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Article

The Impact of Historical Context on Indigenous Female Leaders in Education: A Comparative Analysis of Canada and the US

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Abstract: Educational disparities have long shaped the schooling experiences of the Indigenous people of North America. Since the 20th century, many Indigenous female leaders have stepped forward, using various methods of advocacy to improve Indigenous education. This paper seeks to compare the methods used by Canadian and American Indigenous female leaders in education. Through analyzing the cross-generational and cross-country historical context of indigenous leadership based on literature review, individual case analysis, the research reveals no significant links between the methods of advocacy and national contexts across countries. However, across generations, there were significant links in socioeconomic contexts and the methods of advocacy used. These findings highlight how shifts in social and economic factors influence Indigenous advocacy, offering a deeper insight into the forces that shape Indigenous leadership.

Keywords: female leadership; education; indigenous advocacy; indigenous leadership; systemic disparities; methods of advocacy; Canada; United States

1. Introduction

For generations, Indigenous people across North America have experienced education systems that seemed designed to erase their languages, cultures, and identities. In Canada, residential schools systematically separated Indigenous children from their parents and forbade the use of native languages [1]. Native American boarding schools in the US similarly enforced assimilation by removing children from their communities [2]. These policies ultimately led to deep-rooted damage in Indigenous communities and excluded Indigenous participation from leadership roles in education. Yet throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, many Indigenous women have worked to reverse the impacts made by a system that was never designed with them in mind.

There is a growing body of research on Indigenous women in educational leadership. Robinson et al. [3] found that Mi'kmaw female principals draw on community trust and culture to build effective schooling environments. In higher education, scholars such as Povey et al. [4,5] document how Indigenous women across Canada and the U.S. are reshaping institutions through relational leadership grounded in cultural accountability. These studies show how the leadership of Indigenous women is vital not only for community empowerment but also for institutional change. However, existing studies focus on individual leaders in specific contexts but rarely compare leaders across nations or generations. Such studies miss an opportunity to investigate how leadership strategies differ between Canadian and American Indigenous women or across historical periods: Do the

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methods used vary across historical, geographic, and policy contexts? If so, how does context shape tactics and outcomes? Exploring these questions is crucial to understanding the continuity and evolution of Indigenous women's educational leadership. In particular, comparing Canada and US experiences can be very informative: While the two countries share similar histories of settler colonialism and assimilationist schooling, they differ in policy frameworks, governance structures, and recognition of Indigenous rights [6]. Examining leaders from both contexts helps deepen understanding of how national and cultural contexts shape advocacy strategies, the negotiation of political space, and the outcomes achieved. In Canada, Verna Jane Kirkness combined Cree cultural values and academic advocacy to influence education policies and promote Indigenous-controlled curricula [7]. In the U.S., Cindy Blackstock challenged institutional inequities through legal advocacy that led to the first human rights tribunal ruling on underfunded Indigenous education [8]. These examples underscore how Indigenous women have brought cultural knowledge, resilience, and a deep sense of justice into efforts to reform education. However, they are not the only ones who push for these changes in educational reform.

This paper examines six Indigenous women leaders, three from Canada and three from the United States, whose work spans community activism, academic leadership, legal advocacy, and cultural revitalization. The paper reviews their methods of advocacy, specifically how these leaders have navigated the tensions between Indigenous and Western education systems, challenged systemic barriers, and advanced educational models rooted in Indigenous worldviews. By situating their efforts within broader movements for Indigenous rights, this study aims to illuminate patterns and divergences in the methods of advocacy from Indigenous female leaders, reveal how diverse experiences and environments informed the paths taken to reform Indigenous education.

2. Literature Review

In both Canada and the United States, Indigenous women have played a central role in driving educational change. They lead in classrooms, communities, courts, and universities in order to achieve cultural revitalization and systems-level reform. In doing so, they confront colonial legacies while creating new opportunities for Indigenous youth.

