Leadership and Accountability in American Indian Education: Voices from New Mexico

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How do American Indian students, parents, and teachers conceptualize leadership in New Mexico public schools? How do they negotiate power dynamics within this context? The objective of this study was to investigate how leadership and accountability in American Indian schools and communities in New Mexico is recognized, characterized, contested, and envisioned by students, teachers, and community members. We contend that American Indian communities are uniquely positioned to provide insights for understanding leadership and visions of decolonized and empowering education for American Indian communities. Our data come from focus groups and interviews with American Indian students, parents, and community members, as well as teachers in seven public school districts in New Mexico. Participants described how they observed leadership enacted and how they participated in New Mexico public schools. We found participants describing unequal power relations, yet they also held visions of school leadership embedded in the values and definitions of leadership traditionally and historically held in American Indian communities. These visions of leadership centered around the importance of sustaining and strengthening American Indian communities and self-determination.

Introduction

How do American Indian students, parents, and teachers conceptualize leadership in New Mexico public schools? How do they negotiate power dynamics within this context? The objective of this study is to investigate how leadership and accountability in American Indian schools and communities in New Mexi-
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Leadership is recognized, characterized, contested, and envisioned by students, teachers, and community members. The data for this study come from the Indian Education in New Mexico, 2025, study (IENM 2025; Jojola et al. 2010), which was conducted between 2007 and 2010. In this article, we define leadership through the perspectives of the participants, who described characteristics and values linked to their traditional views of leadership in American Indian communities. We examine the participants’ critiques of and challenges to the bureaucratic policies and procedures that limit participation in schools. We also contextualize culturally based definitions of leadership through the views of our participants.

Our analysis of the qualitative data identified three key themes around leadership in New Mexico public schools: (1) asymmetrical power structures, (2) critique of leadership practices in schools, and (3) visions of leadership and accountability. In each of these themes, American Indian people’s visions of school leadership were anchored in the importance of preserving and strengthening their home communities. Their narratives also exemplified the dynamics of state power and interpersonal power as they lived the experiences between their Native communities and the schools serving them. These narratives demonstrate how Native people’s visions of school leadership are embedded in the values and definitions of leadership traditionally and historically held in Apache, Diné, and Pueblo communities. Before delving into these thematic areas, the following sections outline the key theoretical frameworks, describe the context of New Mexico Native communities, provide a brief overview of the IENM 2025 study, and present the methodology guiding our analysis.

Conceptualizing Traditional American Indian Leadership

Love your people and love your land. (Manuelito, nineteenth-century Diné leader; quoted in Bighorse 1990, 21)

In this quote, Manuelito, one of the leaders of the Diné (Navajo) people in 1864, during the time of their removal from their homelands to Hweeldi, a...
concentration camp, described an essential characteristic of what it means to be a leader. Diné leadership encompassed qualities of one’s character, such as having love, compassion, respect, and integrity, as opposed to power, force, and authority represented by the military they encountered and who represented Western European leadership styles. The focus of leadership was on relationships with one’s people and one’s homeland, as established by the Creator (Bighorse 1990).

Deloria and Lytle (1984) also described American Indian leadership qualities as connections to spiritual beliefs and worldview. Before European contact, the authors explain, Native people understood their homelands as provided for them by their Creator. Their name for themselves, “the People,” identified their role in the web of creation as part of the land and environment, not as distinct from it. Additionally, Deloria and Lytle stated that the people within Native communities who were regarded as leaders did not campaign for these positions; positions were designated to them on the basis of their personal prestige and charisma and the respect the people held for them as individuals. The authors characterized leadership as connected to personal virtues, writing, “Even where a position as chief was a lifetime office, qualifications for filling the post were primarily those of personal integrity and honesty, so that respect rather than popularity was the criterion by which Indians selected who would lead them” (9–10).

A similar view of leadership exists today in the Pueblo communities of New Mexico that still practice traditional forms of governance. Traditional religious leaders, clan leaders, and governmental leaders are identified and mentored by the community, thus becoming highly respected in their work for the community. Their responsibilities include conducting the traditional ceremonial calendar of events in order to maintain the physical and spiritual health of the community. Their leadership style is to counsel and serve, rather than command (Benjamin et al. 1996; O’Brien 1989). Leaders who are chosen do not have the option to decline the position. A leader is considered “a servant of the community, pledging to safeguard the beliefs, practices, and well-being of all of the tribal members” (Benjamin et al. 1996, 119).

These traditional views of leadership are important for understanding the expectations that Native American students and parents have of teachers and administrative leaders. In the broader field of American Indian education, many researchers have cited the conditions that negatively affect the schools attended by American Indians (Belgarde et al. 2002; Indian Nations at Risk Task Force 1990; Lomawaima and McCarty 2006). These researchers find American Indian students negotiating challenging circumstances, including low socioeconomic status and poor health conditions; inadequate, inequitable, and unpredictable funding for schools; assimilationist school agendas; lack of respect for the use of Native languages; lack of culturally relevant and culturally
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appropriate curricula; lack of support for the holistic development of Native students; and poor teacher training. Moreover, in the last decade, federal-funding formulas pegged to the No Child Left Behind Law of 2001 have created additional barriers to Native reform efforts in education by focusing on limited, number-driven indicators of success tied to standardized assessments and curricula (National Indian Education Association 2006). Yet, despite these barriers and challenges, traditional views of American Indian leadership are valued and embedded in the visions of leadership described by the participants in this study.

Conceptualizing Educational Leadership

The current study uses the work of Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) and Martinez (2010) to understand the current state of American Indian education in New Mexico. Lomawaima and McCarty’s theoretical model of a “safety zone,” used to understand American Indian educational policy shifts, shows schools either welcome or deter Native culturally based perspectives and practices (or any cultural difference), depending on the perceived level of threat to a hegemonic, national American identity. For example, while educational rhetoric might call for the inclusion of Native language and historical perspectives, in practice, their inclusion is done in a manner that does not challenge the existing status quo of unequal power relations. In other words, the school-level practice limits or enhances the quality and quantity of instructional content on the basis of the perceived level of threat to the school’s assimilative goals or national agenda.

