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Indigenous Resistance in the Academy: Decolonial Reflections on Integrating Tribal and Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Education

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Abstract

Social work education, a field historically entangled with assimilation policies, continues to perpetuate colonial logics that devalue and erase Indigenous knowledge systems. While calls for "inclusion" are common, integration often remains tokenistic, failing to challenge the Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist ideologies at the discipline's core. This essay emerges from our participation in a 2024 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting session focused on integrating Indigenous knowledges into social work curricula. Using a "Reflection as a Method" approach grounded in Indigenous Feminist Thought (BlackDeer, 2023), we analyze the collective praxis of a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. Our thematic reflections explore key sites of decolonial resistance: (1) shifting pedagogy from symbolic inclusion to sovereignty-affirming practices; (2) centering community-defined, land-based healing practices over institutional "best practices"; and (3) resisting extractive research logics by upholding epistemic sovereignty and relational accountability. We argue that integrating Indigenous knowledge is not only a reframing action, but a transformative, decolonial praxis of resistance and resurgence. We conclude with a call for social work education to move beyond rhetorical commitments and into material and epistemic practices that support Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge justice.

Indigenization Statement

As co-authors, we come together across lines of identity, discipline, and institutional affiliation—bound by a shared commitment to unsettling colonial power in social work education. Our collective includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, scholars, and practitioners engaged in curriculum development, community-based work, anti-oppressive teaching, and transformative pedagogy. Some of us identify as Indigenous women, bringing lived experiences and epistemologies rooted in specific Nations and territories. Others come to this work as settlers and allies, committed to lifelong unlearning, relational accountability, and critical reflection. We understand that our work is situated within systems shaped by settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy—and we strive to confront these forces, even as we navigate them from within.

We acknowledge the complex, uneven terrain of working within academic systems built on Indigenous dispossession. Our relationships to Indigenous knowledge and community vary—but what unites us is a political and ethical commitment to resisting extractive scholarship, honoring Indigenous sovereignty, and contributing to a deeper decolonial praxis within and beyond the academy. This reflective conceptual essay is not presented as an authoritative or neutral account. Instead, we offer it as a situated contribution—an act of solidarity, a call to accountability, and a gesture toward co-resistance with Indigenous movements for knowledge justice and educational self-determination. We write from our entangled roles as educators and learners, aware that our work is always relational, always unfinished, and always shaped by responsibilities to communities past, present, and future (Kahpeaysewat et al., 2023).

Introduction

Indigenous resistance remains alive and ongoing in land, language, ceremony, and education, a necessary response to the ‘logic of elimination’ underpinning settler colonialism, which seeks to dissolve Native societies to territorial access (Wolfe, 2006). Yet within social work education, colonial structures persist as an enduring coloniality of power—a logic managing knowledge and subjectivities long after formal colonialism has ended—in shaping what counts as knowledge, whose voices are centered, and how healing is defined (Craig, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2008; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). While Indigenous communities have long offered holistic, relational, and land-based approaches to wellness and justice, their integration into academic curricula is often tokenistic—a superficial “tagging a feather on it” (Walters et al., 2020, p.8) adding Indigenous content without

challenging Western epistemological primacy—or co-opted through Western frameworks. As educators and practitioners, we offer this reflective conceptual essay as part of a broader movement resisting settler-colonial logics in higher education.

Grounded in Indigenous Feminist Thought we foreground the leadership and knowledge of Indigenous women and call for a pedagogical shift—one that centers sovereignty, relational accountability, and community protection as core to social work education (Ahmed-Landeryou, 2023; Anderson, 2016; BlackDeer, 2023). This requires confronting the epistemic violence (Fricker, 2007; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022) inherent in the discipline, which devalues Indigenous ways of knowing (Ficker, 2007) and perpetuates a "zero-point epistemology" that presents Eurocentric, individualistic lifeways as universal (Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022, p.254). Such work is both a critique and invitation: to move beyond symbolic inclusion, toward practices that support collective dignity, land-based learning, and Indigenous self-determination.

