

**Critical Commentary: Canadian Educational Systems
as Structures of Indigenous Oppression**

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Introduction

I was inspired to write the topic of my critical commentary through Episodes 1 and 4 of Sasha Reid's Podcasts titled *Sociology of Indigenous People* (2021a; 2021b). In Episode 1, Reid (2021a) gave a brief review of Indigenous history in Canada and touched on topics such as the Indian Act and Residential Schools. Further, Reid asked multiple true or false questions testing students understanding of Indigenous people and discussed her previous classes misconceptions (Reid, 2021a). In Episode 4, Reid delved into the relationship between education and Indigenous people and education as a significant determinant of health (Reid, 2021b). Reid furthered the discussion with the concept of Indigenizing education to combat the negative consequences of a Eurocentric curriculum that stereotypes and misrepresents Indigenous people (Reid, 2021b).

The four topics from the lectures I discussed above; the Indian Act, Residential Schools, widespread misconceptions around Indigenous peoples and Eurocentric education, demonstrate Canada's transition from explicit to implicit oppressive tactics on Indigenous peoples. I believe Canada's educational system, besides being a major health determinant for Indigenous people, is also working to further the cycle of racism. In the late 1800s to 1900s, Canada used a combination of overtly racist policies and practices including the Indian Act and Residential Schools along with widespread negative stereotypes to create nationwide prejudice against Indigenous People (Reid, 2021a). The stereotypes justified the Canadian government's control and domination over Indigenous people. Now, I argue Canada uses public education to produce both negative stereotypes about and structural subordination over Indigenous peoples.

These topics introduced the question: to what extent is Canadian public education used as a structure of oppression and domination over Indigenous people? To better understand this, I will examine biases within the development and content of the curriculum and how this

engenders the cycle of racism. The purpose of this examination is to expand the readers' knowledge regarding education as a prominent and necessary tactic in the government's continued racist perspective on Indigenous people and to make more complete, my understandings of Episode 4.

Bias Within the Development of the Curriculum

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final report calling Canada to action to reconcile its relationship with Indigenous peoples (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). One of these calls to action included mandatory Indigenous curriculum for all schools comprising of age-appropriate education on Residential Schools and Treaties (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The report stated education was key to reconciliation and recognized the role educational systems have played in the damaged relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Following this report, many provinces including British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia revised their curriculum to incorporate the TRC's call to action (Government of Alberta, 2019). Since 2014, The Alberta Government stated they are committed to honoring the TRC and incorporating Indigenous culture, perspectives and history into their curriculum (Government of Alberta, 2014). Alberta is currently revising its kindergarten to grade 12 curricula with their end goal to implement it by the year 2022 (Government of Alberta, 2019). The recommendations for the revision of the curriculum state, "Ensure First Nations, Metis, and Inuit perspectives and ways of knowing continue to be reflected in curriculum, supporting the ongoing advancement of recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the calls

for justice in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Final Report,” (Non-Government of Alberta Entity, 2020). Alberta Education has released many public statements such as the one above promising to incorporate the TRCs call to action however, the evidence on how they plan to do so is scarce as I will discuss below.

Revising Alberta’s curriculum involves seven steps beginning with the Minister of Education appointing a 12-member panel who draft a framework which is then reviewed by the public, revised and piloted (Government of Alberta, 2019). The Minister of Education is appointed by the current Premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney who is a member of the United Conservative Party (UCP) (Government of Alberta, 2019b). Thus, the Minister of Education shares political values similar to those of the conservative Premier. This introduces opportunity for partiality and bias within the development of the curriculum.

Currently, there are no Indigenous people on the curriculum advisory panel and out of all of the educators working on the revision only 12 out of 409 are Indigenous (Government of Alberta, 2019c). In stage 5 of the revision, a final draft is composed after being reviewed by experts (Government of Alberta, 2019). Some of the experts that reviewed the curriculum included those with experience in “Indigenous histories, contributions and perspectives,” (Government of Alberta, 2019). However, these experts only provided advice or recommendations and did not write any of the curriculum (Government of Alberta, 2019).

I argue there are two points of bias within Alberta’s curriculum creation; the curriculum is generated largely by people who share political ideologies analogous to that of our current Alberta Premier and there is a clear lack of Indigenous people working intimately with the curriculum. The advisory panel, which holds much power in terms of creating the curriculum, is appointed by the Minister of Education who shares the political values of the UCP. I argue

giving executive roles to those that share similar political values to our Premier creates prejudice and bias as it allows them to inject political values into the curriculum. Further, it permits such people to use the curriculum to accomplish their own political agenda or goals. This point of bias has already been shown within the curriculum revision when leaked documentation in October 2020 shared the UCP's new plans for kindergarten to grade fours' revised Social Studies curriculum (Government of Alberta Education, 2020). This curriculum would exclude many Indigenous experiences, knowledge and history in favour of Feudalism and the Chinese Dynasty (Government of Alberta Education, 2020). An Indigenous woman and Officer for Indigenous education, Melissa Purcell made the following remark about the leaked documentation, "The Indian Residential School system was created to erase the cultures, histories, languages, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples within Canada, and these recommendations perpetuate that erasure. The recommendations perpetuate systemic racism through whitewashing of the draft curriculum," (Purcell, 2020).