Lomawaima and McCarty posit that the labeling of “safe” or “dangerous” Native beliefs and practices cannot be understood as solely a cultural question but as a political one due to the inherent sovereignty of Native Nations and their present-day interactions with the United States. They argue, “Culture, language, politics, and legal status are inextricably bound together in the fabric of US/Indian relations” (2006, 7). Their analysis illuminates the power struggle Native communities and people have with state agencies in order to have their viewpoints, experiences, knowledge, and values acknowledged, respected, and integrated into educational institutions.

For example, in 2003, New Mexico passed the Indian Education Act (IEA; New Mexico Public Education Department 2003). The key objective of the act was to create culturally responsive educational approaches for American Indian students in New Mexico’s public schools. While the act holds great merit for encouraging systemic culturally based reform, it has not been fully funded, nor are any state entities accountable for implementing it (New Mexico Public Education Department 2006). Although this is an example of a “safe
practice” in the school-based safety zone because it appears to create a culturally responsive infrastructure, the power structures in the state marginalize and withhold it from full implementation. Lomawaima and McCarty argue, “The federal government has not simply vacillated between encouraging or suppressing Native languages and cultures but has in a coherent way—using salient criteria such as gender, childhood, ‘aesthetic’ versus ‘economic’ life—attempted to distinguish safe from dangerous Indigenous beliefs and practices” (2006, 6). In essence, our view is that the full implementation of the IEA, which would entail multifaceted accountability to sovereign American Indian nations, is construed as too “dangerous” for full implementation and support.

Martinez’s study (2010) also illustrated the complexities of this power struggle in contemporary educational contexts. From the perspective of Native students in an urban public high school in New Mexico, Martinez examined how power operates in decisions about curriculum, daily instruction, and the school environment. Using the concept of “asymmetrical power relations,” Martinez explored the ways that American Indian students questioned the inherently political curriculum to which they were exposed. Her study identified these unequal power structures and posited ways to alleviate them.

A history of colonization and negative race relations manifests itself today in schools’ determination of what counts as knowledge and what are acceptable levels of cultural representation. While dominant and colonizing ideologies that marginalized American Indian students permeated the school and maintained hegemonic control over curriculum, instruction, events, and youth, Martinez unearthed how students resisted and confronted those ideologies and associated rules by voicing their discontent, maintaining strong connections to their Native community’s values and beliefs and challenging the status quo’s rationalizations and rules. Martinez illustrated that American Indian students are not passive recipients of power structures that marginalize their experiences, history, and traditions.

In spite of all the challenges facing Native communities, there are moments of resistance and transformative changes that advance social justice and decolonization. Within the past 2 decades, educators and scholars have documented influential and successful efforts to create positive and transformative changes in schools (Belgarde 2004; Bird 2007; McLaughlin 1992). Current research has also addressed what it means to be culturally responsive in American Indian education (Castagno and Brayboy 2008; Lee 2008; Yazzie-Mintz 2007). These efforts have set the stage for “visioning” future educational experiences and success for Native students.

IENM 2025 (the data source for this current analysis) purposefully sought to draw out the visions about the future of American Indian education in New Mexico held by American Indian students, parents, and community members as well as teachers (both American Indian and non–American Indian).
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The review of relevant research (see Jojola et al. 2010) for that study led us to concentrate on seven critical areas of inquiry: pedagogy, accountability, language, curriculum, successful students, school climate, and vision. Examining the comments of participants through a lens focused on leadership, we were able to cull out participants’ views on leadership as they relate to these critical areas. This analysis identified how participants discussed issues of unequal power relations and the minimal inclusion of Native voices in leadership practices and processes that affected school experiences related to areas such as pedagogy, curriculum, school climate, and understandings of what it means to be successful in school. These findings are supported and substantiated by the work and findings of Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) and Martinez (2010).

Our participants conveyed similar experiences within schools. However, they also envisioned and described expectations for leadership practices that honor and include Indigenous knowledge, experiences, and values, aligned with the characteristics of American Indian leadership as articulated by Big-horse (1990) and Deloria and Lytle (1984). In the following sections, we describe the research process and findings that demonstrate how Native American students, community members, and teachers experience and aspire to change leadership structures in their schools.

Native Communities in New Mexico

In terms of population, New Mexico is a relatively small state with just over 2 million residents. According to the 2010 census, it is a “majority minority state” with over half of the residents composed of Hispanics and American Indians (US Census Bureau 2012). There are 22 Pueblo and Tribal Nations in New Mexico. Specifically, there are 19 Pueblos, the Navajo Nation, and the Jicarilla and Mescalero Apache Tribes. Of the 89 public school districts in New Mexico, 23 are located on or near tribal lands. American Indian students make up nearly 11% of the statewide public school enrollment (New Mexico Public Education Department 2012). The 23 public school districts serving American Indian students are largely rural, with very high concentrations of American Indian student enrollment within particular schools in a district. American Indian students in 12 of the 23 districts make up more than 25% of the student population, and in six of those districts, they make up more than 50% of the total student population.

Indian Education in New Mexico, 2025—an Overview of the Original Study

This section summarizes the research and data from which this current study drew for its analysis related to leadership. The research questions for this
The current study are (1) How do American Indian students, parents, community members, and teachers conceptualize leadership in New Mexico public schools? and (2) How do they understand and negotiate power dynamics within this context? The objective of this study was to investigate how leadership and accountability in American Indian schools and communities in New Mexico is recognized, characterized, contested, and envisioned by students, teachers, and community members. Drawing on Deloria and Lytle’s (1984) characterization of traditional American Indian leadership qualities, Lomawaima and McCarty’s (2006) theory of the safety zone, and Martinez’s (2010) concept of asymmetrical power relations between Native communities and institutionalized educational systems in the United States, we examined Native peoples’ views of leadership and their contestation and negotiation of power structures shaping current leadership practices in New Mexico schools.