This essay emerges from our participation in a Connect session during the 2024 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting. CSWE is the national association that accredits social work programs in the United States and serves as the primary professional body advancing quality social work education through advocacy, standards, and professional development opportunities like its Annual Program Meeting. The session, coordinated by the Council on Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity (CRECD), focused on advancing the integration of Indigenous knowledges in social work curricula. In early 2024, our team collaboratively developed a proposal that was later accepted and presented at the conference. The presentation drew upon our shared experiences and academic work, with the intention of offering

faculty tools, language, and ethical frameworks to embed Indigenous perspectives into their pedagogy and scholarship.

During the session, participants engaged in reflection and dialogue around key themes: shifting dominant mindsets about Indigenous Peoples, promoting food sovereignty and community health, resisting tokenism in curriculum design, and fostering relational approaches to research and teaching (Hall-Faul et al., 2024; Hatcher et al., 2009; Joyner et al., 2024; Smith, 2021). We also addressed ethical engagement with Indigenous communities, and shared tools such as the curriculum wheel and the method of yarning to guide relational, healing approaches.

To help us synthesize our experiences, we used NotebookLM (Google, 2024), an AI-assisted research tool to thematically organize presentation materials, reflection notes, and discussion threads. However, the interpretive work—the meaning-making, critique, and visioning—is our own, shaped by our diverse identities, roles, and shared commitment to equity in social work education.

We come together to share this narrative not as a definitive answer, but as an inclusive invitation for collective action—to reflect, to engage, and to act. We hope that these insights and examples will support fellow educators and institutions in deepening their commitment to integrating Indigenous knowledges in ways that are ethical, relational, and grounded in community accountability.

Theoretical Framework

Our guiding principle centers Indigenous women's voices, land-based epistemologies, and sovereignty-rooted ways of knowing. The framework resists settler-colonial logics that detach knowledge from land, impose colonial/modern gender binaries, and portray Indigenous life as deficit or data (Lugones, 2007). Instead, it treats knowledge as relational, embodied, and

intergenerational—rooted in story, place, ceremony, community, and care. In social work education, it offers critique and direction: challenging Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal, capitalist dominance; interrogating institutional harm; and affirming sovereignty as political, epistemic, and ontological (Grande, 2004; Simpson, 2017). For us, it serves as a relational methodology demanding accountable practice and structural change.

The framework encourages social work educators and practitioners to shift from symbolic gestures to intentional types of transformation that privilege Indigenous cosmologies in curriculum design, support land-based pedagogies, and reject extractive research paradigms. Following Simpson's (2017) concept of resurgent education, we view learning as a practice of collective liberation—rooted in Indigenous worldviews, languages, and relationships to land. It echoes Anderson's (2016) assertion that Indigenous women's experiences are not only valid sources of knowledge but essential to the regeneration of Indigenous futures. Through this lens, our reflections highlight resistance not only as critique, but as creation: the (re)making of educational spaces that honor Indigenous resurgence, protect life, and open futures grounded in collective dignity. Ultimately, we invoke our guiding principle as a praxis—a way of doing and being that insists on sovereignty, relationality, and liberation in social work education and beyond.

Reflections as a Method

As social work educators and scholars committed to decolonizing the field, we engaged in an intentional process of collective reflection—grounded not in detached analysis, but in relational accountability. Our method privileges Indigenous storywork, listening, and intersubjective visioning (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). This approach aligns with a decolonizing methodology that views research as a "living dialogical relationship with the world" (Brant

Castellano, 2004, p.104) and centers Indigenous projects of storytelling, testimonies, and remembering (Smith, 2021) as legitimate and necessary forms of knowledge production. The practice of reflection involves a shift from surface to deep learning that can show itself to be a transformative process (Harris, 2008). We treat meaningful reflection not as a neutral exercise that consists of thinking and learning, but as a process to deliberately seek out and examine a belief that one supports to better consider knowledge that is available. There is a level of practicality that must also be accepted with this close examination to encourage acceptance. As a form of ethical engagement and an act of resistance against institutional erasure of Indigenous voices, the authors strongly believe that one can create opportunities for personal and professional development growth to enhance personal capacity to close this gap.

