Settler Colonial Legacies: Indigenous Student Reflections on K-12 Social Studies Curriculum

Stephanie Masta
Purdue University, szywicki@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/intersections

Part of the Indigenous Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intersections: Critical Issues in Education by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
Settler Colonial Legacies: Indigenous Student Reflections on K-12 Social Studies Curriculum

Stephanie Masta, Purdue University

Abstract
This article explores how Indigenous students make meaning of the dominant structure of settler colonialism within their K-12 academic experiences. I build on previous work done on settler colonial ideology by linking structural forms of settler colonial power to the lived experiences of Indigenous students, and using their voices to describe how pervasive settler colonial ideology is in practice. Through their descriptions of the curriculum narratives in K-12, the participants create a compelling image of the influence of settler colonialism in their educational experiences. Confronting settler colonial ideology is not just about providing a more accurate historical record of what occurred in the United States. Confronting settler colonial ideology reaffirms the value and importance of Indigenous people.

Keywords: Indigenous education, settler colonialism

Introduction
As a young Native child in mainstream public schools, I became intimately familiar with the concepts of “home knowledge” and “school knowledge” when introduced to social studies and U.S. history curricula. School knowledge involved the content my teachers taught about the development of the United States, which often directly conflicted with the information shared by my parents at home. As my teachers told story after story of American exceptionalism, my parents reminded me of the incredible damage the quest for American exceptionalism did to Indigenous communities. My lack of understanding about settler colonialism within the context of U.S. history meant that memories of my experiences in K-12 revolved around reconciling these two versions of the United States. These formative experiences in K-12 led me to study how Indigenous people make meaning of settler colonial ideology within their own educational environments. The purpose of this article is to acknowledge the role of settler colonial ideology in educational experiences. To do this, I present data from a qualitative study on Indigenous students’ reflections on settler colonial ideology and their experiences in K-12 education. I focus specifically on K-12 education because the curricula represent one such structure that maintains, reinforces, and replicates settler colonial ideology (Calderon, 2014b; Leonardo & Singh, 2017).

Given the social and political location of my participants as Indigenous people in the United States, my work highlights their experiences with settler colonialism. The most significant distinction between settler colonialism and other forms of colonialism is permanence. The process of settler colonialism is not an event, but instead is a structural process meant to replace the local population with the settler population (Wolfe, 2006). Despite the U.S. being a settler colonial state, social studies curricula often treat colonialism as a one-time event in the educational system, and does not address the distinction between
colonialism and settler colonialism. For example, social studies curricula often suggest that the U.S. challenged British colonial rule (true), and that challenge ended the process of colonialism in the U.S. However, this depiction ignores both the process and effect of settler colonialism. From a settler colonial perspective, colonization is an ongoing process built into societal structures, and people continue to experience these effects, particularly those who identify as Indigenous. Because a disjuncture exists (e.g. how colonialism is taught versus how it operates), more work is needed on how students, especially Indigenous students, understand settler colonialism. The purpose of this study is to understand how a group of Indigenous students connects colonial ideology to their previous educational experiences.

The outcomes of this study will engage with the ongoing battle to fight the effects of colonialism for Indigenous people, particularly because work advancing “postcolonial” theories rarely acknowledges the ways in which colonialism permeates present-day societal structures. As Smith (2012) argues, “A constant reworking of our understandings of the impact of imperialism and colonialism is an important aspect” of Indigenous politics, culture, and critique (p. 25). Therefore, the goals of the study are to question the assumptions made regarding Western ideals and practices, and to tell an alternative story through the perspective of the colonized (Smith, 2012). This article also demonstrates how academic systems are often entrenched in settler colonial ideologies that privilege certain Western perspectives as legitimate while marginalizing Indigenous perspectives (Rizvi et al., 2006).

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it focuses on Indigenous students’ educational experiences by looking specifically at coloniality, which “has not been a valued concept when studying race and schools” (Leonardo & Singh, 2017, p. 95). This is particularly important since raising awareness of the permeation of settler colonialism in educational spaces changes the experience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and educators by offering a structural explanation for the ongoing challenges encountered by Indigenous peoples. Second, this work explores the dominant structure of settler colonialism and demonstrates the purposeful entrenchment of settler colonialism in the U.S. educational system.

