Breathing the Air of Their Ancestors: The Influence of Ethnic-Racial Identity on School Connectedness for Native American Youths

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Abstract: In this Indigenous-grounded, transformative sequential explanatory study, the author examined the influence of ethnic-racial identity exploration on school connectedness in a sample of (*n = 41*) Native American youths attending a public school on a federally recognized Indian reservation. The students were enrolled in a Native American cultural immersion program. Participants completed a survey packet including a demographic form, an adapted cultural connectedness survey, and the MAC 5-A-Short Version six-item school connectedness subscale. While the results indicated that ethnic-racial identity exploration slightly impacted school connectedness, they were not deemed statistically significant. The author also captured youth participants' perspectives to develop a deeper understanding of how ethnic-racial identity exploration impacted school connectedness, identifying eight categories. These findings may help inform a broader development and application of a Native American way of knowing instructional model that contributes to strengthening school connectedness for Native American youths through ethnic-racial identity exploration.
Keywords: Native American, Indigenous methodologies, ethnic-racial identity, school connectedness, transformative mixed methods.

Land Recognition

I open by paying homage to past, present, and future elders of the Blackfeet[2] Nation, the parents and students participating in this study, and Naatosii sahkomapii and Natoyii' saamiiakii. I recognize that the sovereign territory where this study was conducted is the ancestral homelands of the Blackfoot people. Similarly, I acknowledge the ancestral homelands of tribal nations where scholars are as they read this article.

Decolonizing Positionality

Indigenous authors highlight the importance of scholars decolonizing their identity because past research atrocities against Native American people were influenced by settler-colonial ideology (Smith, 1999). Western scholars decolonizing their positionality is symbolic of their

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[2] The Blackfoot people are called the Nitsitapiksi or Niitsitapi, *which means Real People (Bastien, 2004). The general term 'Blackfoot' refers to all the Confederated tribes, whereas the term 'Blackfeet' references an individual within the Confederacy or the tribe of the Confederacy whose lands reside in the United States of America (Hall, 2018). The difference in spelling between Pikani and Piikani represents a lack of agreement on a standardized spelling between the Blackfoot Confederacy members (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016).

commitment to situate themselves in their cultural and colonial histories that contribute to "healing to our recovery" (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 116).

I used the self-location framework (Absolon & Willet, 2005) plaited with the conceptualization of a research methodology framework (Walter & Andersen, 2016) to decolonize my positionality and my research methodology. Absolon and Willet (2005) wrote that to self-locate means "to say who you are, give yourself voice, and claim your position" (p. 112). Walter and Andersen (2016) broadened what it means to self-locate and emphasized the importance of recognizing one's social position to include explaining who we are "socially, economically, culturally, and racially" (p. 46). I am a white, non-Indigenous male scholar who comes from a colonized first-world country (the United States of America). I was a school administrator for 7-years in the school district at the center of this study. I recognize the influences of my colonizing settler society origins on my research methodology and the lens through which I interpreted the results.

The conceptualization of a research methodology framework depends on scholars uncovering the genesis of their axiological frame. Walter and Andersen (2016) suggest that scholars can gain insights about their axiological positioning by asking themselves "reflective, value-querying questions" such as, "Why this topic?" or "How come the research questions were posed a certain way?" (p. 50). The point of asking and answering reflective and value-querying questions is not about bringing additional credibility to a study. Instead, it is about recognizing that scholars bring their values to a study that influences their methodology. Having an awareness of our axiological positioning permits us to explore our scholarly works or those of others with a view of the values influencing them (Walter & Andersen, 2016). Once we discover and acknowledge the values informing our work, we can live in Māori scholar Bishop's (2008) utopia "where learning is interactive, dialogic, and spirals and participants are connected and committed to one another" (pp. 445–446).

My motivation for designing this study was to form a learning circle, described as "a process that generates information sharing, connections, builds capacity, and seeks balance and healing" (Absolon & Willet, 2005, p. 116). I aimed to understand how Native American[3] youths explored their ethnic-racial identities (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014) to cultivate school connectedness through a Native American way of knowing educational paradigm. In this study, I asked, how does ethnic-racial identity exploration inform school connectedness for Native American youths?

Unique Contribution Statement

The findings from this study inform a broader development and application of a Native American way of knowing instructional model that contributes to strengthening school connectedness for Native American youths who are rarely studied (Quijada Cerecer, 2013) and infrequently portrayed in educational settings (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Serafini et al., 2017). Numerous studies explore identity development with various populations of minority youths

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[3] For the current article, the terms American Indian (Lowe & Struthers, 2001), Native (Hill, 2006; Schultz & Noyes, 2020), Native American, and Indigenous were used interchangeably, "relating to people who trace their ancestral origins to the indigenous cultures and peoples of the Americas" (Strayhorn et al., 2016, p. 67). The term American Indian commonly denotes tribes residing in the United States (Grande, 2000) that have received federal recognition (Hill, 2006; Struthers et al., 2005). The term Indigenous is capitalized to recognize the distinct cultural and political relationship Indigenous people have with their homelands (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

(Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alpuria, 1990), yet few center on Native American youths (Kenyon & Carter, 2011).

Identity formation is challenging (Newman, 2005), yet a significant part of moving from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968). The transition is more difficult for Native American youths who are forced to make sense of their ethnic identity while braiding their traditional culture with Western culture (Clark, 2022b). Ethnic identity is described as how one views their connection to an ethnic group (Newman, 2005). Scholars suggest that ethnic identity is shaped by either ethnic socialization or enculturation (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). Ethnic socialization refers to how one attains the values, ethics, and principles of a group, whereas enculturation references how one discovers and connects with their traditional culture (Newman, 2005). Scholars indicate that cultural backgrounds help develop identities linked to ethnicity or race (Rivas-Drake et al., 2017). The dearth of attention paid to culture as a universal part of normal development (García Coll et al., 2000) contributes to the significance of using ethnic-racial identity exploration (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014) to study the connections between culture and school connectedness.