We drew upon our own materials—the session proposal, presentation slides, written notes, monthly meetings pre-conference, and post-conference debriefs—as living texts. These were not treated as "data," but as manifestations of ongoing relationships: with one another, with Indigenous communities, and with the pedagogical spaces we hope to transform. Meaning emerged not through coding or thematic abstraction, but through sitting with discomfort, returning to stories, and asking what the work required of us.

We used NotebookLM (Google, 2024) only to collate sources across documents. Aware that such tools are grounded in epistemologies often misaligned with Indigenous ways of knowing, we avoided using it for interpretation or narrative generation. Through dialogic, care-centered collaboration, the authors undertook all analytic tasks—interpretation, critique, and theorizing—guided by our diverse identities and commitment to equity in social work education.

We approached this process as a practice of listening—to stories, to silences, and to what remains unresolved. In doing so, we refused extraction and instead honored the principle that

knowledge is not a product but a relationship, striving for a practice grounded in mutual care, trust, and solidarity (Ciofalo, 2019; Wilson, 2008). This reflection is not a generalizable finding but contributes to ongoing discussions on social work education's accountability. In the following section, we will examine the principal themes that arose from this session.

Thematic Reflections

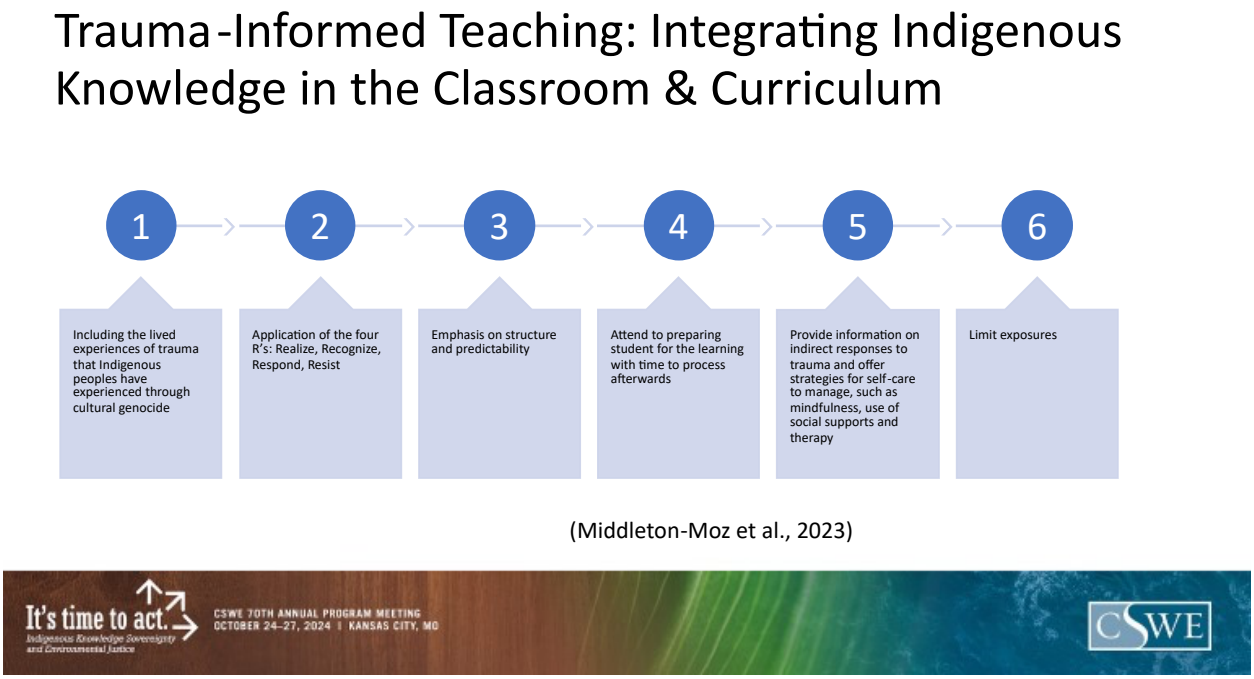
Theme 1: Moving Beyond Performative Pedagogy

One of the most urgent themes emerging from our reflections is the need to shift pedagogy from symbolic gestures to sovereignty-affirming educational practices. During the Connect session, participants voiced frustration with surface-level inclusion—land acknowledgments, token guest lectures—without deep curricular engagement with Indigenous worldviews.

