here,” they say when she arrives. She knows them. They know her. This mutual recognition shapes her understanding of teaching. Her future is not imagined as departure, but as return. “My end goal... no matter what... I’m going to come home and teach.” She spoke of teaching as something larger than herself. It is about giving back, sustaining community, continuing what was given to her. Even as she dreams of teaching abroad, of seeing the world, that vision always circles back home. “That’s the most home I feel,” she said.

Across her story, persistence was never framed as individual determination. It is relational. It is built through family, mentors, language, and community accountability. Her journey reflects what it means to move through higher education while remaining rooted in Diné ways of knowing. She is not navigating alone. She is carried, guided, and reminded, again and again, of who she is and who she is becoming. Her story does not simply describe success within teacher education. It redefines it. She is the *Community-Rooted Educator*.

Portraiture 2: Pat, The Returning Math Educator

Pat entered the classroom quietly, often without announcement. She was accompanied by her dog, who settled near her chair as if already familiar with the classroom’s rhythm of lectures, pauses, and conversation. Her presence was steady, grounded, and composed. She did not immediately insert herself into discussion, but instead listened closely—eyes attentive, posture relaxed but alert. When she did speak, her words were measured and intentional, offered after careful thought rather than impulse. There was a calm authority in the way she carried herself, shaped not by ease, but by experience.

She is 27 years old, Jicarilla Apache, and from Northcentral, New Mexico—a place she referenced not just as a hometown, but as an anchor. Her story, like many of the participants in this study, did not follow a linear trajectory. Instead, it moved through disruption, pause, return, and rebuilding. It is a story shaped by movement across places, responsibilities, and identities—and one that reflects both struggle and transformation.

Her early schooling began in Northcentral New Mexico, within a predominantly Indigenous community where cultural familiarity shaped her sense of belonging. That sense of belonging shifted dramatically when she moved to Colorado during her high school years. She described this transition as one of the most jarring experiences of her life: “It was the biggest culture shock I’ve ever experienced... no one wanted to talk to me.”

In her home community, she was surrounded by people who shared her background, language references, and lived experiences. In Colorado, she became hyper visible—one of only a handful of Native students navigating a predominantly white school environment. She recalled feeling both seen and unseen at the same time: visible in difference yet excluded in connection. “I feel like they’re all just so white that being around someone who’s Brown...it’s intimidating to them.” Friendship, in that context, did not come easily. Instead, it emerged at the margins—among students who, like her, existed outside dominant social circles. “The only people I became friends with were the people who smoked by the bridge.” She offered this memory without judgment, but with clarity. It reflected a young person navigating belonging where she could find it, rather than where it was readily offered.

These early experiences carried into her first attempt at college. When she initially enrolled at SMU at 18, she was simultaneously navigating academic expectations and personal challenges that shaped her ability to fully engage in her education. “I struggled a lot...I was

dealing with addiction and alcoholism.” She described this period with honesty, but without dramatization. The first time she attended college, she was present in name but not fully grounded in purpose or direction. Courses blurred together. Time passed without the structure or stability she would later come to build for herself. That version of her story was not where she lingered. Instead, she marked a clear turning point—one that reoriented everything that followed. “I’m just celebrating two years clean.” She said this with a quiet but unmistakable pride. It was not performative. It was deeply personal. Sobriety, for Pat, was not a side note—it was the foundation of her return to education, to stability, and to herself. “That’s actually why I wanted to come back to school.”

The shift was visible in how she talked about her current academic experience. Where once there was disconnection, there is now clarity. Where there was uncertainty, there is now confidence. “Every semester I have all As...I didn’t know I could do that.” She spoke about this transformation almost with surprise, not because the ability was not there before, but because it had not yet been realized under different circumstances. Sobriety, in her words and in her presence, was both a personal achievement and an ongoing practice; something she actively maintains and returns to each day. “I remind myself...I’m not the person I used to be...I’m a completely different person now.” This statement was not about erasing the past, but about acknowledging growth. Her story holds both versions of herself—the one who struggled and the one who returned.

Her return to college at 27 was shaped by a different set of responsibilities. She is now a mother, balancing coursework with caregiving, decision-making, and long-term planning for her family. Her son, still an infant, remains central to how she navigates her educational journey. “I

think I want to do my student teaching here...because I have a baby...it's better if I'm close to town.”

Her choices are intentional, rooted in stability rather than convenience. Where she lives, where she studies, and how she structures her time are all shaped by her role as a parent. Her support system reflects both proximity and distance. Her partner is her primary source of day-to-day support, while her extended family, particularly her sisters, remain deeply present, even when geographically apart. “My sisters helped me a lot...my sisters helped me a lot.” The repetition signals emphasis. Support is not abstract—it is lived, consistent, and relational.

Her community also supports her in tangible ways. Through her tribe's education program, she receives a full scholarship that covers housing and other school expenses. “They pay for everything...for us to live on campus.” She names this support not as charity, but as investment, her community showing up for her in material ways that allow her to focus on her education and family.

Within her TEP, Pat described her experiences as largely positive, particularly when coursework engages with Indigenous histories and systemic inequities. “I love that she [course instructor] includes teaching about Indian boarding schools...that's something that's not taught.” Moments like these stand out to her—not because they are extraordinary, but because they are often absent from earlier educational experiences. They signal recognition, even if partial, of histories that have shaped Indigenous communities. At the same time, she remains aware of the limits of that recognition. Her experiences with peers reveal that underlying tensions persist. In one assignment, she proposed an “ideal school” rooted in her home community, one that centered Native students. The response from a peer was immediate and resistant: “My ideal school was...majority Indigenous...he was like, ‘I don't like that.’” This interaction left her

momentarily frozen. “I just didn’t say anything...I wasn’t ready.” Her silence, however, was not passivity. It was strategic, shaped by an understanding of when and how to respond. Later, she reflected on that moment, recognizing that she will encounter similar situations again. “Next time, I’ll be more prepared.” Her learning, then, extends beyond content—it includes learning how to navigate, respond, and hold her ground within spaces that are not always affirming.

Language and cultural knowledge remain important threads in her story. While she is not fully fluent in Jicarilla Apache, she carries the language with intention and sees it as essential to her future teaching practice. “I do know a lot...I want to teach the language.” She imagines incorporating language in everyday classroom moments—simple, consistent, meaningful. “Like when it’s snowing just saying it in the language.” These small acts are not minor; they are ways of sustaining language and connection across generations.

Her grounding practices reflect both cultural teachings and personal healing. She spoke openly about therapy, naming her experiences with PTSD and anger and the tools she has developed to manage them. “I go to therapy...I remind myself to breathe...to be kind.” Alongside this, she carries teachings from her aunt—guidance that connects her to the land and to herself: “Go outside ... go to the trees ... go to the water...take off your shoes ... speak to the earth.” These practices are not separate from her education. They sustain her ability to remain present within it.

Her motivation to become a teacher is rooted in both memory and responsibility. She recalled the teachers who recognized her potential, who told her she was capable when she struggled to see it herself. “They told me ... you’re really good at math ... you’re capable.” Now she wants to return that same affirmation to the next generation. “I want to go back to [my home community] ... and help young Jicarilla kids realize their potential.” Teaching, for Pat, is not

about leaving—it is about returning. It is about giving back, sustaining community, and ensuring that students see themselves reflected in their classrooms.

Her story is one of becoming through both healing and responsibility. Sobriety, family, community support, and cultural grounding are not separate elements—they are interwoven, each sustaining her persistence in teacher education. She carries with her the memory of who she was, the work it took to return, and the clarity of who she is becoming. She is not defined by interruption, but by return. She is the *Returning Math Educator*.

Portraiture 3: Jovi, The Poet Scholar in the Classroom Educator

Jovi began, not with credentials, but with introduction—an orientation that situates him in relation to people, place, and lineage before profession. When asked about himself, he first named who he is in Diné terms, grounding his identity in language and kinship: “Shí éí Kinlichíí’nii nishkí, Bit’ah’nii báshishchíín, Ta’neezahnii dashicheii, Honágháahnii dashinálí”. The introduction was not rushed. It carried rhythm, familiarity, and intention. It signaled that identity, for him, is not something secondary to education—it is foundational. Degrees come later. Titles come later. What comes first is relation.

He is Diné, from the Navajo Nation, with ties to Southeastern, Utah. At 23, he is a first-generation college student who completed his undergraduate degree in English and is now finishing a Master of Arts in Education with secondary English Language Arts licensure. Most often, I encountered him through a Zoom screen, his presence shifting slightly depending on connection, camera angle, or light. Sometimes only part of his face was visible. Sometimes his voice carried before his image stabilized. Even within that partial framing, his presence was steady. He listened carefully. He spoke when he was ready.

His pathway into teaching was not planned. “I never had any intention to go into

education whatsoever.” He described searching for graduate programs in English, focused on literature and writing, before realizing, almost incidentally, that SMU offered a master’s degree program in education. “I totally forgot ... [SMU] had their Master’s of Arts in Education...and surprisingly, I got accepted.” The word *surprisingly* lingered. It was subtle, but it reflected something deeper, an internal negotiation with belonging in academic spaces. As a first-generation student, acceptance is not always assumed. It is something that still carries a sense of improbability. And yet, once inside the program, something shifted. “This is something that flew unexpectedly ... but it’s something I am enjoying to the very extent of it.”

His story is not one of sudden transformation, but of gradual recognition—of finding himself within a path he had not initially chosen. His passion for teaching is rooted in language, specifically, in poetry. “It all started ... when I started taking a poetry class... I started to build that passion and that love for poetry writing.” Poetry, for Jovi, is not simply a form of writing. It is a way of making voice visible. “I thought I could make other people find an interest in it...make them see that they have their own voice.” He spoke about voice as something that can be uncovered, shaped, and shared—not just spoken but created. His desire to teach emerged from the belief that students already carry stories within them, and that education can help bring those stories forward. This orientation extends beyond the classroom. He has published his own poetry, weaving Diné Bizaad into his work. Some lines remain in English, while others move between languages. “There’s some lines that are in Navajo ... it was more so of expanding...having my work be seen.” Writing for him is personal expression, language reclamation, and cultural continuity.

His early professional experience further shaped his understanding of teaching. After graduating, he accepted a position as an English Language Learner specialist in the valley of

Arizona, without fully knowing what the role entailed. “I had no idea what I was for ... I just applied for it.” What began as uncertainty became a turning point. Working with multilingual students expanded his understanding of identity, language, and belonging. “It made me realize that the world doesn’t necessarily revolve around the Four Corners.” He described this realization not as disorienting, but as opening. He listened to students’ migration stories, their languages, their lived experiences. In those moments, teaching became reciprocal.

“I felt honored ... to hear their stories ... and teach them as well.” In one instance, a student from Central America—also Indigenous—recognized something familiar in him. “The spark in his face ... he was so happy to see another Indigenous person.” Jovi shared words in Diné Bizaad. The student repeated them back. “It was very nice to share my language and my culture with them.” In these exchanges, language becomes more than communication; it becomes a connection.

Family remains central in his journey. “My grandparents, my parents...have been the number one support for me.” Their support is not primarily financial. It is relational, spiritual, and emotional. “They always say, ‘You’re doing good son ... you’re doing good.’” He paused when he talked about them. There is an awareness of time—of presence, of impermanence. “I cherish every moment...every advice...every encouragement.” This form of support reflects something deeper than encouragement. It is a grounding force, one that sustains him across transitions, uncertainties, and decisions.

As a first-generation student, he described navigating college without a clear roadmap. “I didn’t [know how to navigate it] ... it just flowed naturally.” Yet beneath that statement was recognition of effort, adjustment, and persistence. He recalled moments of fear entering graduate school, aware that it would be different from his undergraduate experience. “There was a sense

of fear ... this was a first-time thing for me.” Now, nearing completion, he reflected differently: “I just kind of look back ... and it’s like, wow ... I got through it.” This reflection was not celebratory in a loud sense—it was quiet, grounded, and real.

His student teaching placements required adaptability. Initially placed in Utah in his home community, he later experienced a last-minute reassignment when the school could not host him for the spring semester. “It was more of a last-minute decision ... I was stressing about it.” The transition to a high school in Northwest New Mexico required adjustment—moving between rural and previously urban teaching contexts. “It takes me a while to adjust to new settings.” Still, he described the transition as ultimately positive. “Everyone here was so welcoming ... my mentor is phenomenal.” These experiences reflect both institutional unpredictability and personal resilience, an ongoing negotiation between structure and adaptability.

Within the classroom, Jovi carries a presence that is deliberate and measured. He does not speak to fill silence. Instead, he listens, processes, and then contributes with clarity. When he asks questions, they are purposeful, often aimed at understanding expectations, refining ideas, or deepening discussion. His approach to teaching reflects this same intentionality. “What makes a successful teacher ... is seeing students beyond the numbers ... seeing their potential.” He emphasizes care, but at the expense of rigor. “I don’t want to just pass them ... I want them to know what they’re capable of.” This perspective is shaped by his own experiences—moving from uncertainty to confidence, from student to educator. “I was once where you were...and now I’m here.”

His understanding of success is layered: personal, cultural, and professional. “Success ... is continuing forward ... even with challenges.” Culturally, success extends beyond the

individual. “Having youth look up to someone like myself ... knowing they can do the same.” Professionally, success is relational. “Seeing what my students are capable of ... and helping them see it too.” Across these definitions of success, one idea remains consistent - success is not isolated—it is shared, extended, and carried forward. Although, he does not always frame his identity as central within institutional spaces, it is present in quieter ways, through language, mentorship, and interaction. He described encouraging his Native students to explore opportunities beyond their immediate surroundings. “Go out...go explore ... don’t just stay here.” This encouragement was not about leaving community behind. It was about expanding their potential and possibility.

Language, for Jovi, is not only something he teaches, it is something he lives within. His relationship to words extends beyond assignments, beyond classroom instruction, and into authorship. He is not only a student of poetry; he is a published poet. His work carries traces of place, memory, and Diné ways of knowing, often moving between English and Diné Bizaad as a way of holding multiple worlds at once. When he spoke about writing, there was a quiet confidence that surfaced—one shaped not by performance, but by practice. “It was more so of expanding ... having my work be seen ... and just having that confidence to put it out there.” His poetry is not separate from his identity as an educator. Instead, it reflects the same commitments—to voice, to story, and to continuity. In one of his published poems, *T’áá Bíích’jídii*, he writes:

As the river flows on
It pulls the soul
From dust, from water
From the very stance which made us whole

Where the clans live and thrive
The tangled ones dwell
Where the twins stand side by side
Even as we depart
Its marks will stain the ground
To the depths of its earth
Till its people are found
The rocks have stories, ones our grandparents haven't told
To many it's home
But what gives it that title?
Seeing it was pushed to the back corner
T'áá Bíich'íidii
Where the demons hide
T'áá Bíich'íidii
Where the land divides
Where past meets present, and the future you decide

This poem moves between grounding and disruption. It begins with origin—dust, water, clans—and then shifts toward displacement, questioning what it means to call a place “home” when it has been “pushed to the back corner.” The repetition of *T'áá Bíich'íidii* anchors the poem, returning the reader to place even as it gestures toward division, memory, and choice. In many ways, this poem mirrors Jovi's own journey. It holds tension between past and present, between rootedness and movement, between what is inherited and what is still being decided.

As a Poet, he creates space for voice—his own and that of his students. As a Scholar, he navigates institutions that were not historically designed with Indigenous first-generation students in mind. As an Educator, he carries those understandings forward, preparing students not only for school, but for the choices they will make beyond it. These roles are not separate. They move together, much like the river in his poem, carrying memory, shaping direction, and leaving marks that remain. He is the *Poet Scholar in the Classroom Educator*.

Portraiture 4: Joan, The Matriarch in Motion Educator

Joan began, as she often does, with place. She situates herself in Southeast Alaska, on the only federally recognized reservation in the state, a detail that is not offered as background, but as grounding. Where she comes from shapes how she understands responsibility, learning, and community. “My culture is a huge part of my identity,” she explained. Her voice was steady, thoughtful, and deliberate. Joan did not rush to speak. She listened first, observing, processing, weighing her words before offering them. There was a quietness to her presence, but not absence. It was a quiet that signaled attentiveness. When she did speak, her words were precise, measured, and deeply considered. She was exceptionally articulate, intellectual in a way that was not performative, but evident. This was especially visible in mathematics. She spoke about math with clarity and confidence, describing it as a space where she feels most grounded, “my happy place.” Her thinking was structured, analytical, and reflective, yet always connected back to people.