In K-12 education, Robinson et al. studied Mi'kmaw women principals working within Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, a collective of 12 Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia that emerged as a community-based, Mi'kmaq-led education authority. They showed that relational accountability, community trust, and culturally grounded practice are central to effective leadership. Their study concluded that this kind of leadership strengthens cultural identity while also improving student engagement and achievement [3]. Building on this, Robinson et al. describe how Indigenous women use storytelling, land-based learning, and governance rooted in Indigenous knowledge to decolonize schools. They argue that such practices shift school culture and curriculum toward community sovereignty [3]. Fitzgerald also finds that Indigenous women leaders challenge dominant discourses by creating culturally open spaces in schools. She concludes that leadership itself becomes a decolonial act that affirms identity and resists assimilation [9]. In higher education, Indigenous women are also recognized as key agents of change. Coates et al. show how Indigenous female scholars draw on relational governance and Indigenous methodologies to reshape academic practice [10]. They see this approach to leadership as both distinctive and transformative. Comparative studies by Povey et al. [4, 5] reveal similar patterns in Canada and the U. S. They show that women leaders emphasize reciprocity, community accountability, and cultural responsibility to drive institutional change. Brunette-Debassige further demonstrates how embodied, land-related, and relational leadership sustains Indigenous futures in Canadian universities. She concludes that leadership rooted in relationships and place is not symbolic but structurally powerful [11].

At the policy level, Indigenous women have reshaped the landscape through rights-based advocacy. One key example is Cindy Blackstock's human rights case. In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that Canada discriminated in its funding for First Nations children. Since then, follow-up orders have continued to push federal reforms [12]. In the U. S., Hill et al. document how Indigenous women lead community-based education governance. Their leadership is rooted in cultural knowledge and challenges to patriarchal systems [13]. Together, these cases show that Indigenous women's leadership operates across both grassroots movements and institutional reform. Foundational work has long connected women's leadership to language and cultural

resurgence. Kirkness shows that embedding Indigenous knowledge and governance, as seen in Indian Control of Indian Education, shifts curriculum and schooling under Indigenous authority [7]. In the U.S., Lomawaima et al. describe how language and land-based learning have always been central to Native education. They conclude that schooling, which affirms identity, is not simply cultural enrichment but a democratic necessity [2]. Taken together, these studies show that culturally grounded leadership is both political and pedagogical.

Recent doctoral research shows how Indigenous women use storytelling, personal narrative, and autoethnography to drive educational reform in powerful ways, as seen in studies by Fraser-Saddleback [14] and Harper [15]. These approaches highlight dimensions that mainstream studies often overlook, demonstrating that leadership is not only about policy or institutional change. It is also about voice and lived experience. Their work shows that narrative frameworks are now central to Indigenous educational practice. A review of these studies reveals several consistent themes. Indigenous women's leadership is rooted in relationships and cultural traditions. It gains legitimacy from the community rather than from Western credentials. It also relies on decolonial frameworks that both resist and reshape dominant structures. At the same time, important debates continue. Some argue that reform should happen within mainstream institutions, while others believe it is best pursued through fully Indigenous-led alternatives.

However, clear gaps remain in the research. Much of the present literature focuses on rural or reserve contexts, leaving the leadership of urban Indigenous women less explored, particularly comparative work. There is little comparative research looking across Canada and the U.S. or across different historical periods. For example, scholars have not often contrasted mid-20th-century leaders like Verna Jane Kirkness and Wilma Mankiller with contemporary figures such as Tasha Spillett-Sumner and Quannah ChasingHorse. Such work could show whether/how social and policy contexts shape leadership styles and outcomes. In North America today, new policies and investments have created more opportunities for Indigenous women's leadership in education. In Canada, governments have committed to Indigenous-focused curriculum mandates, infrastructure renewal, and reconciliation initiatives [16]. In the U.S., Tribal Colleges and the Bureau of Indian Education continue to provide spaces for Indigenous governance in education. These changes offer important possibilities. Yet, the research still lacks comparative and cross-generational studies that can systematically document how leaders adapt over time and across different policy settings.

Taken together, the literature shows that Indigenous women's leadership is both culturally grounded and strategically diverse. What remains less studied are the dynamics across countries and historical periods. Filling this gap would strengthen our understanding of how Indigenous women shape educational leadership in response to shifting historical, policy, and cultural contexts.