Studying the impact that ethnic-racial identity exploration has on school connectedness is vital for Native Americans who survived a cultural genocide (Kirmayer et al., 2014; Wolfe, 2006) perpetrated through United States government-sponsored boarding schools (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). A Native American Elder explained genocide this way, "When we talk about genocide, the definition is to extinguish the culture through the children" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 336). Boarding schools were designed to separate Native American children from their cultural identity (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Reyhner & Eder, 2017; Running Bear et al., 2018; United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1887) by barring their traditional languages (Reyhner, 2018), assigning Christian names in place of their Indian names, cutting their hair, and forcing them to wear military-style uniforms (Adams, 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016). Many Native American children were held captive at boarding schools (Adams, 2020; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016) prevented from returning home or visiting their ancestors (Reyhner, 2018), experienced physical and sexual abuse (Charbonneau-Dahlen et al., 2016), and many perished under the harsh conditions (Adams, 2020; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016).

The lasting impact of forcing Native American children into boarding schools manifests in elevated school dropout rates, poor academic achievement, and increased mental health struggles (Clark, 2022b). The 2022 Montana American Indian Student Data (AISD, 2022) report shows an 84% graduation rate for American Indian students compared to 93% for their non-American Indian peers. The same report indicates that the achievement proficiency levels on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) Reading assessment show 55% of American Indian students scored as Novice compared to 24% of their non-Native counterparts scoring as Novice. A similar trend is seen with the SBAC Math assessment, where 64% of American Indian students scored as Novice compared to 29% of non-American Indian students (AISD, 2022). Perhaps, most alarming is the 2021 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealing that nearly 50% of American Indian schoolchildren living on or off an Indian reservation felt sad or hopeless for two or more weeks, and nearly 30% seriously considered suicide.

Study Design

This study was initially developed as an Indigenous-centered, convergent (Creswell, 2015) transformational data mixed methods study (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). However, following the administration of the pre-survey and conducting initial classroom observations, I transitioned

the study to an Indigenous-centered, transformative sequential explanatory (Creswell, 2015; Pluye & Hong, 2014) transformational data mixed methods study (Creswell et al., 2004; Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). The model change was the result of information gathered by me following the initial survey administration combined with information gleaned from field notes created during classroom observations.

A mixed methods study is a process of gathering, analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative data during a single study to discover deeper connections between ideas (Creswell, 2015). The rationale for using an Indigenous-centered mixed methods design is that it is a decolonizing approach that recognizes the worldview of the tribal nation at the center of the study. The transformation process includes transforming one kind of data into the other form of data by either quantifying qualitative data or qualifying quantitative data (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). In the case of this study, I transformed qualitative data into quantitative data.

The design of this study consisted of two distinct phases. First, I administered the pre-survey at the start of the study, followed by observing classroom activities and developing field notes. The initial phase led to the development of clarifying questions posed to youth participants during interviews. For example, the initial interview guide only included one question related to the youth's Indian name (Do you know your Indian name?). However, the pre-survey results established that 38 out of 41 participants knew their Indian name, and yet, only 18 out of 41 indicated participating in a traditional ceremony. Taken together with my field notes describing the classroom teachers using students' Indian names and describing the naming ceremony, additional questions were developed. The new interview guide began by asking the participants if they knew their Indian name. They were then encouraged to tell a story of what their Indian name means, where their Indian name came from, and why it is important (Clark, 2022a). The post-survey was administered following the youths' interviews.

The statistical consciousness of this study was guided by the work of Walters and Andersen (2016). The priority was given to the qualitative data because it aligns with my use of an Indigenous-centered research paradigm. By designing follow-up questions that encouraged participants to become storytellers, I honored Indigenous epistemologies and research approaches grounded in storytelling (Brayboy, 2005) that are relational (Wilson, 2001) and consistent with an Indigenous worldview (Kovach, 2010).

Study Variables

Ethnic-Racial Identity Exploration

Scholars suggest that ethnic-racial identity exploration is a complex process adolescents use to discover and make sense of their ethnic-racial group (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014; Wantchekon et al., 2021) by exploring their "(cultural values and traditions) and one's racialized experiences" (Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, Douglass Bayless, & Updegraff, 2018, p. 1907). The controversy regarding using race and ethnicity impacts this study because Native Americans were both racialized and colonized in America (Brayboy, 2005). The racialized identity of American Indians links to European-American notions of race (Tallbear, 2013). Andersen (2011) defines racialization as the "processes through which certain physical and cultural differences are emphasized, elevated, and distinguished between such that races are produced and legitimized" (p. 57). Wimmer (as cited in Walters & Andersen, 2016) explains ethnicity as the "subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry" (p. 30). Phinney (1996) recommends braiding race into ethnicity because race commonly

references biological traits. However, for Native Americans, blood quantum is a biological trait that many tribal nations use to determine membership. Contemporary blood quantum policies are the remnants of colonization and tie to past United States government assimilation acts (Grande, 2000; Wolfe, 2006) designed to eliminate anyone from claiming Native American heritage (Garroutte, 2001; Krakoff, 2017).

Adolescence is a time when social awareness and cognitive abilities advance, making identity discoveries important (Quintana, 1998). Ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution is recognized as a fundamental and vital element of normal youth development (Rivas-Drake et al., 2017; Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014). Scholarly literature suggests that ethnic-racial identity growth might contribute to an optimistic outlook toward school (Bakth et al., 2022), nurture an increased view of oneself, and improve happiness for Native children (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2021).

School Connectedness

School connectedness is described as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow 1993, p. 80). Scholars suggest that the degree of school connectedness experienced by youths is tied to their beliefs about their learning and identity being valued by teachers and classmates (Foster et al., 2017; Oldfield et al., 2018). Other researchers identified youths' affection towards their peers as an element of school connectedness (Karcher et al., 2006). Clark (2022b) expanded on the elements of school connectedness to include cultural connectedness and the broader community.