She is half German; that part of her identity remains peripheral in how she understands herself. “I don’t remember that I’m half German until somebody looks at me funny.” Her primary identity is Alaska Native, rooted in community, language, and cultural practice. Her mother ensured that this was not something she would have to search for later in life. It was

given to her early, intentionally, and continuously. Now, as a mother of three, she carries that same responsibility forward.

Her pathway into education was not a single decision, but a continuation of lived experience. She has worked in schools for over a decade, beginning when her eldest child was one year old. Over time, what may have started as work became something more clearly defined. “I knew that it [teaching] was already my passion.” Much of her experience has been in special education, where she encountered students who required different approaches to learning—approaches that challenged her own assumptions about teaching. “Getting to help them get to their ‘aha’ moment... aside from my family, it’s what I live for.” For Joan, learning is not abstract. It is relational. It is something you witness in others, support through patience, and measure through growth rather than perfection.

Two commitments consistently anchor her vision of teaching - compassion and accountability. She does not separate them. “I want to be the teacher that I always needed... someone that had compassion, but a lot of accountability.” This pairing reflects more than pedagogy—it reflects *ayaawx*, traditional laws that guide how one should live in relation to others. Within this framework, responsibility is not individual. It extends outward: to family, to community, to future generations. These teachings are not theoretical. They shape how she moves through classrooms, relationships, and decisions.

Her journey through the program began in 2021 as part of a cohort that has since narrowed from more than students to five. She spoke about this shift without judgment. “It’s been tough.” She understands these changes as structural, not personal, shaped by credit barriers, life responsibilities, and the realities of navigating higher education while maintaining community ties. Within the cohort, Joan holds a quiet leadership role. She notices when others

are struggling. She advocates without drawing attention to herself. She carries a sense of responsibility that feels both learned and inherited.

The online structure of the program does not distance her from learning; it allows her to remain where she needs to be. “I work full time ... I’m a mother of three... if I had to leave for class ... it wouldn’t be possible.” Staying in her home community meant staying connected to her strongest supports. “That’s where my strongest supports are.” Her support system is not abstract—it is active, daily, and essential. Her mother created space for her to succeed, stepping in to care for her children during classes, assignments, and assessments, ensuring that Joan could focus fully without interruption. Her partner carried equal weight, managing meals, routines, and the unseen labor of daily life. “She makes sure the kids are taken care of ... all of the things that would have interrupted my learning.” Together, they created the conditions that made persistence possible. Her cohort added another layer of support by offering reminders, accountability, and shared responsibility. “Make sure you get this done... don’t forget about Zoom tonight.” This network of care reflects more than support; it reflects collective responsibility—a core value embedded within her cohort and cultural worldview.

Language remains central to Joan’s identity and practice. Although she is not yet fully fluent in *Sm’algayax*, she is actively working toward it, learning through mentorship, family, and community engagement. Her relationship to language is shaped by both loss and resistance. She recalled that her grandmother’s generation experienced punishment for speaking their language, part of a broader history of language suppression and attempted eradication. Yet her grandmother continued to speak the language. “She still did it.” This decision matters. It represents resistance to language extinction and the continuation of cultural knowledge despite systemic efforts to erase it. Joan experienced this through a form of immersion. “Nobody was allowed to translate

... she would just repeat it.” Language, in this sense, is not simply learned; it is carried, practiced, and lived. Even now, its structure shapes how she writes and speaks. What might be labeled as passive voice in academic writing reflects the grammatical patterns of Sm’algax. “It was part of how our language is structured.” Rather than a deficit, this becomes evidence of linguistic continuity and capital. She already brings language into her teaching. “It’s more natural for me to say commands in my language.” Her children are learning alongside her: through her, through a cultural mentor who is also family, and through community practices. Language, for Joan, is not symbolic. It is instructional, relational, and necessary for cultural survival.

Her sense of courage is rooted in lineage. “I come from a long line of women who have always been unafraid to shake things up.” From a young age, she was told she was “a matriarch in the making.” That identity shapes how she responds when something does not align with her values. “I have a very strong moral compass... I’m not quiet when it comes to things like that.” She does not seek conflict, but she does not avoid responsibility.

Her vision of success reflects balance across multiple dimensions. Personally, success means growth, effort, and “the ability to breathe.” Culturally, it means becoming more fluent in Sm’algax and passing that language and knowledge to her children. Professionally, it is measured through student growth. “Those ‘aha’ moments are some of my favorite.” For her, success is not about individual advancement. It is about collective well-being.

While she is deeply rooted in her home community, she also recognizes the possibility of leaving - not out of desire to disconnect, but out of responsibility to her family. She spoke about potentially moving—acknowledging both opportunity and concern. The decision is not simple. It

reflects a tension between place-based belonging and the need to support her partner and family in new contexts. Even in imagining a transition, she remains grounded in who she is.

Across her portrait, Joan embodied steadiness. She is quiet, but never passive. Observant, but never disengaged. Highly intellectual, yet deeply relational. She carries *ayaawx* into her teaching. She carries Sm'algyax into her speech, even when unrecognized. She carries her family with her into every space she enters. Her identity as an educator is not something she is becoming, it is something she is extending. She is the *Matriarch in Motion Educator*.

Portraiture 5: Debbie, The Relentless Path-Maker Educator

Debbie did not begin her story at the beginning. She began with the moment that changed everything. “I ended up dropping out my senior year ... I had clinical depression after I lost my baby.” She said this directly, without hesitation, naming it as a turning point rather than something to be softened. At that time, school no longer felt like a place she could return to. The future she had imagined—becoming a teacher—felt closed. “I thought my dreams of being a teacher were just over.” For a while, they were.

Her pathway back into education did not follow a straight line. Instead, it unfolded gradually, shaped by work responsibility and her continued connection to her community. After earning her GED, Debbie moved through a range of roles: working as a cook, a lifeguard, and later as the director of the Boys and Girls Club. She also spent years as a long-term substitute teacher, stepping into classrooms where consistency was needed. These positions were not temporary stops; they kept her close to youth, to schools, and to the everyday realities of learning.

By the time she returned to the school system full-time, working in Montessori and special education settings, she was already doing the work of teaching—building relationships, supporting students, and navigating classrooms in ways that formal preparation had not yet provided. She understood how to meet students where they were, how to adapt when things did not go as planned, and how to stay when others left. Debbie was already developing her identity as an educator, one rooted in practice.

Her entry into the teacher education program came through recognition rather than planning. A principal, someone who had never met her before, offered her a position and encouraged her to pursue licensure. Debbie recalled the moment with humor, but also with an awareness of its significance. “She’s like, you’re going to school... you’re made to be a teacher ... I was voluntold.” At first, she did not believe it was real. “Why would college give [my home community] a chance? We’re just a small Indian reservation in the state of Alaska.” This question reflected more than doubt, it reflected an understanding of how often communities like hers are overlooked within higher education.

The cohort she entered began with more than 20 students and gradually narrowed to five. Debbie explained this shift in ways that center her community rather than individual failure. “Family means a lot here. Family is everything to us, culturally.” Students stepped away not because they lacked commitment, but because they were responding to caregiving responsibilities, financial pressures, and the demands of everyday life. For Debbie, staying required sustained sacrifice across multiple areas of her life. “I haven’t had a life in five years.” During that time, she moved through marriage and divorce, raised three children, worked full-time, and remained a full-time student. Her persistence is not marked by a single moment of resilience, but by the accumulation of decisions to continue. Now, at thirty-eight, she stands at

the threshold of graduation, carrying that experience with her. “If I can do it... there’s no reason why they can’t do it too.”

Debbie’s presence within the cohort is immediate and unmistakable. Where others may lead quietly, she leads out loud. She asks questions, challenges ideas, and speaks directly when something does not feel right. Her leadership is visible, felt in how she organizes, how she follows up, and how she ensures that no one is left behind in group work and discussion. She does not hesitate to step in, particularly when she sees confusion or inequity. “I want to be that person that I needed when I was in school.”

For Debbie, teaching is not about delivering content alone. “It’s building relationships, building trust, and making sure that all needs are met.” She is quick to challenge deficit thinking about students, often reframing behaviors through a lens of understanding. She asks questions others may not: What is happening at home? What responsibilities is this student carrying? What are we not seeing? Her voice is protective, but also instructive—pushing others to reconsider how they interpret student behavior.

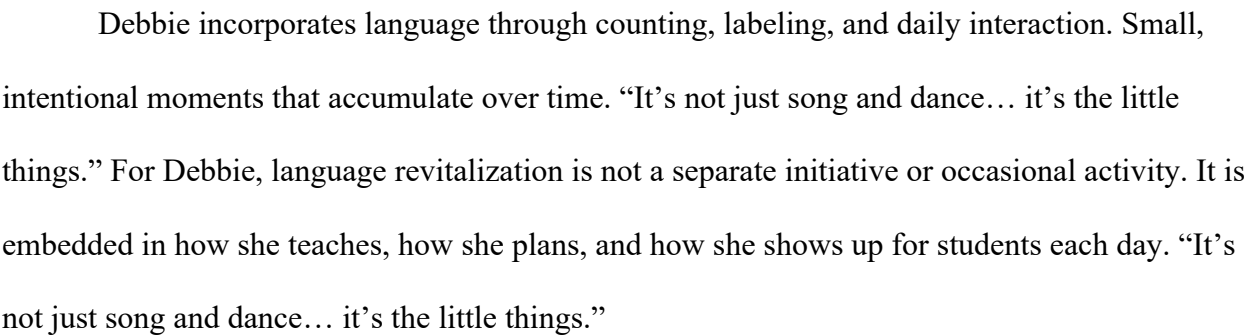
Her identity is rooted in her community. As a member of the Southeast Alaska Indian Community, with Tsimshian, Haida, and Tlingit affiliations, she understands belonging through lived experience rather than external recognition. “My Native side is the only side I’ve ever known.” At the same time, she is aware of how others may question that identity based on appearance. This tension is something she navigates openly. She recalled a moment in school when she corrected a teacher’s pronunciation of “Tlingit,” only to be dismissed. “She told me I didn’t know what I was talking about.” This moment stayed with her, not just as a personal experience, but as an example of how Indigenous knowledge is often overlooked or invalidated

within educational spaces. It is also part of what shapes her commitment to creating classrooms where students do not have to defend their identities to be recognized.

Language is central to Debbie's work and sense of responsibility. She spoke about Sm'algyax with urgency, naming the reality of language loss within her community. "Our language is dying." She connected this directly to histories of schooling and assimilation, where speaking the language was punished. "We were beaten for speaking our language ... beat the Native, save the man." The impact of that history continues. Some elders chose not to pass the language down as a way of protecting younger generations from harm. Now, only a few fluent speakers remain. Debbie described conversations with elders who express fear that the language may not survive. Her response is grounded in action. She integrates Sm'algyax into her classroom in everyday ways: counting, labeling, speaking, and creating opportunities for students to hear and use the language regularly.

During her student teaching, Debbie began creating classroom materials that center Sm'algyax in everyday learning. One example is a visual poster she designed to teach body parts using the language by integrating labeling and imagery to support students' engagement with vocabulary in context. Figure 4.1 illustrates a classroom resource that integrates Indigenous language into instructional practice, reflecting CSRP and linguistic capital.

Sm'algyax Language Body Parts Poster Created by Debbie During Student Teaching



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she continues. “They don’t realize how much they push me... this is my why.” Her support system reflects that same relational grounding. Her mother, stepfather, and close friend encouraged her to continue when she considered leaving, reminding her that “the finish line’s right there... you just have to finish.” Her children remain central to her purpose, shaping her commitment to finishing what she started and modeling perseverance for them.

Looking ahead, Debbie expresses a strong desire to remain in her home community, teaching where her work feels most connected and meaningful. At the same time, she recognizes that opportunities may require movement. “I’ll go where the job takes me.” This decision reflects a balance between staying rooted and providing for her family. Regardless of where she teaches, her purpose remains the same—to support students, build relationships, and contribute to the strength of her community.

Debbie’s story is not one of quiet endurance. It is visible, vocal, relational. She names what happened. She challenges what continues. She builds what should exist. She does not wait for pathways to appear. She creates them. She is the *Relentless Path-Maker Educator*.

Portraiture Cross-Case Analysis

Several themes emerged across participants’ narratives that illuminate how Native American preservice teachers experience teacher education within NASNTIs. Together, the five portraitures highlight unique differences in personalities, locations, and life paths. Nonetheless, they share common themes as Native preservice teachers go through the teacher education journey: The major themes emerging from this study include CCW as survivance; relational persistence; nonlinear pathways and structural navigation; navigating colonial schooling structures; commitment to returning home as educators; gaps in preparation for Indigenous

community contexts; and NASNTIs as sites of possibility and contradiction. The next section provides further discussion of these areas, organized around my research questions.

Cross-Case Analysis Alignment with Research Question #1

The portraits presented earlier illuminate the individual journeys of each participant. When examined collectively, however, several shared patterns emerge across their experiences. This section shifts from individual portraiture to cross-case analysis, identifying themes that help explain how Native American students navigate TEPs at NASNTIs in the Southwest.

The following themes align with Research Question #1: *How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?* This analysis also addresses the accompanying sub-question: *What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?*

Guided by the study's conceptual framework—Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), and Culturally Sustaining and Revitalizing Pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2014)—seven major themes emerged across participants' narratives. While each participant's experience was unique, these themes reveal shared patterns in how participants drew on relational support, navigated institutional structures, and sustained their commitments to becoming educators within their communities.

Theme 1: Community Cultural Wealth as Survivance

Across the five portraits, persistence rarely appeared as an individual accomplishment. Instead, participants described their educational journeys as sustained through kinship, mentorship, community encouragement, and relational accountability. Their narratives illustrate

the ways that CCW (Yosso, 2005) operates as a form of survivance by actively sustaining Indigenous presence and continuity within educational systems not originally designed for them (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999).

For Cyndi, extended kinship networks played a critical role in allowing her to remain enrolled in college when institutional and family support became uncertain. During her freshman year, after her parents withdrew financial assistance for school, she turned to relatives and community members for guidance. She recalled calling a clan-relative figure who simply asked, “How much do you need?” When she hesitated to accept help, he responded, “You’re my little sister. I’m going to take care of you.” This moment illustrates familial and social capital functioning as tangible resources. Rather than interpreting education as an individual pursuit, Cyndi described it as something that others were invested in helping her complete. These forms of support enabled her to remain enrolled despite financial uncertainty.

Pat similarly framed her educational persistence in terms of community encouragement and relational motivation. Reflecting on her journey back to school after struggling with addiction, she explained that sobriety allowed her to realize she could succeed academically: “Now every semester I have all A’s... there’s a really big difference. I realized I’m capable of attaining a higher education and understanding the course content really well.” Her persistence was also tied to her desire to give back to her home community. She described wanting to return to her home community to teach math and help younger students recognize their own potential: “I want to go back to [home community] and help young Jicarilla kids realize their potential.” In this case, aspirational capital and community accountability intersect. Educational success was not framed solely as personal mobility but as preparation for community contribution.

Jovi emphasized mentorship and relational guidance as key influences in his educational trajectory. While reflecting on his undergraduate experience, he described the importance of family and faculty mentors who helped guide him through college: “My grandparents, my parents... they were the number one support for me during undergrad.” He also described how encouragement from mentors and colleagues continued to shape his graduate journey, explaining that support came from “every walk of my educational journey.” These accounts demonstrate how relational networks extend beyond family to include mentors, faculty, and professional colleagues.

For Joan, familial capital manifested through everyday acts of care that made continued participation in the program possible. As a parent of three children completing coursework through an online cohort, she relied heavily on her family’s support: “My mom would take care of my kids anytime I had class... she made sure I had the time and space to finish my work.” Her partner also contributed to sustaining her progress through the program. These relational supports allowed her to focus on coursework while balancing multiple responsibilities.

Similarly, Debbie described her pathway to teacher education as the result of community recognition and encouragement. After returning home during the COVID-19 pandemic, a principal recognized her potential and encouraged her to join the cohort program. Reflecting on this moment, she explained: “She told me, ‘You’re going to school. You’re made to be a teacher.’” Debbie later described the long path she traveled to reach this point, moving from high school dropout to preservice teacher. The encouragement of community leaders helped reframe what she believed was possible.

Across these narratives, participants rarely described themselves as navigating teacher education alone. The portraits illustrate how CCW (Yosso, 2005) operates in multiple forms:

- **Familial capital** is reflected through intergenerational support, clan relationships, and shared responsibility for educational success.
- **Navigational capital** is demonstrated through participants' ability to maneuver institutional requirements and academic structures that were not originally designed with Indigenous students in mind.
- **Aspirational capital** is visible in participants' continued commitment to educational goals despite financial, familial, and institutional challenges.
- **Social capital** emerges through mentorship networks, cohort relationships, and institutional advocates.
- **Resistant capital** is evident in moments where participants challenged deficit narratives or set boundaries around expectations placed upon them.