In conducting the current study for this article, we drew on data collected as part of the statewide study mentioned earlier, titled Indian Education in New Mexico, 2025. Data for this study were collected between 2007 and 2010 for the purpose of identifying “best practices” from the perspectives of Native students, Native community members, Native parents, and teachers. Thirteen schools (11 public schools and two public charter schools) located within seven communities in New Mexico were included in this study. For this analysis, we chose to focus on school districts with a critical mass of American Indian students (approximately 20% or more of the student body). Pseudonyms for all the schools and districts in this study are used to protect the identities of the participants. We also only identify our participants by their tribal heritage and role in the school.

In the Mesa School District, there were two Pueblo and two Navajo communities served by the schools, with 42% of the student population identified as American Indian students. The River Way School District had a population of 41% American Indian students from five Pueblo communities. In the third district, Mountain View Schools, most of the schools were located on the Navajo Nation and enrolled a majority of Navajo students. This district had a population of 89% American Indian students. The fourth district, Great Valley School District, served primarily Pueblo communities and a larger population of small Hispanic communities. This district had a student population of 19% American Indian. The fifth district, Pine Tree Schools, served an Apache community with a population of 92% American Indian students.

The study also included two charter schools. Red Rock Charter School was located in one Pueblo community. New View Charter School, located in a large city, enrolled a mixture of students primarily from tribes within the state, mostly Navajo. At New View, students commuted from nearby tribal communities or resided in the city. Both of these charter schools had a population of over 95% American Indian students.
We conducted 31 focus group discussions and 14 interviews, ending with a total of 205 participants. Participants were composed of 83 American Indian students, 79 teachers (10 were American Indian), and 43 American Indian parents and community participants. The overwhelming majority of the participants were Pueblo and Navajo tribal members; only 13 of the 205 participants were Apache tribal members, and another handful included Native people from tribes outside of New Mexico who had moved into the state. Diné, Keres, and Towa were the predominant Native languages spoken among the Native American participants in this study. The teachers in the study were a mix of Native and non-Native backgrounds, with non-Native teachers in the majority.

The focus groups lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and primarily took place at school sites. In one school district, interviews were conducted with individuals and took on average 30 minutes each. This school district requested we conduct interviews instead of focus groups because of scheduling conflicts. We asked participants about their perspectives on the basis of questions from the seven critical topic areas. The study examined how schools teach students (pedagogy), what they teach students (curriculum), how they assess students (accountability), what school environment students and community members experience (school climate), how native languages are taught or valued in school (language), and what participants envision for the future (vision).

The study also asked participants to identify the attributes of an “educated native person” and asked students how they could see themselves becoming an educated native person. Coprincipal investigators also identified the area of “relationships” as another important theme that emerged from the data. Although it was not a theme specifically addressed in the focus groups, it became salient during our analysis. All focus groups were audio recorded digitally, while designated recorders wrote the comments on flip charts so that participants could see what was stated. All of the notes and recordings were transcribed and reviewed by the investigators. After coding and analyses of the transcripts were completed, feedback sessions were conducted to share our findings with the participants, in order to refine our understandings of the major issues they discussed.

From that initial study, the current examination of data for this article focused on exploring visions of leadership held by American Indian participants. We also examined the dynamics of asymmetrical power relations—while additionally recognizing the contours of the safety zone—among American Indian parents, community members, teachers and students, their communities, and the state, as represented by the teachers and school leaders.
The Research Team

The research team that undertook the IENM 2025 study was made up of six principal investigators and several graduate and undergraduate research assistants (Jojola et al. 2010). The analysis for this article was completed by three of the six original principal investigators. Carlotta P. Bird is Santo Domingo Pueblo and has lived and worked in New Mexico most of her life in educational support, teaching, and administrative positions within tribal education organizations, public schools, and higher education. She supports the perspectives of Indigenous communities in the education of their children, as well as the survival of their communities, by advocating for school programs that foster resilient and talented American Indian students, including the maintenance and revitalization of their Native languages and culture.

Tiffany S. Lee is Dine’ and Lakota and grew up in New Mexico and on the Navajo Nation. Her life’s work has been directed toward understanding and promoting language revitalization and cultural continuity through educational and community-based venues. She is also engaged in understanding and using Indigenous research methods grounded in the context of the study community’s values, protocols, and tribal sovereignty. She is a former high school teacher, coach, and program coordinator.

Nancy López is a New York City–born and raised Dominican woman who grew up in public housing and is a native Spanish speaker who identifies as an Afro-Latina. As the only non-Native in the Indigenous Education Research Group, she was an outsider to Indigenous communities in New Mexico. However, being deeply committed to producing scholarship that advances social justice in her continuing research with black and Latino youth in New Mexico, she adopted the Indigenous research methodologies that guided the study from its inception.

Key Features of Indigenous Methodology

We understand Indigenous research methods based on the work of Kovach (2009), Lee (2008), Smith (1999), and Wilson (2008). Wilson highlights the importance of relationships in Indigenous communities and beliefs for understanding one’s identity: “Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to their land, and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people and things, we are the relationships that we hold and are part of” (2008, 80). According to Wilson, this extends to research processes, where research by
and with Indigenous peoples is rooted in relationships and respect for Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty, worldviews, life ways, experiences, and knowledge. Indigenous research is set apart from Western traditions of research in that the process involves accountability to all our relations.