Academic literature notes that schoolchildren expressing a robust sense of school connectedness show enriched mental health and emotional well-being (Allen et al., 2021; Eugene et al., 2021; Kidger et al., 2012), encounter fewer negative experiences of depression (Eugene et al., 2021; Joyce & Early, 2014), and have decreased suicidal ideation (Marraccini & Brier, 2017). Other scholars indicated that a strong sense of school connectedness contributes to students' capacity to overcome the impacts of bullying (Foster et al., 2017), reduces drug and alcohol use (Serafini et al., 2017), and increases school completion rates (Bond et al., 2007).

Scholars noted that a sense of belonging is impacted by one's view of their ethnic identity and ethnic associations across time (Saylor & Aries, 1999). Schools that nurture a sense of connectedness in Native American schoolchildren are likelier to have students more dedicated to their academics and less likely to drop out of school (Hussain et al., 2018). Other scholars assert that a robust sense of school belonging, braided with ethnic pride, safeguards Native American youths from drug use (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991). Researchers postulate that Native American youths reporting a strong sense of belonging use less alcohol or tobacco, and experiment with fewer substances across their lifespan (Napoli et al., 2003).

Literature indicated that Native American youths were enthusiastic about learning when their teacher was approachable and caring (Dehyle, 1992). Ruedas-Gracia and associates (2020) indicate a connection between Native American caregivers' degree of educational attainment and school belongingness for their children. Hill (2006) suggests a link between a sense of belonging and mental health well-being when viewed through a cultural worldview (Hill, 2009) that may buffer against the ill effects of historical trauma (Clark, 2022a).

Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) claim that Native American youths experience a greater sense of school belongingness when interacting with self-relevant role models. Bandura (1986) describes self-relevant role models as people having similar ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status as the person being motivated. Self-relevant role models are believed to begin impacting

children as early as preschool (García Coll & Ferrer, 2021). Moreover, García Coll and colleagues (1996) claim that Native American children felt less connected with their non-Native teachers when they neglected to use American Indian speech and rhythm patterns during instruction. Baumeister and Leary (1995) counter the claims regarding self-relevant role models and suggest physical proximity is more vital than defining traits. Other scholars wrote that Native American youths attending a school comprised mainly of their tribal members conveyed a lower sense of school connectedness (Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2020).

Cultural Connectedness

Jumper-Reeves and colleagues (2014) described culture as a structure of collective ideals and principles that guide individuals within a group. Academic literature specified that culture helps people make sense of their worldview and contributes to nurturing community (Wexler & Gone, 2012). Cultural connectedness is an understanding and association with facets of one's culture (Henson et al., 2016; Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, & Hinson, 2017). Clark (2022a) found that ethnic-racial identity exploration significantly influences cultural connectedness. Scholars wrote that cultural connectedness and school connectedness are interrelated (Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2020). Researchers point out that cultural connectedness protects against adverse mental health struggles associated with colonization (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Mohatt et al., 2011; Whitbeck et al., 2001). Some researchers reported positive associations between cultural connectedness and overall mental health well-being and reduced suicidal tendencies in Native American communities (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015). Crooks and associates (2017) discovered positive associations between culturally based mentoring, cultural connectedness, and youth mental health. In contrast, Gone and Alcántara (2007) indicated mixed results between cultural activities and suicidal ideation among Indigenous youths.

Theoretical Lens

This article was conceptualized through the integrated model (García Coll et al., 1996) woven with Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005). The integrated model is a strength-based approach for viewing Native American culture as beneficial instead of as a deficit. Specifically, this study is grounded on the integrated model's concept of adaptive culture. Adaptive culture is explained as "a social system defined by sets of goals, values, and attitudes that differ from the dominant culture" (García Coll et al., 1996, p. 1896). I anchored this study on an aspect of adaptive culture explained as ethnic-racial socialization. Ethnic-racial socialization is defined as "the transmission of one's cultural history, values, and beliefs from one generation to another or across groups" (Perez-Brena et al., 2018, p. 719). TribalCrit was theorized by Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy (Padgett, 2015). He centered the theory on the experiences of Native American people and their communities (Castagno & Lee, 2007). Researchers subscribing to TribalCrit focus their attention on aspects of society that nurture and reproduce the structural inequalities created by colonization and racism.

Strategies of Inquiry

Wilson (2008) delineated between methodology, methods, and strategies of inquiry and argued that "strategies of inquiry build upon a methodology" (p. 39). Wilson (2001) insinuated that Indigenous methods and those borrowed from dominant paradigms are inseparable. Authors

claimed it is not necessarily the characteristics of Indigenous methodologies that influence the relationship between the method and the paradigm, but instead, the degree to which there is congruency between the method and an Indigenous worldview (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). I used several strategies of inquiry that honored Indigenous research practices, including (1) conversational methods tied to narrative meaning-making, (2) participant observation, and (3) individual interviews.

Kovach (2010) advanced the notion that the conversational method upholds the relational aspect of an Indigenous paradigm and is consistent with an Indigenous worldview. Scholars signified that identity is formed through narrative meaning-making, defined as "the degree to which one learns something about oneself from reflecting on past events" (McLean & Breen, 2009, p. 702). Wilson (2001) said that storytelling and personal narrative approaches align with an Indigenous epistemology because you form a relationship with another person. Kovach (2010) highlighted the promise of "reflecting upon story as a method within research" (p. 127). Academic literature indicated that TribalCrit scholars embrace narrative "as a tool generating data relevant to scholarly research and theory" (Nelson & Youngbull, 2015, p. 93).

Wilson (2008) described participant observation as learning by observing and participating. The author suggested that the goal of using participant observation is to develop a nearness or sense of belonging with the participants by partaking in their daily happenings. Bastien (2004) denoted that "knowledge lives in the process of observing" (p. 105). By being a participant observer and sharing in the daily experiences of the classroom teachers and their students, I was able to build in-person relationships that support what Wilson (2008) believes are essential elements of "ethical Indigenous research" (p. 40).

