

## **Relational Autonomy in Teacher Education: Deepening Teacher Quality through Indigenous and Decolonizing Education**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing from transnational and critical studies in Indigenous and decolonizing education, this paper argues for *relational autonomy* as a key dimension of teacher quality. Bridging feminist critiques of autonomy and Indigenous and decolonial conceptions of personhood, it defines relational autonomy as the personal and social factors that allow individuals to take principled action to benefit their communities when applied to teacher education, relational autonomy helps us understand that good teachers are those who ably support students while transmitting a love of learning, an ethic of care, and a sense of responsibility. Relational autonomy encourages teachers to build supportive and collaborative learning environments that reinforce students' relationships with and responsibilities to their peers, instructors, and environments. In fostering these mutually sustaining relationships, a well-developed sense of relational autonomy compels teachers to move beyond declarations toward the active cultivation of safe and trusting classrooms that enable students to feel more agentic and empowered in their learning. The article concludes by discussing how relational autonomy might enrich and decolonize efforts to conceptualize, administer, and evaluate teacher preparation programs going forward.

**Keywords:** Relational autonomy, teachers, teacher education, Indigenous and decolonizing education, students

### **Introduction**

Throughout the history of schooling as social and spatiotemporal fixity, educators, philosophers, and students have continuously mobilized for its reinvention. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey (2010) critiqued the ongoing standardization of formal learning and called for educators to recognize the social context of learning and the interconnected relationship between *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, Summer 2023, 15(1), pp. 57-70  
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child development and everyday life. Freire (1970) famously called to abolish banking education, which reduces learning to the rote memorization of biased information and views learners as *tabula rasa*. In his call to disestablish school, Illich (1971) frames formal instruction as a lever of social control that equates the ritualistic display of bourgeois sensibility with cognitive development. hooks (2003) indicts schooling for its role in institutionalizing systems of domination related to “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values” (p. 1). The same educational issues Dewey, Freire, Illich, and hooks responded to persist today, as US school systems continue to divorce learning from life and pathologize those marked as ‘other’ according to invisibilized identitarian norms like whiteness, cisheteronormativity, and able-bodiedness (Annamma et al., 2022; Leonardo & Grubb, 2018; Tadiar, 2015). Scholars of decolonizing education note that schooling often reproduces the exploitative structures of Eurocentric imperialism. In recentering Indigenous histories and knowledges, decolonizing education advances the resurgence of Indigenous lifeways and languages, alongside the conscientization of non-Indigenous peoples propagandized into colonial ways of knowing (Tejeda et al., 2003). This status quo has material consequences, evinced in the disproportionate rates in which Black, Brown, and Indigenous students are disciplined for supposed behavioral issues, referred to special education programs, and tracked into the juvenile incarceration system (Mallett, 2016; Rogers & O’Byron, 2008).

Students and educators have long agitated to expand the possibilities of schooling (Tintiangco-Cubales & Duncan-Andrade, 2022). These calls for transformation reverberate in the field of teacher preparation, which is largely administered and assessed according to instrumentalist standards that prioritize theory, content knowledge, and behavior management without prioritizing the needs of students and communities (hooks, 1994; 2003; Johnson, 2019; Reyes, 2019). This pressurized and punitive superstructure contributes to attrition, burnout, and the *teacher preparation diversity gap* (demographic disparities which ensure that students of color seldom meet an educator who looks like them and understands their experiences), making the prospect of revolutionary change in education contingent on multiscale reconfigurations of pedagogic discourse, practice, philosophy, and policy. Such an agenda, at minimum, requires induction programs that prepare educators to act not as middle managers and guards, but as mentors, changemakers, and community leaders (Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016).