3. Methodology

This study will use a qualitative comparative-historical approach. It focuses on six Indigenous women leaders from Canada and the United States to examine how their backgrounds and environments shaped their methods of educational reform.

3.1. Criteria for Selection

These six leaders were purposively chosen based on three key criteria: geographic representation, generational span, and modes of leadership. For geographic representation, the group includes three leaders from Canada (Verna Jane Kirkness; Cindy Blackstock; Tasha Spillett-Sumner) and three from the U.S. (Alyce Spotted Bear; Wilma Mankiller; Quannah ChasingHorse). This design allows meaningful comparisons across national educational systems and policy environments. For a generational span, the leaders span different eras, from mid-20th-century pioneers like Verna Jane Kirkness and Wilma Mankiller, to contemporary voices such as Tasha Spillett-Sumner and Quannah ChasingHorse, enabling examination of how strategies evolved over time. The last criterion, modes of leadership, sought leaders on various paths in advocacy, including institutional advocacy, legal reform, tribal governance, creative educational practice, and youth-driven activism. Together, these leaders represent a rich spectrum of leadership styles shaped by their environments.

3.2. Data Collection Methods/Analysis Approach

The data collection was done through three methods: archival research, document analysis, and existing literature. The archival research included sources such as published biographies, autobiographies, government and tribal archives, speeches, and media interviews. The document analysis included reviews of education legislation, policy documents, and curricular frameworks relevant to the leaders' periods of activity. The literature review focused on academic articles and books that contextualize Indigenous educational reform and the contributions of these leaders.

The analysis was set to identify patterns such as early-life influences, leadership strategies, and community engagement to determine connections between childhood experiences and later-on advocacy styles. This comparative analysis contrasted experiences across countries and generations, noting how context may or may not shape methods and impacts. This essay used a STEEPLE analysis, i. e., a systematic review of social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, ethical factors to examine events and establish the historical context.

4. Analysis: Historical Contexts of Indigenous Female Leadership

4.1. The Six Leaders in Historical Context

This timeline provides a visualization of relevant key historical dates alongside the lives of the featured female leaders (as shown in Figure 1). Through situating their childhoods within broader historical events, it highlights the generational distinctions that resulted in different experiences growing up.

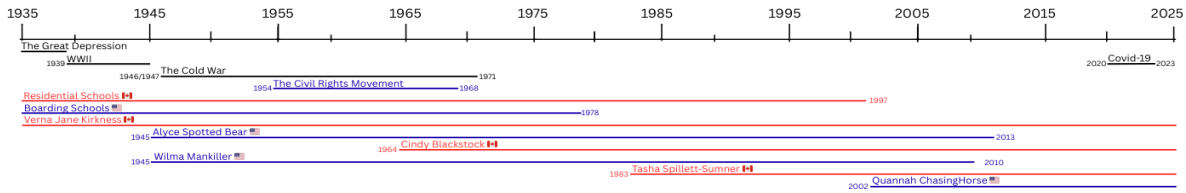

Figure 1. The Six Leaders in Historical Context. Source: drafted by the author based on public information.

Specifically, the timeline underscores the socioeconomic contexts of their early lives that shaped the challenges and opportunities each female leader faced. This then offers insights into their later paths of advocacy, supporting discussions of how socioeconomic contexts impact methods of advocacy.

4.2. STEEPLE Analysis of Influencing Factors

Tables 1 and 2 contextualize significant Canadian and American Indigenous historical events within social, economic, environmental, and political frameworks. This allows the biographies of female leaders in each country to be situated in relation to these events.

Table 1. Summary of STEEPLE Analysis for Canada's Experience.

Social	Residential schools (1831–1996) resulted in forced assimilation that was designed to erase Indigenous culture and caused mistrust in the education system [17].
Economic	Many schools in Indigenous communities face underfunding, resulting in a lack of proper facilities, materials, etc. [18]. Many families, additionally, face financial concerns that limit access to post-secondary education [19].
Environmental	Communities are often isolated, which can limit access to resources as fundamental as teachers.
Political	The Indian Act was a law enacted in 1876 that is still in place today with alterations. It originally handed the responsibility of education to the federal government and laid the grounds for residential schools [20].
Legal	R v. Sparrow in 1990 affirmed cultural and language rights [21]. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in 2016 brought forward a ruling that the federal government discriminated against First Nations children [22].