Importantly, these forms of wealth did not replace institutional responsibility. Rather, they often compensated for gaps in institutional structures. When advising systems were unclear, peers shared information. When financial resources were limited, relatives stepped in. When emotional burdens intensified, family members reminded participants why their education mattered.

Viewed through TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) and the CCW framework (Yosso, 2005), these relational supports represent more than assistance; they are expressions of survivance. Participants were not simply enduring teacher education programs. Instead, they were sustaining Indigenous presence within them while preparing to carry their knowledge back to their communities. More importantly, these forms of capital did more than support persistence; they function as mechanisms of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999). Survivance extends beyond survival alone, emphasizing active presence, continuity, and self-determination within spaces historically shaped by colonial structures. Within the context of teacher education,

participants were not merely enduring institutional challenges. They were sustaining Indigenous presence within these programs while preparing to return to their communities as educators.

Theme 2: Relational Persistence Rather Than Individual Resilience

Across the portraits, persistence rarely appeared as an individual act of determination. Instead, participants described persistence as something sustained through relationships. Family members, mentors, cohort peers, and community members played essential roles in helping participants remain in their TEPs. For several participants, these relationships functioned not only as encouragement but also as reminders of responsibility. Educational progress was rarely framed as a personal accomplishment alone; instead, it was often described as something connected to family expectations and community trust.

For example, Cyndi described how encouragement from family members helped sustain her when academic demands intensified. Reflecting on moments when coursework felt overwhelming, she explained, “My family always reminds me why I’m doing this... they tell me, ‘you’re doing this for more than just yourself.’” These reminders reinforced her sense that continuing in the program mattered not only for her own future but also for those who had invested in her success. Relational persistence also appeared most clearly during moments of Cyndi’s grief and uncertainty. After the death of her brother, returning to campus became emotionally difficult because his work was visible throughout the university. Reflecting on this period, she explained: “It was really hard to be here... we would have lunch all over campus.” Despite these challenges, encouragement from family members and her partner helped her remain enrolled and focused on completing her degree.

Similarly, Pat spoke about the relational support that surrounded her journey back to school. Discussing how she balanced sobriety, parenting, and coursework, she reflected, “My

sisters and my partner stepped in when I needed help. They made it possible for me to keep going.” In this sense, persistence was sustained through shared responsibility rather than individual endurance.

For Joan, family accountability was central. Completing coursework required careful coordination with her partner and mother, who frequently provided childcare while she attended online classes. For Joan, relational persistence was deeply intertwined with family care. As a parent of three children completing coursework through an online program, she relied heavily on her mother and partner for support. She shared: “My mom would take care of my kids anytime I had class... she made sure I had the time and space to finish my work.” She also explained, “If I’m going to take this time away from my kids to do school, then I have to give it everything.” Her statement reflects both a sense of relational obligation and a deep commitment to completing her program.

Debbie described similar relational dynamics within the cohort itself. She often took on informal leadership roles, checking in with classmates and helping coordinate group assignments. As she noted, “We kind of look out for each other ... if someone misses class, someone else will text them and make sure they’re okay.” These peer relationships created an additional layer of support within the program. Debbie also described the long-term persistence required to complete the program while working full-time and raising children: “It’s hard being a full-time mom, a full-time student, and a full-time employee.” Across the research community, persistence emerges as relational rather than individual. Participants described educational progress as something sustained collectively through networks of care, encouragement, and accountability.

Even Jovi, whose narrative emphasized steadiness rather than struggle, described key moments when mentors and faculty members reinforced his path forward. Reflecting on their encouragement, he explained, “There were people who believed I could do this even when I wasn’t sure myself.” Each of these accounts illustrates how persistence within TEPs was sustained through networks of relational support. Rather than navigating these programs alone, participants relied on interconnected systems of family, mentorship, and peer accountability that helped stabilize their educational journeys.

Theme 3: Nonlinear Pathways and Structural Navigation

Another pattern revealed that Native preservice teachers’ educational trajectories were rarely linear. Interruption, return, redirection, and re-entry were common experiences. For example, Debbie described dropping out of high school after experiencing grief and depression. She later earned a GED and re-entered education through employment in schools before enrolling in the SMU cohort. Pat described being “off and on” in college, navigating addiction and eventual sobriety before returning with renewed academic focus. Cyndi nearly withdrew following her brother’s passing. Jovi moved across multiple states during his graduate program. Joan) experienced significant cohort attrition, watching peers leave due to credit transfer issues, structural scheduling barriers, or competing obligations.

These nonlinear trajectories are often framed within dominant educational discourse as deficiencies. However, across portraiture, participants reframed these interruptions as navigation. Educational pauses were linked to structural inequities, grief, caregiving, financial challenges, or institutional misalignment, but never from lack of capacity.

Viewing this through a TribalCrit perspective, these nonlinear paths should be understood as responses to colonial educational systems that have historically impeded Indigenous access to

education. Participants weren't acting outside the norm; instead, they were maneuvering through systems not tailored to Indigenous realities. Therefore, nonlinearity is better seen as a common adaptive pattern within structurally complex environments, not an exception.

Theme 4: NASNTIs as Partial Counter-Spaces within Colonial Structures

Participants expressed both appreciation and critique of the NASNTI context. While the institution provided campus resources, tuition access, cohort models, and, in some cases, culturally responsive faculty, structural friction remained visible. For example, Pat described stark educational disparities between reservation schooling and border-town education, revealing how inequities precede college entry. She also referenced peer prejudice and instructor non-intervention within teacher education spaces. Jovi noted challenging district-college placement dynamics that disrupted their field experience and student teaching. Joan described technological and structural challenges in navigating online learning management systems and online sequencing and course availability. Debbie expressed skepticism that a college would invest in her community at all, reflecting historically grounded distrust of institutions.

At the same time, participants highlighted the strengths of NASNTIs. Joan and Debbie explained that the cohort model reduced isolation. Evening and online class delivery enabled parenting and employment. Faculty were also described as supportive and relational. In several cases, culturally responsive practices were explicitly acknowledged. This duality suggests that NASNTIs operate as partial counter-spaces. They create access and relational scaffolding yet remain embedded within broader colonial and bureaucratic educational systems. Thereby, requiring students continue to perform significant navigational labor. In this sense, NASNTIs do not eliminate structural inequity, but they mitigate some of its impact.

While the interviews foreground resilience, relational strength, and aspiration, they also reveal patterned friction within institutional spaces. Moments of misrecognition surface quietly but consistently across cases. Cyndi recalled that her left-handedness was nearly interpreted as a learning issue, an early instance of difference being labeled as a deficit. Pat described the sharp academic transition from reservation schooling to a city district, where disparities in preparation were felt immediately and personally. Debbie spoke candidly about doubting whether “college would give [home community] a chance,” a statement that carries the weight of historical underrepresentation and institutional neglect. These experiences are not isolated incidents; they reflect what TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) identifies as the endemic presence of colonization within educational institutions. Schooling structures often normalize whiteness as the default standard, while Indigenous knowledge, language, and ways of being are positioned in the periphery, perhaps acknowledged, but not foundational. In such contexts, Indigenous students must continually interpret whether difference will be honored or misread.

Yet the participants do not describe themselves as passive recipients of these structures. They respond with intention. A few participants chose an institution close enough to home to remain accountable to family and community. Others strategically leveraged NASNTI tuition waivers and cohort models to make enrollment financially and relationally possible. Pat also demonstrated a critical awareness of institutional symbolism, questioning when Native imagery or rhetoric appeared more performative than substantive. When confronted with dismissive comments or racialized assumptions, the participants often set boundaries, sometimes directly, sometimes quietly, but always deliberately. In this way, institutional friction does not simply impede their journeys; it sharpens their navigation. Their stories reveal not only the persistence of structural inequity but also the agency with which they move through it.

Cross-Case Analysis Alignment with Research Question #2

While the previous section focused on how participants' lived experiences shaped their journeys through teacher education, this section shifts attention to how institutional contexts influence their preparation as future educators to address Research Question #2: *How does a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?* Participants described TEPs at NASNTIs as spaces that both supported their aspirations and revealed gaps in how Indigenous community contexts are addressed within formal preparation. Across the portraits, participants consistently expressed a strong commitment to returning to and serving their home communities as educators. At the same time, they reflected on the ways TEPs both facilitated and constrained their readiness to do so.

Three themes emerged across participant narratives that illuminate how NASNTIs shape Indigenous teacher preparation: (1) commitment to returning home as educators, (2) gaps in preparation for Indigenous community contexts, and (3) NASNTIs as sites of possibility and contradiction. Together, these themes reveal the ways Indigenous preservice teachers navigate institutional structures while carrying relational responsibilities to their communities. The themes presented below illustrate how teacher education programs at NASNTIs simultaneously provide pathways into the profession while leaving critical aspects of Indigenous-centered preparation to the knowledge and experiences that preservice teachers bring with them.

Theme 5: Commitment to Returning Home as Educators

One of the most consistent patterns across the portraits was that participants did not view teacher education as a pathway away from their communities. Rather, becoming a teacher was framed as a return and as an opportunity to bring knowledge, credentials, and experience back to

the places that shaped them. Pat explicitly stated her desire to “circle back” to her home community in North central New Mexico to help young Jicarilla students recognize their potential. Cyndi articulated her long-term plans to return to her home community in Northwest New Mexico. Joan described pursuing endorsements in mathematics and special education to meet community needs in Southeast Alaska. Debbie was already teaching within her local school system while completing the program and desired to stay within the community. Jovi integrated the Navajo language into his classroom practices and envisioned continuing his service in the Four Corners region.

Teaching was conceptualized as a sense of accountability to elders and ancestors, a rejection of becoming a statistic, a preservation of cultural integrity, an enhancement of accessibility for Indigenous learners, and a fostering of a desire for language revitalization. These narratives align closely with CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) because participants do not simply want to teach; they want to sustain language, cultural identity, and community continuity through teaching. Teacher education, therefore, serves not solely as a means of credentialing but also as a preparation for community engagement. It grants formal certification to individuals involved in the profession who are already dedicated to their relational responsibilities. While participants described strong commitments to serving their communities, their reflections also revealed tensions between their aspirations and the preparation they received within their TEPs. Although coursework addressed broad concepts such as diversity, equity, and culturally responsive teaching, participants frequently noted that preparation for the specific realities of Indigenous community schooling contexts remained limited.

Theme 6: Gaps in Preparation for Indigenous Community Contexts

Across participant narratives, a pattern emerged regarding limited preparation within teacher education coursework for Indigenous community schooling contexts. While participants valued aspects of their program, they described feeling underprepared for the cultural, linguistic, and relational realities of fieldwork and professional roles in Indigenous communities. As a result, they relied on personal experience, family knowledge, and community relationships to fill these gaps. This highlights a tension between institutional teacher preparation structures and the lived realities of Indigenous schooling contexts.

Pat described how coursework included discussions of equity, diversity, and social justice, but rarely addressed Indigenous schooling contexts in sustained or applied ways. For example, Pat explained, “We talked about diversity and culture in classes, but it was always general. It wasn’t really about Native communities or what it’s like teaching on the reservation.” Similarly, Jovi reflected that although Indigenous histories were sometimes included in coursework, practical preparation for working in Indigenous schools was limited: “I wish there was more about what it actually looks like teaching in our communities... things like working with families, understanding community expectations, language, or even just how different school structures are.” These reflections suggest that while the institution may integrate multicultural frameworks, specific preparation for Indigenous educational contexts remains inconsistent. This aligns with broader critiques within Indigenous education scholarship, which argue that teacher preparation programs often address cultural diversity in generalized ways that fail to engage deeply with Indigenous epistemologies or sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

From a TribalCrit perspective, this gap reflects how colonial schooling structures continue to position Indigenous communities as outside rather than central within teacher education curricula. As Brayboy (2005) argues, colonization remains endemic to U.S. educational systems, shaping how knowledge about Indigenous communities is produced and taught. Because of these gaps, some participants described drawing extensively on community knowledge, cultural upbringing, and family teachings to guide their teaching practices. Pat explained: “A lot of what I know about how to work with students comes from growing up in my community. It’s not something I learned in a class.” Joan echoed this reliance on lived experience: “When it comes to understanding students and families, that comes from home... from my parents, my grandparents, and the way our community works.” Debbie explained that within the program, the curriculum was centered primarily on dominant narratives that felt disconnected from her experience: “I don’t do well with white people’s history... it doesn’t pertain to me.”

These narratives illustrate the activation of familial and social capital, key areas of CCW (Yosso, 2005). Rather than relying solely on institutional preparation, participants mobilized knowledge embedded within community networks, cultural practices, and relational norms. Participants’ experiences suggest that while teacher education programs provide foundational pedagogical knowledge, preparation for Indigenous community contexts often relies heavily on the cultural knowledge that preservice teachers already bring. Participants also repeatedly emphasized the importance of language revitalization, community relationships, and Indigenous-centered curriculum within teacher preparation programs. These perspectives align with scholarship on CSRP, which argues that teacher education should sustain Indigenous languages,

knowledge systems, and community relationships rather than merely acknowledge diversity (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Importantly, this reliance was not framed as a deficiency. Instead, participants described their cultural knowledge as an asset that shaped their teaching philosophy and classroom practice. This finding aligns with scholarship emphasizing that Indigenous educators often bring forms of knowledge that teacher preparation programs undervalue or overlook (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Participants' reliance on community knowledge, therefore, reflects both cultural strength and institutional limitation. These reflections also shaped how participants understood the institution's role. While NASNTIs created important opportunities for Indigenous students through access, grants, mentorship, and representation, participants' narratives also revealed moments where institutional support felt incomplete or symbolic. Their experiences suggest that NASNTIs function as spaces of both opportunity and contradiction within Indigenous teacher preparation.

Theme 7: NASNTIs as Sites of Possibility and Contradiction

Participants described NASNTIs as spaces of both opportunity and tension. While institutional recognition of Native students created meaningful opportunities for access, mentorship, and representation, participants also described moments when inclusion felt symbolic rather than relational. These narratives reveal how NASNTIs function simultaneously as sites of possibility and contradiction. Pat noted, "Seeing Native faculty and other Native students here makes a difference. It makes you feel like you belong." Jovi described how institutional support programs created access to opportunities: "Programs and scholarships for Native students really helped me stay in school." But also viewed the NASNTI designation more critically, suggesting that a NASNTI label did not always shape daily experience: "My

experience probably would have been similar regardless.” These experiences highlight how NASNTIs can serve as critical access points for Indigenous students in higher education. Institutional initiatives such as tuition waivers, cultural programming, and the presence of Native faculty and students contribute to environments where Native students can envision themselves as educators and leaders. Representation matters. From a CCW (Yosso, 2005) perspective, these institutional supports can strengthen aspirational and social capital, reinforcing students’ belief in their ability to succeed within higher education systems.

Despite these positive experiences, some moments where institutional recognition felt performative rather than substantive. Pat explained: “Sometimes it feels like Native students are used to promote the school, but we’re not always part of the decision-making.” Pat also described feeling uncomfortable when Native identity appeared to be highlighted primarily for promotional purposes: “It feels like they want to show that Native students are here, but sometimes it’s more about the image than actually supporting us.” These reflections echo critiques in Indigenous higher education scholarship of symbolic inclusion, in which institutions highlight diversity without addressing deeper structural inequities (Brayboy et al., 2012). Her reflection highlights a tension between representation and relational accountability, raising questions about whether institutional inclusion is always accompanied by meaningful structural change. This dynamic aligns with scholarship on minority-serving institutions, suggesting that representation alone does not guarantee institutional transformation (Garcia, 2019).

Participants’ interpretations of what it means for an institution to be “Native serving” varied significantly. For some, NASNTI status represented a genuine commitment to Indigenous students, particularly when faculty and programs demonstrated cultural responsiveness. Joan reflected: “Not all colleges are as culturally responsive ... but when they are, the knowledge

sticks more.” Others described the designation as less influential in their day-to-day experiences, suggesting that institutional labels alone do not guarantee meaningful support. Pat explained: “Being a Native-serving school is important, but it doesn’t automatically mean everything is designed with Native students in mind.” These reflections suggest that a NASNTI designation alone is insufficient to ensure culturally grounded teacher preparation. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of relational accountability, Indigenous-centered curriculum, and sustained partnerships with Native communities. Similarly, minority-serving institutions note that institutional designations often create opportunities for funding and recognition, but the depth of institutional transformation depends on how programs enact those commitments (Garcia, 2019).