To this end, this paper offers a vision of teacher preparation, inspired by Indigenous education that envisions it as a community-accountable moral education. It does so by decolonizing the concept of autonomy. Taking cues from Bishop and Glynn’s (2000) evergreen contention that Indigenous knowledges make it so that “structural issues of power and control, initiation, benefits, representation, legitimization and accountability can be addressed in mainstream classrooms in ways that will eventually benefit all students” (p. 4), we uplift *relational autonomy* as a key dimension of teacher quality. Bridging feminist critiques of autonomy and Indigenous and decolonial conceptions of personhood, it defines relational autonomy as the personal and social factors that allow individuals to take principled action to benefit their communities (Cajete, 2016; Enriquez, 1989; MacKenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Relational autonomy interferes with the increasingly pervasive necropolitics of dominant culture, where artificial intelligence, misinformation, extractive capitalism, gender-based violence, racialized discrimination, and pro-death legislation work in tandem to isolate people, profit from their fear, and reify raced, gendered, and ableist hierarchies rooted in colonial humanism (Howard, 2019). When applied to teacher education, relational autonomy helps us understand that good teachers are those who ably support students while transmitting a love of learning, an ethic of care, and a

sense of responsibility. Relational autonomy encourages teachers to build supportive and collaborative learning environments that reinforce students' relationships with and responsibilities to their peers, instructors, and environments. In fostering these mutually sustaining relationships, a well-developed sense of relational autonomy compels teachers to move beyond declarations toward the active cultivation of safe and trusting classrooms that enable students to feel more agentic and empowered in their learning.

This conceptual study is foregrounded in a critical synthesis of literature that defines autonomy as an ethical orientation that emerges out of shared senses of self, community, and responsibility. These renderings depart from dominant, post-enlightenment readings of autonomy, which equate liberty with the uninhibited pursuit of dominion, mastery, and property. The hegemonic construction of self-centered autonomy is a bedrock of western liberal democracy, whose participating nations are founded on white supremacist notions of personhood and agency that reproduce the corporal and psychic forms of colonial conquest (MacKenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Weaving these critiques into reflections of how relational autonomy has affected our own work as teacher educators, this article considers how a decolonized understanding of agency might catalyze educational futures rooted in healing, interconnectedness, reciprocity, sovereignty, self-determination, and kinship.

### **Defining Relational Autonomy**

In contemporary western theorizing and jurisprudence, the ideas of humanity and agency are primarily drawn from philosophical traditions that view individual actors as archetypal units of existence. Kant, for example, holds that “freedom does not consist of being bound by no law but by laws that are in some sense of one’s own making” (Johnson & Cureton, 2022, p. 10). In Kantian moralizing, autonomy is the product of rigorous internal reflection, which allows one’s life to be governed by bespoke, rational, and internally consistent systems of integrity. Upscaling Kantian autonomy to social formations makes it so that a free and autonomous society is one whose laws and mores are derived from the will of its constituents and enacted through agreed-upon rituals or adjudicated by elected representatives. Kantian autonomy notably makes it so that occupied or colonized nations cannot be free in any meaningful sense, as the rules that govern them are imposed from without rather than articulated from within (Johnson & Cureton, 2022).

Autonomy is a vexing proposition for the putatively ‘postcolonial’ states of the first world. Nation-states like the United States, Canada, and Australia are governed by legal instruments that prioritize ideals like ‘the will of the people’ and the ‘consent of the governed’ but are, with no historical uncertainty, built upon the theft of Indigenous lands, the invasion of preexisting sovereignties, and the erasure of autochthonous knowledge through the violent imposition of western religions, gender roles, and worldviews (Fanon, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Their continued existence furthermore relies upon the dispossession, enslavement, disenfranchisement, and oppression of Blackened, racialized, and minoritized peoples (Blackhawk, 2023; Garba & Sorentino, 2020). When combined with state backing and an economic mandate to occupy, pilfer, and annex stolen lands, Eurocentric settler-invader statecraft shows how a primordially individualistic understanding of autonomy can be used to fuel and justify the global dispensation of patriarchal white supremacist terror. Its heretofore eradicated telos frames the exigent need to reconceptualize autonomy.

In *Relational Autonomy*, MacKenzie and Stoljar (2000) compose a feminist critique that indicts autonomy as a traditionally masculinist ideal predicated on the assumed morality of avarice. They note that conflating autonomy with individualism has unsettling implications:

[First,] it supports valuing substantive independence over all other values, in particular over those arising from relations of interdependence, such as trust, loyalty, friendship, caring, and responsibility.

