

Decolonizing Educational Curricula in Settler Societies: Unpacking White Supremacy in Canada

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In the present time of ongoing social crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the senseless killing of George Floyd and subsequent upheaval settler societies have been given the opportunity to reflect deeper on the structures and practices that until now have been upheld as the standard. A settler society is one where people have settled on the land through violent means (colonialism), and where this notion of dominance over certain groups remains in the minds and daily practices of these societies (Granzow, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, which took the world by storm, exposed many cracks in society and presented the world, namely settler societies, with a unique look at how global inequality reigns. This includes how some are afforded more privilege based on factors such as geographical location, race, gender, economic status, sexual orientation, or able-bodiedism (Loggins et al., 2021). In early 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, and the ensuing global backlash, the systems that we have always taken at face value were put into question by the masses. Since then, Canadians in particular have been forced to open up a larger conversation about structural racism, colonialism, and white supremacy through the uncovering of thousands of children's bodies left behind from the Canadian residential school system. In 2021, discoveries were made first at the Kamloops Residential school in British Columbia, and several discoveries followed in different locations within the country (Al Jazeera, 2022). Education has been a significant part of the discussion thus since. Through a critical discourse analysis of the New Brunswick social studies curriculum, my master's research critically dissects and analyzes Multicultural Citizenship Education and how far it represents Indigenous perspectives in the Canadian school curriculum. Multicultural Citizenship Education is a term coined by Banks (2008, 2016) and Sabzalian (2019) which refers to the kind of education aimed at citizenship within the context of multiculturalism. Through this research, I have been able to draw larger comparisons to global trends that have been brought to light by the ongoing social crises we face. In this paper, I will use the findings of this research to build a case for shifting the focus and painting a larger picture of how white supremacy is embedded in the Canadian public school curriculum and systems.

White supremacy in this context can be defined broadly and in accordance with Gillborn (2005), as an entire system which underpins and has embedded itself in education in settler societies. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on Canada and its educational structures, although common trends can be seen in other settler societies. White supremacy in this context is an active agent, and it seeks to uphold systems of racial injustice which inevitably intersect with other forms of inequality (Gillborn, 2005). White supremacy actively de-normalizes all non-whiteness and is especially harmful in educational policies and practices where it seeks to teach a single narrative to a multiplicity of students (Gillborn, 2005). Although this concept is actively enforced and upheld, its inherent danger lies not only in its unequal premises but also in its ability to blend in and become accepted as 'the norm' (Gillborn, 2005). What is also important

to note is that white supremacy in the context of education in settler societies cannot be separated from colonialism (Seawright, 2014).

It is of utmost importance to address my positionality within this research. I am a white, cisgendered female settler who was raised and educated in New Brunswick, Canada. I was completely blind to the white supremacy and embedded colonialism in the curriculum which I grew up directly benefitting from. My schools were filled with students who looked and thought like me who came from middle to middleclass families, just like I did. It was not until as late as after my undergraduate degree (also obtained in New Brunswick) that I began to reflect on these systems and how they were built and maintained for me to succeed. I write this as a postgraduate student who has been afforded the opportunity to live and obtain a master's degree in Freiburg, Germany. Due to my inherent privileges which allow me to freely move across borders and seek new opportunities, I was able to make the decision to apply for a master's degree in another country. I am continuously reflecting on how my privilege has taken me to where I am today, and how although I am researching white supremacy and contemporary colonialism in education, I will never be able to fully understand the harm it causes as I have never and will never experience it.

My master's thesis research intends to understand the role of Multicultural Citizenship Education, as defined by Banks and Banks (2016) and Sabzalian (2019), in the Canadian curriculum. This kind of education is common in settler societies and focuses on respecting diversity in multicultural societies with the common goal of citizenship. More specifically, this research aims to understand how or if Indigenous perspectives can fit into this current model of education. The findings of this research were not surprising, in that they revealed a significant lack of Indigenous representation in the Canadian school curriculum through the Multicultural Citizenship Education approach. Going beyond the scope of this research, I have analyzed the New Brunswick social studies curriculum further to draw out notions of white supremacy more broadly. This research was based on 10 curricular documents from the New Brunswick social studies program, covering elementary level through to the last year of high school. The New Brunswick social studies curriculum is largely outdated, some documents being written as long ago as 1993 (Government of New Brunswick, 1993). At this pivotal moment in history, where settler societies have been given the insights needed to point out discrimination in educational structures, curricula, and practices, there should be a distinct focus on white supremacy in action that is inherently tied to colonialism. Although this research was narrow, understanding this small glimpse into what curricula in settler societies looks like can help us paint a larger picture of white supremacy as having active agency in education.