Table 2. Summary of STEEPLE Analysis for U.S.'s Experience.

Social	Boarding schools from 1869–1960s were designed to suppress Indigenous culture, language, and knowledge, and resulted in distrust in formal education [23]. The urban relocation program, primarily active in the 1950s, provided federal incentives to encourage Native Americans to move to urbanized areas, which often left them socially isolated and subjected to racism [24].
Economic	The underfunding that many schools faced resulted in a lack of proper facilities, materials, and teachers, while the poverty that many families faced limited their ability to focus on education and access to post-secondary schooling.
Environmental	The remoteness of communities limited schools' access to the internet and technology, along with the occurrence
Political	The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 gave tribes control over their own schools, allowing the development of tribal schools and community-run curriculum [25]. Prior to this, education was in
Legal	The Indian Education Act of 1972 was aimed at improving educational opportunities for Indigenous people [26].

4.3. Biographies of Study Leaders

4.3.1. Canada: Verna Jane Kirkness (b. 1935, Fisher River Cree Nation, Manitoba)

"My only real aspiration was to become a teacher, particularly a teacher among my own people. I was born with a love for school." [27].

Verna Jane Kirkness

Verna Jane Kirkness was born in 1935 in Fisher River Cree Nation, Manitoba. She started a school in 1941 where the teachers were most likely permitted teachers, curriculum and textbooks were presumably out of date, and the school was not obligated to follow the provincial curriculum. Despite all this, she continued to foster a love for education, unlike her peers. However, growing up as a non-Status Indian, she was excluded from many Indigenous institutions, including the Birtle Indian Residential School 160 km away, resulting in her attending the Teulon Collegiate as the sole native [27]. In 1959, she earned a teaching certificate from Manitoba Normal School. With it, she taught in residential and public schools, eventually becoming a principal. She later completed her BA (1974), BEd (1976), MEd (1980) at the University of Manitoba [28].

From 1967 – 1970, she served as Manitoba's first cross-cultural consultant and Frontier School Division Supervisor, introducing Cree and Ojibwe instruction [29]. She was also an Education Director for Manitoba and National Indian Brotherhood, co-authoring Wahbung: Our Tomorrows (1971) and Indian Control of Indian Education (1972) [27]. Furthermore, she joined UBC in 1981 as a NITEP director, founding Ts'kel Graduate Program (1984), First Nations House of Learning (1985), and UBC First Nations Longhouse (1993). She received many honours for her work, such as Order of Canada (1998), Order of Manitoba (2007), Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal (2003), and multiple honorary doctorates [29].

4.3.2. Canada: Cindy Blackstock (b. c. 1964, Gitxsan First Nation, British Columbia)

"My goal is to help raise a generation of First Nations children who never have to recover from their childhoods, and a generation of non-Indigenous children who never have to say sorry." [30].

Cindy Blackstock

Cindy Blackstock was born into Gitxsan heritage in Burns Lake, British Columbia, in 1964 [31]. Growing up, she witnessed first-hand the racist stereotypes directed towards Indigenous people, often being characterized as lazy and dumb solely based on her heritage [32]. Throughout her childhood, she switched schools often due to moving, one time resulting in her being placed in a remedial class as school administrators assumed Indigenous children would require additional help [33]. Despite this, she eventually attended the University of British Columbia, graduating with a bachelor's degree in Psychology, and moved into social work. Devoting her life to child protection and Indigenous child welfare, she earned two more masters from McGill University and Loyola University and a PhD in Social Work from the University of Toronto [30].