Our approach created relationships with participants on the basis of a mutual interest in contributing to the betterment of educational services for Native students. We believed maintaining transparency about our research positionality and standpoint was a prominent feature of the Indigenous-based methodologies we employed. We also established relationships by drawing on the lived experience and language fluency of the coprincipal investigators and research assistants to engage in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways of interaction. For example, interpreting the results required knowledge of Native language phrases and the purpose and meaning behind culturally based activities described by participants. To gain the trust of our participants, it was important that they understood our cultural background first as Native people and then as researchers. We felt that since all but one member of the research team came from the communities included in the study, this afforded us with unique knowledge and identification for participants and researchers, which created a shared and trusting relationship. Drawing on the research team members’ knowledge regarding the significance of following cultural protocols in research, we knew and understood the protocols and boundaries of research interaction with the students, teachers, community members, and parents who participated. We believe this enabled their comments to be honest and forthright.

We extended Wilson’s point about being accountable to all our relations to our research assistants. An important goal of our research process was to include, train, and mentor the next generation of Native scholars, while creating a learning community that intentionally planned to minimize the power hierarchies that constitute traditional researcher–researcher assistant dynamics (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Hence, each principal investigator worked with one or more student research assistants over the course of the study. We also created an Indigenous Education Study Group (IESG) that met on a regular basis and sought to create an egalitarian learning community that was committed to advancing the personal and community goals of research assistants.

The IESG team agreed with Lee’s (2008) and Wilson’s (2008) discussions about the importance of Indigenous methodologies, including a process for demonstrating how the research will be meaningful and beneficial to the communities of study. At the conclusion of our analysis in the original IENM 2025 study, we conducted feedback sessions with participants (when possible) and other community members and educators to share the results orally, and in written form, to learn about their perspectives regarding the findings. Kovach (2009) and Smith (1999) discuss the significance of using a decol-
onizing lens and approach in Indigenous research methods. Such an approach demystifies the process as a solely Western academic endeavor and aims to be more “respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful” (Smith 1999, 9). Kovach explains that Indigenous research methods disrupt oppressive outcomes of homogenous research: “As long as the academy reflects a homogeneous reflection of the bodies, minds, and methods, our work in this area is stalled. The infusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and research frameworks informed by the distinctiveness of the cultural epistemology transforms homogeneity” (2009, 12).

Smith and Kovach declare that decolonizing research honors Indigenous codes of conduct, knowledge systems, and worldviews, while also recognizing there is not one uniform method for conducting research using Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies may hold values in common, such as privileging relationships and honoring cultural protocols, but they are context specific. Thus, our approach encompassed decolonized methods by recognizing the distinct cultural epistemology located in each American Indian nation who participated in the study (Navajo, Pueblo, and Apache). We applied decolonized methods by using the Navajo-, Pueblo-, and Apache-based processes, which were defined by the cultural protocols of these communities. Among the Pueblo communities, we contacted the All Indian Pueblo Council (a consortium of all the governors for each Pueblo community in the state) and made a formal presentation of our research intentions. The council’s endorsement signified to its respective participating communities and schools that the Pueblo community’s leadership was aware of and in support of our research. In the case of the Navajo Nation, we followed the review process formalized by the Navajo Nation Research Review Board. The length of this process was not in line with the state funders’ timelines; thus, we insisted that the state recognize and respect the timelines of the Navajo process. Since the Apache process was not as clearly defined, we asked Apache people we knew about their protocols and followed the school-based process for access. We felt this represented a decolonized approach because the research process for engaging with the schools and communities was determined by the tribal communities, not the university institutional review board or the state funders. The process was rooted in adhering to and respecting tribal sovereign powers with regard to research engagement.

We also followed local school students and teachers during the school day. Each of the districts identified a local contact person to assist the IESG in the scheduling of focus groups. Oftentimes these individuals were Native Americans who worked in the school system and who understood both school and tribal protocols. This understanding was essential in the case where students were permitted to stay after school for a discussion and the tribe provided transportation for this after-school activity.
Analysis

The analysis for the study reported in this article used the data from the IENM 2025 study and explored participants’ perspectives with regard to the dynamics of power relations and leadership. We reviewed participant quotes with regard to comments about leadership within the eight critical areas that were identified for the original study: pedagogy, curriculum, accountability, language, school climate, successful students, relationships, and vision of an ideal education. For this article, we identified the characteristics of leadership as defined by our participants, as well as leadership practices observed in school contexts. The next sections convey our key findings focused on leadership, according to three thematic areas: (1) negotiating asymmetrical power structures, (2) critique of leadership practices in schools, and (3) visions of leadership and accountability. We include quotes from students, teachers, parents, and community members to highlight each thematic area. We mapped out the participants’ visions for leadership and found that they align with traditional American Indian leadership characteristics, the dynamics of the safety zone, and asymmetrical power relations at play in the schools we visited.

Negotiating Asymmetrical Power Structures

The asymmetrical power structure in most New Mexico public schools attended by American Indian students was visible in that there was a scarcity of American Indians in positions of leadership. The percentages of American Indian teachers were single digits in most schools, with an even smaller percentage of them serving as principals, coordinators, and directors. When there were American Indian teachers, they were usually part of the instructional staff designated as “educational assistants” rather than as licensed teachers. This was evident especially in the rural districts where schools often were the largest employer in the community.

In spite of their subordinated positions, American Indian educational assistants advocated for their students and maneuvered the politics of leadership in the schools. For example, during a focus group in which her non-Native school principal was present, one of the American Indian assistants responsible for teaching the local Native language at the school critiqued the practice of bringing paid trainers (read: non-Native) from California to “train” them on how to handle discipline in Native communities instead of valuing their community knowledge. The discussion below demonstrates the disconnect between the non-Native leadership and the Native community:
Non-Native Principal: Right now in middle school we have a Discipline Committee with a representative from each grade level.