Second, it promotes a very stripped-down conception of agents as atomistic bearers of rights, a conception in which the diversity and complexity of agents are pared away and agents are reduced to an interchangeable sameness.

Third, it suggests that values, social practices, relationships, and communities that are based on cooperation and interdependence threaten, or at least compromise, autonomy. (MacKenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 6)

Dominant western conceptions of autonomy largely valorize independence, or an understanding of self that is atomized and separate from others, over interdependence, or conceptions of personhood that situate individual experience within nests and webs of kinship. An independent and individualist conception of autonomy devalues the emotional labor and relational affectivity often associated with women, such as care work and sensitivity. Feminist critiques of autonomy accordingly refute the notion that autonomy is the exclusive domain of individual agents, drawing attention to the ways autonomy is experienced and practiced collectively. To this, Annette Baier argues that individuals are in fact *second-persons*, as people are primarily the beneficiaries of those who cared for them. Individual subjectivities are not exclusively innate nor are they the private property of independent agents. Rather, our personalities are inherited from our carers and ancestors before they are iteratively revealed through our relationships with others.

Feminist critiques of autonomy hold significant promise for teaching and teacher education. Education is a fundamentally relational act that involves exchanging and bridging new and existing knowledge between people with differing degrees of experience. Assessing teacher quality through an individualistic lens risks transforming the classroom into a battlefield, where an autonomous and putatively *effective* teacher is one who can impose their will over a hostile body politic (in this case, the students). Relational autonomy disarticulates the notion of a meaningful education from the valorization of dominance, imposition, and coercion, and recenters it toward community-sustaining practices based on reciprocity and connectedness. In practice, relational autonomy calls for action rather than signification or representation. Feminist critiques of autonomy, however, are often reticent to proffer explicit moral pedagogies that stipulate what an autonomous and ethical polity, collectivity, or educator must aspire toward, beyond the dislodging of patriarchal power. To this end, transnational literature on Indigenous and decolonizing education offers several provocations for the deepened understanding of relational autonomy, alongside its usefulness as a dimension of teacher quality. This, in part, is because scholars of Indigenous and decolonizing education define several specific learning conditions that foster collective well-being. Notably, they also clarify that autonomy emerges out of our relationships with and responsibilities to *all* others—not only human beings.

### Indigenous Knowledges and Colonizing Logics

Indigenous knowledges are the heterogenous cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific teachings that underpin autochthonous societies. While citizenship criteria, historical contexts, political aspirations, and cultural practices of Indigenous communities vary in diverse and variegated ways (Brayboy, 2005), political definitions of Indigeneity have been advanced by the United Nations and Indigenous communities themselves. These definitions acknowledge that Indigenous peoples preserve and inherit unique languages, knowledge systems, and beliefs that are distinct from dominant culture. Indigenous peoples also “have a special relation to and use of their traditional land [which] has a fundamental importance for their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples” (UN, n.d., p. 2).

Indigenous knowledges often emphasize the interconnected and reciprocal relationships between people, land, ancestors, and non-human relations, such as animals, waterways, and the cosmos (Cajete, 2016). Santee Dakota poet John Trudell observed that “the history of the People is one of cooperation, collectivity, and living in balance” (Trudell, n.d., n.p). This history, and the relational ways of knowing and doing that underpin it, continues to catalyze contemporary Indigenous politics, activism, and movement-building for sovereignty and self-determination. Indigenous political movements like #landback, NoDAPL, the defense of Mauna Kea, and the Dumagat people’s efforts to stop the construction of a massive dam that would destroy their ancestral domain all reflect a categorical understanding that land is a living ancestor to be cared for and respected, rather than a lifeless resource to be extracted and exploited (Cadena, 2015).

