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**Teaching Indigenous Curriculum
in Settler Colonial Contexts**

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“State education systems... are primarily designed to produce communities of individuals willing to uphold settler colonialism.”

—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), “Land as Pedagogy”

I grew up in a Mormon settlement in rural Southeast Idaho, on the occupied traditional territories of the Shoshone and Bannock nations. In school I learned little about those peoples, their past or present, or my own position as a settler on their homelands. I’m working on that gap now as a graduate student at Simon Fraser University, studying Indigenous literatures that reflect on Mormon settlement. Being here in British Columbia, I can’t help contrast my own education with recent changes to B.C. K-12 curriculum mandating the inclusion of “Indigenous perspectives” in the classroom. I want to be very positive about these changes, to see them as taking some of the focus off Western ways of thinking in order to make room for Indigenous ones. However, I also remain aware of the antagonism inherent in expecting government-run public education to “provide the proper context” for Indigenous knowledges—something Miichi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues it “does not and cannot” do (Simpson 17). This, Simpson points out, is because Indigenous knowledges arise from and make sense in the context of Indigenous freedom and sovereignty, whereas state education arises from and makes sense in the context of settler colonial rule. “The context is the curriculum,” Simpson writes (10). This is consistent not only with Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan’s notion that “the medium is the message,” but also with French philosopher Michel Foucault’s argument that state education is essential to upholding class dynamics and state power. If, as Simpson suggests, “State education systems...are primarily designed to produce communities of individuals willing to uphold settler colonialism” (1), it seems worthwhile to consider what educators can do to resist that, as well as what remains outside of their control.

One way state education reproduces the dynamics of settler colonialism is through the encouragement of guilt. “Guilt,” Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Gerald Taiaiake Alfred writes, “is a monotheistic concept foreign to Indigenous cultures” (Alfred 182). Getting students to feel guilty for Canada’s treatment of Indigenous peoples might seem like a reachable goal, but it actually discourages students from participating in further dialogue. Teachers can show students how to question structures like settlement, whiteness, or Christianity without the need to feel shame because they may (or may not) be settler-descended, white, or Christian. Administrators can support them by remaining cautious of sensationalism or guilt-encouraging rhetoric when planning school-wide events, assemblies, or programs like those held on Orange Shirt Day.

Another way state education reproduces the dynamics of settler colonialism is through the twin forces of repetition and inconsistency. According to my classmates teaching in B.C. schools, students in some of their schools have never learned about residential schools, while other students complain about having to learn about them “again”—a complaint which indicates those students are hearing the same set of facts and statistics about residential schools and not connecting with them. Though teachers may value the freedom that comes from non-standardized curriculum and testing, they need to be aware of the ways repetition and inconsistency can alienate students. They

can do much to prevent this alienation by thoughtfully preparing and carefully coordinating their curriculum in advance and with the support of administrators. If Indigenous curriculum is not well coordinated, students may feel it is being imposed upon them or that it is not valuable to their education. They might come away feeling resentful of Indigenous presence and apathetic about Indigenous livelihood.

Teachers and administrators can experience similar feelings of resentment when they receive inconsistent messaging or inadequate resources and support. Though B.C. is putting together a variety of resources for educators to support their teaching of the new curriculum, my classmates have described talking with many teachers who hesitate to teach Indigenous material and many who teach it without feeling they have the proper knowledge to do so. The resentment inadequately prepared teachers may feel will likely grow if conversations around teaching Indigenous content leave them feeling frustrated or called out. Rather than directing that resentment at themselves or at the curriculum, educators should recognize these feelings as products of the state education system.

If educators can put their own frustrations into context and undertake the work to help students have consistently affirming and dynamic experiences with Indigenous curriculum, they will do much to disrupt the reproduction of settler colonial dynamics via the state education system. Educators should remain critical of the notion that education can become decolonizing simply by including Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum of the multicultural mainstream or using Indigenous perspectives to teach students the Western academic disciplines. Instead of merely considering how Indigenous perspectives contribute to Western understandings, educators should also reflect on how Indigenous perspectives can reframe, challenge, or transcend them. When educators approach Indigenous curriculum this way, Simpson suggests they can create “sites of decolonization within academic institutions” (13) that intervene in the ways students are generally taught to think of their relationships to those around them and to the land they live on. And yet educators, administrators, students, and parents should also be wary: if a government can mandate the inclusion of certain curriculum, can’t it also mandate its exclusion, intervene in its integrity, or oversee its demise?

SOURCES

Alfred, Gerald Taiaiake. “Restitution is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples.” *Response, responsibility, and renewal: Canada’s truth and reconciliation journey*, Vol. 2, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009.

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