These areas reveal important tensions within teacher preparation at NASNTIs. While participants described meaningful institutional support and access opportunities, they also identified gaps in preparation for Indigenous community contexts and questioned the depth of institutional commitment to Indigenous students. These findings suggest that NASNTIs hold significant potential as sites of Indigenous teacher preparation, but fully realizing this potential requires moving beyond symbolic recognition toward culturally grounded program design, language revitalization efforts, and sustained partnerships with tribal communities.

Summary

The findings in this chapter illustrate that NA/AN preservice teachers at NASNTIs experience TEPs through multiple, interconnected forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005). Participants did not draw on these forms of capital in isolation; rather, aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant capital were activated simultaneously and relationally as they moved through their programs. Their journeys were shaped by a range of experiences, including

early educational misrecognition, mentorship, grief, addiction recovery, motherhood, language suppression, and institutional ambiguity. These experiences did not lead to disengagement. Instead, they cultivated a sense of purpose, direction, and responsibility, particularly in relation to family and community. Persistence, in this context, was not an individual act but a relational process sustained through networks of support and accountability.

Viewed through the lens of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), these findings reveal how colonization and systemic inequities continue to shape teacher education spaces. Participants described experiences of misdiagnosis, racial hypervisibility, curricular marginalization, and moments of symbolic inclusion that did not always translate into meaningful structural change. At the same time, their narratives extend beyond a focus on constraint. Through acts of boundary-setting, language revitalization, and a clear commitment to returning home as educators, participants demonstrated survivance (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 1999), an active presence that resists erasure and affirms Indigenous identity within educational systems.

CCW further illuminates how participants navigated these environments by drawing on strengths rooted in family, community, and culture. These forms of capital were not supplemental; they were essential for persistence in systems not historically designed for Indigenous students. CWRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) is reflected in participants' aspirations to sustain language, culture, and community through their future roles as educators. Teaching was not framed as an individual career pathway, but as a return and an intentional effort to contribute to the continuity and well-being of their home communities. Each of these frameworks make visible both the structural realities participants navigate and the strengths they carry with them.

NASNTIs emerged in this study as spaces of both possibility and contradiction. Institutional supports such as tuition waivers, flexible program delivery, Native-centered

coursework, and faculty mentorship created pathways for access and persistence. These structures allowed participants to remain connected to their communities while pursuing licensure, whether through in-person or online pathways. At the same time, access did not always equate to culturally responsive or sustaining experiences. Participants described moments where institutional commitments to Native students were visible but not always fully realized in practice. This tension highlights the ongoing work required for NASNTIs to move beyond access and toward deeper relational accountability and structural transformation.

Preparing Native educators is not only about increasing access to TEPs. It requires a reorientation toward relationality, cultural recognition, and Indigenous ways of knowing. Programs that center these elements are better positioned to support Native preservice teachers as they navigate their pathways and prepare to serve their communities. The stories shared in this chapter do not end here. They return to the same place where this study began, with Native students moving through teacher education while carrying their communities, languages, and responsibilities with them. In the next chapter, I return to these stories once more, considering what they ask of institutions, of research, and of the future of Native teacher preparation.

CHAPTER FIVE: CARRYING FORWARD: REFLECTIONS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND FUTURE PATHWAYS

For participants in this study, education was never just about earning a degree or entering a profession. Their portraits revealed that teacher preparation is connected to something more meaningful, specifically, relationships with their family, community, language, and for future generations. The journeys described in the portraits were not about personal advancement but about collective commitments to giving back knowledge to the communities that shaped who they are. This chapter reflects on what these stories mean. In many Indigenous traditions, reflection is not separate from action. Knowledge is meant to be carried forward, shared, and used to guide future decisions. In this way, the final chapter of this dissertation is a space for reflection and responsibility. It raises the central question that emerges after the findings are presented: What do these stories teach us about Native American and Alaska Native (NA/AN) teacher preparation, and how should institutions respond?

The previous chapter presented portraiture of five NA/AN preservice teachers and the major themes that emerged from their narratives. Through their stories, it became clear that persistence in teacher education was not simply an individual accomplishment. Rather, participants' journeys were shaped by community cultural wealth, relational networks, and a commitment to their home communities. These themes surfaced repeatedly in their experiences within a teacher education program (TEP) at a Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institution (NASNTI) in the Southwest. In this chapter, I step back from the individual portraits to consider the broader meaning of what participants shared. The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the findings in relation to the research questions and to reflect on what these narratives reveal about

NA/AN preservice teachers navigating teacher education. While Chapter Four centered participants' voices and experiences, this chapter situates these stories within the larger scholarly conversation about Native teacher preparation.

The insights in this chapter are considered through the conceptual framework that guided this study: Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Each part of this framework helps illuminate different aspects of participants' experiences, how colonial structures shape educational institutions, how Native students draw from cultural wealth to navigate these systems, and how teacher preparation can support the sustaining of Native language, knowledge, and relationships. In addition to the Portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) the goal of this chapter is not to generalize participants' experiences to all Native students or all TEPs. Instead, I reflect on the meanings that emerge from these stories and consider how they might inform broader conversations about Native teacher preparation, the role of NASNTIs, and the future of Native education.

Therefore, this chapter moves from interpretation to implication. I begin by summarizing the study's key findings, then interpret them through the conceptual framework. I then discuss the implications for TEPs, NASNTIs, and tribal communities/partners, followed by the limitations of the study, and what these stories might teach us about preparing Native educators and sustaining Native communities through education.

Overview of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers enrolled in a TEP at a NASNTI in the Southwest. While research on teacher preparation is extensive, far less is known about how NA/AN students experience TEPs at NASNTIs and how these programs

prepare them to serve their home communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand how NA/AN preservice teachers navigate TEPs and how their institutional contexts shape their preparation to return to and serve their communities as educators. This is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the lived experiences of Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a Native American Serving Nontribal Institution in the Southwest shape their journeys in the program?
 - a. What forms of community cultural wealth do Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers draw upon as acts of survivance?
2. How does a teacher education program at a Native American-serving nontribal institution in the Southwest prepare Native American and Alaska Native preservice teachers to serve their home communities?

To explore these questions, the study employed semi-structured interviews, journal reflections, and classroom observations. The portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), a qualitative approach that emphasizes storytelling, context, and relationships, helped shed light on participants' rich, complex experiences while also honoring the strengths, resilience, and wisdom they shared through their stories.

Five NA/AN preservice teachers participated in the study, each bringing their distinct experiences shaped by their tribal affiliations, family responsibilities, and community relationships. During data collection, participants shared stories about their educational journeys, motivations for becoming teachers, and hopes for returning to their communities as educators. The findings revealed several themes that illuminate both the strengths NA/AN students bring to teacher education and the institutional contexts that shape their preparation.

Key Findings

As discussed in Chapter Four, I identified two sets of themes that address the research questions guiding this study. These themes reveal how NA/AN preservice teachers experience TEPs at NASNTIs and how these programs prepare them to serve their home communities. The themes also reflect the conceptual frameworks of TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP. The following findings provide further detail and additional insights.

Community Cultural Wealth as Survivance

Participants described drawing heavily on familial, social, navigational, and aspirational capital to persist in their TEPs. These forms of CCW were not simply supportive resources; rather, they functioned as critical strategies that enabled participants to navigate educational environments that were not historically designed for Native students. In this context, activating CCW becomes really important because students rely on resources outside of the institution to help them navigate systems that have not traditionally been designed to support them (Sabzalian, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Within the CCW framework, Yosso (2005) argues that students of color bring “an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts” (p. 77) that are often overlooked or undervalued within dominant educational institutions. CCW challenges deficit-oriented perspectives that have historically framed students of color as lacking cultural capital. Instead, it highlights the strengths students draw from their families, communities, and cultural traditions. Participants in this study drew on multiple forms of CCW, particularly familial, social, navigational, and aspirational capital, as they described relying on family members for support, mentors for guidance, and long-term aspirations to serve their communities.

These findings also resonate with scholarship examining the role of CCW in teacher education contexts. Burciaga and Kohli (2018) and Perez and Jacobs (2023) argue that asset-

based frameworks such as CCW can illuminate the lived experiences and cultural strengths of teachers and preservice teachers of color within TEPs. Their work highlights how preservice teachers of color draw upon cultural knowledge, community relationships, and lived experiences to navigate programs that often center dominant cultural norms. Participants' narratives in this study similarly demonstrate how Native preservice teachers relied on CCW to navigate institutional expectations while maintaining their cultural identities and commitments to their communities. The importance of CCW in this context becomes even more significant when considering the broader landscape of teacher education.

The teaching profession remains predominantly white, and TEPs often reflect white normative cultural frameworks and Western epistemologies (Castagno, 2012; Sleeter, 2001, 2017;). Scholars have noted that whiteness continues to shape curriculum, pedagogical expectations, and institutional practices within teacher education, often marginalizing preservice teachers of color (Daniels & Varghese, 2020; Haddix, 2017). As a result, minoritized preservice teachers frequently find themselves navigating institutional structures that prioritize dominant cultural norms while undervaluing other ways of knowing and being (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). Participants' experiences in this study reflect these dynamics, as they described drawing on cultural and community-based strengths to persist within programs shaped by these broader institutional contexts.

Participants' experiences also align with the concept of Indigenous survivance. Vizenor (1999) introduced survivance to describe the active presence, resistance, and resilience of Indigenous peoples within colonial structures. Survivance moves beyond narratives of victimhood and instead highlights the ways Indigenous peoples assert agency and cultural continuity despite systems designed to erase their identities. Sabzalian (2019) explains that

survivance reflects the ways Native peoples “...refuse colonial scripts of erasure or victimization” (p. 4) and instead actively confront and transform those scripts. In this context, participants’ persistence within TEPs can be understood as an expression of survivance.

Participants’ continued presence within institutions shaped by settler colonial histories represents more than individual academic success; it reflects the ongoing assertion of Indigenous identity, knowledge, and community commitment within spaces that have historically marginalized Native voices. From a TribalCrit perspective, colonization remains embedded within educational systems and policies (Brayboy, 2005). Participants’ narratives, therefore, illustrate how Native preservice teachers navigate TEPs shaped by both settler colonial histories and the dominance of whiteness in the teaching profession. These narratives demonstrate how CCW functions as a form of survivance within TEPs. Participants’ reliance on family support, community relationships, and cultural grounding not only sustained their persistence but also enabled them to challenge dominant narratives about Native students in higher education. Their educational journeys, therefore, represent both acts of personal achievement and broader efforts to maintain Native presence and knowledge within teacher education spaces.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, CCW has been widely used to examine the experiences of students of color in higher education; its application to Native American students, particularly those enrolled in TEPs, remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship using CCW has focused primarily on Latiné student populations (Espino, 2014; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Luna & Martinez, 2013). As a result, scholars have called for broader application of the framework to better understand the educational experiences of other minoritized groups, emphasizing the need to extend CCW beyond its predominant use with Latinx student populations (Espino, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). In the literature on Native education, only a small

number of studies have applied CCW as a conceptual or analytical framework. Moeller and Bielfeldt (2011) used CCW to explore how teacher candidates engaged with Native students during a workshop setting, suggesting that TEPs could benefit from more intentional integration of CCW principles. Waterman and Lindley (2013) incorporated CCW alongside TribalCrit to examine the experiences of Native women in higher education, highlighting how cultural traditions and community relationships function as forms of cultural capital. Similarly, Lindley's (2009) qualitative study of Northern Arapaho women demonstrated how they draw upon forms of cultural wealth embedded in family, community, and cultural traditions throughout their educational journeys. More recently, Garcia (2024) employed CCW to examine the experiences of Indigenous students within a Native and Indigenous Studies program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution, emphasizing how students relied on cultural wealth to navigate institutional environments.

Despite these contributions, research using CCW with Native students remains relatively scarce, and even fewer studies have explored its application within TEPs. This gap is particularly significant given the dominance of whiteness within teacher education and the ways institutional norms often prioritize Western knowledge systems and pedagogical frameworks (Castagno, 2012; Sleeter, 2001, 2017). By applying CCW to the experiences of Native preservice teachers at NASNTIs, this study contributes to expanding the use of the framework within Native education scholarship and highlights how Indigenous students draw upon multiple forms of cultural wealth to navigate teacher preparation programs.

Spiritual Capital and Cultural Teachings

In addition to the six forms of capital identified in Yosso's (2005) original CCW framework, Huber (2009) introduced the concept of spiritual capital to describe the ways

individuals draw strength from religious, ancestral, and spiritual beliefs and practices. Spiritual capital has been described as encompassing “religious, Indigenous, and ancestral beliefs and practices learned from one’s family, community, and inner self” (Huber, 2009, p. 721). Given the significance of spirituality within many Indigenous cultures, two interview questions in this study invited participants to reflect on how spirituality influenced their educational journeys. Although participants were asked directly about spirituality, most responses focused on cultural teachings, family guidance, and community values rather than on explicit discussions of spiritual or religious practices. Participants frequently spoke about lessons learned from elders, cultural expectations within their communities, and teachings that emphasized responsibility to future generations. These forms of guidance were often described in cultural rather than spiritual terms. For this reason, spiritual capital did not emerge as a distinct form of capital within the findings. Instead, many of the experiences described were more closely aligned with familial and social capital, as they reflected knowledge and values transmitted through family members and community relationships (Yosso, 2005).

Cultural teachings shared by elders, parents, and community members were often described as shaping participants’ motivations to pursue teaching and to return to serve their communities. This distinction may also reflect the ways participants interpreted questions about spirituality within the context of their cultural identities. For many Native communities, spirituality, culture, and everyday life are deeply interconnected rather than understood as separate. As a result, participants often described cultural teachings and community responsibilities in ways that implicitly reflected spiritual values, even when spirituality itself was not explicitly named. These findings highlight the importance of understanding how Native students articulate cultural knowledge and values within research contexts, suggesting that future

studies may benefit from exploring more culturally grounded ways to examine spirituality and cultural teachings within Native educational experiences.

Relational Persistence

Another key finding from this study is that persistence was rarely framed as an individual achievement. Instead, participants consistently described their educational journeys as deeply relational. Family members, mentors, partners, and community members played central roles in sustaining their motivation and commitment to completing their programs. Participants frequently spoke about encouragement from relatives, guidance from mentors, and cultural teachings from elders that reminded them of their responsibilities to their communities and future students. This relational orientation aligns with Indigenous perspectives on education that emphasize collective responsibility rather than individual advancement. Indigenous educational philosophies often view learning as embedded within relationships among family, community, land, and culture (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Cajete, 2000). Similarly, Brayboy and Castagno (2009) emphasize that education for Native students is frequently connected to broader commitments to community well-being and self-determination. Within these perspectives, educational success is not solely an individual accomplishment but part of a collective investment in the future of the community.

Within the CCW framework, familial and social capital highlight the importance of extended kinship networks and community relationships that support educational success (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledge, traditions, and support systems that students draw from their families and communities, while social capital refers to networks of relationships that provide guidance, encouragement, and access to resources. Participants in this study frequently described relying on these forms of capital as they navigated

their programs. Encouragement from family members, cultural teachings from elders, and support from mentors were often described as sources of motivation during difficult moments in their educational journeys. Prior research on Native students has similarly emphasized the importance of relational support systems in higher education. Studies have found that family connections, community encouragement, and culturally grounded mentorship often play significant roles in Native student persistence and educational success (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Pavel et al., 2002). These forms of support reflect broader Indigenous values that center relational accountability and collective responsibility within educational spaces.

Participants' narratives, therefore, reinforce the idea that Native student persistence cannot be fully understood through the individualistic frameworks that often shape higher education research and policy. Instead, persistence must be viewed through a relational lens that acknowledges the interconnected roles of family, community, and cultural identity in shaping educational journeys. Recognizing these relational dimensions challenges institutions to rethink dominant assumptions about student success and to consider how educational environments can better support the networks of relationships that sustain Native students in TEPs.

Nonlinear Educational Pathways

Participants' journeys into teacher education were often nonlinear. Many described returning to college after periods away from school, balancing family responsibilities, or navigating personal challenges before entering their programs. These pathways complicate traditional narratives of college progression that assume a direct and uninterrupted path through higher education. Within dominant higher education discourse, success is often framed through these linear timelines and continuous enrollment; however, such expectations do not always align with the lived realities of many Native students.

Research on Native students has long noted that educational pathways are frequently shaped by community responsibilities, cultural obligations, and life circumstances (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Pavel et al., 2002). Native students often remain closely connected to their communities while pursuing higher education, balancing family care, community commitments, and cultural responsibilities alongside their academic goals. As Kitchen et al. (2013) explain, many Native students choose to remain near their home communities because of family, ceremonial, and community obligations. These responsibilities are not separate from students' educational experiences but are deeply intertwined with their motivations for pursuing higher education and careers that can benefit their communities. Participants in this study echoed these patterns as they described stepping away from school to care for family members, work in their communities, or address personal circumstances before returning to complete their degrees. Rather than viewing these experiences as interruptions, participants framed them as meaningful parts of their educational journeys. Their narratives reflect Native perspectives that understand education as relational and embedded within networks of family and community responsibility rather than as an individual pursuit detached from these relationships.