After witnessing no one taking charge of the issue of Indigenous families disproportionally in need of child welfare services, she chose to make a difference. From 1999 to 2002, she helped transform the First Nations Family Child Care Workers Society into Caring for First Nations Children Society, challenging inequitable federal funding for child welfare and education and launching the Aboriginal Social Worker Program [34]. Since then, she's brought forward many legal cases to fight for equal rights for Indigenous children, such as the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, which found systemic discrimination in the funding of Indigenous child services. She has also written many children's books, and even contributed to a film discussing Indigenous child welfare and human rights [31]. She received many honours, including Queen Elizabeth II Diamond [35] and Golden Jubilee Medals [36].

4.3.3. Canada: Tasha Spillett-Sumner (b. 1983, Halifax, Nova Scotia)

"The gifts that we were given aren't for our individual benefit but for that of the collective, so share them generously with one another."

Tasha Spillett-Sumner

Tasha Spillett was born to Cree and Trinidadian descent during the early 1980s. However, she grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba [37]. Throughout her childhood, she rarely saw her cultural identity affirmed in a positive way in public. It was only through connecting with her traditional territory and lands that she began rebuilding her cultural identity and sense of self. She earned a master's degree in land-based Indigenous education along with her PhD from the University of Saskatchewan [38]. She was formerly a high school teacher of social studies and English, creating culturally responsive learning environments in the classroom for her students [39].

She is also the author of many literary pieces, such as Surviving the City, a graphic novel series about two high school Indigenous girls. She uses her writing to amplify the voices and experiences of Indigenous people, earning her many awards and honours along the way, such as the 2020 Youth Media Awards, 2020 American Indian Youth Literature award Young Adult Honor Book, 2019 Indigenous Voices Awards, 2019 WordFest Imaginarium Award, 2019 Manitoba Book Award, and more [39].

4.3.4. U.S.: Alyce Spotted Bear (Numakshi Mihe) (1945–2013, Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota)

Alyce Spotted Bear was born on 17 December 1945, in Elbowoods, North Dakota, and attended Stephan Indian Mission School for twelve years [40]. She experienced firsthand cultural and educational disruption that her community faced from the loss of land in 1953 due to the Garrison Dam [41]. She earned a bachelor of science in education at Dickinson State, a MEd from Penn State, and completed coursework toward a PhD at Cornell [42]. She also contributed greatly to Fort Berthold Community College, serving as the vice president of the Native American Studies and Tribal Relations department, and she worked at all levels of education, from preschool to college [43].

Her contributions to education were immense, creating the Native American Studies and Tribal Relations department at the Fort Berthold Community College in New Town [43]. Additionally, she established groundwork for the Joint Tribal Advisory Committee during her tenure as Chairwoman of the Three Affiliated Tribes, which secured the Economic Recovery Fund for education, economic development, and social welfare for her community [44]. Having been appointed by President Obama to the National Advisory Council on Indian Education, she was equally instrumental in providing policy recommendations in regards to advancing culturally based education and support for Native language immersion schools [45]. Throughout her lifetime, she was recognized posthumously by the Three Affiliated Tribes for tribal leadership and as a cultural and educational pioneer, with the Alyce Spotted Bear & Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children, established in 2016, to guide national Native youth policy, being named after her [46].

4.3.5. U.S.: Wilma Mankiller (1945–2010, Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma/California)

"I don't think anybody anywhere can talk about the future of their people or of an organization without talking about education." [47]

Wilma Mankiller

Wilma Mankiller was born in 1945 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the sixth out of eleven children. Growing up, her ancestral home had no electricity, indoor plumbing, or telephones. In 1956, her family joined the federal Indian Relocation program under the Bureau of Indian Affairs and moved to San Francisco, California [48]. Having disliked the move to the big city, she used money from babysitting to take a bus to her maternal grandparent's ranch five times before being allowed to stay [49]. However, it was in San Francisco where her commitment to social activism began, developing after witnessing the Occupation of Alcatraz, which exposed the unfair treatment of American Indians [48].

Prior to returning to Oklahoma for her bachelor's degree in social science at the Flaming Rainbow University, she attended classes at San Francisco State College. After her studies at the Flaming Rainbow University, she attended the University of Arkansas for graduate courses [50]. Eventually, she was elected as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1985, serving as the Deputy Principal Chief prior to her election [48]. There, she expanded the Head Start program to promote school readiness for Cherokee youth [51]. She also negotiated for self-control of the federal education funding and programming [52]. She earned many honours throughout her life, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1998) and being inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame (1993) [48].