In response, we offered tools to support educators in resisting settler pedagogies and moving toward healing-informed, relational teaching rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. One teaching model adapted from Middelton-Moz et al. (2023), illustrated how Indigenous epistemologies can reshape not only what we teach, but how we teach (see Figure 1). Rather than reinforcing colonial hierarchies of knowledge, this approach foregrounds care, relational accountability, and cultural safety.

Figure 1

A trauma-informed teaching model adapted from Middelton-Moz et al. (2023)



We also shared case studies grounded in ethical tensions specific to Indigenous contexts—challenging students to consider relationality, sovereignty, and collective care, rather than applying settler-defined "best practices." This marks a critical departure from mainstream cultural adoption models (Barrera & Castro, 2006), which seek to methodologically modify existing Western interventions, and instead moves towards a decolonial model that centers Indigenous knowledges as the foundation for a new praxis (Hartman et al., 2019; Walters et al., 2020). These case studies become sites of resistance themselves—interrupting Western problem-solving models and inviting learners into uncertainty, complexity, and interdependence (Wolfer et al., 2013). During the session, we used the first story, entitled "No Place Like Home" by Lori D. Franklin (Wolfer et al., 2013), to illustrate this approach. The case centers on Lucy, a 63-year-old Indigenous woman admitted to a psychiatric unit, whose clinical presentation cannot be separated from a life shaped by displacement, cultural disconnection, and institutional harm.

Rather than presenting a diagnostic challenge to be solved, Lucy's story invites students to engage with deeper questions: How is Indigenous experience pathologized in clinical settings? What does the absence of cultural safety reveal about the assumptions embedded in mainstream care? And where do Western frameworks fall short in honoring lived experience and community knowledge?

In the case, Lucy, an Elder and survivor, has been institutionalized without any recognition of her cultural identity, community ties, or access to culturally grounded support (Wolfer et al., 2013). At one point, her records even misidentify her tribal affiliation as Choctaw, a Nation based hundreds of miles away, illustrating how systems routinely erase or flatten Indigenous identity. This misrecognition is an example of the ongoing disregard for Indigenous sovereignty and the significance of nationhood in health, healing, and belonging.

During the session, we modeled how this case could be used to generate decolonial research questions and prompt ethical reflection. We also demonstrated strategies for prioritizing cultural awareness and relational accountability when approaching clinical narratives like Lucy's—emphasizing how Indigenous values can reshape both inquiry and intervention.

Participants resonated with the framing of teaching as a reciprocal relationship, not a neutral transmission of knowledge (Pollack, 2026). Practices such as storytelling, ceremony, and honoring intergenerational wisdom were affirmed as pedagogical strategies—and as acts of resistance against the erasure of Indigenous presence in the academy. These conversations reinforced that classrooms can be sites of both harm and healing—and that pedagogy can be mobilized in service of Indigenous resurgence.