These experiences also challenge deficit-oriented assumptions that have historically shaped scholarship on Native students. Earlier research often framed Native students' educational trajectories through deficit perspectives that blamed families or communities for perceived educational challenges (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1998). In contrast, asset-based frameworks, such as CCW, highlight the strengths and forms of capital that students draw upon from their families and communities (Yosso, 2005). Participants' stories highlight various types of capital, especially familial, navigational, and aspirational capital, as they shared

how family support, community guidance, and personal determination helped them persist in their studies and pursue teaching degrees.

As a Diné scholar, these narratives also resonate with my own experiences navigating education. In my positionality, I describe how my educational journey was shaped by family responsibilities and motherhood while navigating educational institutions that often operated through dominant Western norms. These experiences shaped how I understand educational pathways within Native communities. What might appear to institutions as “nonlinear” trajectories often reflect deeply rooted relational commitments to family and community rather than a lack of academic commitment.

Collectively, participants’ experiences highlight the importance of recognizing diverse educational trajectories and the ways institutional structures may not always accommodate the realities of Native students’ lives. Their stories suggest that TEPs and higher education more broadly must reconsider rigid timelines and assumptions about student success in order to better support the relational responsibilities and varied educational pathways that shape many Native students’ journeys into the teaching profession.

Navigating Colonial Schooling Structures

Participants also described navigating educational systems that were not originally designed for Native communities. Participants reflected on moments when curriculum, policies, or institutional expectations did not fully reflect their cultural backgrounds or the realities of Native communities. While their programs offered valuable preparation in pedagogy and instructional practice, participants sometimes felt that aspects of their TEP experience were shaped by assumptions and structures rooted in Western educational traditions. These

experiences reflect broader critiques in the literature about how TEPs continue to operate within Western epistemological frameworks and institutional norms shaped by settler-colonial histories.

Scholars have argued that TEPs often center white, normative knowledge systems and Western approaches to teaching and learning, thereby marginalizing other ways of knowing and being (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012). Research on teacher education has also documented how whiteness and dominant cultural norms continue to influence curriculum, pedagogical expectations, and professional standards within TEPs (Haddix, 2016; Sleeter, 2001, 2017). As Sleeter (2017) explains, teacher education has historically been structured around white, middle-class cultural norms that are often traced as universal standards of teaching and learning.

Within these contexts, preservice teachers of color frequently encounter institutional expectations that require them to navigate dominant frameworks that do not reflect their lived experiences or community knowledge. Participants' reflections in this study echo these concerns. Some described navigating coursework and program expectations that did not always align with the cultural contexts in which they hoped to teach. Prior scholarship has similarly noted that Native preservice teachers often move through educational spaces shaped by assimilationist traditions and institutional structures that historically sought to erase Indigenous languages and cultures (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Pewewardy, 1998). Scholars have further argued that the persistence of whiteness in TEPs can create tensions for preservice teachers of color who must negotiate between dominant professional expectations and their cultural identities and community commitments (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Picower, 2009).

These experiences align closely with the core tenets of TribalCrit, which emphasize that colonization remains embedded within contemporary educational systems and policies (Brayboy,

2005). From a TribalCrit perspective, schooling cannot be separated from the broader historical context of colonization, assimilation, and ongoing struggles for tribal sovereignty. Participants' portraits, therefore, illustrate how they navigate educational spaces shaped by both whiteness and settler-colonial structures while simultaneously maintaining their cultural identities, community responsibilities, and aspirations to serve Native students. These reflections highlight the complex realities Native students encounter in TEPs. While participants demonstrated resilience and commitment in navigating these systems, their experiences also underscore the importance of rethinking TEPs in ways that more intentionally recognize Native knowledge, histories, and community contexts.

Commitment to Returning Home as Educators

Participants consistently framed teaching not as a pathway away from their communities but as a return to them. They described their motivation for entering the teaching profession as rooted in a desire to support the next generation of Native students and to contribute to the well-being of their home communities. Rather than viewing education as a means of leaving their communities, participants described their educational journeys as part of a broader commitment to giving back and strengthening their communities through teaching. This orientation reflects broader scholarship on Native education that emphasizes the importance of self-determination and community accountability in educational spaces. Brayboy and Castagno (2009) argue that culturally responsive education for Indigenous students must center community needs and tribal sovereignty, positioning education as a tool for community empowerment rather than assimilation.

Similarly, research on Native teacher education highlights the importance of preparing educators who are deeply connected to their communities and cultural traditions (Anthony-

Stevens et al., 2020; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). These scholars emphasize that Native teacher preparation is often rooted in commitments to community wellbeing, cultural continuity, and nation-building. Participants' reflections in this study echo these perspectives, describing teaching as a responsibility tied to their identities and relationships with their communities. Prior research has similarly found that Native students often choose education as a profession because of their desire to support Native youth and strengthen educational opportunities within their communities (Pavel et al., 2002; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). Teaching then becomes more than a professional pathway; it is also a way to sustain community knowledge, support younger generations, and contribute to the long-term well-being of tribal communities. These portraits highlight how participants viewed their future roles as educators not only through the lens of individual career aspirations but also through a broader commitment to community responsibility. Their motivations reflect the ways in which education can serve as a pathway to strengthen Native communities while supporting the cultural and educational development of future generations.

Gaps in Preparation for Native Community Contexts

Although participants valued many aspects of their TEPs, they also described gaps in their preparation for teaching within Native community contexts. Several participants noted that their coursework did not always address the cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical realities of Native communities. While their programs provided important foundations in pedagogy and instructional strategies, participants often felt that these experiences did not fully prepare them for the specific contexts in which they hoped to teach.

These experiences reflect broader concerns raised in the literature about the limited integration of culturally responsive and Indigenous-centered approaches in teacher education.

Castagno et al. (2015) found that many TEPs struggle to adequately prepare educators for schools serving Native students, particularly when culturally responsive approaches are treated as supplementary rather than central to program design. Similarly, Ginsberg et al. (2017) note that TEPs often address cultural diversity through isolated coursework or elective topics, rather than embedding culturally responsive perspectives across the curriculum. Scholars have long argued that preparing teachers for Native communities requires a deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and community contexts. Research on Native education emphasizes the importance of connecting teacher preparation with Indigenous ways of knowing and cultural knowledge (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Cajete, 2000; Jacob et al., 2018). From this perspective, culturally responsive preparation involves more than acknowledging cultural differences; it requires educators to understand the historical and sociopolitical realities shaping Native education, including tribal sovereignty, colonization, and community accountability (Brayboy, 2005; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Participants' reflections in this study echo these concerns. While they valued the training they received in their programs, participants also expressed wanting stronger connections between coursework and the realities of teaching in Native communities. Prior research similarly suggests that effective teacher preparation for Native educators must integrate community knowledge, cultural traditions, and local contexts into program design (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Pavel et al., 2002). Participants' narratives, therefore, highlight the importance of preparing teachers in ways grounded not only in general pedagogical knowledge but also in the cultural and community contexts in which they intend to teach. These experiences suggest that TEPs, particularly those located at NASNTIs, hold important potential to better align preparation with the needs of Native communities. At the same time, participants'

reflections indicate that doing so requires more intentional integration of Indigenous knowledge, community partnerships, and culturally sustaining approaches to teaching and learning.

NASNTIs as Sites of Possibility and Contradiction

Participants described NASNTIs as spaces that offered both meaningful opportunities and ongoing tensions. On one hand, the institution created important pathways into higher education and the teaching profession for Native students. Because many NASNTIs are located near tribal communities, they often allow students to remain geographically and relationally connected to their home communities while pursuing a degree, which prior research suggests is an important factor for Native student persistence (Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011; Kitchen et al., 2013; Pavel et al., 2002). Participants in this study echoed these findings, describing NASNTIs as institutions that made higher education more accessible and attainable, particularly through the Native American Tuition Waiver and online courses.

At the same time, participants noted that institutional structures sometimes fell short of fully supporting Indigenous ways of knowing and community-centered approaches to teacher preparation. These experiences reflect broader critiques of TEPs that continue to operate within Western epistemological frameworks and institutional norms rooted in settler colonialism (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Castagno, 2012). While NASNTIs hold a federal designation as Native-serving institutions, scholars have questioned whether enrollment numbers alone translate into environments that truly center Indigenous perspectives and community priorities. This tension reflects broader discussions about the concept of “servingness” within minority-serving institutions. Garcia et al. (2019) argue that servingness extends beyond demographic representation and requires institutions to intentionally cultivate structures, policies, and practices that affirm students’ identities and lived experiences. Similarly, Minthorn (2022)

suggests that NASNTIs must actively work to Indigenize their campuses through institutional leadership, student support systems, and academic programming that center Indigenous knowledge. Reports on NASNTIs have also identified cultural awareness and culturally responsive practices as ongoing institutional challenges, noting that many institutions seek additional professional development to better meet the needs of Native students (Falkenstern & Rochat, 2018). Participants' portraits also illustrate how NASNTIs can function simultaneously as sites of opportunity and sites where deeper structural change is still needed. While these institutions expand access to teacher education for Native students, their experiences also highlight the importance of moving beyond symbolic recognition toward institutional practices that meaningfully center Indigenous knowledge, community accountability, and culturally sustaining approaches to teacher preparation.

Summary of Findings

The themes presented in Chapter Four illuminate the lived experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers as they navigate TEPs at a NASNTI. Participants described educational journeys shaped by community relationships, cultural commitments, and the responsibility to return home and serve their communities. At the same time, their stories revealed the tensions of moving through educational systems that have historically centered Western epistemologies and colonial schooling structures. These findings highlight both the resilience of Native students and the institutional challenges that remain within TEPs. While Chapter Four focused on presenting the themes that emerged from participant narratives, the next section moves beyond description to interpret these findings through the conceptual lenses that guided this study. The frameworks of TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP provide an analytical foundation for understanding how

participants' experiences both reflect and extend existing scholarship on Native education and teacher preparation.

In the sections that follow, I interpret the findings by continuing to situate them within the broader literature discussed in Chapter 2. TribalCrit offers a lens for examining how colonial histories and structures continue to shape educational systems and the experiences of Native students within them. CCW helps illuminate the ways participants drew on familial, social, navigational, and aspirational capital to persist in their programs. CSRP provides an important perspective for understanding how TEPs might better prepare Native educators to sustain language, culture, and community knowledge. These frameworks help explain not only *how* participants navigated TEPs but also *why* their experiences matter for the future of teacher preparation at NASNTIs and for the broader goal of strengthening Native education. By interpreting the findings through these lenses, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about how institutions can move beyond access and toward deeper forms of Indigenous educational sovereignty and community-centered teacher preparation.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

In this section, I reflect on how the findings in this study connect to the conceptual frameworks that guided this research: TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP. These frameworks shaped my approach to data analysis and provided valuable perspectives for understanding participants' experiences within TEPs at NASNTIs. While the portraits presented in Chapter Four highlight each participant's lived experiences, interpreting the findings through these frameworks helps reveal broader patterns in how NA/AN preservice teachers navigate higher education, maintain their educational journeys, and imagine their future roles within their communities.

Tribal Critical Race Theory Interpretation

Several aspects of TribalCrit emerged across participant narratives, beginning with the assertion that colonization is endemic to society and continues to shape educational institutions and policies (Brayboy, 2005). When I revisited the findings through this lens, three areas stood out: structural navigation, institutional contradiction, and relational accountability to their community.

Participants' educational journeys frequently involved navigating higher education institutions that were not originally designed with Native students in mind. Many participants described learning to navigate bureaucratic processes, financial barriers, and institutional expectations through trial, support networks, and persistence. These experiences reflect how colonial structures remain embedded within higher education systems, shaping how Native students must navigate pathways into the teaching profession. Congruently, participants did not frame themselves as passive recipients of these systems; rather, they demonstrated agency in learning how to navigate them. For example, participants often described relying on mentors, family members, or cohort peers to help interpret institutional expectations. In this sense, navigation itself became a form of resilience.

When discussing the experience of navigating educational settings not originally intended for Native students, I note that TEPs, like many aspects of higher education, are founded on Western epistemologies that have historically favored white, middle-class standards of knowledge, communication, and professionalism (Castagno, 2012; Sleeter, 2001, 2017). These structures are not neutral because they are shaped by histories of settler colonialism that positioned Indigenous knowledge systems as peripheral, or in some cases, erased entirely (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2004).

In Chapter Four, participants spoke about moments when coursework, expectations, or interactions did not reflect their lived realities. When I sit with those moments now, I see them not as isolated gaps, but as predictable outcomes of systems that were never built with Native students at the center. As Haynes Writer and Oesterreich (2011) argue, TEPs often fail to incorporate Native knowledge and culturally responsive pedagogy, resulting in environments where Native students must constantly navigate between their own cultural frameworks and dominant institutional expectations. This mismatch requires students to do additional work of translating, adapting, and at times, withholding parts of themselves to succeed. Scholars have also pointed to the role of whiteness in shaping these environments. Whiteness operates not only through who is present in teacher education, which is predominantly white faculty and peers, but through what is normalized as legitimate knowledge, appropriate pedagogy, and professional behavior, also known as teaching dispositions (Haddix, 2017; Milner, 2008). As Sleeter (2001) notes, teacher education has historically been designed around the experiences and expectations of white, middle-class women, which continues to shape how programs are structured today. Participants' experiences reflect these patterns, as they describe learning within systems often centered on dominant narratives, even when these systems are situated within institutions designed for Native-serving.

At the same time, participants were not passive within these spaces. Their stories show how they navigated, negotiated, and at times resisted these structures while maintaining their commitments to community and culture. This is where the findings connect directly to TribalCrit; if colonization is endemic to education, then it follows that Native students entering TEPs are not simply participating in neutral systems, instead they are entering spaces shaped by ongoing colonial logics. What stands out in this study is not only that participants recognized

these dynamics, but that they persisted within them while holding onto their own ways of knowing, being, and relating. This tension between institutional structures and Native presence helps explain why participants relied so heavily on CCW, as mentioned in the next section. CCW was not supplemental support; it was necessary because their persistence required them to draw on resources that existed outside of the institutional because the institution itself was not designed to fully support and sustain them.

Another finding also uncovered tensions related to the role of NASNTIs. Participants perceive these institutions as sites of both opportunity and contradiction. While Native faculty, scholarships, and student programs fostered a sense of belonging and support, some questioned whether institutional acknowledgment of Native students necessarily led to meaningful structural change. For example, one participant reflected that while Native students were often visible in promotional materials, their voices were not always included in decision-making spaces. This observation echoes Brayboy's (2005) argument that institutions may acknowledge Indigenous presence without fully transforming the structures that shape Indigenous educational experiences.

Additionally, TribalCrit emphasizes the importance of sovereignty, community, and tribal nationhood. Across participant narratives, education was rarely described as an individual achievement disconnected from their communities. Instead, participants frequently described their educational experiences as relational accountability, emphasizing strong connections to family, elders, and their home communities. They see their pursuit of teaching as more than just personal growth; it is linked to their responsibilities to their community and collective future. From a TribalCrit perspective, these stories show that Native preservice teachers are not just

focused on higher education and earning a degree; they are also committed to maintaining their community ties and centering the well-being of their people.

Community Cultural Wealth Interpretation

When I examine the findings through the perspective of CCW, it becomes evident that what is most prominent is not the deficiencies but rather the strengths and resources participants brought to their TEPs. Yosso (2005) explains that students of color bring “an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts” (p. 77), yet much of this wealth is often unrecognized within traditional educational narratives. This disconnect was clear in this study, as participants navigated systems that did not always name or value their strengths, even as those strengths were central to their persistence. At the same time, CCW has been taken up far more extensively in research with Latiné students than with Native students (Espino, 2014; Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Luna & Martinez, 2013). Across the portraiture, participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of relationships. Family networks, community ties, and mentorship were not merely peripheral supports; rather, they were central to their experiences. When a participant talked about extended family helping with school costs or elders offering advice during uncertain times, I saw these not just as support but as active expressions of familial and social capital (Yosso, 2005).

These moments reflect a broader Indigenous orientation toward collective responsibility, where educational success is shared, supported, and carried by many rather than by the individual alone (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). This relational grounding also reshapes how persistence is understood. In dominant higher education narratives, persistence is often framed as grit or individual determination; however, that framing does not fully capture what participants described. Their persistence was relational; it was sustained

through accountability to family, encouragement from mentors, and a sense of responsibility to their community. What I saw in their stories was not independence, but interdependence.