American Indian Educational Assistant: One of the things that instructional assistants are concerned about is that they need to be included in this discipline committee. I didn’t know there was a committee already. We need more discussion because I think you need to hear from more Native people how discipline should be designed for our students.

The principal defended her decision to include only licensed teachers in the Discipline Committee and even pointed to the presence of one Native Teacher on the committee (an indication of a decision understood through the safety zone as tokenism), but the American Indian education assistant quickly critiqued the token representation of one sole Native voice in a very important decision making body at the school. After the principal left, the Pueblo educational assistant continued her critique of the asymmetrical power relations in her school:

They’re not going to come back and ask our approval. They’re coming back to tell us what they’ve come up with. And it doesn’t work for our Indian students, because it doesn’t come from our own Indian point of view, how we can assist these kids. It’s coming from the experiences of non-Indian kids. It worked for them, but not for our students. That’s one reason why our students are constantly out of hand. So I think if we all come together, we have to come together as a community with the staff here, to really come up with our own discipline policy.

This is an example of how there is little school or district-level leadership accountability to the tribes for their everyday decision making vis-à-vis school rules and American Indian students.

The use of an asymmetrical power structure was also reflected in participants’ views that the decision-making positions in upper-level administration and in the parent groups were not representative of the American Indian community surrounding the school. A comment from a Navajo teacher and school administrator expressed the challenge of serving the community in the current environment. This school was located in a community bordering the Navajo Nation, and the population of the school and community was predominantly Navajo. “We really have very little Navajo representation on our parent advisory committee. Mesa View is a unique school, because it comes from a very large Mormon community, and there’s a lot of the founding traders’ families that are here, who have been here for generations, and they have a lot of political power. And I think this is the first time, I am the first ever Navajo administrator at Mesa View High School. There’s Navajo prin-
cipals in almost all of the elementary schools, but not in Mesa View. It never happened before.” Implicit in this comment is the importance placed on school leadership that is representative of the community but also the nature of power that had to be negotiated.

In another example of asymmetrical power structures, Native American parents were concerned about teacher qualifications and school programs that were developed specifically for Native American students. They shared examples of administrative decisions regarding staffing and assigned duties of staff that were related to programmatic accountability and authority. They saw themselves as having a role in making sure these programs were appropriately taught and administered. Their attempts to influence these decisions are shared in the following two examples: “We have a full time teacher who is not a state-certified teacher, and she is more on the level of a teaching assistant. We have her full time and last year she did her Navajo [language] classes only with the Navajo kids; which kids liked; and this year is when it got reinterpreted so that those Navajo culture classes they call, now have to be taught to everybody” (Navajo parent). “One of the things we put in our budget this year was to get an American Indian counselor. This counselor is supposed to actually help just American Indian students preparing for college, prepare for the ACT, take them to trips. . . . It should just be focused on the job description. . . . They put people there, and before you know it, people are doing other stuff” (Pueblo parent). The decision to put staff and programs in the school to address American Indian student needs was welcomed by the parents; however, the actual implementation of these programs became weakened when the school leader assigned more students, more tasks, fewer resources, and inappropriate duties to program staff. These are the decisions that did not include the parents and community members. The marginalization of Native American staff in this manner was also a source of continued problems for Native students and their families.

The hiring of leaders who did not seem to understand Native American expectations translated into continued problems and miscommunication between teachers and community members. Interestingly, sometimes it was not enough to have American Indian staff present in the school. Some parents described instances when they encountered unwritten bureaucratic policies and procedures that marginalized their voices and also placed a few American Indian staff in token positions where they were directed to maintain the status quo rather than take the leadership responsibility that the parents expected. It also offers an example of the safety zone at play, where participation by American Indians was formally included by the school but limited in terms of the American Indian representatives’ perceived power. One Pueblo parent exemplified this unequal power relationship within the safety zone:
But then also if you have liaisons that come from the Pueblos or to sit in IEPs [individual educational plan for students with special needs] to be here on behalf of students, a number of them . . . and you’ll have either an Ed director from the Pueblo or a liaison sitting in that meeting; they’ll say nothing. And then I’ll go up to them after and say, “How come you didn’t say anything?” They said, “Well, we’re directed by our—whether it’s the Ed director or somebody in the school district—that we are not supposed to say anything if we want to keep good communication between the district and the Pueblos.”

This parent saw the need for another voice on behalf of her child and, when it was not there, questioned and held the staff member accountable for not demonstrating effective leadership.

Education pundits, researchers, and policy makers agree that parent involvement is vital to student success (Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon 1996). In the legislated education reforms that schools must implement, the responsibility for developing and maintaining stronger parent involvement is a critical issue for schools. Both state and federal policies call for parent committees at every school site. Parental input can affect all aspects of curriculum, pedagogy, school climate, language, successful students, vision, and relationships as indicated in our findings. As the parent quoted above advocated for her child, we found additional examples in which asymmetrical power relations did not stop some parents from becoming advocates for their children. An Apache parent asserted a vital reason for this type of advocacy: “There’s a lot of teachers that I feel they’re racial. The school ain’t very Native friendly. There’s really no culture or anything brought in, Native culture brought into the schools. Their idea of Native culture is putting a poster on the wall with Native Americans.”

Undaunted by the negative situations and experiences that marginalized their children and minimized services, Native American parents challenged the power structures in the schools to address their children’s needs. An example of this is found in the way a Navajo parent observed and acted on the subtle messages that implied her children should not enroll in competitive advanced placement classes: “They wouldn’t test my kids even though they were gifted, so many times. . . . They told me ‘The standard in New Mexico is way higher for gifted. . . . Are you sure you want to set up your kids for that? What if they don’t make it? What if they don’t complete it?’ And so I told them, ‘You know what? You’re going to test her and your going to find out she’s going to be way above that.’”