Settler Colonialism in Education

Although many academic disciplines engage in conversations about the influence of settler colonialism, I look specifically at how Indigenous students understand settler colonialism ideology through their reflections on their educational experiences. Within education, settler colonial ideology serves three important functions. First, it reduces the power of Indigenous nations by ignoring and dismissing Indigenous contributions in U.S. society (Brayboy, 2005). Second, it assimilates and controls resources through the adoption of certain ways of knowledge and learning (e.g. Western dominated thinking), positioning Indigenous knowledges as inferior (Steinman, 2016). Lastly, it engages in ongoing narratives of erasure at all levels (e.g. political, structural, and educational) (Patel, 2016). Understanding how settler colonialism and education intersects is important because

[education was and in many ways continues to be (1) a battle for the hearts and minds of Indigenous nations; (2) a colonial call for assimilation; and (3) a responsibility of the federal government arising from a series of agreements between Indian nations and the United States meant to open up land bases to a burgeoning immigrant population. (Brayboy et al., 2015, p. 1)]

Education has its roots in a patriarchal, Eurocentric society and is often complicit in multiple forms of oppression, making it neither culturally neutral nor fair (Battiste, 2013).
Therefore, educational institutions reflect and replicate ideology present in the settler society, and represent a primary site for negotiation between settler colonial ideology and Indigenous recognition.

Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001), in their foundational work on anti-colonial frameworks, argue that “colonial” includes “all forms of dominating and oppressive relationships that emerge from structures of power and privilege inherent and embedded in our contemporary social relations…. [C]olonial is not defined simply as foreign or alien, but more importantly, as dominating and opposing” (p. 308). It is this settling that is most destructive to Indigenous communities. While forms of colonialism include the exploitation of natural and human resources, settler colonialism has a more specific goal: to acquire, control, and define these resources and the territory as a whole. To accomplish this, settlers engaged in genocide, forced removal, and assimilation, all of which occurred in the U.S.

While early settler colonial societies replaced Indigenous communities through physical assault and violence, another vehicle was needed because settler colonialism is also “an institutionalized or normalized (and therefore mostly invisible) ideology of national identity” (Lovell, 2007, p. 3). Moreover, because the goals and outcomes of settler colonialism link to U.S. ideas of nationalism, the structural nature of education (both church-based and governmental) made it the perfect vehicle for replicating and reinforcing settler colonial ideology (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016; Glenn, 2015). Twenty years ago, Willinsky (1998) argued that the educational project of colonialism in Western countries was only the beginning, and, given its enormity, was to live on as an unconscious aspect of education. Therefore, it is essential to make conscious how entrenched and ongoing the process of settler colonialism is within the context of education (Calderon, 2014a; Calderon, 2014b; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

A key element of making conscious the role of settler colonialism in education is recognizing how everyone is implicated in settler colonial practices, even if they are unaware of this implication because of how normalized settler colonial ideologies seem in educational spaces (Calderon, 2014b; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This normalizing occurs in K-12 education through, most notably, the social studies curricula, which often only focus on the dominant narratives around settler colonial success and achievement.

K-12 Education: The Narrative of Settler Colonial Success

In the U.S. school system, students first learn about colonialism when they study U.S. history; this is also one of their first experiences being mis-educated in U.S. and Indigenous history (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). U.S. social studies and history classrooms are not neutral, objective spaces. Instead, they are “contested arenas where legitimacy and hegemony battle for historical supremacy” (T. Lintner, as cited in Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016, p. 1). Maintaining this historical supremacy often requires the failure to acknowledge Indigenous history after the 19th century. For example, a nationwide mixed-methods study (Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015) on the state standards for teaching Indigenous history and culture found 87% of references to Indigenous peoples are in a pre-1900s context. This is important because the standards often drive the curricula choices teachers make when teaching Native American content, and reflects the narratives they choose to tell students about early U.S. history. Steinman (2016) writes:

Textbooks and theorizations commonly note some distinctive elements of the American Indian experience but nonetheless represent them as a racial and ethnic minority. Thus, while making important advances, scholarship spurred by Red Power and published primarily in the 1980s and 1990s did not clearly disrupt predominate minority concepts of American Indians or locate the racialization of American Indians in relation to continuing colonial processes. (p. 2)
This lack of representation of Native Americans after the 1900s means Native Americans are most often discussed in three types of narratives: 1) the narrative of manifest destiny and westward expansion; 2) the narrative of American exceptionalism, and meritocracy; and 3) the narrative of the colonial savior.