Participants also demonstrated strong navigational skills, especially as first-generation college students navigating systems that were often unfamiliar and sometimes unclear. There was no clear roadmap for many of them, especially regarding licensure requirements, program expectations, and institutional processes. Yet they found ways forward. They asked questions, leaned on peers, sought out mentors, and learned through experience. This aligns with Yosso's (2005) navigational capital, but it also reflects the added labor required of students moving through institutions not designed with them in mind (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Haynes Writer & Oesterreich, 2011). Navigating was not just about figuring out logistics; it was about learning how to exist within systems shaped by different cultural expectations while still holding onto their own.

Aspirational capital was present across each participant's story, and in many ways, it anchored the others. Even when participants spoke about financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, or moments of uncertainty, they did not speak about giving up. Instead, they spoke about why they needed to continue. Their aspirations were not abstract or individually driven; they were grounded in purpose. Participants consistently connected their educational goals to returning home, supporting their communities, and creating different possibilities for the next generation. This reflects what Yosso (2005) describes as the ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite structural barriers, but here, those hopes were deeply relational. They were tied to people, places, and responsibilities.

What stands out to me most is how these forms of capital functioned together. They were not isolated categories, but interconnected ways of being that participants drew on as they moved

through their programs. At the same time, the need to rely so heavily on these forms of capital also points to the institution's limitations. If TEPs were fully designed to support Native students, these forms of wealth might be recognized, affirmed, and built upon within the program rather than existing as resources students must bring in from outside. In this way, CCW does more than describe student strengths, it also exposes the gap between what institutions value and what students actually use to survive and succeed. Participants' stories reveal that Native preservice teachers come to TEPs well-equipped, bringing deep knowledge, strong networks, and a clear sense of purpose. The issue is not the absence of capital, but the failure of institutions to fully recognize and center it.

Culturally Sustaining and Revitalizing Pedagogy Interpretation

In addition to TribalCrit and CCW, CSRP (McCarty & Lee, 2014) provides an important lens for understanding how participants envision their future roles as educators. Among all five participants, teaching was consistently characterized as a means of preserving communal knowledge, language, and identity. Participants did not view teacher education merely as a professional credential. Instead, they considered teaching a pathway to help younger generations in their communities.

Some of the participants spoke explicitly about the importance of representation in classrooms. Pat explained that she wanted students in her community to see that becoming a teacher was possible. Debbie and Joan described how integrating language into classroom instruction helped students feel recognized and connected to their identities. These perspectives align closely with the goals of CSRP, which seeks not only to acknowledge cultural diversity but to actively sustain and revitalize the languages, practices, and identities of historically marginalized communities (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

At the same time, participants' narratives highlighted tensions between institutional teacher preparation structures and the realities of Native schooling contexts. Pat and Joan noted that while their TEP addressed diversity broadly, they felt less prepared for the specific cultural and relational dimensions of teaching in Native communities. As a result, many participants described relying on their own cultural knowledge, family teachings, and lived experiences to guide their teaching philosophies. This reliance suggests that while TEPs provide important pedagogical foundations, much of the culturally sustaining knowledge Native educators bring to classrooms originates from their communities.

Intersections of Three Frameworks

With these three frameworks, I see important connections in how participants' experiences unfold. TribalCrit helps explain the structural and historical contexts that shape Native students' experiences in higher education. CCW highlights the strengths and resources participants bring into these spaces. CSRP illuminates how participants envision transforming educational spaces for future generations. Together, these frameworks work to reveal that Native preservice teachers are not simply navigating TEPs. They are simultaneously negotiating institutional systems, drawing on community knowledge, and preparing to return that knowledge to the communities that shaped them. Their portraits suggest that preparing Native educators requires more than access to TEPs. It requires institutions to recognize the cultural knowledge Native preservice teachers carry with them and to create learning environments that support their commitments to community, language, and cultural continuity.

Limitations of the Study

While Chapter Three outlined the methodological limitations of the study, this section considers the limitations in interpreting and applying the findings. Although the limitations of

this study do not diminish the significance of participants' narratives or the contributions of the findings, they are important to acknowledge as they help contextualize the scope and transferability of the study. In qualitative research, limitations are not viewed as weaknesses but as factors that shape how findings are interpreted and applied beyond the immediate context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than seeking generalizability, qualitative studies aim for transferability, in which readers determine the extent to which findings may be applicable to similar contexts based on the richness of the description provided (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following limitations are presented to provide transparency and to situate the findings within the specific context of this study.

Sample Size

One limitation of this study is the small number of participants. The research community consisted of five Native American preservice teachers enrolled in a TEP at a NASNTI in the Southwest. In qualitative research, smaller samples are common because the focus is on depth of understanding rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). Portraiture methodology, in particular, prioritizes rich narrative detail and relational understanding over broad generalization (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In designing this study, my intention was not to generalize the experiences of all NA/AN teachers, but rather to illuminate patterns and insights that emerge through detailed examination of participants' stories. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, qualitative inquiry seeks to provide "thick description" that allows readers to understand how experiences unfold within specific contexts (p. 242). While the experiences of these five participants cannot represent the full diversity of Native teacher candidates across institutions, their narratives offer meaningful insight into how community relationships, cultural identity, and institutional contexts shape teacher preparation.

Institutional Context

Another limitation concerns the study's institutional scope. The research community was drawn from a single NASNTI. Although this institution has a significant NA/AN student population and several initiatives designed to support Native students, participants' experiences may differ from those attending other NASNTIs, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), or institutions without Native-serving designations. Institutional structures, faculty representation, and program design can vary significantly across TEPs. As Garcia (2019) notes in her work on minority-serving institutions, institutional designations alone do not guarantee consistent experiences across campuses because each institution operationalizes its mission differently. Because this study focused on one NASNTI, the findings should be understood as situated within this particular institutional context rather than representative of all Native focused TEPs.

Portraiture Interpretation

Another limitation relates to the interpretive nature of the portraiture method. Portraiture blends systematic data analysis with narrative representation to capture the complexity and humanity of participants' experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As the researcher and portraitist, I played an active role in interpreting the data and constructing the portraits presented in Chapter Four. My positionality as a Diné scholar and educator influenced how I approached this work. My shared cultural and professional background helped build trust with participants and encouraged open conversations that might not have happened with an outsider. However, this insider perspective also required continuous reflexivity to keep my interpretations aligned with participants' stories rather than my personal assumptions based on my own experience.

Bhattacharya (2017) reminds qualitative researchers that analysis is always interpretive and shaped by the researcher's standpoint, emphasizing the importance of reflexive awareness throughout the analytic process. To address this, I engaged in memo writing, transcript review, and iterative coding throughout the analysis process in order to remain attentive to how my interpretations developed. Even with these strategies, it is important to acknowledge that another researcher might emphasize different aspects of participants' narratives or draw alternative interpretations from the same data. This interpretive dimension is an inherent feature of qualitative inquiry rather than a flaw in the methodology (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

Data Collection Constraints

A final limitation involves the time available for interviews and participant engagement. Each participant completed two interviews: the first lasting approximately 90 minutes and the second up to 60 minutes. While these interviews generated rich narrative data, additional interviews or extended observation could have provided even deeper insight into participants' experiences. Participants were balancing multiple responsibilities, including coursework, employment, and family obligations. As a result, scheduling interviews sometimes required flexibility and occasionally limited opportunities for extended follow-up conversations. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) note that qualitative research conducted with participants who hold multiple responsibilities often requires negotiating time constraints while still prioritizing respectful engagement with participants' schedules and commitments.

Participants were also invited to maintain reflection journals during data collection; however, engagement with this component varied. Some participants contributed reflections, while others indicated that their existing responsibilities made it difficult to participate consistently in journaling. These realities reflect the complex lives many preservice teachers

navigate while completing their programs. To supplement interview data and provide additional context, I also conducted classroom observations of participants within their TEP courses. Observing participants in a classroom setting allowed me to see how they interacted with peers, engaged with course material, and contributed to class discussions. These observations provided important contextual insight that complemented the interview narratives. For example, observing participants ask questions, support classmates, or participate in collaborative activities helped illuminate aspects of their personalities and relational dynamics that later informed the portraits presented in Chapter Four. Although classroom observations provided an additional layer of understanding, they were limited in duration and scope. Extended observation across multiple courses or over a longer period of time might have yielded additional insight into how participants navigated their TEPs in everyday settings. Furthermore, spending time in participants' home communities might have yielded even more insights into their sense of relational accountability and commitment to their home communities. Nevertheless, the observations conducted during this study provided valuable context that helped shape the development of the participant portraits and strengthened the relational understanding central to Portraiture.

Another consideration relates to the relational nature of conducting research within Native communities. Indigenous research methodologies emphasize relational accountability, meaning that researchers hold responsibilities to the people, communities, and knowledge shared through the research process (Wilson, 2008). As a Diné researcher working with NA/AN participants, I approached this study with a commitment to honoring participants' stories and representing their experiences with care and respect. At the same time, this relational connection required careful reflection to ensure that the analysis remained faithful to participants' voices

while also maintaining scholarly rigor. Indigenous scholars, such as Smith (1999) and Wilson (2008), remind us that research involving Indigenous communities must prioritize ethical relationships and reciprocity. In this study, I remained mindful of these responsibilities throughout the research process, recognizing that the stories shared by participants represent lived experiences that extend beyond the pages of this dissertation.

Each of these limitations defines the scope of the study. The small sample size, focus on a single NASNTI, interpretive approach to portraiture, and time constraints on interviews and observations all influence how the findings should be understood. At the same time, the depth of participants' narratives provides valuable insight into the experiences of Native preservice teachers navigating TEPs within a NASNTI context. The strength of narrative inquiry is not in statistical generalization but in the depth of understanding that emerges from carefully examined stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the limitations outlined above help contextualize the scope of this study, they also highlight the importance of considering how the insights gained from participants' experiences can inform practice. The next section discusses the study's contributions to the literature

Contributions to the Literature

This section explains how this study contributes to research on Native teacher preparation by expanding the understanding of preservice teacher experience. This study also contributes to NASNTI, as few studies specifically explore NASNTIs, and none examine the teacher education context at NASNTIs. This study also contributes to the current body of scholarship regarding portraiture in Native research; further demonstrating portraiture as a culturally responsive method. A central purpose of this dissertation was to better understand how Native preservice teachers experience TEPs within NASNTIs. While a growing body of scholarship has examined

Indigenous teacher preparation and the experiences of Native students in higher education, this study offers several important insights that extend the existing literature.

Much of the current scholarship on Native teacher preparation focuses on structural barriers within higher education or the need for increased culturally responsive TEPs (Brayboy, 2005; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; McCarty & Lee, 2014). While these areas remain critically important, the portraits in this study illuminate a dimension of persistence among Native preservice teachers that is often less visible in the literature - its relational nature. Among all five participants, persistence was not described as an individual accomplishment but as a collective process sustained through family relationships, mentorship networks, and community accountability. Cyndi, for example, described how extended family members helped sustain her educational journey after financial support was withdrawn, explaining that relatives stepped in to ensure school expenses could be paid. Debbie described how encouragement from a school leader helped shape her decision to pursue teaching, recalling that she was told, “You’re made to be a teacher—you need to do this.” These narratives suggest that persistence within TEPs is deeply relational, supported through kinship networks that extend beyond institutional boundaries. In this way, the study contributes to scholarship on CCW (Yosso, 2005) by demonstrating how forms of familial, social, and navigational capital operate not simply as abstract concepts but as lived practices within Native communities. Participants’ stories show how these forms of capital function as mechanisms of survivance (Sabzalian, 2019), sustaining Indigenous presence within institutions that historically excluded Native peoples.

Another contribution of this study involves its examination of NASNTIs as complex institutional spaces. While research on minority-serving institutions has highlighted their role in expanding educational access (Garcia, 2019), relatively little scholarship has examined how

NASNTIs specifically function in the preparation of Native educators. Participants in this study described NASNTIs as spaces that offered both opportunity and tension. On one hand, institutional supports such as scholarships, Native faculty presence, and cultural programming contributed to a sense of belonging. As one participant noted, “Seeing Native faculty and other Native students here makes a difference. It makes you feel like you belong.” At the same time, participants raised questions about whether institutional recognition always translated into deeper structural change. Pat reflected that Native students were sometimes highlighted in institutional materials but not consistently included in decision-making spaces. These reflections reveal the dual role NASNTIs can play as both sites of possibility and sites where institutional contradictions remain visible. By examining these dynamics through the lens of TribalCrit, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about how colonization continues to shape educational institutions while also identifying spaces where Indigenous presence and leadership are expanding.

Another contribution of this study relates to how Native preservice teachers conceptualize teaching itself. Participants consistently framed teacher education not as a departure from community but as a return to community. Participants described their long-term goals as returning to teach within their home regions. One participant expressed a desire to help young students in her community recognize their own potential, explaining, “If I can do it, there’s no reason why they can’t do it too.” Another participant described integrating Indigenous language into classroom instruction, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that students see their identities reflected within educational spaces. These narratives align closely with CSRP, which emphasizes the importance of sustaining Indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and cultural practices within educational settings. By highlighting participants’ commitments to

returning home as educators, this study contributes to scholarship that views Native teacher preparation not only as workforce development but also as a process connected to cultural continuity and community wellbeing.

This dissertation also makes a methodological contribution by utilizing portraiture to highlight the lived experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers. Instead of merely categorizing their experiences into themes, the portraits reveal the complexity of their paths, including their family obligations, interactions with institutional systems, and visions for the classrooms they aspire to create. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of Native teacher preparation, viewing preservice teachers not just as students within institutions but as individuals connected to communities, histories, and futures.

The findings of this study contribute to the literature by illuminating how Native preservice teachers navigate TEPs within NASNTIs while remaining accountable to their communities. The portraits presented in this dissertation demonstrate that Native teacher preparation is not only about preparing individuals for classrooms; it is about sustaining relationships between education, culture, and community. By centering the voices of Native preservice teachers, this study offers insights that may inform future research, institutional practice, and partnerships between universities and tribal communities seeking to strengthen pathways for NA/AN educators. Reflecting on these contributions, I turn next to several implications for NASNTIs, TEPs, tribal partners, and Native communities seeking to strengthen pathways for Native educators.

Implications for Practice

Participants' narratives extend beyond the role of NASNTIs and TEPs, revealing a broader network of responsibility that spans K–12 systems, tribal communities, policymakers,

and institutional leadership. Throughout the portraits, preparation for teaching was described not as an isolated academic process but as a relational journey. For Native preservice teachers, this journey is deeply connected to lived experience and community knowledge. As Cyndi reflected, “a lot of what I know about how to work with students comes from growing up in my community,” highlighting how familial, navigational, and social forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005) serve as foundational sources of pedagogical knowledge. At the same time, participants’ reflections suggest that these forms of knowledge are not always fully recognized within TEPs, where learning is often framed through formal coursework rather than lived experience. Creating space for preservice teachers to draw on and extend this knowledge shifts preparation away from deficit-oriented models and toward approaches that affirm identity, agency, and belonging.

Implications for NASNTIs

An implication of this study centers on understanding NASNTIs not simply as federally designated institutions, but as relational spaces shaped by both possibility and contradiction. What makes NASNTIs unique is their positioning: they serve significant Native student populations while often operating within predominantly Western institutional structures. This duality creates both opportunity and tension. NASNTIs can enhance access by providing financial support, proximity to Native communities, and a critical mass of Native students that promotes a sense of belonging. However, these institutions might also perpetuate colonial frameworks that influence curriculum, assessment methods, and the definition of “success.” This distinction matters because it reframes NASNTIs not as inherently Native-serving by default, but as institutions with the potential to become more responsive through intentional action. Recognition alone is insufficient; what matters is how that designation is enacted in daily practices, policies, and relationships.

For NASNTI leadership and institutional systems, this study suggests the need to move from symbolic inclusion toward shared governance and community accountability. This includes creating formal pathways for Native students, families, and Tribal communities to inform program design, teacher preparation pathways, and institutional priorities. Rather than positioning Native students as recipients of support, NASNTIs have the opportunity to center them as knowledge holders and co-constructors of teacher education. This shift aligns with TribalCrit's emphasis on sovereignty and self-determination (Brayboy, 2005) and with CCW frameworks (Yosso, 2005) that recognize the strengths Native students already bring. Institutional practices, such as advisory councils with Tribal representation, community-based field placements, and sustained partnerships with local Tribal communities, can help ensure that NASNTIs remain accountable to the communities they are intended to serve.