Similarly, students shared a deep understanding of not only their schooling but the daily operations of the schools they attended. They felt that their schools often ignored or dismissed their perspectives. Their voices spoke to leadership realities and the expectations for accountability that need to be in
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place to provide meaningful educational goals and experiences. Students invited the research team to spend time at the schools, visiting classrooms, observing instruction and the day-to-day activities. One Pueblo student challenged the research team: “If you really, really want to understand it, spend at least a week here. And you will find out every little thing. When kids are being harassed, when kids are being told that they’re no good, they’re not going to go anywhere. And when kids are being avoided by teachers, and teachers have favorites. I would say that you have to spend a week.”

Students were not consulted in the decisions that affected their schooling and saw this research as an opportunity to present their concerns to those who have control over their education. Thus, they were forthright in the comments they shared. One Pueblo student echoed a common sentiment: “It seems like this school does not really do much [with our communities].” Other students offered the criticism that the only time they saw a community member on their school premises was when they were called in to deal with “problems,” suggesting parents’ decision-making authority and perspective was only called on for disciplinary issues.

Critiques of Leadership Practices in Schools

Student participants’ recognition of asymmetrical power relations in the decision-making processes of the school extended to their critique of leadership practices in schools. Students at the “ground level” of school-based experiences knew that they had a responsibility to learn, but they saw the impractical nature of decisions that limited their access to meaningful study and resources. One Apache student stated, “Well, right now we’re kind of restricted on our research, because they’ve blocked all the computers. You have to have a teacher’s computer to actually get access to information.” School leaders in this community wanted high achievement and saw that the resources had to be made available for students’ use. In this instance, the tribal government set up a community learning center to assist students by providing computers they could use after school. However, without the coordination between school and tribal leadership, the students’ lack of good information and research was not optimizing student learning.

Another common issue articulated by many students was that they had old textbooks and did not have the resources to do research outside of the schools since technology and community libraries were not always available or reliable. The condition of resources that the students were using in the classroom and the students’ perception of not having “the truth” being taught about their Native communities’ rich history, culture, knowledge, and contributions were major concerns in of themselves but, in combination, created a perception of
their being seen as not worthy of quality services. One Apache student expressed her dissatisfaction with the condition of materials that were supposed to assist them in their studies: “And then, like, sometimes the printing of it [chapter copies]; you can’t even understand it, ’cause it’s like always so foggy. And then you have to go back and try figuring out what the work is. So it takes us extra time just to do some of our assignments.”

Students also witnessed and critiqued an inequitable application of discipline and grading practices. They described situations in which others received opportunities and privileges that translated to them as an inequitable implementation of policies and procedures. This was an accountability issue requiring discussion and resolution by teachers and administrators. The students saw it as an issue deserving more leadership and accountability. One Pueblo student critiqued the double standard she witnessed in her school: “If you talk back to the teacher you get ISS [in school suspension]. Or, it depends on the certain teacher . . . some kids are let go and then some aren’t. It’s like some kids are favored over others.” In these cases, students indicated that it was Native students who were most likely to be harshly disciplined in comparison to their white and Hispanic counterparts who may have engaged in the same disciplinary infraction. These findings are consistent with other research that has found American Indian/Alaska Native students more likely than all other student groups to be suspended from school (e.g., DeVoe and Darling-Churchill 2008). It also demonstrates unequal power relations in terms of how American Indian students were inequitably treated by the school leaders compared to other students.

Parents were aware of this type of racially influenced inequity in power relations in their schools as well. One Apache parent stated, “This is a Native community but the school is not. I don’t see it doing anything to promote Native American way of life, like Jicarilla way of life.” Similarly, an Apache grandparent, undeterred by insensitive and at times hostile school contexts, told us about the changes she had seen and experienced over the years. In spite of these conditions, she remained an active agent in the school community by continuing to advocate for her community. She said, “I teach classes. I open my door to whoever so they will want to come to learn pottery or moccasin making, but no one comes.”

Teachers, too, were critical about the lack of instructional leadership, especially in integrating Native American experiences and history into the core curriculum. A non-Native teacher in a Pueblo community explained that the official curriculum did not include Native American content: “I can’t believe that they don’t have it. I just—really it’s just incredulous that they don’t have a Native American Studies Program right now. They should I think.” In spite of these challenges, teachers in several schools from all of the districts we visited described how they wove local knowledge and resources into their
curricula and lesson plans, in spite of the lack of leadership to implement Native American Studies in the official curriculum.

Many teachers had poignant critiques about the rigidity of state-imposed curricula, which used only one measure of progress, the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment. These teachers were concerned about the inflexibility of a mandated curriculum and expressed that the “canned curriculum” impeded collaboration with other teachers on projects that integrated interdisciplinary knowledge. Some worried that the narrow focus contributed to discipline problems for students who valued more meaningful content and learning experiences.

Other teachers expressed frustration with school district administrators’ lack of leadership in providing opportunities for culturally relevant professional development in their schools. A non-Native teacher in a Pueblo community reminisced:

[In the past] we had as a part of our orientation as new teachers that year—a tour of the whole district, which included the tribal areas, and we got mentored by a Native American woman. . . . It was a good title; something like “Appropriate Practices for Use with Native American Students.” I don’t think they’re doing that at all. It’s fostered a lot of antagonisms. One of the cultural things for the communities that we serve is that when there’s a death, there are four days observed for the death. I have heard teachers comment this year, “That’s a ridiculous amount of time,” but they don’t know that that is an obligation.

This lack of leadership in the professional development of a mostly non-Native American staff in the public schools that serve Native American communities has led to misunderstanding and disrespect for Native American traditions and dissatisfaction with the schools among American Indian students and parents.