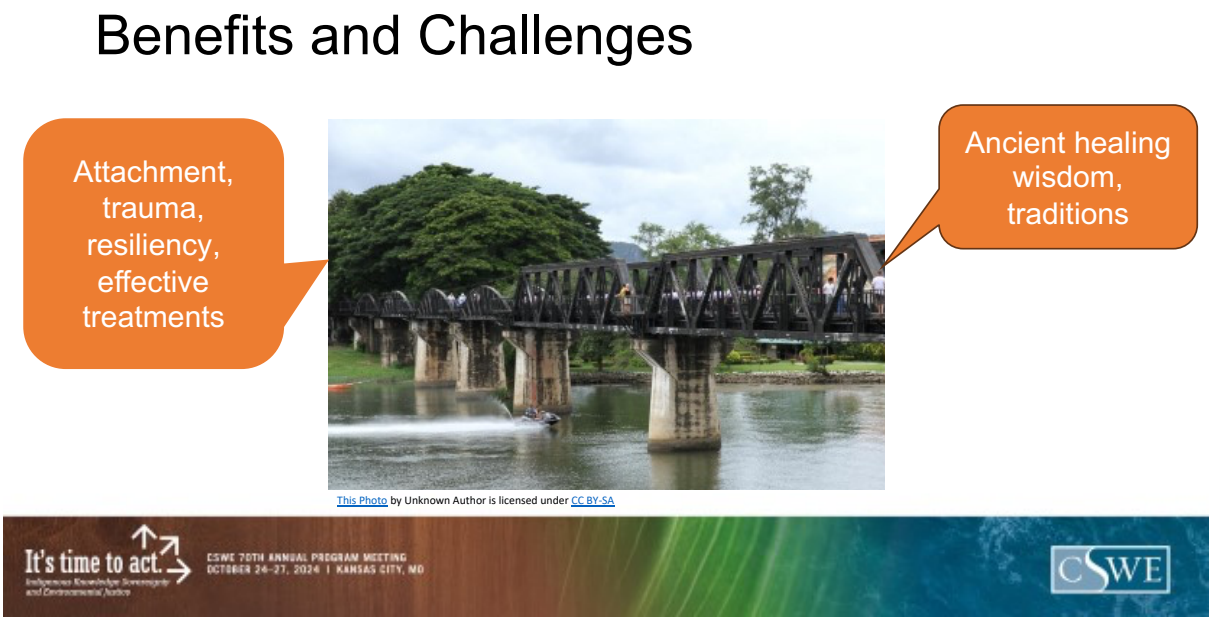
Theme 2: Challenging the "Alternative" Label

This theme centers a critical question: Who does social work serve, and at what cost? Our reflections revealed how institutional expectations around evidence-based practice often position Indigenous approaches as "alternative," marginalizing community-defined healing practices.

We used the metaphor of a bridge with Western clinical concepts on one side, and Indigenous systems of healing on the other (Figure 2). These Indigenous systems represent a complete, parallel explanatory model in which the diagnosis is historical trauma and the 'treatment' is direct participation in cultural practices (Gone, 2013). This employment of culture as medicine (Walters et al., 2020) is not an alternative but an anticolonial prescription (Hartmann et al., 2019) for healing. The bridge is not a neutral connector; it must be intentionally built with community consent and structural humility. This metaphor catalyzed powerful conversations about shifting from working for communities to working with, and being guided by Indigenous leadership.

Figure 2

Bridge Metaphor



Examples shared included food sovereignty initiatives, language revitalization projects, and community arts as wellness practices. These are not ancillary to clinical work—they are core expressions of resistance and survivance. They assert Indigenous values in spaces where deficit-based models often dominate and reclaim social work as a tool for community-defined healing and land-based care.

The metaphor that Figure 2 provided resonated strongly with attendees, many of whom spoke about the difficulty of reconciling institutional expectations for evidence-based practice with community-centered, culturally grounded approaches to healing. The bridge image allowed us to emphasize that Indigenous and Western approaches are not inherently incompatible but require intentional relational work to bring into dialogue (Pollack, 2026). This tension persists despite robust empirical evidence demonstrating that community-level factors of cultural continuity—such as land claims, self-government, and community control over health and education—are strongly and inversely correlated with youth suicide rates, serving as a hedge against distress (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

This is not a new idea—many scholars and community leaders have long called for a relational approach to professional helping—but it remains underdeveloped in social work education and professional training (Chinn, 2007). In our discussions, we heard a clear call: social workers must shift from working "on" or "for" Indigenous communities to working *with* them, in relationships built on trust, accountability, and shared power.

We also explored the role of community-based practices in supporting Indigenous sovereignty and wellness. These practices, rooted in collective identity and intergenerational resilience, offer powerful alternatives to deficit-based models often promoted in mainstream

settings. Participants expressed appreciation for seeing these approaches uplifted, as they often go unrecognized or unsupported in formal social work curricula.