The narrative of manifest destiny and westward expansion is a key element of U.S. history and is widely discussed in the curricula (Banks & Banks, 2010). Manifest destiny represented the belief that it was (White) Americans’ providential mission to expand their communities and institutions across North America (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994). Therefore, the curricula describe manifest destiny as necessary for both territorial control and for liberty and individual economic opportunity (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994). However, what the curricula do not address is the use of manifest destiny as justification to destroy Indigenous communities (Calderon, 2014a). Using this conception also justified the erasing of Indigenous communities as necessary for the development of American society, as colonial ideology views Indigenous displacement as American progress (Veracini, 2011).

The second narrative present in U.S. social studies curricula centers on the connected ideas of American exceptionalism and meritocracy. When discussing the early development of colonial America, the development is often linked to notions of American exceptionalism (Banks & Banks, 2010). American exceptionalism is the belief that the success of the U.S. is a result of the political foresight of the Founding Fathers; the virtues found in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution; the priority placed on individual liberty; and the hard work of the American people (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994). However, to believe in the notion of American exceptionalism, one must believe only colonizers contributed to the development of the U.S. (Calderon, 2014a). Given that the settler colonial state defined and limited who could be considered exceptional, it is not surprising social studies curricula treat exceptionality as a product of colonialism, while ignoring how advanced Indigenous communities were when colonialism in the US began (Calderon, 2014a; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Related to the notion of American exceptionalism is the belief in individualism and social mobility. The concepts of individualism and social mobility are connected to the notion of meritocracy, which is the belief that individual success is due to hard work and ability alone (Banks & Banks, 2010). Much like American exceptionalism is used to reinforce the notion that the people of the U.S. were better because of settler colonialism, meritocracy serves to support that narrative by acknowledging that the success of colonialists is a result of their ability as opposed to being the result of their violence against Indigenous communities. It is important to recognize this because much like settler colonialism defined who was “exceptional,” only colonists’ success was meritocratic. Howard (2006) argues this is also reinforced in education. He writes:

The academy functions as a space for the creation, acquisition, assertion, and reassertion of whiteness and the simultaneous rejection of non-Whiteness. The strategies that enable this are numerous. Among these are liberal notions of “merit” and “excellence” involved in determining, who gets into and belongs in the academy and why, and who then becomes successful by academic standards. (p. 50)

The notions of meritocracy and success are linked to both Whiteness and settler colonialism (Calderon, 2014a). Although social studies curricula often address the racial differences in colonial America, there is no acknowledgement that the goal of settler colonial is to “erase and replace” non-white communities with White communities. Settler colonial was not just about expanding colonial rule, but also the expansion of Whiteness (Calderon, 2014b; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

The third narrative present in U.S. social studies curricula is the narrative of the colonial savior (Calderon, 2014b; Stanton, 2014). Linked to both the narrative of manifest destiny
and westward expansion and the narrative of American exceptionalism and meritocracy, the narrative of the colonial savior creates a situation in which colonization is viewed as a necessary act to “save” Indigenous peoples (Stanton, 2014). To maintain the narrative of the colonial savior, which is essential for the ongoing justification of settler colonialism, the curricula often presents Indigenous people as savages, as unable to live peacefully, as incapable of functioning in settler society (Calderon, 2014b; Stanton, 2014). Because of this presentation, all colonial acts are viewed as necessary and important for the greater good of the Indigenous population. The narrative of the colonial savior means the social studies curricula do not interrogate how problematic settler colonial ideology is; instead, it accepts colonization as an untenable element of American history.

Study Overview

To determine how Indigenous students understand the relationship between settler colonialism and their educational experiences, I conducted a yearlong qualitative study with twelve Indigenous graduate students, focusing on their experiences in academia. In addition to interviews and observations, participants completed a series of journal reflections centered upon what they learned in K-12 schooling about colonialism and the role of meritocracy within the United States. Participants received journal prompts bi-weekly, and then we discussed their responses during our scheduled interviews.

Embedded in this study lies a form of resistance that attempts to disable the grand narratives of superiority and inferiority constructed by settler colonialism and identified in the curricula. One way to disable grand narratives is to study how individuals understand them in relationship to their own educational experience. To understand this relationship, I use two theoretical frameworks: Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) and Settler Colonial Dimensions of Power (Steinman, 2016).