Indigenous conceptions of personhood, sociality, and ethics emanate from an abiding respect for the ways in which all beings are constituted *in relation* (Bishop, 2003; Hoskins, 2017). Nothing, least of all people, exists as an atomized and independent entity in competition with others. Instead, we become what and who we are by engaging and communing with ever-evolving networks of human and non-human relations. Everything that exists in these networks has a relationship with and responsibility to everything else. The cyclical and perpetual nature of existence makes these entanglements and their associated duties inherent and infinite. While Indigenous knowledges are diverse and diffuse, they are roundly distinguishable from *colonizing logics*, or prevailing Eurocentric worldviews built on foundational dualisms that separate body from mind, people from nature, cognition from experience, and individuals from communities. Colonizing logics also reproduce regimes of regulation that assign normative value to characteristics like gender, sexuality, race, age, and ability (Lugones, 2007; Reyes, 2019). Formal compulsory schooling, particularly in colonial contexts like the Philippines, North America, and Tanzania, is directly implicated in the violent imposition of colonizing logics, as schools were often forced on colonized peoples as a strategy for quelling rebellion and consolidating imperial rule through the erasure of place-based cultures, oral histories, and knowledge systems (Blackhawk, 2023; Gleeck, 1976; Nyerre, 1968; Romero, 2020).

In Indigenous Philippine epistemology (Enriquez, 1989; Romero, 2021), the term *kalayaan* refers to the capacity of an individual to take principled action to benefit one’s community. This framing notably contrasts with a standard Eurocentric definition of autonomy, which simply refers to the ability to do as one pleases. The dimensions of *kalayaan* are both internal and external, as it involves an individual’s personal investment in relational ways of thinking and doing along with the contextual factors that enable one to act upon these priorities. Rather than defining autonomy

as a quality possessed by individuals, relational autonomy compels us to think of agency as an ecological condition that is partly possessed by individuals but also mediated by social, cultural, and environmental factors. While non-western conceptualizations of agency and autonomy recognize that individual aspirations and thought processes are important factors in agentic decision-making, they also show the analytical need to move beyond a wholly self-centered understanding of why people do the things they do. In other words, relational autonomy grants ethical purchase to one's ability to serve one's community while understanding that the community is collectively responsible for making the adjudication of communal duty possible. An individual who prioritizes relational autonomy accordingly takes direct action to benefit others while ensuring others can do so in turn. A culture that prioritizes relational autonomy is one in which all people are constantly striving to care for one another. Vibrant networks of opportunity, connection, and learning emerge when individuals are empowered to leverage their unique skills, competencies, and perspectives to care for others in ways that resonate with them.

In the foreword to Marie Battiste's *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (2013), Métis poet and educator Rita Bouvier frames decolonizing education as a project of universal concern:

[Decolonizing education] is an invitation for all of us to work together — as Indigenists, to offer our unique gifts to the important work of decolonization, moving beyond cultural awareness and inclusion — challenging racist ideology as we rethink and re-imagine ourselves in relationship with one another sharing place — one earth. (p. 12)

Bouvier asserts that cultural awareness and putative multiculturalism are not the same as decolonization. In nation-states like the US and Canada, efforts to decolonize education always exist in relation to colonial histories and their contemporary manifestations, like racialized capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. The facticity of enduring systemic trauma brought about by the colonial project makes it so that sweeping structural reform is needed, ideally informed and led by Indigenous peoples (Sabzalian, 2019). Decolonizing education cannot be limited to the inclusion of Indigenous and non-western knowledge in Eurocentric schooling, but rather demands a new understanding of education altogether. Such transformative work has already been undertaken and continues to be iterated, via initiatives that acknowledge colonial atrocities while recentering students' relationships with land (McCoy et al., 2016). Other decolonizing education initiatives include programs that bridge teaching and activism in ways that strengthen students' links to their communities (Battiste, 2013; Styres, 2019).