Theme 3: Research Practice and Ethical Reflexivity

Research, historically a tool of colonization, remains contested terrain in social work education. As Brant Castellano (2004) noted, the jagged colliding of world views between Western reductionism and holistic Indigenous ethics meant communities developed a negative perception of research. Our Connect session emphasized the urgent need to resist extractive research logics and instead uphold epistemic sovereignty. Participants were invited to interrogate who defines "valid" knowledge, who benefits from research, and how communities are involved in shaping inquiry. In response, we shared community-driven frameworks such as Two-Eyed Seeing, the Alaska Native Heritage Center Logic Model, and Indigenous data sovereignty principles (Harris, 2015; Hatcher et al., 2009; Hudson et al., 2023). Central to this theme was the concept of ethical reflexivity—a call to continuously assess one's position, power, and responsibility. This surpasses IRB protocols to include ceremony, consent, and long-term relational accountability as foundational elements of ethical research, through a framework grounded in the Four R's: Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) that transform research from an extractive act into a respectful relationship (Battiste, 2008; Datta, 2018).

Indigenous Feminist Thought compels us to name how gendered and racialized power operates in knowledge production (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 2021). It insists that we center the leadership and lived realities of Indigenous women, and refuse research practices that erase, extract, or instrumentalize their stories. As one session participant noted, "Research should be in service to the people—not the academy." Ultimately, this theme affirms research as a site of

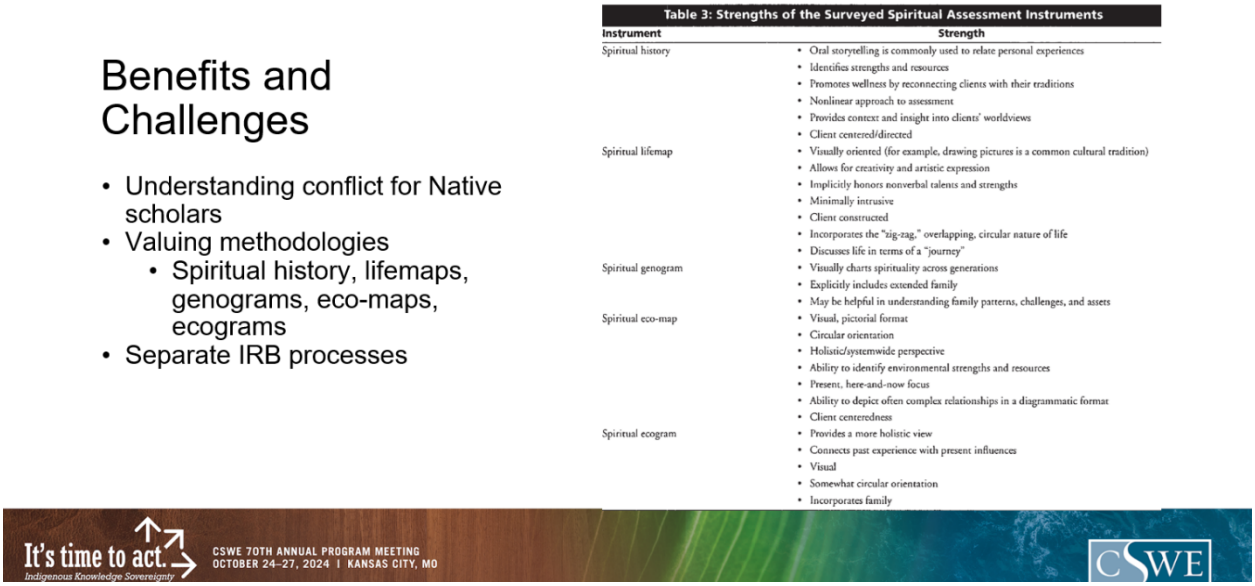
either harm or healing. Our responsibility as scholars and educators is to ensure it is the latter—a practice of listening, returning, and repairing, grounded in the political and spiritual project of Indigenous resistance.