Conducting individual interviews was the third strategy of inquiry I used during this study. Wilson (2008) suggested that interviews allow the researcher to gather perspectives directly from the participants. I built relationships by visiting with the classroom teachers and conducting interviews with the youth participants, which is essential to preserve connections (Cajete, 1999).

Setting

The research site was at a public elementary school located on a federally recognized Indian reservation. The school consisted of 450 students, with roughly 98% identifying as American Indian. The school is part of a larger public school district governed by an eight-member publicly elected board of directors that establishes district policy and is monitored by the State Office of Public Instruction. I conducted this study in 4th- and 5th-grade cultural immersion classrooms because the teachers are tribal members, participate in traditional cultural practices, and include cultural activities that counter the practices found at traditional boarding schools, such as braiding their Native language and the English language during instructional practices, using the student's Indian name, smudging, and practicing traditional prayers. The cultural activities used were integral to defining and measuring how ethnic-racial identity exploration informs school connectedness.

Participants

The participants were 41 youths enrolled in a 4th and 5th-grade cultural immersion program. There were 21 (51.2%) participants listing their age as 9 years old and 20 (48.8%) listing their age as 10 or 11. Of the 41 participants, 37 (90.2%) recorded their ethnicity as American Indian, and 4 (9.8%) reported their ethnicity as both American Indian and White. There were 20 (48.8%)

that indicated they had participated in a Blackfeet immersion class for 2 years, 6 (14.6%) for 3 years and 15 (36.6%) for 5 years. The parents or guardians of the youth participants completed a parent consent form, and the students completed an assent form.

Measures

The measures used included (1) a demographic form, (2) the Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S), and (3) the MAC 5-A-Short Version (Karcher, 2011). The author administered the pre-survey and post-survey. The 14-question pre-survey and post-survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Demographic questions included gender, age, ethnicity, and the number of years of participation in an immersion classroom.

Blackfeet Adapted Cultural Connectedness Scale (BACCS-S)

To measure participants' Ethnic-Racial Identity growth, I used the Blackfeet-adapted version of the Cultural Connectedness Scale Short (CCS-S) crafted by Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, and Hinson (2017). The CCS-S is based on a subset of the original 29-item Cultural Connectedness Scale (CCS) (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015). The Blackfeet version was adapted under a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to reflect Blackfeet culture and age appropriateness. The measure demonstrated good scale score reliability, Cronbach's α = .70, 95% CI: [.641, .752] (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, & Hinson, 2017).

School Connectedness Survey

To measure school connectedness, I used the MAC 5-A-Short Version (Karcher, 2011) six-item school connectedness subscale. The subscale is designed to reflect how invested youth are at school, how much they enjoy school, and how successful they feel at school. The scale focuses on the importance a youth places in school and the degree to which he or she actively seeks to be successful in school. The school connectedness subscale had acceptable reliability in our sample (Cronbach's α = .75, 95% CI [.702, .798]). Respondents rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The subscale was not altered by the CAB for this study.

Youth Interviews

To develop an understanding of how the youth participants conceptualized school connectedness, I conducted semi-structured interviews with youth participants (n = 41) using an interview guide. The interviews took place at school and lasted approximately 17 minutes (average = 17.12, SD = 4.52). The interviews included one question from each of the three BACCS-S subscales: Spirituality, Identity, and Traditions, and two questions related to the MAC 5-A-Short Version, in addition to clarifying questions for each of the original interview questions.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The Hoop of Values affixed to the Blackfeet Education Standards (Clark, 2022a), and the five Great Values developed by Sanchez (2007) guided the analysis. I used a data analysis process described by Saldaña (2013) in which the researcher uses interviews, observations, and field notes. The precoding process was initiated by sifting through 41 fully transcribed youth interviews and

reading each a minimum of four times before creating two-column notes to determine patterns of words and phrases. To identify the categories voiced, I used In Vivo coding that is "particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91) because youth voices are often minimized. An example of In Vivo Coding captured during this study is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
In Vivo Coding Example

Doing Blackfoot language makes me happy.	1) Blackfoot language
When we say the prayer after we smudge. I like	2) Prayer 3) Smudge
when my teacher calls me by my Blackfoot name	4) Teacher 5) Blackfoot name
I like recess so I can see my friends.	6) Friends
I know because I try my best.	7) I try my best

Analytic Memo Process

I adhered to the belief that coding connects fragments of data to provide the foundation of an idea (Saldaña, 2013) as the basis of my qualitative data analysis. I used youth participants' statements and my observations and participation in classroom activities to build a deep understanding of how Blackfeet youth explored their ethnic-racial identities. Saldaña (2013) upheld that an analytic memo process helps the researcher organize their thoughts and provides a guide for exploring complex relationships between our personal views and how we interact with the data. Below are examples of analytic memos created from field notes captured during hallway and classroom observations.

Example of Analytic Memo

I walked through the front door of the school and stepped into a hallway littered with children laughing and talking with each other as they hurried to their classroom. The sounds elicited memories of my own experiences attending Central Elementary School decades earlier. I felt the rush of excitement as though it was my first day of school, and I hadn't seen my friends in months.

Example of Analytic Memo

The teacher began class by taking attendance with students' Blackfoot names. She then lit a small bit of sweetgrass that had been placed in a small wooden box. Students approached the box and fanned the smoke into their faces and through their hair. I felt a sense of calmness as students sat in silence before saying a prayer in their traditional language. It was at that moment that I felt a feeling of aloneness and that I was intruding on a sacred moment that I didn't deserve to witness.