At first glance, many of the issues around the lack of culturally appropriate professional development opportunities for school staff could be addressed by revisiting school budgets to allocate adequate funds for such services and ensuring that such training becomes a regular and valued part of the school calendar. However, on second glance, these issues are much more complex than allocating funds and time. The development and implementation of culturally relevant professional development opportunities provides a much-needed opportunity for these schools to collaborate with local tribes and businesses to generate and share solutions and resources for serving their children and their schools. Unfortunately, the continued emphasis on standards-based accountability measures such as the drive to meet Adequate Yearly Progress has resulted in a lack of time, money, and other resources being devoted to
building school-community relations aimed at improving the cultural relevancy of these schools.

**Visions of Leadership and Accountability**

I want to be a nurse or a pharmacist. I want to work with medicine. I want to stay in the community. My grandpa is next to the head chief and I help him. I want to keep my traditional way. (Pueblo student)

This Pueblo student’s comment above is reflective of a major finding in our study, which is that a common view of leadership expressed by the participants is defined by service and contribution to one’s community. Expressions of leadership were often tied to the values held in their communities. Students, parents, community members, and teachers all expressed the importance of seeing members from their communities represented in leadership roles. Their concept of what this means was evident in comments such as this one from a Pueblo parent: “What I would like to see is more of our students becoming educators, and then eventually become administrators and then get as far as becoming superintendent and see what the outcome is. I know we have so many smart students out there that are very much capable of succeeding and becoming superintendent. I would like to see somebody from our community become that.” The foregoing comment begins to identify the qualities parents and community members look for in leaders. It describes leadership that would honor service, commitment, and care to the community but also recognizes success in the schools that echoes the traditional words of “doing your best for the people.” It also alludes to the potential for the nature of current relationships with the school system to be different if there were someone from the community in a leadership role.

Students had very clear visions of opportunities for leadership to improve the education of American Indian students. One idea that reverberated among American Indian students, parents, and community members alike was the need to create structures of opportunity for homegrown American Indian teachers. One Pueblo student beamed when she talked about the importance of having homegrown teachers: “I want to have somebody from our own Pueblo to work here that would teach us more about Native or about our community.” Bringing this idea to fruition has some precedent and calls for partnerships and commitment of leaders from school, tribal, state, and institutes of higher education.

Another common vision articulated by students, parents, and Native teachers was the opportunity to learn Native American languages in the schools. This vision is tied to traditional views of leadership in American Indian com-
munities, as characterized earlier. While there were some language programs in elementary school, students wanted school leaders to extend those programs throughout the K–12 experience. Echoing tribal leaders, we heard students say, “They should have more Native languages so that everyone can learn their language again because we’re kind of losing it” (Navajo student). As such, it becomes an accountability issue for school leaders when it is left to their discretion to provide time, personnel, resources, materials, and professional development to assure a successful program. Language programs also provide a way for schools to partner with local tribal leaders and community resource people.

Transforming the “Safety Zone”

In this section, we share how participants explain their visions for leadership and accountability by redefining the common “safe” practices to transform their schools. In New Mexico, administrators and teachers at the local level are responsible for implementing state and federal statutes and mandates in the schools, and schools reflect the nature of this local leadership in their daily operation and interactions. Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) explained how schools have often treated the cultural backgrounds of American Indian students as “safe” or “dangerous” with regard to the assimilative goals of the schools. The safety zone theory posits that schools control what cultural or linguistic practices are tolerated through curriculum, pedagogy, and policy. Some parents in our study found ways to challenge and transform these controls so that their respective cultural and linguistic practices could be included. One approach depended on the level of involvement that they had with their children’s schools. The more involvement the parents had with their children’s school, the more positive their interactions were with the school and its administrator(s). A Pueblo parent shared: “What’s good about this school is that as parents we can go to the school anytime, and it’s always real inviting. I’ve been able to get into some programs with my kids just because I’ve been there; get some different opportunities just because I’m there.” In these instances schools work with parents to ensure their participation.

In another district where there were some beginning steps for shared decision making, we heard, “now we have (Pueblo) people on the school board; now we are part of it; know about the funding; they’re showing us numbers [referring to financial budgets] now. They never shared that with us before.” This illustrates how Native parents used their agency to elect representatives from their community to serve on the school board and transform the safety zone in their schools. In transforming schools, which is what is being called for, local administrators’ sense of fairness and appropriate action toward their
clients can be instrumental in their advocacy for students and communities (Marschall et al. 2011).

Finally, our participants redefined the safety zone by advocating for the creation of cultural connections within schools by honoring the cultural beliefs of American Indian students. In doing this, the school can facilitate the growth of its students’ cultural identity. One Navajo administrator discussed the potential of her school for creating this type of atmosphere: “I think for the most part, they [the students] know their Navajo identity... I mean we just need to bring it more, whether it be the Diné Club being the main organization to really promote. For the first time, they promoted. We called it a cleansing. I forget. What was it called? Protection day. They sponsored a protection day, and it’s the first time we ever had a medicine man come over to our school and do a blessing. It was all sponsored through the Diné Club. So yeah, it’s there. The potential is there.” This activity recognized the traditional beliefs of the Diné, while supporting and respecting the heritage of the majority of the school’s students. It relates back to traditional views of leadership, which entail safeguarding the well-being of the community. The activity was achieved because of the actions of the student group, the Diné club, and the support of the Diné school administrator. In this instance, the school leadership enabled a vision for supporting cultural continuity to come to fruition.

Similarly, the poignant comment from a Pueblo parent below calls attention to the urgency of American Indian leadership in New Mexico public schools and beyond:

The day might come when everything is so contaminated with the air, the water, the land, that they’ll come to the Pueblo and tell us, “You know what? You guys—sorry to tell you this—but your land is condemned and if all 3,000 of you decide to stay here, you’re on your own!” And so my question is, “Where do we all go—a group of 3,000 of us—to go live where we can still live and we know who our neighbor is and we know who lives behind us, in front of us, or in back of us? Where [can] we all live together where we can still speak Tewa, where we can still be uncle and aunt; that we’re not living, like, in Albuquerque or in Minneapolis where we don’t know who the neighbors are across the street?” We’ll have no idea about language, songs, dances, culture, nothing. It’s just erased. I want our children to be totally reaching their potential but also hanging onto who they are because I think that’s important; not only for our survival but I think that it’s the survival of the whole world. That’s just the way I see things—that’s what I would like for 2025.