In addition to teaching and community practice, our reflection emphasized the urgent need to re-examine how research is conducted in social work, especially when it involves Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems. Historically, research has been used as a tool of colonial domination—extracting data, reinforcing stereotypes, and perpetuating systemic harm (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 2021). During the Connect session, we challenged participants to confront these legacies and consider how research can be reimagined as a relationship-based, community-driven process.

A key concept that emerged in our discussion was the idea of ethical reflexivity. As social work educators and scholars, we must go beyond institutional review board protocols and engage in deep, ongoing reflection about our roles, intentions, and relationships in the research process, as illustrated in Figure 3. This means asking questions like: Who benefits from this research? Who defines what is valid or rigorous? How are communities involved in framing the questions, interpreting the findings, and sharing the knowledge?

Figure 3

Example of ethical reflection



Critical guidance from the guiding principle compels us to consider how gender, power, and colonization intersect in knowledge production, and it underscores the leadership and lived experiences of Indigenous women who have too often been marginalized even within Indigenous research spaces. This framework challenges dominant paradigms by advocating for relational accountability, storywork, and the honoring of Indigenous data sovereignty.

During the session, we introduced community-driven frameworks tools and approaches that reflect this shift and community-based participatory research models that prioritize Indigenous leadership and agenda-setting. Participants expressed a desire for more training and support in these methods, as well as institutional flexibility to allow for nontraditional dissemination practices such as community storytelling, art, and ceremony.

Together, these themes move beyond critique alone by showing how performative pedagogy, deficit framing, and unexamined research norms must be confronted through ethical reflexivity. This type of purposed reflection can confront unexamined research norms and lead to transformative action, resulting in the redistribution of authority, redefining legitimate

knowledge, and centering community-defined practice. The intellectual peak for the authors on this journey included redefining what counts and shifting authority to Indigenous communities for knowledge production. We each were significantly challenged to revisit and revise our own pedagogical, evaluative, and institutional practices to elevate Indigenous approaches and not treat them as add-ons.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Social work education stands at a critical crossroads, long shaped by settler colonial logics that render it contested, not neutral, terrain (Cleece et al., 2025). Indigenous knowledge within this system has often been removed, tokenized, or erased in service of institutional power. And yet, it is also a place of possibility. From this experience, we recognized that language and symbolic acknowledgment was not enough to disrupt dominant structures. We were able to share how we identified how power operates as more than just personal insight. We had to examine ourselves and our adopted/taught practices and how harmful they were in reproducing assumptions about evidence and legitimacy. This essay has traced our collective reflections as an act of resistance, a braid of voices committed to unsettling, unlearning, and rebuilding educational spaces that honor Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating. We were able to collectively reorient ourselves to action.

Our central message is that integrating Indigenous knowledge is not a curricular add-on or symbolic gesture; it is a relational, ethical, and transformative commitment. This requires noticing the gaps in curriculum, practice, and research methodologies. It is a decolonial praxis of return, resurgence, and relational accountability. How one identifies power and names this is critical in changing the existing dynamic. This work requires a deep rethinking of what counts as knowledge, who holds it, and how it is shared. Scholars will need to oscillate between personal

and professional identities, and mezzo/macro practices that continue to perpetuate harmful assumptions. It demands that we move beyond rhetorical inclusion and into material practices that support Indigenous sovereignty: hiring and retaining Indigenous faculty, funding community-led partnerships, restructuring curricula around land and kinship, and challenging white supremacy in both pedagogy and policy. By noticing and documenting performativity and interrogating complicity, others can take our shared experiences and take transformative actions.

To do this work is to be in relationship—with land, with ancestors, with future generations. It requires us to accept discomfort, relinquish control, practice humility, and refuse the myth of neutrality. We offer this reflection not as an endpoint, but as a contribution to this movement—one that seeks not just to reform social work education, but to root it in justice, community, and care. This is the praxis—the unity of reflection and action (Freire, 2014) that is required to delink from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It is an answer to Fanon's (1963) call to “turn over a new leaf...work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (p.316).

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