NAPI Survey Qualitative Analysis

The participants were asked two structured questions and additional follow-up questions covering the MAC 5-A-Short Version. The interviews produced two pillars (school happiness and school success) and eight categories (language, academic, personal, spirituality, grades, caregiver, teacher, and intrinsic). The pillars and categories are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

School Connectedness Pillars

Pillar	Category				
School Happiness	→	Language	Academic	Personal	Spirituality
School Success	→	Grades	Caregiver	Teacher	Intrinsic

Transformational Data Analysis

To develop a robust understanding of the relationships between Ethnic-Racial Identity exploration and school connectedness, a transformational data analysis was used to quantify the qualitative findings (Creswell et al., 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) discovered during the youth interviews. The findings are illustrated below.

School Connectedness Pillar 1: School Happiness

To explore how youth participants found happiness while at school, they were asked to describe the activities that brought them joy. The responses were classified into four categories including language, academics, relationships, and spirituality. The responses showed that 15 out of 41 students related their school happiness to using Blackfeet language, 11 out of 41 picked core academics, 17 out of 41 students identified a personal connection, and 8 out of 41 students recognized spirituality.

School Connectedness Pillar 2: School Success

Student participants were asked to describe how they came to know when they were doing well in school. The responses show that students identified four categories: grades, caregiver, teacher, and intrinsic motivation. The responses showed that 17 out of 41 students identified grades, 7 out of 41 students said their caregivers told them if they were doing well in school, 6 out of 41 relied on their teacher to inform them if they were doing well in school, and 5 out of 41 students reported terms related to intrinsic motivation.

NAPI Survey Quantitative Data Analysis

Four paired *t*-tests and two repeated measure ANOVA tests were used to compare the means of the pre-survey and the post-survey for each subscale of the NAPI survey (Spirituality, Identity, Traditions. School Connectedness), as well as participant age and gender to determine any significance at the $p < 0.0001$ (Using a Pearson Correlation on SPSS Version 19), illustrated in Tables 3 through 8. The degree of internal consistency of the NAPI survey instrument was measured by applying Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$), indicating strong internal reliability. Four paired-sample *t*-tests and two Repeated ANOVA tests ($n = 41$) were conducted to determine to what degree Ethnic-Racial Identity exploration informs school connectedness, illustrated in Table 3 (Subscales), Table 4 (Gender), Table 5 (Age), Table 6 (Post Survey Variables), Table 7—Repeated ANOVA (Gender), and Table 8—Repeated ANOVA (Age).

Table 3

Results of Paired Sample t-test Between Pre and Post NAPI Survey (subscales)

(*N=41*)

Variable	Pre	Post	Difference	*t*-Value	*df*	*p*-Value	Significance
Spirituality	2.71	2.9	-0.195**	-3.114	40	0.003	Yes
SD	(0.461)	(0.300)	(0.401)				
Tradition	1.88	2.56	-0.683***	-4.823	40	0.000	Yes
SD	(1.053)	(0.743)	(0.907)				
Identity	3.71	3.9	-0.195*	-2.72	40	0.01	Yes
SD	(0.512)	(0.300)	(0.459)				
MAC 5	1.59	1.67	-0.089	-0.653	40	0.517	No
SD	(0.586)	(0.725)	(0.876)				

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *SD* = Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 3, the results of the Paired Sample *t*-test indicated that the survey program was effective and caused a significant increase in the mean values of Spirituality ($t(40) = -3.114$, $p < .01$), Tradition ($t(40) = -4.823$, $p < .001$), Identity ($t(40) = -2.720$, $p < .01$) from pre-survey to post-survey. The results of the Paired Sample *t*-test indicate that the difference was statistically significant at a 0.01 level as the *p*-value is less than the standard significance level of 0.01 ($t(40) = -3.114$, $p < .01$). Although the mean value of School Connectedness in the post-survey (1.67) was higher than the pre-survey (1.59), the difference of 0.089 was not found statistically significant based on the results of the Paired Sample *t*-test. Therefore, the survey program was minimally impactful for School Connectedness ($t(40) = -0.653$, $p > .05$).

Table 4

NAPI Survey Paired t-test (Gender)

Gender	Variables	Pre	Post	Difference	*t*-Value	*df*	*p*-Value	Significance
Male	Spirituality	2.72	2.94	-0.222*	-2.204	17	0.042	Yes
(*n*=18)	*SD*	(0.461)	(0.236)	(0.428)				
	Tradition	1.5	2.5	-1**	-4.123	17	0.001	Yes
	SD	(1.150)	(0.857)	(1.029)				
	Identity	3.56	3.83	-0.278	-2.051	17	0.056	No
	SD	(0.616)	(0.383)	(0.575)				
	Mac 5	1.65	1.59	0.056	0.2	17	0.844	No
	SD	(0.754)	(0.844)	(1.178)				
Female	Spirituality	2.7	2.87	-0.174*	-2.152	22	0.043	Yes
(*n*=23)	*SD*	(0.470)	(0.344)	(0.388)				
	Tradition	2.17	2.61	-0.435**	-2.865	22	0.009	Yes
	SD	(0.887)	(0.656)	(0.728)				
	Identity	3.83	3.96	-0.13	-1.817	22	0.083	No
	SD	(0.388)	(0.209)	(0.344)				
	MAC 5	1.54	1.74	-0.203	-1.805	22	0.085	No
	SD	(0.423)	(0.627)	(0.539)				

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *SD* = Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 4, the Paired-Sample *t*-test indicated that the mean value of Spirituality significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for both males ($t(17) = -2.204$, $p < .05$) and females ($t(22) = -2.152$, $p < .05$). The mean value of Tradition for post-survey was significantly higher than pre-survey for both males ($t(17) = -4.123$, $p < .01$) and females ($t(22) = -2.865$, $p < .01$). The overall mean value of Identity increased significantly from pre-survey to post-survey but, surprisingly, did not significantly increase for males ($t(17) = -2.051$, $p > .05$) or females ($t(22) = -1.817$, $p > .05$) separately. The mean value of School Connectedness did not significantly change from pre-survey to post-survey for either males ($t(17) = 2.000$, $p > .05$) or females ($t(17) = -1.805$, $p > .05$).