After reading the leaked document, I felt the government was politicizing the new curriculum in favour of conservative beliefs and ideologies. Education should be based on children's learning styles and capabilities, but I believe the UCP is purposely excluding Indigenous content in younger grades to minimize the importance of Indigenous people in Canadian history. The UCP may see Indigenous people as a threat to their political goals and minimizing Canada's blame and accountability could serve to further Indigenous people's subordination and oppression. For example, during his concession speech, UCP premier Jason Kenney did not begin with an Indigenous land acknowledgement, whereas Alberta's New Democratic Party leader Rachel Notley acknowledges the traditional territory of treaty six (Calgary Herald, 2019; FactPointVideo, 2019). A gesture, even as small as acknowledging

traditional Indigenous land, is a sign of respect and recognition. The UCP's actions undermine Alberta's reconciliation efforts and respect for Indigenous peoples and culture. Thus, the role of the elected government within the curriculum as evidence of bias cannot be ignored.

The second point of bias is the clear lack of Indigenous people writing the curriculum. The advisory panel seats no Indigenous people and only 12 out of 409 educators on the curriculum are Indigenous (Government of Alberta, 2019c). The importance of Indigenous people working intimately with the curriculum cannot be understated as the Social Studies curriculum retells the story of Canada and the history, cultures and traditions of Indigenous peoples (Alberta Education, 2021). Without Indigenous people equally weighing in on Canadian history, Alberta cannot say their curriculum is an accurate reflection of Canada's historical and present relationship with Indigenous people. Instead, the curriculum will over-represent one viewpoint and perspective: the dominant Euro-Western culture of the colonizers. Thus, Alberta education is failing to meet their own promises; to incorporate the TRC's call to action into their curriculum.

These two points of bias within the development of the new curriculum demonstrate the continued use of education as a form of structural and systemic racism against Indigenous people. The Alberta government may have publicly committed to incorporating the TRC's call to action into their new curriculum but their plan does little to involve Indigenous people in executive roles. If the new curriculum continues to over-represent the colonizers viewpoint, it will continue the cycle of racism within the educational system that works to subordinate and oppress Indigenous people.

Bias Within the Curriculum Itself

I believe the current curriculum in provinces such as Alberta and Ontario lack the Indigenous experience and knowledge needed to tell an unbiased, accurate history of Indigenous peoples. I will contextualize and support my opinion with research and studies discussing the accuracy of the Indigenous curriculum, and to determine whether there is truth mixed with bias in our education system. If this is the case, I will discuss the cycle of racism in Canada produced by our government to control and manage this population and how Canada benefits.

To play a role in Indigenous oppression, education must first work to undermine Indigenous people's inherent value and dehumanize them, through stereotyping and prejudice. A review of the Ontario Social Studies curriculum in 2013 found the curriculum was, "dominated by forms of marginalization, omission, and distortion. The curriculum whitewashes Canadian history and relations between Indigenous peoples and Canada. It omits the narratives of Indigenous people," (Lambert, 2018). Lambert (2018) found the curriculum treated Indigenous people and culture as historical contingencies by using passive voice. Additionally, he observed the lack of Indigenous figures within Canadian history with students having to memorize only 1 Indigenous name in contrast to 18 European names by grade 6 (Lambert, 2018). All of the tactics described by Lambert (2018) including whitewashing, minimizing, linking Indigenous atrocities with the past and removing their role within the creation of Canada furthers prejudice and racism. When history is retold from the perspective of the dominant power, which is the Canadian government, it transfers blame, guilt and responsibility for the atrocities committed towards the Indigenous peoples. As Allingham (1992) writes, "How can an education which teaches, implicitly and explicitly, that one culture, one religion and one colour deserve the most and the best, be good for anyone?"

Comparably, in Episode 4, both Reid (2021b) and Erik discuss the harmful impacts of Euro-Western dominated curriculum and schools. Reid (2021b) describes interactions with her previous students in which they had never learned about Residential Schools and did not understand why dressing up as Pocahontas for Halloween was racist, exemplifying the effect of Canada's inaccurate and prejudiced curriculum on Indigenous peoples (Reid, 2021b). Similarly, in a study observing prejudice in White undergraduate Canadian students towards Indigenous peoples', researchers found participants who were prejudiced admitted to having little knowledge about Indigenous people even though all participants had been exposed to Canada's history through education. Both of these examples demonstrate the Canadian curriculum's ineffectiveness at educating and enlightening students on the atrocities committed by the government towards Indigenous people, nor did they dispel any of the racist beliefs and prejudices held by the students. Further, they exemplify the relationship between the lack of Indigenous education in schools and prejudice, stereotypes and misconceptions held by non-Indigenous students. The examples support my argument by showing the clear bias, misconceptions and partiality present in the curriculum.