Through the process of colonization, the land which we presently know as Canada was forcefully stolen from its original inhabitants (Nadeau, 2020). With the land presently known as Canada being situated on stolen land, we must not separate colonialism from any of its institutions. White supremacy is an active instrument of colonialism (Seawright, 2014) which has embedded itself in the Canadian public school curriculum, as was discovered through analyzing the New Brunswick social studies curriculum. Some of the findings of this research included the outright failure to include Indigenous history in the Canadian History 122 course, only beginning the content at Canada's independence and only mentioning Indigenous people in passing (e.g., using the term 'native issue,' presenting Indigenous people as a problem) and not as a major part

of our past and presence (Government of New Brunswick, 1998). Furthermore, there is a significant lack of representation of Indigenous and non-Western authors, content, and approaches to learning for the sake of Eurocentric methods of knowing and being. For example, in the Political Science 120 curriculum, the suggested philosophers fail to include representation outside of Western thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato (Government of New Brunswick, 2019). Zooming out and looking at the social studies curriculum through a broader lens of anti-colonialism allows us to see that these documents do not only fail to represent Indigenous perspectives but fail to represent anyone who does not fit within a single, white supremacist narrative. This is extremely harmful and puts a significant portion of the population at risk of exclusion, academic and social precarity for the benefit of privileged students and the maintenance of colonialism. Many solid examples of white supremacy are embedded in these documents, such as narratives of genocide against Canada's Indigenous people as an 'emerging argument' and not as a solid fact, and a total neglect for the ongoing struggles faced by Indigenous people in Canada today (Government of New Brunswick, 2012).

When looking at a way forward for educational systems, especially in settler societies, we must look through an anti-colonial lens and apply a decolonial praxis. This is because assuming that colonialism was a period in history does not validate the contemporary lived experiences of many students. For example, in Canada, claiming that colonization was a period in history from which we have moved on invalidates identities in the classroom who were and continue to be colonized (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). The New Brunswick social studies curriculum fails to look outside of a one-sided view of history, actively erasing parts of the past to serve a colonial narrative and invalidating the lived experiences of so many. According to Asgharzadeh and Dei (2001), anti-colonial theory should be applied in education as a way forward from discrimination and inequality. Anti-colonial theory can be understood as a way of thinking which rejects all things post-colonial and views colonialism as having a contemporary hold on settler societies (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018). Asgharzadeh & Dei (2001) reject a post-colonial view of history, which we see often throughout the New Brunswick social studies curriculum. Rejecting anything post-colonial, and assuming that everything we read and know is still embedded with colonialism is a great starting place for education at this crucial moment in time. If we can see through an anti-colonial theory that white supremacy is actively engaging with our education, we can then seek an active force to diminish and move past it. This force is called decolonial praxis and can be defined as an active dismantling of colonial practices not only through the curriculum, but through challenging conversations in classrooms, and through small daily actions (Gahman & Legault, 2017). The anti-colonial framework centers on Indigenous knowledge, but it is important to understand that this does not mean Indigenous histories and cultures become the dominant ones. In applying this approach, those who have always been in the margins hold one another up, and no one narrative becomes dominant (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018). This theoretical approach and subsequent decolonial praxis work to unpack colonialism at work through the application of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In short, decolonial praxis is the action required to dismantle white supremacy, and this can be done through small actions every day which actively challenge the dominant discourse. Not only teachers, but students, heads of school, and even parents can and should participate in this dismantling. This dismantling can look like encouraging diverse perspectives in the classroom, and not shying away from confrontation or conflicting

opinions (Gahman & Legault, 2017). It can also look like encouraging different styles of learning, incorporating non-Western authors in the curriculum, or simply challenging the status quo.

The New Brunswick social studies curriculum acts as a small representation of Canadian education's hidden white supremacist agenda. There are solid attempts at inclusivity in these documents, such as one of their main areas of focus being respect for 'diversity and inclusion.' Although these are perhaps steps in the right direction, we need to do more than 'respect' diversity at the surface level. The New Brunswick social studies curriculum is in need of a major update, and perhaps a good starting place is the consideration of diverse perspectives in and out of the classroom. Centering Indigenous history in Canadian History 122 for example, would be an excellent starting point. When looking at education in a settler society like Canada, and trying to understand how to move forward, an anti-colonial approach must be taken. We can no longer look at colonialism as a part of history classes, but as embedded in the very structures which teach these histories. From this research we can see clearly that this particular set of curricula are outdated. With the information we are now learning together as a society though, we have an opportunity to not only update these documents but to root them in an anti-colonial perspective to ensure equal educational opportunities, validation of all lived experiences, and to put an end to education based discrimination. Although the scope of this research focuses on the curriculum as a point of intervention, anti-colonial theory and decolonial praxis means looking both within and beyond the curriculum. Curricular intervention is perhaps a good starting point, however decolonial praxis must become a part of our everyday existence in order to truly disrupt the stability of settler colonialism in Canadian education.

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