Implications for NASNTI faculty further highlight the importance of relational pedagogy and culturally sustaining practices. Faculty play a critical role in shaping whether TEPs function as sites of affirmation or assimilation (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Picower, 2009). Participants' experiences suggest that when faculty build authentic relationships, acknowledge Native knowledge systems, and create space for students' lived experiences, learning becomes more meaningful and connected to community goals. At the same time, the burden of this work often falls disproportionately on Native faculty, pointing to the need for broader faculty development and institutional responsibility. Non-Native faculty, in particular, must engage in ongoing learning around Tribal sovereignty, Indigenous ways of knowing, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, rather than relying on Native colleagues to carry this work alone. This includes rethinking curriculum, incorporating community-based knowledge, and critically examining how whiteness operates within teacher education spaces.

These implications underscore why NASNTIs matter within the broader landscape of teacher education. NASNTIs play a vital role in challenging persistent educational inequalities by training Native educators, many of whom plan to return to their communities to teach. The preparation provided in these programs has direct implications for future generations of Native students, particularly regarding cultural continuity, language revitalization, and community-based education. When NASNTIs fully embrace their potential as spaces of relational accountability, they can move beyond access alone and contribute to the broader project of Indigenous educational sovereignty. In this way, NASNTIs are not just institutions of higher education; they are sites where the futures of Native communities and the next generation of Native educators are actively being shaped.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs and Higher Education Leadership

Participants' narratives raise important questions about how TEPs can more intentionally prepare preservice teachers for Native community contexts while also supporting their ability to work with diverse student populations more broadly. Several participants described their coursework as supportive in areas such as pedagogy and classroom management, yet they noted that discussions of culture and diversity often remained generalized rather than grounded in the specific realities of Native communities. As Pat explained, "we talked about diversity and culture in classes, but it was always general. It wasn't really about Native communities or what it's like teaching on the reservation." Debbie similarly reflected, "I wish there was more about what it actually looks like teaching in our communities... things like working with families, understanding community expectations, language." These reflections suggest that while TEPs may emphasize diversity, they often do so in ways that overlook place, history, and the lived experiences of the communities that teachers will serve.

Expanding curriculum to include Native educational contexts does not narrow the scope of teacher preparation; rather, it deepens it. The principle of relevance within the Four Rs underscores the importance of connecting learning to the communities in which it is situated (Brayboy et al., 2015; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). When TEPs integrate Tribal sovereignty, Indigenous histories of education, culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies, and Indigenous language considerations, they are not creating a specialized track for a single group of students. They are modeling what it means to teach in ways that are responsive to context. These practices support more effective teaching by grounding instruction in community knowledge, relationships with families, and local context. In this sense, centering Native contexts offers a concrete example of how teachers can move beyond abstract notions of diversity toward more grounded, relational approaches to teaching.

Participants' experiences also highlight the importance of ongoing professional learning and leadership within TEPs that support this shift. Faculty cannot be expected to implement these changes without continuous opportunities to deepen their understanding of Indigenous epistemologies, Tribal sovereignty, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Consistent professional development, especially when developed in partnership with Native educators and communities, becomes essential to ensure these efforts go beyond superficial inclusion. At the program level, leadership significantly influences whether these priorities are integrated structurally or remain optional. Building partnerships with Tribal communities, establishing advisory spaces for Native voices, and aligning program goals with principles of relational accountability can demonstrate a commitment to change that extends beyond just individual courses. This shift also invites a reconsideration of what counts as meaningful learning outcomes in teacher education. In addition to content knowledge and instructional strategies, preservice teachers benefit from developing

cultural humility (Sleeter, 2017), an understanding of sovereignty and historical context, and the ability to engage with communities in ways that are reciprocal and respectful. These are not competencies limited to Native-serving contexts; they are foundational to equitable teaching environments. Preparing teachers in this way acknowledges the complexity of today's classrooms while equipping them with the skills to navigate that complexity with care and responsiveness.

At the same time, participants made clear that much of what prepares them to teach effectively does not originate solely within their coursework. As Cyndi noted, “a lot of what I know about how to work with students comes from growing up in my community.” This highlights the importance of recognizing CCW (Yosso, 2005) as central, rather than supplemental, to teacher preparation. When TEPs create space for preservice teachers to draw on their lived experiences, they shift away from deficit-oriented models and toward approaches that honor the knowledge students already carry. This benefits Native preservice teachers directly while also modeling for all TEP students how to view students and communities through an asset-based lens. Framing Native-focused preparation as additive rather than exclusive helps clarify why this work matters. NASNTIs, in particular, occupy a position where they can demonstrate what it looks like to prepare teachers who are attentive to place, history, and community while remaining responsive to diverse student populations. The goal is not to prioritize one group at the expense of others, but to strengthen teacher education by grounding it in context. When programs do this well, they prepare educators who are better equipped to teach across differences, engage meaningfully with communities, and create learning environments where all students can see themselves reflected and valued.

Also, within this larger framework, leadership in higher education is crucial in shaping how these priorities are implemented. Participants' reflections on representation and belonging, such as Pat's observation that "seeing Native faculty and other Native students here makes a difference", underscore the importance of visibility within institutional spaces. At the same time, her concern that "sometimes it feels like Native students are used to promote the school, but we're not always part of the decision-making" points to the limitations of representation when it is not accompanied by meaningful inclusion in governance and program design. Leadership decisions related to hiring, curriculum, partnerships, and resource allocation shape whether institutions move toward relational accountability or remain within more performative approaches to diversity. Creating structures that include Native voices in decision-making, investing in Native faculty and community-engaged work, and aligning institutional priorities with the principles of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and relevance all contribute to more substantive forms of change.

Implications for Tribal and Home Communities and the K-12 Sector

Participants' stories highlight the strong connection among tribal communities, local educational partners, and Native teacher preparation, showing that the paths into teaching are seldom driven by individuals or institutions alone. Instead, they are shaped through networks of encouragement, mentorship, and community recognition that begin long before preservice teachers formally enter TEPs. Debbie recalled that a school leader encouraged her to pursue teaching, sharing that the principal told her, "you're made to be a teacher—you need to do this." Similarly, Cyndi described maintaining an ongoing relationship with a former teacher who continues to serve as a mentor and source of guidance throughout her journey. These experiences suggest that tribal communities and local schools serve as important sites for early identification

and the cultivation of future educators, often recognizing potential that formal institutions may overlook.

These findings carry important implications for how NASNTIs and TEPs conceptualize partnerships with tribal communities. Rather than viewing communities as external stakeholders or sites for field placement, this study points to the need for more reciprocal and sustained relationships grounded in the principles of the Four Rs, especially reciprocity and responsibility (Brayboy et al., 2017; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Institutions benefit significantly from the cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and relational expertise that Native students and communities bring into teacher preparation. At the same time, tribal communities invest in these future educators through mentorship, encouragement, and ongoing support. Strengthening this relationship requires moving beyond transactional partnerships toward models of co-construction, where communities play an active role in helping to shape program design, curriculum, and field-based experiences. This may include collaborative curriculum development, the inclusion of community knowledge holders and Elders in coursework, and the expansion of community-based field placements that reflect local educational priorities and practices.

Participants' stories also emphasize that Native teacher preparation is not solely about individual career pathways, but about broader commitments to community, continuity, and future generations. Across the portraits, teaching was consistently framed as an act of returning, of bringing knowledge, opportunity, and representation back to the communities that shaped them. One participant reflected that becoming a teacher meant showing younger students what was possible. Pat described her desire to return home to help students recognize their own potential and navigate educational systems that often feel distant or inaccessible. These narratives reflect

what TribalCrit identifies as a commitment to sovereignty and self-determination, (Brayboy, 2005) as well as what scholars of survivance (Vizenor, 1999; Sabzalian, 2019) describe as the active presence and continuance of Native peoples through education. The presence of Native educators within their home communities carries implications that extend beyond classroom instruction. Teachers often serve as cultural translators, mentors, and role models, creating spaces where students can see their identities, languages, and experiences reflected and affirmed. In this way, Native educators contribute not only to academic learning but also to cultural continuity and community well-being. Their work disrupts long-standing patterns of misrecognition in schooling and opens the possibility of more culturally sustaining and revitalizing forms of education.

These insights call for a reframing of institutional responsibility within NASNTIs and TEPs. Supporting Native preservice teachers cannot be understood solely as an effort to increase enrollment or degree completion. It also involves recognizing the broader relational and community commitments students carry with them. The principle of responsibility within the Four Rs reminds institutions that their work is accountable not only to individual students, but to the communities those students remain connected to. This includes preparing teachers in ways that are responsive to community contexts, sustaining partnerships that extend beyond graduation, and acknowledging that the impact of teacher preparation reverberates across families, schools, and future generations. In this context, tribal communities are not on the margins of teacher education; instead, they are central to its purpose and potential. When NASNTIs and TEPs engage communities as partners in meaningful and sustained ways, they create conditions where teacher preparation becomes a shared endeavor. This relational approach not only strengthens programs but also supports Native communities' ongoing work to cultivate

educators who are rooted in place, guided by community values, and committed to the futures of their people.

These commitments do not end at program completion; they become most visible as preservice teachers move into K–12 spaces. Participants consistently described their desire to return to their home communities, framing teaching as a way of giving back and creating opportunities for future generations. This sense of responsibility reflects a broader commitment to community that extends beyond individual career goals. At the same time, these aspirations raise important questions about the conditions Native educators encounter in K–12 settings. The ability of schools and districts to recruit Native teachers must be matched by efforts to support and sustain them. Without environments that value Indigenous knowledge, foster meaningful relationships with families, and move beyond tokenizing practices, the burden placed on Native educators can be significant. Participants’ emphasis on community, language, and relational teaching suggests that K–12 systems play a critical role in either reinforcing or disrupting the disconnect between teacher preparation and classroom realities.

Implications for Policymakers

These connections also highlight the role of policy in shaping the broader landscape of Native teacher preparation. Programs at NASNTIs, including tuition waivers and targeted supports, create important pathways into teaching for Native students. Participants’ access to these opportunities reflects the impact of such policies in expanding entry points into higher education. Yet their experiences also suggest that access alone does not ensure meaningful preparation. When diversity is addressed only at the surface, without attention to the specific histories and contexts of Native communities, policy efforts risk reproducing the very gaps they seek to address. More responsive policy approaches would support “grow-your-own” pathways

rooted in community contexts, recognize the importance of Tribal sovereignty in education, and invest in partnerships between institutions and Tribal Nations. In doing so, policy can move beyond increasing representation toward supporting preparation that is culturally sustaining, community-informed, and aligned with Indigenous priorities.

The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that teacher preparation is shaped simultaneously by identity, institutional structures, community relationships, and policy conditions. Attending to only one of these dimensions risks reproducing the very gaps this study seeks to address. Strengthening teacher education at NASNTIs, therefore, requires a coordinated approach that recognizes preservice teachers as knowledge holders, supports schools in sustaining Native educators, advances policies that are responsive to Tribal sovereignty, and centers leadership practices grounded in relational accountability. In this way, teacher preparation moves beyond entry into the profession and contributes to more context-responsive teaching, stronger educator pathways, and closer alignment between schools and the communities they serve.

Looking Ahead: Future Areas of Research

While this study adds to the expanding research on NA/AN teacher preparation, it also highlights several areas needing further exploration. The participants' narratives offer important insights into the experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers within a NASNTI setting; however, the complexity of preparing NA/AN teachers goes well beyond what a single study can cover. Future research should continue to explore Native preservice teacher experiences across multiple NASNTIs and other institutional settings. Broadening research beyond a single institution can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional structures, regional factors, and community relationships influence NA/AN teacher preparation. Comparative studies involving

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) may also reveal differences in how institutions implement culturally grounded teacher programs. Furthermore, future research should purposefully investigate the experiences of Native men in teacher education pathways. NA/AN male educators are still vastly underrepresented in the teaching field, and little research has focused on their pathways into teaching. Understanding how Native men navigate TEPs, what motivates them to pursue teaching, and the challenges they face could provide valuable insights for enhancing recruitment and retention efforts.

Furthermore, examining the influence of parents and family members on preservice teachers in NA/AN teacher preparation is important. Participants often highlighted how their family support systems helped them continue through their programs. These relationships often involved childcare, emotional encouragement, and cultural guidance that sustained participants' educational journeys. While this study highlights the importance of familial capital, additional research could explore how parents, extended family networks, and intergenerational relationships influence Native students' decisions to pursue teaching and their ability to remain enrolled in TEPs. Another important area for future research involves the experiences of NA/AN students navigating TEPs through online or hybrid formats. Several participants in this study described the flexibility and accessibility of online coursework, particularly for those balancing family responsibilities and employment. At the same time, participants also noted challenges related to navigating institutional structures, maintaining connections with peers and faculty, and accessing culturally responsive learning environments. Although this study touches on these experiences, there remains much to explore regarding how Native students engage with online TEPs and how institutions can better support these pathways.

Additionally, future research could examine how TEPs can better prepare preservice teachers to support Indigenous language revitalization and culturally sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms. Participants in this study expressed strong commitments to incorporating language and cultural knowledge into their teaching practices, yet many felt that their formal preparation in these areas was limited. Also, longitudinal research following NA/AN preservice teachers into their professional careers would offer valuable insights into how teacher preparation influences classroom practices, community engagement, and long-term retention within the teaching profession. Such studies could help illuminate how Native educators continue to navigate institutional systems while sustaining commitments to their communities. These areas of future research highlight the importance of continuing to expand the conversation around NA/AN TEPs. While this study provides one lens into the experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers within a NASNTI context, there remains much to learn about the diverse pathways NA/AN educators take as they prepare to serve their communities.

The areas outlined above highlight the many directions this work could continue to grow. Each of these possibilities reflects the broader truth that NA/AN TEPs cannot be fully understood through a single study, institution, or cohort. The experiences shared by the participants in this research represent only a small part of a much larger story, one that continues to unfold across NA/AN communities, classrooms, and institutions of higher education. As new questions emerge and future researchers take up this work, the voices and experiences of these educators remain essential in shaping more responsive and culturally grounded pathways into the teaching profession.

At the same time, the stories shared in this study offer important insights that extend beyond the specific themes identified in the findings. They remind us that teacher preparation is

not only an institutional process but also a relational one, shaped by family, community, and cultural responsibilities that extend far beyond the university walls. The following reflection brings this study to a close by returning to the central idea that guided this work: that NA/AN educators do not simply enter the profession as individuals, but as members of communities whose knowledge, histories, and futures travel with them.

Final Reflection

As I reflect on the stories shared in this study, I am reminded that NA/AN teacher preparation involves far more than just producing qualified teachers. It is about sustaining communities, languages, and futures. As a Diné woman and educator, I recognize these commitments not only in the participants' narratives but also in my own educational journey. For the participants in this study, becoming a teacher was never framed as leaving home in search of opportunity. Instead, teaching was understood as a return and as a way to carry knowledge, responsibility, and cultural continuity back to the communities that shaped them. Their journeys reflect what I have to understand in my own work; that education is deeply relational and grounded in connections to family, elders, language, and place.

This study directly addresses a gap in the literature by examining the experiences of NA/AN preservice teachers in TEPs at NASNTIs, a context that has received limited scholarly attention. Using my conceptual framework (TribalCrit, CCW, and CSRP), this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how Native students navigate teacher education while negotiating colonial structures, drawing on cultural wealth, and maintaining their commitments to community. In doing so, it also expands existing scholarship by centering Native students' voices and illuminating how these frameworks work together within a specific institutional context.

These portraits also remind me that NA/AN students do not arrive in TEPs empty-handed. They arrive with community cultural wealth, lived knowledge, and commitments that extend beyond individual career aspirations. As I listened to and engaged with these stories, I was continually aware of the ways that participants described persistence not as an individual act but as something sustained through relationships. Their persistence echoes my own understanding of education as collective rather than individual. Recognizing and honoring these strengths requires TEPs and NASNTIs to move beyond symbolic recognition of NA/AN students toward deeper relational accountability with Native communities.

This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on Native teacher preparation and the role institutions have in supporting the next generation of Native educators. While these findings do not represent all NA/AN preservice teachers, they offer important insight into how Native educators navigate teacher education while carrying forward the knowledge, relationships, and responsibilities grounded in their communities. Across the portraits, I saw education not as an individual pursuit but as a relational, community-centered endeavor shaped by commitments to family, culture, and future generations.