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) emerged from Critical Race Theory as a means to recognize the positionality of Indigenous people in the U.S. as both racialized and colonized. Brayboy articulates nine tenets that address the relationship between colonization and the experiences of Indigenous people in the U.S. Although each of these informs the meaning-making within my analysis, I draw most heavily from two: 1) colonialism is endemic to society, and 2) stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data. One of the ways in which colonialism remains endemic to society is through the reproduction of settler colonial ideology in the curricula. Identifying this is important for the disruption of the grand narratives told about settler colonialism. The second tenet of TribalCrit disrupts the grand narrative by allowing Indigenous stories to serve at the center of this study; it also serves as a methodological justification to use the words and reflections of students as the primary data source.

I also use Settler Colonial Dimensions of Power (Steinman, 2016) to analyze the experiences of my participants. This framework articulates settler colonialism’s relationship with Indigenous people; assists in analyzing the patterns of resistance against these forms of domination; and addresses the salience of settler colonialism and its different forms of power (Steinman, 2016). Steinman uses these dimensions of power, “in conjunction with area scholarship, to identify and categorize well-established patterns of their empirical manifestations” (p. 4). I build on Steinman’s work by linking structural forms of settler colonial power to the lived experiences of Indigenous students, and using their voices to describe how pervasive and harmful settler colonial ideology is in practice. From their descriptions of the curricular narratives in K-12 to their beliefs surrounding the role of meritocracy in educational spaces, the participants create a compelling image of the ongoing influence of settler colonial power in their lives.
I also bring my own background as an Indigenous scholar to the study. Much like my participants, my experiences in both K-12 were marked with a consistent narrative of the value and importance of settler colonialism, despite the large-scale cost to Indigenous peoples. The failure of my teachers to address this cost was formative in my desire to research settler colonialism in school spaces.

Reflections on Colonial Ideology

The purpose of the journal reflections and interviews was to understand how Indigenous students made meaning of settler colonialism in relationship to their own educational experiences. The findings below present two areas that emerged from their journals and interviews: what colonialism looks like in K-12 curricula and how the narrative of American exceptionalism and meritocracy affects Indigenous students’ views on their own educational experience.

Colonialism in K-12

To understand what participants remembered about colonialism within their K-12 education, I asked several questions focused on the curricula, such as which key events they remembered from history and social studies classes, and what concepts or ideas they associated with colonialism. Within the context of K-12 education, participants indicated that colonialism was presented in two primary ways: as a series of events and as a necessary act required for US progress and achievement.

When participants discussed colonialism as an event, they referred to it as both an event of initial contact/arrival, and as a negative act experienced by Indigenous peoples. The narrative of initial contact/arrival was presented as a neutral or even a beneficial event for Indigenous populations. According to Steinman’s (2016) dimensions of settler colonial power, presenting the narratives as neutral or beneficial serves as a denial of settler colonialism. This denial prevents people from interrogating the harmful effects of settler colonial events. This was evident given how participants described the event of initial contact/arrival. Participants referred to “the arrival of certain European populations,” “the arrival of visitors to America,” and “the start of US civilization.” During one interview a student reflected, “Yeah, we learned that the settlers arrived and that was it. Once they landed, they became Americans and that was the end of colonialism.” Another participant remembered colonialism being discussed as a positive development for Native Americans who “would benefit from European ideas and advancement.” When students learned about negative acts experienced by Indigenous people, the curricula made no link made between those acts and colonialism. Treating these acts as singular and disconnected from colonialism represents another form of settler colonial power: the diminishment of settler colonial violence. These acts are portrayed as stand-alone events, not part of a larger project to destroy Native American communities. Despite the treatment of these events in the curricula, my participants saw those events as examples of colonialism. As one participant wrote in their journal, “We only talked about events like the Trail of Tears. So, unless it was something well-documented like that, there was little to no mention of anything related to Indigenous peoples.” Several other participants mentioned learning about the Trail of Tears as the one significant act experienced by Indigenous peoples.

According to my participants, the second way the curricula presented colonialism was as a required process for US progress and achievement. Presenting colonialism as a necessary action represents another dimension of settler colonial power, which is the ideological justification of settler colonialism. All participants referenced learning about manifest destiny. They also learned how vital it was for US expansion. Manifest destiny serves as
the largest justification for colonialism by arguing that the settlers felt like it was their divine right to expand the U.S. with no regard for its original inhabitants. As one participant wrote,

In classes on American history, the atrocities committed by the US government against the Indigenous peoples has [sic] always been written as a necessary act, something that had to happen for the greater good. Manifest destiny became the cry for expansion, no matter the cost to the people already living in the territory.