4.3.6. U.S.: Quannah ChasingHorse (b. 2002, Arctic-Russia–Arizona)

"We need to create space where youth can be safe, where they can have fun and learn and unapologetically be themselves." [53].

Quannah ChasingHorse

Quannah ChasingHorse was born in 2002 in Arizona to Han Gwich'in and Oglala Lakota lineage [54]. She grew up living on the Navajo homelands, before moving to Mongolia and finally returning to her hometown in Alaska. Under the guidance of her mom, who taught her all the skills she needed to survive, she embraced her Indigenous heritage [55]. From a young age, she incorporated her Indigenous knowledge into school. However, as she continued to get older, the judgement of peers pushed her to try assimilating into Western society due to the feeling of being different. Despite this, she eventually grew to find her confidence and embrace herself [53].

Her largest education impact was during her school years, where she advocated for changing Columbus' Day to Indigenous People's Day, having been pulled out of school to testify at the school board meeting discussing the change [56]. It started small in her own school, but the change quickly caught on, resulting in many other schools following suit [57]. She also serves as a cultural educator and public figure. Her work as a model, openly embracing her cultural identity, is an inspiration for Indigenous youth to reconnect with their culture and continue looking for ways to incorporate their Indigenous background into the still heavily Westernized society [58].

5. Key Insights from a Comparative Analysis

Our examination of the methods of advocacy for education utilized by the Indigenous female leaders of Canada and the United States shows several cross-border differences. Throughout both countries, Indigenous female leaders consistently relied on mediums such as policy development and public speaking, or representation to challenge the systemic discrimination and provide institutional reforms that brought culturally relevant education to the Indigenous people. The differences seen in choices of method and implementation are not due to any particular socioeconomic conditions specifically connected to either country.

However, when the analysis shifts from a geographical to a generational perspective, clearer distinctions emerge. The earlier generation shows a clear emphasis on the use of policy interventions as their main tool, while the emerging generation shows a clear preference for methods more geared towards public representation. There are two causes for this pattern: one, that each of the female leaders became the advocate that their generation needed, and two, that methods of advocacy evolved as society evolved.

In much of the twentieth century, the Indigenous people of Canada and the United States faced legal environments that were highly restrictive of their autonomy and rights. In Canada, the Indian Act regulates

nearly every aspect of the lives of First Nations, including and not limited to their structures of government, cultural practices, and off-reserve movement [20]. In the United States, the Indian Reorganization Act sought to reverse some assimilative policies but still introduced the American government structures to tribes, imposing external control over tribal governances [59]. Throughout this period, residential schools in Canada and boarding schools in the United States were widespread, operating to assimilate Indigenous children to Euro-Western languages and cultures by any means. Additionally, advocating through public speech and representation would have been more difficult during this time period due to the limited technology. Without the benefit of modern-day platforms such as YouTube or Instagram, the ability to reach broader audiences was constrained. Public speeches were limited to areas with heavy foot traffic, while access to media outlets such as newspapers or television appearances required significant financial funding. These factors brought forth space for female leaders who fight for systemic change through targeting progress with policy advocacy. Verna Kirkness, Alyce Spotted Bear, and Wilma Mankiller primarily used such policy changes to support the majority of their advocacy, joining and establishing committees and programs. Verna Kirkness was instrumental in developing the Indian Control of Education policy in 1972 and later worked to increase access to post-secondary education for Indigenous students through initiatives such as the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia. Similarly, Alyce Spotted Bear contributed as a member of the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education and co-chaired the U.S. National Advisory Council on Indigenous Education. Additionally, she assisted in the development of the Native American Studies Program. As Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Wilma Mankiller fought for tribal control of education programs and expanded the Head Start program to promote school readiness for Cherokee youth.