This parent expressed the understanding of how the success of children is tied to the survival of their community and the contribution of this knowledge.
base to the well-being of the entire world. This worldview is testimony of how parents, community members, teachers, and students identified the need for environments and relationships that share knowledge and power for creating vital connections of Indigenous values, school leadership, and the growth and cultural continuity of Native communities. Their visions of leadership are grounded in the values and traditions of their communities, which include having love and concern for your land and your people. The parent quoted in the statement above proposes a community-centered approach to education that can ultimately benefit and transform schools, American Indian communities, and the wider world.

Conclusion and Implications

This article began with the question of how leadership is conceptualized in the public schools that enroll Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo Nation students. We found that students, teachers, parents, and community members experience, understand, and negotiate unequal power dynamics in New Mexico schools. The participants in this study shared experiences that marginalized their voices in the everyday leadership practices and power relations between the schools and the community. Yet they saw clearly how they could change their schools to be more responsive and enriched with greater involvement and shared decision making.

In describing how they navigated power dynamics in New Mexico public schools, American Indian students, parents, and community members, as well as teachers (both Native and non-Native) in this study, articulated the characteristics and responsibilities of transformative school leadership in providing an environment conducive to enhanced learning for their children. As described by one of the students, we found that traditional American Indian understandings of leadership were anchored in the traditional wisdom and responsibility to community that have been part of the visions of leadership articulated by Native American communities in New Mexico for generations. Their views of leadership were based in their community values and practices. They envisioned meaningful connections between the purpose of school and the well-being of their communities. This is in line with American Indian leadership values and characteristics, which are rooted in the caretaking and health of the people and land of the community.

As state and federal accountability processes placed the onus for performance on students and the communities they come from, the call for high academic achievement was welcomed by many tribal communities who saw the regular education services provided to their children as mediocre or less. One implication for practice on the basis of the study’s findings is that col-
laborative decision making between schools and communities could facilitate communication and improve student performance. According to participants, school administrators often limited their role and voice in the school. Another implication for practice is the need for professional development of Native educators to create more avenues for pursuing educational leadership opportunities. Using tribal community resources would help to balance the asymmetrical power structures.

Efforts toward these goals have begun through the IEA, which was passed in 2003 to address the inequities of educational services and long-standing needs of American Indian children within the public and Bureau of Indian Education schools serving tribal communities. Native communities’ understanding of the intent of the IEA was to hold the New Mexico Public Education Department accountable for the education of American Indian students in its schools, as evidenced by tribal testimony at education summits and government-to-government meetings conducted in the state (Bird 2007; New Mexico Public Education Department and Higher Education Department 2005). This study showed that a high priority for tribal communities in New Mexico is the continued survival of their Native languages and culture. Many envision the school and educational systems to play an important role in this endeavor.

As McCarty (2011) aptly writes, “In contrast to the documented failure of exclusionary curricular approaches, a large and growing body of research from diverse cultural-linguistic settings documents the academic benefits of approaches that systematically include home and community language and cultural practices as integral to the school curriculum—pedagogies which, it is important to point out, go unquestioned for mainstream English-speaking children” (2).

Another implication for practice based on the findings of this study stems from how the participants saw the need for schools to support their visions of successful students by providing their children additional resources, more meaningful learning experiences, enriched curricular content, and respectful relationships with those that arrive in the community to teach them. Professional development for teachers and administrators regarding the cultural background, values, beliefs, and practices of the local community would be one step toward honoring these visions. This type of support holds the agencies and schools that provide educational services for their children accountable and responsible in ways that have yet to be addressed. In the words of an Indian education director from a Northern Pueblo, “Indian children need to be given the opportunity to pursue their dreams. Schools need to be held accountable for those who do not succeed” (New Mexico Public Education Department and Higher Education Department 2005).

There are currently state and federal policies in place to make this happen in the schools; however, what cannot be legislated is the day-to-day interac-
tions, decisions, and the deliberate attention to details that must be in place in order to ensure successful students—students who are successful as measured by the academic standards of schools, as well as the cultural and linguistic indicators of success as determined by their families, communities, and tribes. That the maintenance and preservation of language, cultural knowledge, practices, and ways of being are sacrificed for the sake of achieving Adequate Yearly Progress is not what education for Native children is about. Students, parents, and teachers see what has to be done. Now, the challenge is for policy makers, school leaders, and educators at large to move beyond the bounds of their safety zones, as they work to transform their philosophies and practices to better serve the needs, abilities, and priorities of Native children, their families, communities, and tribes.

Notes

1. We use the terms “American Indian” and “Native American” to refer to populations within the United States. We use the terms “Native” or “Indigenous” to refer to broader or global Indigenous populations across the world, including those located in New Mexico. We also capitalize the terms “Indigenous” and “Native” out of respect for the political and cultural sovereignty of Native people and their homelands. This also falls in line with the United Nations use of the term “Indigenous.”

2. “Diné” and “Navajo” are synonymous; the term “Diné” is the original name in Navajo language that Diné people have called themselves. It is translated to mean “the People.” However, the term “Navajo” is also widely used, including as the official name of the tribal nation—the Navajo Nation. We use both terms.

3. We identify the American Indian heritage of the participants we quote to provide more context for the quote. However, for Pueblo participants, we do not name their specific Pueblo due to the smaller number of participants in each Pueblo. This adds an extra level of protection of their identity.


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