In addition to manifest destiny, participants also remember learning that Indigenous peoples were “uncivilized” and that colonization was fundamental for their development as citizens, without any acknowledgement of the contributions of Indigenous peoples. Describing Indigenous people in this manner is another example of the ideological justification of settler colonial power. One participant wrote:

What I learned about colonialism is that settlers that came to America deemed that the Indigenous peoples needed “saving.” So, settlers brought missionaries in to give the people Christianity and teach them English. Essentially colonialism suppressed the culture and language of the Indigenous people for the Western culture as it was deemed more civilized. Colonialism became a game for land and resources while removing the land and culture that had been present for centuries.

All participants mentioned how the narrative about “saving” of Indigenous people was central to their perspective of colonialism. One of the ways the curricula replicates settler colonial power is using different forms of ideological justification to erase the harmful effects of settler colonialism on Indigenous communities.

The role of meritocracy

One of the primary functions of settler colonial power is to naturalize and deny settler colonialism. The naturalization occurs in the stories told about settlers, particularly around individualism and their ability to “succeed” in the frontier. The denial then occurs when curricula ignore the contributions of Indigenous peoples in assisting the settlers in their survival. Taken together, this naturalization and denial of settler colonialism manifests itself in a narrative of meritocracy surrounding settlers in the U.S. I asked participants to reflect on the concept of meritocracy and if the United States can be defined as such. I did so because meritocracy is a myth often perpetuated by settler colonial ideology within the K-12 curricula. As described in the dimensions of settler colonial power, much of the narrative surrounding colonization depicts colonizers as individuals who colonized the U.S. of their own volition and merit, without acknowledging the assistance Indigenous people provided to the colonizers, nor acknowledging the many contributions Indigenous people made and never received credit for. Journal prompts for this concept focused on personal definitions of meritocracy, as well as reflections on who higher education benefits and how. While participants acknowledged that colonialism prevented the U.S. from being a meritocracy, (most referenced their identity as Indigenous peoples as a reason for this) there was a strong undercurrent of wanting to believe this was something the U.S. could achieve.

For most participants, their understanding of meritocracy was linked to their identity as Indigenous students and concerns regarding their abilities and skills. While participants acknowledged that programs for minorities were a necessary action to provide underrepresented populations with opportunities, there was a tense undercurrent to this acknowledgement—that somehow admitting this called into question their own abilities and skills on campus. One participant wrote:

I appreciate affirmative action type things for acknowledging that minorities haven’t always been given the opportunity to be successful and rewarded for success. But at the same time, I do not want to be awarded or acknowledged
because I’m a minority. The thing that made me who I am [being Indigenous] allowed me an opportunity which I so appreciate. But is it ok to be rewarded for that once my foot is in the door? I just have very mixed feelings about this.

Other participants shared similar sentiments such as “I believe that hard work and talent is not enough to be rewarded. Sometimes it is who you know that can give you rewards” and “You may be rewarded for a small amount of merit but that is it. America has turned into a country where you have to know someone in order to get anywhere.” While merit is still acknowledged as being important, it is not viewed as the only element of success.

Other participants indicated a connection between colonialism and the idea of meritocracy. As one participant wrote:

While that [meritocracy] was supposed to be the main difference between the United States and the Old World version of rewarding one for the accomplishments of their ancestors, this is not the case. While the ability to move up is possible for some people in the U.S., there have always been limits on people of color, which of course would limit Native Americans in their quest for improving their own lives.

Despite the belief that the US was not a meritocracy, participants thought it could eventually become a meritocracy. This tension played out in several journal entries where participants stated that education was one of the primary places where meritocracy should exist, despite their own admissions of not being recognized or rewarded due to their own merits. One participant reflected that:

I graduated at the top of my class and there were no internships or job offerings. I feel if people applied themselves and succeeded there should be opportunities. There were no schools interested in funding me for graduate school. It just so happens a mentor, who was also a professor, watched me in undergrad and connected me with the people here. If it were not for that connection, I’d probably be working some dead-end job somewhere. But maybe that’s just me.

Another participant shared:

From my own individual experiences (on paper), I might tend to agree with the idea of working hard and having talent as prerequisites for societal awards. However, on a much more personal level I would say I disagree because I feel like (and I have described this to many people over the past ten years), that much of my “success” is coincidence. I think that [meritocracy] is an ideal of what the U.S. might be or might try to portray itself to be, but it is just incommensurate with the lived reality of many people due to such things as colonialism, racism, discrimination, social injustice, etc.