Table 5

NAPI Survey Paired t-test (Age)

Age	Variable	Pre	Post	Difference	*t*-Value	df	*p*-Value	Significance
9	Spirituality	2.81	2.95	-0.143	-1.826	20	0.083	No
(*n*=21)	SD	(0.402)	(0.218)	(0.359)				
	Tradition	2.14	2.62	-0.476**	-2.911	20	0.009	Yes
	SD	(1.062)	(0.74)	(0.750)				
	Identity	3.76	3.86	-0.095	-1.451	20	0.162	No
	SD	(0.436)	(0.359)	(0.301)				
	Mac 5	1.44	1.73	-0.286	-1.561	20	0.134	No
		(0.385)	(0.886)	(0.839)				
10	Spirituality	2.6	2.85	-0.25*	-2.517	19	0.021	Yes
(*n*=20)	SD	(0.503)	(0.366)	(0.444)				
	Tradition	1.6	2.5	-0.9**	-3.943	19	0.001	Yes
	SD	(0.995)	(0.761)	(1.021)				
	Identity	3.65	3.95	-0.3*	-2.349	19	0.03	Yes
	SD	(0.587)	(0.224)	(0.571)				
	MAC 5	1.73	1.62	0.117	0.588	19	0.563	No
	SD	(0.722)	(0.522)	(0.887)				

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; SD = Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 5, the Paired-Sample *t*-test showed that the mean value of Spirituality significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for 10-year-old children ($t(19) = -2.517$, $p < .05$), while the amount of increase from pre-survey to post-survey was not statistically significant for 9-year-old children ($t(20) = -1.826$, $p > .05$). The mean value of Tradition for post-survey was significantly higher than pre-survey for 9-year-old children ($t(20) = -2.911$, $p < .01$) and 10-year-old children ($t(19) = -3.943$, $p < .01$). The mean value of Identity significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for 10-year-old children ($t(19) = -2.349$, $p < .01$), while the amount of increase from pre-survey to post-survey was not statistically significant for 9-year-old children ($t(20) = -1.4516$, $p > .05$). The mean value of School Connectedness did not significantly change from pre-survey to post-survey for either 9-year-old children ($t(20) = -1.561$, $p > .05$) or for 10-year-old children ($t(19) = 0.588$, $p > .05$).

Table 6

Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Post-Survey Variables

Variables		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Spirituality (1)	Correlation Coefficient (*r*)					
	Magnitude					
Tradition (2)	Correlation Coefficient (*r*)	0.139				
	Magnitude	VW				
Identity (3)	Correlation Coefficient (*r*)	-0.108	0.251			
	Magnitude	VW	W			
MAC 5 (4)	Correlation Coefficient (*r*)	-0.303	-0.334*	0.119	-0.044	
	Magnitude	W	W	VW	VW	
Years (5)	Correlation Coefficient (*r*)	0.328*	0.223	0.073	-0.405**	0.022
	Magnitude	W	W	VW	M	VW

*Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; VW = very weak; W = weak; M = moderate; S = strong; VS=very strong

As shown in Table 6, the Pearson correlation for the post-survey indicated that Spirituality is in positive, very weak, and not significant correlation with Tradition ($r = .139$, $p > .05$), insignificantly negative and very weak correlation with Identity ($r = -.108$, $p > .05$), insignificantly negative and weak correlation with School Connectedness ($r = -.303$, $p > .05$) and significantly positive but weak correlation with Years ($r = .328$, $p < .05$). Tradition is positive, but weak, and not significantly correlated with Identity ($r = .251$, $p > .05$), significantly negative but weak correlation with School Connectedness ($r = -.334$, $p < .05$) and insignificantly positive and weak correlation with Years ($r = .223$, $p > .05$). Identity is insignificantly positive and very weak correlation with School Connectedness ($r = .119$, $p > .05$), and insignificantly positive and very weak correlation with Years ($r = .073$, $p > .05$). The correlation between School Connectedness and years was also found as positive, very weak, and not significant ($r = .022$. $p > .05$).

Table 7

Repeated Measure ANOVA to Examine the Changes between (Gender) and Pre and Post Survey

Variable	Pre		Post		*F*-Value	*p*-Value	η^2	Magnitude	Significance
	Male	Female	Male	Female					
Spirituality	2.72	2.7	2.94	2.87	0.143	0.707	0.004	Small	No
SD	(0.46)	(0.470)	(0.23)	(0.344)					
Tradition	1.5	2.17	2.5	2.61	4.243*	0.046	0.098	Medium	Yes
SD	(1.150)	(0.887)	(0.85)	(0.656)					
Identity	3.56	3.83	3.83	3.96	1.040	0.314	0.026	Small	No
SD	(0.62)	(0.388)	(0.38)	(0.209)					
MAC 5	1.65	1.54	1.59	1.74	0.876	0.355	0.022	Small	No
SD	(0.75)	(0.423)	(0.84)	(0.627)					

*Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *SD* = Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 7, the results of Repeated Measure ANOVA indicated that the mean value of Spirituality from pre-survey to post-survey changed almost the same for males (from 2.72 to 2.94) and females (from 2.7 to 2.87) as the *p*-value is above the threshold of 0.05. The magnitude of change in the mean value from pre- to post-survey between males and females was 0.004, which is small ($F(39) = 0.143$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .004$ = Small effect size). The mean value of Tradition for

both males and females had increased from pre-survey to post-survey, but the magnitude of change was significantly higher for males (1.5 to 2.5) compared to females (2.17 to 2.61) ($F(39) = 4.243$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .095$ = Medium effect size). The mean value of Identity increased with nearly the same magnitude for males (3.56 to 3.83) and females (3.83 to 3.96) ($F(39) = 1.040$, $p > 0.05$, $\eta = .026$= Small effect size). The mean value of School Connectedness decreased from pre-survey to post-survey for males (1.65 to 1.59) but increased for females (1.54 to 1.74), however, the difference was not statistically significant because the p-value was above the threshold of 0.05 ($F(39) = 0.876$, $p > .05$, $\eta2 = .022$= Small effect size).