Reid (2021b) shares a video titled, "Native American Students Respond to American Education," where Indigenous children discuss barriers they face in school related to their Indigenous ethnicity. Students talk about assumptions from peers and teachers around drug and alcohol abuse, feeling misrepresented and villainized within the curriculum and enduring racist comments and questions (Reid, 2021b). These experiences support my argument that the curriculum and the school environment foster racism towards Indigenous people. Moreover, these examples show the link between a racist curriculum and a racist school environment. Perpetuating stereotypes in the curriculum develops Indigenous racialization and subordination

among school-aged children. Therefore, the Canadian educational system isn't just teaching stereotypes or misconceptions about Indigenous people, but it may also be producing a prejudiced school environment where both teachers and students engage in racist behaviour.

Lambert (2018) exemplifies the extent to which racist ideologies are present within the current curriculum and Reid (2021b) shows the harmful consequences of such racist education. These consequences include a racist school environment, prejudiced teachers and students, Indigenous children feeling unwelcome or unrepresented and ignorance around Indigenous people, history, culture and traditions. Educating current students on harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about Indigenous people fosters a hostile relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Additionally, it works to maintain racism towards Indigenous peoples among the Canadian population. These consequences result in the educational system working as a structural tactic for Indigenous oppression and subordination.

Canada's Educational System as a Structure of Indigenous Oppression

Up to this point, I have discussed bias within the development of Indigenous curriculum and within the curriculum itself. All of these biases work towards the same goal; to oppress and subordinate Indigenous people. These biases create structural and systemic racism within the educational system as they cause many Canadians to believe and engage in widespread racism, misconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous people. The TRC's executive summary stressed the importance of education as key to reconciliation however, the clear racism in the development and content of the curriculum threatens Canada's reconciliation efforts (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Once I understood this, I wondered why and

to what end does the government continue to oppress and subordinate Indigenous people? What does the government gain from doing this?

In the past, it proved advantageous for Britain (and then Canada) to oppress Indigenous people. In Episode 1, Reid (2021a) discusses the transition between Britain's relationship with the Indigenous people from amicable to malicious. At first, Britain treated the Indigenous people as allies helping them fight in the War of 1812 and surviving in Canada's cold climate (Reid, 2021a). However, after Britain won the War of 1812, their policy towards Indigenous people turned malicious (Reid, 2021a). They began to stereotype Indigenous people as ignorant, cruel, blood-thirsty and savage (Reid, 2021a). They then passed the Indian Act which allowed the government to control and assimilate Indigenous people (Reid, 2021a). Later on, Residential Schools became a prominent staple in the government's assimilation efforts with their purpose, "To kill the Indian in the child," (Reid, 2021a). All of these tactics by the British and later, Canada, were to oppress and subordinate Indigenous people and while listening to this lecture I wondered why this proved beneficial? I believe Britain transitioned from treating Indigenous people as allies to then enemies as they saw Indigenous people as a threat to their sovereignty. After the War of 1812, Britain no longer needed Indigenous military allies, as a militant threat was unlikely (Reid, 2021a). The only additional threat to Britain's colonization and sovereignty of Canada was the Indigenous people. I believe Britain understood they could never have full control over the land unless they removed Indigenous people from it and therefore, began a process that would result in Indigenous people's subordination.

While this explanation makes sense in terms of its historical context, it does not explain why Canada continues to engage in structural and systemic racism within the education system. Wilson (2006) an American Indigenous woman proposes that governments benefit from

Indigenous oppression and subordination presently because it maintains their superiority and the status quo. Additionally, she states Indigenous oppression gives colonizers a sense of entitlement to the land and its resources (Wilson, 2006). I agree with Wilson's (2006) argument and believe Canada continues dehumanizing and stereotyping Indigenous peoples in its educational system to legitimize their oppression as Indigenous people represent the greatest threat to Canada's power. Indigenous people represent Canada's greatest threat to power because Canada is stolen land (Reid, 2021a). For example, in British Columbia the Keystone Pipeline has sparked much controversy as Indigenous people are once again fighting the government for the right to their land which was promised to them in the Royal Proclamation (Reid, 2021a). The Keystone Pipeline would generate economic wealth for the government but at the cost of environmental damage and risk to Indigenous land (Reid, 2021a). Indigenous people continue to represent a major threat to Canada's ownership of wealth via land, property and resources.

Conclusion

Overall, I argue there is a clear system of structural racism within Canada's education that goes beyond just a health determinant but acts to maintain the strained relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and provides colonizers power. Alberta and Canada benefit from systemically oppressing Indigenous people as they represent the biggest threat to Canada's ownership of land, resources and wealth. There is clear bias within the making and content of the curriculum which exemplifies the continued use of public education as a system and tactic of racism against Indigenous people. In the past, Britain and Canada used explicit racism to dominate Indigenous people. Presently, I argue Canada uses implicit structural racism, such as the educational system, to subordinate Indigenous peoples. I believe Canada's

relationship with Indigenous peoples and their reconciliation efforts will continue to suffer until they dismantle the present systems of racism and oppression.

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