Reyes's (2019) call for a pedagogy of and towards decoloniality “works to recenter indigeneity while also calling for the abolition of white supremacy and world capitalism” (p. 2). Reyes argues that this mission can be pursued in classrooms by transforming them into places where students can explore non-western and Indigenous ways of knowing, thus affirming the inherent sovereignty of dispossessed peoples. Pedagogies of and toward decoloniality attend to colonial processes that reproduce inequitable power relations and cause trauma in school settings. Decolonial educators are those who recognize oppression as a systemic production rather than an individual failing and take principled action to agitate for change using whatever tools are available to them. Reyes (2019) further argues that under neocolonial economic conditions, students and teachers alike are rendered workers who must produce according to explicit and implicit economic expectations. The products of educational labor include the attainment of test

scores, grades, and manners of dress, speech, and thinking that reflect a positive perception of whiteness, heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, capitalism, and Eurocentrism. Decolonial pedagogues, Reyes (2019) argues, must continually interrogate these biases and refrain from punishing students who do not reproduce them. A pedagogy of and toward decoloniality requires instructional leaders to “problematize situations and conditions, not pathologize people” (Reyes, 2019, p. 7).

Reyes’s (2019) work is instructive in theorizing the role of relational autonomy in teacher preparation, as it argues that a decolonial educator is one that works with students to understand that social, economic, and historical realities continue to have negative effects on contemporary school experiences. Empowered by this critical consciousness, teachers and students may devise strategies to make the classroom a beneficial environment, irrespective of externally imposed curricula or regimes of assessment (Howard, 2019). The reparative potential of decolonial pedagogy informs Battiste’s (2013) argument that the transformative capacity of decolonizing education should not be the exclusive domain of Indigenous peoples. Colonizing logics, germinated on Native soil through historical invasions, create contemporary conditions marked by interlocking forms of oppression, making decolonizing education a universal concern (Halagao, 2010).

### **Relational Autonomy in Teacher Education**

Decolonizing education is difficult and risks alienating students who benefit from the status quo, as “...those from Eurocentered, privileged backgrounds, tend to react in avoidant, defensive, hurtful, and sometimes aggressive behaviors” (Reyes, 2019, p. 5). Decolonial pedagogy and, in fact, relational autonomy, call us to embrace this discomfort and guide all learners in ongoing critiques of how coloniality reproduces systemically and personally. Doing so “questions the construction of one’s entire being: Why am I who I am? Why do I think what I think? Why do I do what I do?” (p. 5). Proclamation is not enough. For example, a justice-oriented pedagogy might begin with a land acknowledgement, which recognizes the traditional caretakers of school-occupied land, but does not offer any suggestion for the resurgence of Indigenous life upon that land. Further iterations involve a recursive dance—acknowledgements that end with an acknowledgment that acknowledgements are not enough and settlers must end their occupations. Commensurate action is seldom proposed or undertaken. Students and faculty of more dominant backgrounds often compose apoplectic positionality statements that colleagues of color, in the moment, are compelled to resolve with forgiveness. Others protest this expectation of penance and absolution, interpreting it as alienating, even oppressive, to those who hold ‘different perspectives.’ When classroom communities are built on preconceived ideological foundations, they tend to create experiential realities where all subjects (students and teachers alike) must fit into definable categories (the oppressors, the oppressed, the aggrieved, and the penitent) and make themselves legible as such. When individuals chafe against the stories being written about them, they withdraw or obtrude, foreclosing the prospect of meaningful exchange.

Students often assume that educating for social justice simply requires that they understand a different set of rules from those which govern dominant, capitalistic, patriarchal, and Eurocentric cultures. In our own practice as teacher-educators, simply inverting colonial hierarchies is insufficient to actualizing social justice conditions in multicultural contexts, which

at a fundamental level is unconcerned with performative politics of ideological purity, and entails creating a world in which many worlds fit (Cadena, 2015). Modeling this world means the classroom ought to function as a living ecosystem where shared commitments to ideas like Indigenous futurity, racial justice, and revolution materialize as they emerge out of our commitments to *one another*. In practice, this means contesting the assumptive commonsense that governs how students and teachers relate to and encounter one another. On every first day of class, I (Noah) initiate this process through the collaborative construction of classroom codes of conduct, rather than imposing my own rules about how an empowering and just learning environment ought to function. This process is inspired by the Māori concept of *tikanga*, or customary and correct practices that ultimately strengthen interpersonal relationships (Mead, 2006). I was introduced to *tikanga* as a Doctoral candidate in Māori and Indigenous Education at the Te Waipapa Taumata Rau (the University of Auckland). There, I learned that while Māori customs are derived from centuries of tradition, they are also “adaptable, flexible, transferable and capable of being applied to entirely new situations” (Mead, 2006, p. 450). As in real life, classroom *tikanga* is negotiated and reevaluated according to the class’s evolving needs and contingent relationalities. Key considerations we continually revisit in the process of building our *tikanga* include:

- How do we ensure that everyone who wishes to participate is empowered to do so?
- How do we manage disagreement?
- How will we keep the discussion respectful, confidential, and focused? How do we construct a community founded on respect, trust, and accountability?

As a strategy for cultivating collective well-being through a never-ending conversation, *tikanga* calls on all community members to cultivate relational autonomy by actively reflecting upon how their skills and aspirations can be reoriented toward the community and leverage them to advance its collective aspirations. *Tikanga* divests our subjectivities from posturing and purity. It instead calls for commitment, planning, consultation, and collaboration—all without apology, apoplectics, or delay.

When practiced in ways that center relational autonomy, teaching and learning become active, collaborative processes that enact and imagine worlds based on abiding commitments to respect and reciprocity, rather than self-centered edification (Battiste, 2013). A relational understanding of autonomy emphasizes the importance of dialogue and collaboration in shaping individual agency. In school environments, teachers who embody relational autonomy transmit this understanding by encouraging students to collaborate in ways that cultivate mutual respect and the construction of shared meaning.

Minoritized and Indigenous peoples continue to deal with the loss of their cultures, traditions, lifeways, languages, and children to genocidal institutions like Indian boarding schools in the U.S., residential schools in Canada, and the colonial school system administered by the U.S. military in the Philippines (Romero & Yellowhorse, 2021). Colonizing logics pervade in formal schooling, as teachers are often disincentivized from reflecting critically on their practice and compelled to dole out information while punishing difference (Miller, 2017). Transformative action is incommensurable with colonizing logic, while reparative justice requires decolonial thought, engaged relationship building, and commensurate action. While

broad systemic change is needed to seed educational justice across settler-colonial terrains, it remains necessary to interrupt the ongoing reproduction of colonial schooling, even in intimately and small-scale ways like the collaborative construction of community guidelines. Intentionally centering the collective, ethical, and affective characteristics of relational autonomy in scholarly conversations around what makes an ideal teacher represents one way of doing so in educator preparation.

Acknowledging relational autonomy as a dimension of teacher quality reflects an ancestral understanding of teaching itself. In precolonial Philippine societies, teaching was the province of the warrior, a community servant tasked with protecting a tribe youth, thus ensuring its survival. The Maranao people of Mindanao, for example, understand the concept of education mostly as “existential [rather] than epistemological, a conception expressed in the quality and nature of the individual’s being rather than the quantity or quality of knowledge possessed” (Milligan, 2021, p. 32). Warriors and teachers in Maranao society held vaunted positions that were derived from compassion rather than repressive power. While warriors do take up arms and fight (and continue to do so fiercely in defense of their lands and lifeways; see Razon & Hensman, 1976), Indigenous perspectives on leadership are foremost accountable to the needs of one’s communities and kin. Power, in this sense, comes not from dominion, control, or material wealth but from a visceral sense of consideration for all one’s relations, be they human or non-human. In the classroom, a relational understanding of autonomy helps educators recognize the agency of all relations, reinforcing the importance of student voice and encouraging young people to take ownership over their learning. In drawing inspiration from the sense of agency that inspires a warrior autonomy to navigate existential threats (like famine, war, dispossession, imposition, and invasion) to advance collective goals, so too can teachers create opportunities for students to express their views and make decisions about their own learning goals and trajectories.