Table 8

Repeated Measure ANOVA to Examine the Change between (Age) & Pre and Post Survey

Variable	Pre		Post						
Age	9	10	9	10	F-Value	p-Value	η^2	Magnitude	Significance
Spirituality	2.81	2.6	2.95	2.85	0.726	0.400	0.018	Small	No
SD	(0.402)	(0.503)	(0.218)	(0.366)					
Tradition	2.14	1.6	2.62	2.5	2.312	0.136	0.056	Medium	No
SD	(1.062)	(0.995)	(0.74)	(0.761)					
Identity	3.76	3.65	3.86	3.95	2.091	0.156	0.051	Medium	No
SD	(0.436)	(0.587)	(0.359)	(0.224)					
MAC 5	1.44	1.73	1.73	1.62	2.229	0.144	0.054	Medium	No
SD	(0.385)	(0.722)	(0.886)	(0.522)					

Note. * p< .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; *SD* = Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 8, the results of Repeated Measure ANOVA indicated that the mean value of Spirituality from pre-survey to post-survey changed nearly equally for 9-year-old (from 2.81 to 2.95) and 10-year-old children (from 2.6 to 2.85), as the p-value is above the threshold of 0.05. The magnitude of the mean value changing from pre- to post-survey between 9-year-olds and 10-year-olds was 0.018, which is small ($F(39) = 0.726$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .018$ = Small effect size). The mean value of Tradition increased from pre-survey to post-survey with almost the same magnitude for 9-year-olds (2.14 to 2.62) and 10-year-olds (1.6 to 2.5) ($F(39) = 2.312$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .056$= Medium effect size). The mean value of Identity increased from pre-survey to post-survey with almost the same magnitude for 9-year-olds (3.76 to 3.86) and 10-year-olds (3.65 to 3.95) ($F(39) = 2.091$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .051$= Medium effect size). The mean value of School Connectedness increased from pre-survey to post-survey for 9-year-olds (1.44 to 1.73) but decreased for 10-year-olds (1.73 to 1.62); however, the difference was not statistically significant as the p-value is above the threshold of 0.05 ($F(39) = 2.229$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .054$ = Small effect size).

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the interactive effects of ethnic-racial identity exploration (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014) and school connectedness for Native American youths. I hypothesized that Native American youths exploring or gaining clarity about their ethnic-racial identity would experience increased levels of school connectedness. A review of the *t*-tests showed only a slight increase in school connectedness, which determined that ethnic-racial identity exploration did not significantly influence school connectedness with these youths. Additionally, an analysis examining the age and gender differences of the participants indicated that the mean

value of school connectedness did not significantly change from pre-survey to post-survey for either 9- or 10-year-olds or male or female participants. The results also revealed that the number of years participants were enrolled in a cultural immersion classroom had little impact on school connectedness. The repeated measure ANOVA showed that school connectedness decreased from pre-survey to post-survey for males and 10-year-olds but increased for females and 9-year-olds; however, in all cases, it was not deemed statistically significant.

In contrast, the results of the *t*-tests indicated that the survey program was effective and caused a significant increase in the mean values of all three subcategories included as part of the Cultural Connectedness survey (Spirituality, Tradition, and Identity) from pre-survey to post-survey. The *t*-tests showed that the mean value of Spirituality and Traditions significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for both males and females. While the tests indicated that the overall mean value of Identity increased significantly from pre-survey to post-survey, it did not significantly increase for males or females separately. The *t*-tests further showed that the mean value of Spirituality significantly increased from pre-survey to post-survey for 10-year-old children. In contrast, the increase for 9-year-old children was not statistically significant. The mean value of Tradition for post-survey was significantly higher than pre-survey for 9-year-old and 10-year-old children. Finally, while the mean value of Identity significantly increased for 10-year-old children, the increase experienced by 9-year-old children was not deemed statistically significant. The complete results of the cultural connectedness survey can be found in a separate manuscript titled "The Role that Cultural Connectedness Plays in Fostering Educational Sovereignty for American Indian Youth: A Transformative Mixed Methods Study" (Clark, 2022a).

To honor my commitment to emphasizing qualitative data, I devoted most of my discussion to categories generated from interviews with youth participants that connect with elements of ethnic-racial identity exploration. An analysis of the youths' statements showed that components of Language, Traditional Blackfoot Learning, and Spirituality were important parts of defining school connectedness. I, at times, use both the Blackfoot language and the English language. The Blackfoot language is the Native language of the tribal nation included in this study and has only existed in written form for about 100 years (Clark & Wylie, 2021).

Language

Blackfoot scholars submit that their Native language mirrors their philosophies (Prete, 2021) and contains life-sustaining knowledge (Armstrong, 2021) embedded with traditional protocols passed from one generation to the next (Bastien, 2004; Cajete, 1994). Language is a key element of ethnicity (Perea, 1992) and cultural worldviews (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Raczka, 2017). Scholars postulate that language transports culture (Grande, 2000) and unique ideas (Kimmerer, 2013). Academic literature declares that cultural identity is dependent on sustaining traditional languages (Grande, 2000), because, for Native American people, it transports the rules and responsibilities of ceremonial practices that anchor their identity (Benally & Viri, 2005) and connects them spiritually (Head, 2012).