As these educators enter classrooms across Native and non-Native communities alike, they do more than teach academic content. They create spaces where Native students can see themselves reflected, where language and culture are sustained, and where Indigenous knowledge systems continue to live within educational settings. In many ways, this work reflects the kind of education I have sought to enact in my own practice. It is work that challenges and reshapes educational systems, so they more fully honor Indigenous identities, communities, and ways of knowing. The knowledge shared through these portraits does not end with this study. Instead, it extends outward. It informs how I think about teacher education, how I engage in my

own work, and how institutions might better support Native preservice teachers. These stories continue to live beyond these pages, offering guidance, raising questions, and reminding me that this work begins in community and must always return there.

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APPENDIX A: CSU IRB APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

PROTOCOLS



**COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY**

The protocol listed below has been approved by the CSU IRB Determinations Fort Collins on Friday, June 6th 2025.

PI: Barone, Ryan Paul

Submission Type and ID: Initial 6952

Title: From Community to Classroom: A Portraiture Study of Strength and Cultural Wealth Among Native American Students in Teacher Education Programs at NASNTIs in the Southwest

Approval Date: Friday, June 6th 2025

Expiration Date: no date provided

The IRB has completed its review of protocol 6952 From Community to Classroom: A Portraiture Study of Strength and Cultural Wealth Among Native American Students in Teacher Education Programs at NASNTIs in the Southwest. In accordance with federal and state requirements, and policies established by the IRB, the committee has approved this protocol under Exempt review.

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption under category 2 (iii): Research that only includes Interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) where the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the Human Subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

If no expiration date is listed above, continuing review is not required for this study.

What are your responsibilities now, as you move forward with your research?

Document Retention: The PI is responsible for keeping all regulated documents, including IRB correspondence such as this letter, approved study documents, and signed consent forms for at least three (3) years following protocol closure for audit purposes. Documents regulated by HIPAA, such as Release Authorizations, must be maintained for six (6) years.

Site Permission: If your research is conducted at locations outside of Colorado State University (such as schools, hospitals, or businesses), you must obtain written permission from all sites to recruit, consent, study, or observe participants. Generally, such permission comes in the form of a letter from the school superintendent, director, or manager. You must maintain a copy of this permission with study records.

Training: All researchers collecting or analyzing data from this study must renew training in human subjects research via the CITI Program (www.citiprogram.org) every 3 years. New personnel must complete training and be added to the protocol before beginning research with human participants or their data.

Modifications: Change to any aspect of this protocol or research personnel must be approved by the IRB before implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects or others. In such situations, the IRB should still be notified immediately.

Unanticipated Problems/Adverse Events: Unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, serious adverse events, and noncompliance with the approved protocol must be reported to the IRB immediately through a reportable event in Kuali Protocols in accordance with the Reportable New Information CSU IRB procedures. When in doubt, consult with the HRPP/IRB.

Monitoring: The HRPP reminds researchers that this study is subject to monitoring at any time by Colorado State University's HRPP staff, Institutional Review Board, Post Approval Monitoring team, or authorized external entities. Timely cooperation with monitoring procedures is an expectation of IRB approval.

Change of Institutions: If the PI leaves Colorado State, the study must be closed or the PI must be replaced on the study or transferred to a new IRB. Studies without a Colorado State University PI will be closed.

Other Approvals: This Colorado State IRB approval covers only regulations related to human subjects research protections (e.g. 45 CFR 46). This determination does not constitute approval from any other Colorado State campus departments, research sites, or outside agencies. The Principal Investigator and all researchers are required to affirm that the research meets all applicable local/state/ federal laws and university policies that may apply.

If you have questions about this determination or your responsibilities when conducting human subjects research on this project or any other, please do not hesitate to contact the IRB office at your respective campus:

CSU Fort Collins - CSU_IRB@colostate.edu

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO PROGRAM STAFF AND FACULTY

Dear [name],

My name is Kari Deswood, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Colorado State University. I am in the process of developing my dissertation, which analyzes the experiences of Native American students enrolled in teacher education programs at Native American-serving non-tribal Institutions. I hold the position of Co-Principal Investigator for this study, collaborating with my advisor, Dr. Ryan Barone, who serves as the Principal Investigator.

This subject is particularly relevant to me as a faculty member and as a former student in a teacher education program. I am particularly motivated to discover effective strategies for enhancing support for Native American students in their educational pursuits.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in disseminating this message to your fellow students. I am convinced that their perspectives would greatly enrich this study. The insights obtained will assist our teacher education programs in better addressing the distinct needs of Native American students.

If you could spare a moment, I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss this matter further. Please contact me at kdeswood@gmail.com. Thank you for considering my request.

Warm regards,

Kari Deswood
Co-Principle Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
kdeswood@gmail.com

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!

For a study on Native American student experiences in Teacher Education Programs

CSU IRB Study # 6952

ARE YOU...

- Over 18 years of age?
- A self-identified Native American or Alaskan Native?
- An undergraduate, alternative licensure, or graduate student in a Teacher Education Program?

PARTICIPATION INCLUDES:

- Two 60-90 min interviews
- Follow-up contact as needed

STUDY DETAILS:

- The estimated time of study is 2-3 hours (not in one sitting)
- Classroom Observation
- Compensation of a \$75.00 gift card upon completion

Ready to Participate?
Scan or click here
to take a 1-min.
eligibility survey



ABOUT THE STUDY

This research seeks to explore the challenges, successes, and cultural insights that shape your journey in becoming an educator. By sharing your story, you can contribute to enhancing educational environments and support systems for future Native American educators. Your voice matters, and we look forward to hearing from you!

For more information about the study or to participate, contact:

Kari Deswood (Dine)
Co-principal investigator
kdeswood@colostate.edu
505-330-3550 (call or text)

Dr. Ryan Barone
Principal Investigator
ryan.barone@colostate.edu

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time. Your privacy matters — all information you share will be kept confidential. Your real name will not appear in any research materials, and a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity.

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAILS TO STUDENTS

Yá'át'ééh! Dear [name],

Shi éi Kari Deswood yinishyé. Táabaah'á nishlí. T'aaneesahnii Báshishchíín. T'aachinii Dashicheii. Ma'ii deeshgizhnii Dashinálí.

Hi! I'm Kari Deswood, a PhD Candidate at Colorado State University. I am currently working on my dissertation, which focuses on understanding the experiences of Native American students in teacher education programs. I am the Co-Principal Investigator of this study, and my advisor, Dr. Ryan Barone is the Principal Investigator. As a faculty member in a teacher education program (TEP) and a former student in a TEP, this topic holds a special place in my heart. I genuinely want to learn more about how to support Native American students in their journey.

I'm reaching out to you because of your valuable perspective as a student in a TEP. I would like to know if you might be interested in participating in this study. Your voice is incredibly important and will help me understand how teacher education programs can serve you and your peers more effectively. This information will also inform TEPs on how they can better meet the unique needs of Native American students.

If you have a moment, I would appreciate the opportunity to chat briefly about this and you can contact me at kdeswood@gmail.com. Thank you for considering my request!

Warm regards,

Kari Deswood
Co-Principle Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
kdeswood@gmail.com

APPENDIX E: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Date __, 2025

Yá'át'ééh! Dear [name]:

I hope this message finds you well. Shi éí Kari Deswood yinishyé. Táabaah'á nishlí. T'aaneeszahnii Báshishchíín. T'aachinii Dashicheii. Ma'ii deeshgizhnii Dashinálí. Ákót'éego asdzaa dóó amá nishlí. My name is Kari Deswood (Diné) and I am a PhD candidate at Colorado State University conducting a research study titled "From Community to Classroom: A Portraiture Study of Strength and Cultural Wealth Among Native American Students in Teacher Education Programs at NASNTIs in the Southwest" under the supervision of Dr. Ryan Barone I am reaching out to invite you to participate in this study, which explores the experiences of Native American students in teacher education programs at Native American Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) in the Southwest.

This research aims to understand how Native American students navigate their teacher education programs and how these programs support their preparation for serving their home communities. You may be eligible to participate if you self-identify as Native American, are currently enrolled in a teacher education program, and are at least 18 years old.

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to participate in two interviews lasting around 60 to 90 minutes each. These interviews can be conducted via Zoom or in person, depending on your preference. During the interviews, you will be asked about your experiences as a Native American student in the teacher education program and how your cultural background influences your educational journey. I understand there may be topics you don't feel comfortable discussing, so I will provide a journal to document your thoughts. If you prefer, you can also record your thoughts or take photos to express your thoughts. If possible, I would appreciate the opportunity to visit you in the classroom—there is nothing you would need to do for this part, just your permission and that of the course instructor to observe a class. You can expect to spend around 3 hours on this, and once you finish, you'll receive \$50 in an Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for your time and involvement.

Your participation in this study is **completely confidential**. Your name and any identifying information will be removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms to protect your privacy. All data will be securely stored and only accessible to the research team. Participation in this study is entirely **voluntary**. You may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to contact me at kdeswood@gmail.com. You may also reach out to my faculty advisor and the principal investigator for this study, Dr. Ryan Barone, at ryan.barone@colostate.edu. Thank you for

considering this opportunity. I deeply appreciate your time and look forward to the possibility of learning from your experiences! Ahe'hee!

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu or 970-491-1553.

Ryan Barone, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Associate Vice President For Student Success

Kari Deswood
Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX F: SCREENING QUESTIONS

1. Are you 18 years old or older?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No (end of survey- ineligible)
2. Do you self-identify as Native American or Alaskan Native?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No (end of survey-ineligible)
3. Your program status (select one)
 - A. Undergraduate in a teacher education program
 - B. Graduate student in a teacher education program
 - C. Alternative Licensure student in a teacher education program
 - D. Recently graduated (within the last 2 years) from a teacher education program
 - E. None of the above-> end of survey- ineligible)
4. Which college or university are you currently attending (or most recently graduated) for your teacher education degree?
 - A. Southwestern Mountain University
 - B. San Sierra College
5. Please share your email contact below so I can get in touch with you about the next steps for participation

APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

My name is Kari Deswood, and I am a PhD candidate at Colorado State University in the School of Education. I serve as the co-principal investigator alongside my advisor, Dr. Ryan Barone, who is the principal investigator for the research study, "From Community to Classroom: A Portraiture Study of Strength and Cultural Wealth Among Native American Students in Teacher Education Programs at NASNTIs in the Southwest." This study aims to enhance our understanding of how Native American students navigate their teacher education programs and how these programs assist in preparing them to serve their home communities.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obligated to participate. Even if you choose to take part, you are free to skip any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Compensation

By taking part in this study, you will receive a \$70 gift card.

Confidentiality

In all reports of your responses, your confidentiality will be strictly maintained. In order to maintain your confidentiality:

- No personal details (such as name or institutional affiliation) will be recorded or linked to the audio recording or transcript of your participation interview.
- Together, we will develop a pseudonym for you to use during the recorded interview, data analysis, and reporting study.
- The audio file will only be accessible to Kari Deswood, Dr. Ryan Barone, and a professional transcriber of the interview. After your interview transcript is created and confirmed for accuracy, the audio recording will be deleted. Your actual name will not be included in the data reporting and analysis.
- Only Kari Deswood and Dr. Ryan Barone will have access to the written transcript of your interview, which will be stored on a password-protected computer.

Risks/Benefits

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how teacher education programs at NASNTIs can better serve the needs of Native American students.

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions, please contact Kari Deswood at kdeswood@gmail.com or

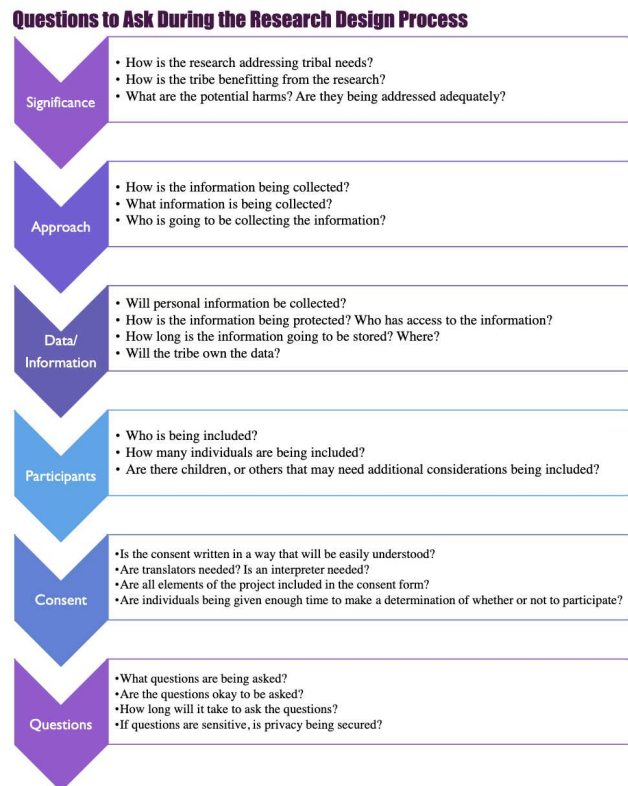
Dr. Ryan Barone at ryan.barone@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Statement of Consent

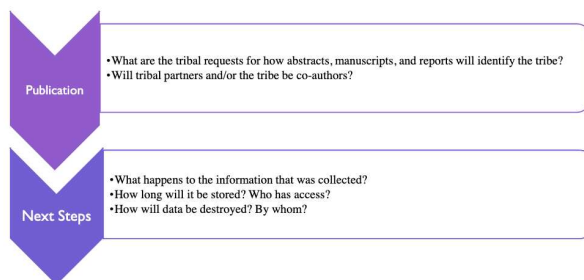
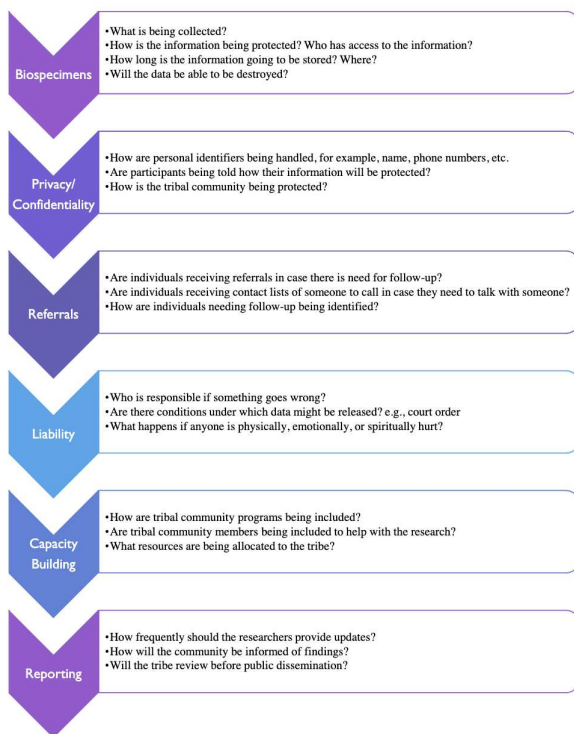
By agreeing to be interviewed, you are consenting to participate in the research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Sincerely,
Kari Deswood

APPENDIX H: TRIBAL PARTICIPATORY ASPECTS TO CONSIDER IN RESEARCH DESIGN³



³ See Gachupin et al., 2019, pp. 17-19.



APPENDIX I: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION GUIDELINE

Observation Category	Focus Areas / Guiding Questions	Notes
Classroom Environment & Context	• What is the physical or virtual setup of the classroom (seating, Zoom layout)? • How is the instructor positioned within the space? • What is the overall tone (formal, relational, collaborative)? • Are there visible signs of cultural representation (materials, language, examples)?	
Participant Engagement	• How does the participant engage (speaking, listening, observing, chat participation)? • Is participation voluntary, prompted, or group-based? • What patterns of participation emerge across the session? • How does the participant position themselves within the learning space?	
Interactions & Relationships	• What are the dynamics between participant and instructor? • How does the participant interact with peers? • Are there signs of collaboration, support, or hesitation? • What moments of connection or disconnection are evident?	
Instructional Practices & Norms	• What teaching strategies are used (lecture, discussion, group work)? • What expectations for participation are present (explicit or implicit)? • What classroom norms are observed? • Do practices reflect culturally responsive or sustaining approaches?	
Navigation of Institutional Structures	• How does the participant navigate assignments or expectations? • Are there moments of confusion, clarification, or adaptation? • Does the participant seek support (peers, instructor)? • How are institutional norms enacted in practice?	
Cultural & Community Connections	• Are there references to community, culture, or lived experience? • Is Indigenous knowledge included or absent? • Is Indigenous language present or used?	

	• Are connections made between coursework and community contexts?	
Field Notes & Reflexivity	• Descriptive notes capturing interactions, environment, and engagement • Impressionistic records noting key moments, patterns, and researcher reflections • Reflexive notes acknowledging positionality and interpretation	