In the mid-twentieth century, residential schools and boarding schools still continued to operate. However, the legal environment began to shift. In 1951, there were amendments to the Indian Act in Canada, removing the prohibition of cultural practices such as the potlatch and sun dance [20]. The Indian Reorganization Act of the United States, on the other hand, continued with minimal modifications. Despite these gradual adjustments, Indigenous people continued to face overall restrictions on autonomy. This time period brought forth some minor progress in systemic oppression, but there was still an evident tone of assimilation. This is what likely influenced Cindy Blackstock's use of a mixture in methods of advocacy, with a main focus on policy work, but additionally publishing literature to connect with the public. She brought forth advancements in systemic change through her leadership in legal cases such as the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal case on discriminatory educational funding. Both female leaders, however, also had published books that spoke on the continuous systemic racism, encouraging and empowering others to take a stand for fairness.

In more recent decades, many of the legal restrictions that once governed nearly every aspect of Indigenous lives have either been completely eliminated or significantly reformed. Both the Canadian residential schooling system and the American boarding schools have officially been closed, marking the end of one of the most pervasive tools of assimilation [60, 61]. Contemporary society has also moved towards acknowledgment of Indigenous rights, public conversations being framed by themes of reconciliation, equity, and cultural revitalization. There has also been substantial progress in the legal battles fought for educational rights, such as the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act* of 1975 in the United States. Alongside these legal shifts, many universities, colleges, and organizations have Indigenous-led groups that continue to address the systemic inequities. This transformation in legislation has left a space for Indigenous female leaders whose methods are geared towards representation, openly embracing their identity and culture to advocate for education and change. Moreover, with the advent of mobile technology and social media platforms, advocacy through public speech and presence has become more accessible for advocates. Posts on platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, or YouTube do not require the same financial funding as television or newspapers did in the past. Tasha Spillet-Sumner and Quannah ChasingHorse embrace this approach, working primarily through public speech and media presence in order to educate and inspire. Tasha Spillet-Sumner has authored many published works that can be found in particular school curricula. Her works, such as *Surviving the City* and *I Sang You Down from the Stars,* carry themes of Indigenous resilience, identity, and kinship alongside the emphasis on land-based education. Quannah ChasingHorse on the other hand focuses more towards media

presence, using her platform as a model to raise awareness of the importance of the relationship between land, culture, and education.

6. Conclusions

This paper reviews and compares the educational advocacy of selected Indigenous female leaders from Canada and the United States, analyzing both their methods but also the underlying social conditions that shaped these choices. Using archival documents and secondary literature across countries and generations, the analyses provide insights into the evolution in advocacy and underscore the impact of lived experiences on the approaches towards educational advocacy taken by Indigenous female leaders.

A cross-border comparison shows few substantial differences in the advocacy strategies used between the leaders of each country. Any minor variations could not be attributed to any specific national socioeconomic context. On the other hand, notable distinctions could be found across generations. Earlier generations tended to focus on methods that involved policy reform and legislative change, engaging directly with institutional systems for progress in Indigenous-led education. In contrast, recent generations emphasized public representation through media, literature, and cultural visibility, demonstrating the importance of cultural acceptance in education. These generational differences reflect the evolving socioeconomic conditions throughout the century, with earlier leaders facing overt legal restrictions that required structural reform, while recent leaders faced barriers rooted in societal prejudice and cultural marginalization. In both contexts, the Indigenous female leaders directly challenged the most pressing issues of their generation, focusing their advocacy on the most pressing issues of their communities at the time.

Despite its unique insights and in-depth description of these six leaders, our research is limited in several ways. First, it is confined to a sample size of six Indigenous female leaders, three from Canada and three from the United States. Future studies should expand sample sizes to allow for a broader range of experiences and methods of advocacy to be examined. While there have been significant advancements in Indigenous rights, there is still progress to be made. The examination of trends in methods across generations shows a shift in focus from legislative and policy concerns among earlier leaders to the representation and public engagement among recent leaders. Second, while this analysis underscores the important role that Indigenous female leaders played in advocating for systemic change, one must acknowledge that they were not alone. For meaningful and lasting progress, the active participation of all members of society in promoting equity and supporting Indigenous communities is needed.

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