Traditional Blackfoot Learning

Academic literature noted that colonizers eroded traditional Blackfoot learning processes by subjecting Blackfoot children to Western learning models that disregarded their emphasis on holism (Prete, 2021). Prete (2019) mentioned that Chambers and Blood explained Blackfoot pedagogy as "a way of living, being, and learning" (p. 35). Another Blackfoot scholar stressed a

vital element of traditional learning was helping Blackfoot children connect with their ancestors (Bastien, 2004). Yosso (2005) coined familial capital to broaden the definition of traditional kinship alliances to emphasize the crucial role that aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Bastien, 2004; Prete, 2021) play in transferring cultural knowledge between generations "that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

Likewise, Blackfoot scholars claim that traditional Blackfoot learning involves grandparents transferring cultural knowledge (Bastien, 2004; Pepion, 1999) at ceremonies (Clark & Wylie, 2021) and through traditional stories (Juneau, 2001). A Blackfoot elder explained how ceremonies help transfer cultural knowledge, "You notice there is a main teepee and an outside area where you begin to learn, and as you gain more knowledge you move forward and gain more responsibility" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 326). Scholars assert the legitimacy of using storytelling to pass on cultural traditions (Brayboy, 2005). Blackfoot scholars avow traditional Blackfoot values (Prete, 2021), and knowledge is transferred between ages (Pepion, 1999) through creation and mythology stories that provide the basis for Blackfoot culture (Bastien, 2004). Scholars claim that Blackfoot origin stories house cultural traditions and spiritual practices (Hernandez, 1999) that are the foundation for a Blackfoot way of knowing (Bastien, 2004).

Spirituality

Several youth participants highlighted aspects of traditional spirituality as factors contributing to school connectedness. In particular, students recognized the importance of the teachers using their Indian names, saying traditional prayers, and having the opportunity to smudge. Scholars learned from a Blackfoot elder that an Indian name is believed to house your spirit (Clark & Wylie, 2021) and allows the [Blackfoot] to connect directly with their ancestors (Bastien, 2004). Lombard (2008) learned from a Blackfoot elder that an Indian name reflects histories of people over millennia. Other scholars suggest that an Indian name acts as a guide throughout life (Wissler, 1912a), is part of your identity (Armstrong Jr., 2021), and is ingrained in a Blackfoot worldview (Bastien, 2004).

Indigenous spirituality seeks to discover harmony between the individual, the larger community, and the environment (Clark & Wylie, 2021). Scholars maintained that Blackfoot spirituality recognizes all life as sacred (Sheets, 2013) and that reality is shaped and transformed through prayer (Bastien, 2004). Native Americans conceptualize spirituality by accepting that all-natural things are interconnected (Long Standing Bear Chief, 1992; Wagner, 2018) believing "The Great Spirit, or Great Mystery, or Good Power, is everywhere and in everything— mountains, plains, winds, waters, trees, birds, and animals" (McClintock, 1968, p. 167). Blackfoot scholar Long Standing Bear Chief (1992) proclaims that a Blackfoot worldview centers on the belief that all things were given a spirit from the Creator. A Blackfoot worldview is circular (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016) and realized through the tipi camp circle where knowledge transfers from the perimeter to the center tipi (Pepion, 2013). Other Blackfoot scholars realize the circle structure through the bundle concept (Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002) to connect the "sociopolitical and spiritual systems of the Blackfeet" (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016, p. 13).

A Blackfoot elder explained the connection between prayer and smudging (ăwăamătṓʹosimăa) stating, "When you're praying—when you light your smudge, you're waking everybody up in the upper world—the spirit world—they're called to attention to help you—to support you" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 319). Smudging signifies the beginning of a ceremony (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Bassett et al., 2012; Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002) and is used to ask for a blessing (Bastien, 2004). Academic literature noted that smudging insulates young people

from dangerous situations (Zedeño, 2008). A youth in this study said, "Smudging cleans the bad from our school." The ceremony involves burning sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*) (Wissler, 1912b, p. 255) in a small wooden box called an Altar (*iităwăamăatōˊosimōˑp̓ˊ*) (Clark & Wylie, 2021). Sweetgrass is believed to be the "hair of Mother Earth" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 197), is braided of three strands denoting the sun, water, and earth, and represents the universe during smudging (Wagner, 2018). The smoke from the burning sweetgrass is believed to be a powerful spiritual agent (Portman & Garrett, 2006) that transfers prayers (Armstrong Jr., 2021) to a higher power (Pepion, 1999; Portman & Garrett, 2006).

Limitations

The findings presented in this article must be interpreted with limitations. First, I acknowledge that I am a non-Indigenous scholar interpreting interview manuscripts from Indigenous youths and lack their worldview. Second, the fact that all the participants came from Blackfeet cultural immersion classrooms may limit the generalizability to other Blackfeet youths, as these youths may have engaged with Blackfeet culture before the examination. Finally, I recognize that each tribal nation has its own traditions and culture, limiting the ability to broadly generalize these findings to other tribal nations.

Conclusion

The findings from this study add vital information for nurturing an environment that encourages youth to engage in ethnic-racial identity exploration to strengthen school connectedness. The results show that the ethnic-racial identity exploration slightly impacts school connectedness. The results are important because school connectedness is believed to improve self-esteem and increase academic success. The youth participants also provided important perspectives about how their ethnic-racial identity development impacts school connectedness.

As I concluded this article, I reflected on an essay composed by Eve Tuck (2009). The author spotlighted what she believed were the long-term consequences of damaged-centered research. She pointed out that damaged-centered research is "intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken" (p. 412). Tuck contends that damaged-centered research is unique because of its social and historical contexts. She worries that damaged-centered research, absent a reflection of settler colonialism, only leaves a picture of defeated and broken. Her fears contributed to me spotlighting the long-term genocidal effects caused, in part, by United States government-sponsored boarding schools. I do not write about the academic and mental health struggles of Native American youths to document their failures. Instead, I write to offer a counter-narrative to the ongoing settler colonialism narrative that contributes to deficit views toward Native Americans and their communities.

Special Thank You

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research and publication of this article: This work is expanded from dissertation research, though substantially different in scope and purpose.

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