One of the primary functions of settler colonial power is to deny and naturalize settler colonial ideology. Meritocracy is a myth perpetuated by settler colonial ideology, and it is important to do so because it naturalizes the gains made at the expense of others. The settler colonial state is designed to reward certain people over others, regardless of their merit or ability. When this myth is replicated in education, it can prevent people from interrogating the structural reasons why students do or do not succeed, as opposed to attributing lack of success to an individual’s ability to work hard.

The Entrenchment of Settler Colonial Ideology in Education

One of goals of this work was to analyze, evaluate, and problematize the dominant structure of settler colonialism and explore how settler colonialism remains entrenched in the U.S. educational system. One of the primary functions of U.S. history curricula is to
deny the existence of settler colonialism. Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) refer to this as “the covering of its tracks” (p. 74). This denial is most visible in the narrative of American exceptionalism and meritocracy. By presenting colonialism as a singular act—and not an ongoing process—there is no acknowledgement of how settler colonialism endures. As one participant acknowledged, settler colonialism exists whether it is addressed or not. In addition to the fact that the curricula present U.S. history from the perspective of the European colonizers, there is no mention of Indigenous people past the 1900s (the group most largely affected by settler colonial ideology) (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). This denial is a very large component of the participants’ understanding of settler colonialism and continues to exist within the dominant discourse on Indigenous issues. As participants noted, challenging the master narrative of American exceptionalism is not welcomed, particularly in classroom dialogue. This makes sense because one of the ways the narrative of American exceptionalism denies the existence of settler colonialism is by presenting the colonists as individual actors who succeeded through their own merit, as opposed to what really occurred—that their “success” was the result of violence, destruction, and their positionality as settlers (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

The concealment of foundational settler violence through the curricula is another form of settler colonial power. The concealment is managed mostly through the “circulation of its creation story” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 74). These creation stories “involve signs-turned-mythologies that conceal the teleology of violence and domination that characterize settlement” (p. 74). Settler colonial violence is largely ignored, or its impact is diminished or shown as benevolent (e.g. colonization happened and thus grew U.S. civilization). For example, although my participants indicated that they learned about the Trail of Tears, it was not discussed as an act of genocide by the U.S. government or linked to the settler colonial ideology of “erase to replace.” Any negative consequence of the act is treated as a necessary element for the larger narrative of expansion. This is most evident in the narrative of the “colonial savior” present throughout the curricula. The colonial savior narrative suggests that colonial intentions were benevolent toward the Indigenous populations and that, without the colonists, the Indigenous populations would not survive or be successful. For example, some history texts “give credit to the U.S. government for the survival of Native peoples, as evidenced by “us” and “them” discourse” (Stanton, 2014, p. 661). The narrative also suggests any advancements made in the early development of the U.S. were at the hands of the colonists.

A third dimension of settler colonial power is the ideological justification for the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the naturalizing of settler colonial authority. Within the curricula, settler colonial ideology presents as a necessary component for growth and development in the U.S., which requires a minimization of the violent acts committed against Indigenous people. This ideological justification is introduced and maintained through the social studies curricula, most commonly through the narrative of manifest destiny and westward expansion (Calderon, 2014b; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). All of the participants mentioned how manifest destiny was discussed as a necessary act for progress. There was no discussion of how the attitude of manifest destiny and policies of westward expansion were harmful to Indigenous populations. And while the initial exposure to settler colonial justification occurs in the social studies curricula, the participants noted its reinforcement in their science and engineering programs, two fields where there is a “long history of exploitation of Native people and lands by “advancements” by science and engineering, particularly medical research and the energy industry” (Smith et al., 2014, p. 413).

Lastly, another dimension of settler colonial power is the denial and elimination of possible alternatives to the settler colonial story. One of the most damning factors of settler colonialism is that it essentially prevented the establishment of any other narratives. While the counter-stories of others have emerged, the dominance of settler colonialism makes it
hard to undo the long-standing damage done by settler colonial ideology. Within the educational system, this damage occurs in the social studies curricula, which maintain and replicate the settler colonial narrative by never giving any airtime to other stories. Even if the curricula address Indigenous issues, these issues serve in relationship to the settler colonial story, not as an independent story to be told (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). This creates and maintains the enduring nature of the settler colonial relationship.