When applied to teaching, an understanding of autonomy that is informed by feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial theorizations deepens and decolonizes the concept of teacher agency. Like agency, relational autonomy guides a teacher’s ability to influence matters related to their professional practice and development (Tinn & Ümarik, 2022). But unlike the primarily internal characteristics of teacher agency, relational autonomy is predicated on the “conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by...social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity” (Mackenzie & Stolkjar, 2000, p. 4). Emphasizing relational autonomy thus moves educators away from self-contained ruminations and orients them toward the multiplicities that emerge when all individuals are empowered to carry out their duties and pursue their goals. A relational understanding of autonomy further extends this ethic of care to the institution, whose stakeholders are charged with providing the material and temporal support structures instructional leaders will need to nourish and protect their communities. Relational autonomy requires engagement, as caring for the infinite worlds realized and potentiated by our relationship-building, collaboration, and reciprocity demand vigilant attention. A relational understanding of autonomy clarifies the importance of grace and generosity, as all community members must, at minimum, be afforded the space and time to critically reflect on their own values, beliefs, actions, and aspirations, while at the same time interrogating the social, cultural, and historical contexts that give these ideas meaning.

Relational autonomy aligns with Khalifa, Khalil, Marsh, & Halloran's (2018) Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership (IDSL) framework, whose tenets involve empowering communities through self-determination and the centering of community voices and values. Framing decolonial agency as the individual responsibility to carry out collective values, IDSL shows that autonomy is not singularly embodied by teachers or localized in classrooms. Teacher agency can and must be sustained through leadership and across an institutional space. These tenets are contingent upon dialogues between students, the community, and school leadership to ensure "school leadership that is grounded in shared values and a deep connection to community" (Shiller, 2020, p. 591). When schools cultivate leadership through this IDSL, a commitment to relational autonomy can efficaciously reinforce communal perspectives, aspirations, histories, and responsibilities.

Relational autonomy is an important consideration in the establishment, evaluation, assessment, and improvement of next-generation teacher education programs. Early data (gathered from semi-structured interviews and surveys) from the Nevada Educator Preparation Institute and Collaborative (NV-EPIC) suggests that a combination of full financial support, community-based recruitment, flexible curriculum, integrated professional development, and in-program and post-program mentorship is successfully preparing teacher candidates to take ownership over their practice (see Koerber et al., 2022). These findings have important implications for understanding the kinds of institutional initiatives, professional competencies, and interpersonal characteristics teacher preparation programs must continue to prioritize in order to support the long-term retention of diverse educators. As such, this article will conceptually inform future studies conducted by this research team, which will explore how NV-EPIC's curricular, programmatic, and pedagogical emphasis on relational autonomy might help remedy longstanding equity gaps, address endemic teacher shortages, and interrupt generational cycles of inequity and disenfranchisement often associated with urban schooling in the United States. These frameworks, initiatives, and implications help us understand that educational justice is not a *product* crystallized in mission statements or placating policies. Rather, educational justice and equity are *processes* that occur through the daily and consistent reification of our voices and values.

### Conclusion

While educational equity will require systemic change in nearly every area of social, political, and institutional life in the overdeveloped west, relational autonomy portends several important societal and pedagogic affects. Relational autonomy compels schools (and schools of education) to take reparative and community-sustaining approaches to teacher training and professional practice seriously. As an analytic, relational autonomy draws attention to the ethical dimensions of educators' decision-making and holds institutions accountable for ensuring that teachers are able to act in ways that benefit, rather than pathologize, learners. Further research will contribute to a nuanced understanding of how relational autonomy can help teacher preparation programs, educational leaders, and teachers themselves understand the ethical, ontological, and community-embedded processes that make teaching joyful and fulfilling.

This analytical trajectory could direct policy and curriculum initiatives built on our evolving and abiding obligations to young people rather than decontextualized assumptions of what teachers, students, and schools *should* be doing. Relational autonomy holds that no action

should require harming, humiliating, or traumatizing another person and no collectivity should require its members to do so. Since new teachers must balance economic insecurity and instability while developing into self-actualized professionals, educational leaders have a concomitant responsibility to encourage their development into community-embedded healers, carers, and warriors (rather than repressive agents of a colonizing force). Above all, relational autonomy helps us understand that a good teacher is one who is prepared and empowered to carry out their responsibilities to their community, as defined by the community itself.

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