Confronting the Legacy of Settler Colonialism in School Spaces

Confronting the legacy of settler colonial ideology is a monumental task, given that the current educational structure, by design, replicates and reinforces settler colonial ideology. While different types of interventions exist (e.g. multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy); most of these interventions fail because each tries to make change without challenging the white settler perspective (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). The reflections provided by the participants reveals the pervasiveness of settler colonial ideology in the curricula. While the insidiousness of settler colonialism is well documented (e.g. Alfred, 2004; Grande, 2008; Leonardo & Singh, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006), this study centers the perspectives of Indigenous students and their reflections on settler colonial ideology within their K-12 experiences. Blackhawk (2008) wrote, “As many Indian people know all too well, reconciling the traumas found within our community and family pasts with the celebratory narratives of America remains an everyday and overwhelming challenge” (p. 287). This work addresses that challenge.

While this article documents the way settler colonial ideology and discourse invade U.S. history and social studies curricula, there are several ways educators can use their classroom spaces to confront settler colonialism. Building on the work of Thésée (2004), I present three strategies for confronting settler colonial ideology in the classroom: redefining what is knowledge; questioning the aims and applications of settler colonial ideology in schools; and refusing to engage and/or support discourse normalizing settler colonial ideology and thought.

A key strategy in confronting settler colonialism is emphasizing the importance of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in comparison to Western-based knowledge systems. In settler colonial ideology, defining what knowledge is helps justify settler colonial permanence. Therefore, finding ways to introduce Indigenous knowledge into academic spaces allows individuals to question the role knowledge plays in maintaining settler colonial ideology. In K-12 education, teachers should include information about the advanced development of Indigenous communities and challenge any narratives that suggests Indigenous people were primitive, savage, or in need of colonists; assistance to survive. Likewise, students (Indigenous students, in particular) should be taught Indigenous ways of knowing, including different Indigenous languages, as a counter to prevailing Western knowledge. While this study looked specifically as social studies and U.S. history curricula, I encourage people to review ethnomathematics. Ethnomathematics is a pedagogical approach to disrupting settler colonial ideology in mathematics curricula. Using the curricula as a vehicle to provide additional non-Western knowledge is one way to emphasize the knowledge contributions of Indigenous peoples.

A second strategy is to question the aims and applications of settler colonial ideology in academic environments. In K-12 schools, questioning the aims and applications of settler colonial ideology requires interrogating the curricula and encouraging all students to analyze critically why the narratives of settler colonialism are retold (despite the depth of knowledge regarding Indigenous communities during the early development of the US). Questioning the application of settler colonial ideology also requires naming what settler colonial ideology is trying to maintain—white supremacy. Situating the settler colonial
narrative within a system of oppression allows students to problematize the history they learn in schools.

The final strategy is refusing to engage and/or support discourse normalizing settler colonial ideology and thought. In K-12 education, this occurs when teachers challenge the narrative presented in the curricula that positions settler colonialism as necessary for the development of the United States. It also requires identifying the long-term consequences of settler colonial ideology—settler colonialism is not a historical act, but instead is an ongoing process that harms everyone, not just Indigenous communities. One curricular example is how teachers discuss the Trail of Tears in relationship to the broader relationship between the U.S. government and Indigenous communities.

Throughout this article, I demonstrate how educational spaces are often entrenched in settler colonial ideologies that privilege certain narratives and forms of knowledge over others. Similarly, the pervasiveness of settler colonial ideology also marginalizes Indigenous peoples and communities. Challenging settler colonial ideology is not just about providing a more accurate historical record of what occurred in the United States. Challenging settler colonial ideology also reaffirms the value and importance of Indigenous people in the United States and gives space to recognize the contributions of Indigenous peoples. For those interested in creating educational spaces that affirm and value all people, confronting settler colonialism is a required act.

References


Author

Stephanie Masta is a member of the Sault Ste. Marie tribe of Chippewa Indians. She is also an assistant professor in Curriculum Studies, in the department of Curriculum & Instruction at Purdue University. Much of her research focuses on the experiences of Indigenous students in educational environments. She is particularly interested in the intersections of race and colonialism in the academy. Additionally, she studies how Indigenous students make meaning of their identity within academic spaces. Her research is narrative-based, and she uses both Indigenous methodologies and critical race/colonial theories in her work.