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Possibility not Difficulty: Difficult Knowledge in K-12 Classrooms as Opportunities for Renegotiating Relationships With Indigenous Perspectives and Knowledges

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Indigenous perspectives and knowledges have been rendered "difficult" to teach and learn due to settler-colonial norms that are naturalized in Ontario's public K-12 education system. We explore how we as educators and teachers with diverse populations of students critically engage pedagogy and knowledge to take up Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in classrooms in ethical ways. Using practitioner inquiry, we draw on our classroom experiences to explore how students engage with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges and our relationships as people who relate to this land in different ways—as settlers, newcomers, and original caretakers. Students perceive our pedagogical interventions not as difficult, but as a disruption from settler colonialism, that can be navigated through. We argue that not only is there nothing inherently difficult about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, but also that students enter into difficulty as possibility. Although students experience disruptions, they seek out ways to renegotiate their relationships to settler colonialism and Indigenous perspectives and knowledges and come to new understandings about their contexts. We argue that examining these disruptions as teacher researchers in our classrooms adds nuance to conversations about revealing how settler colonialism functions and complexity to the task of taking up Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in K-12 classrooms.

Les perspectives et les connaissances autochtones sont devenues des matières « difficiles » à enseigner en raison des normes des colonisateurs qui sont naturalisées au sein du système d'éducation publique de la maternelle à la 12e année en Ontario. Nous explorons dans quelle mesure nous, en tant qu'enseignantes qui travaillons avec des populations diverses d'élèves, adoptons une approche critique et réfléchie à la pédagogie et aux connaissances de sorte à intégrer les perspectives et les connaissances autochtones en classe de façon éthique. Reposant sur une enquête auprès de praticiens, nous puisons dans nos expériences en classe pour explorer la réaction des élèves aux perspectives et aux connaissances autochtones ainsi qu'à nos rapports en tant que personnes qui entretiennent des liens différents avec ce territoire—en tant que colonisateurs, nouveaux arrivés ou premiers gardiens. Les élèves ne perçoivent pas nos interventions pédagogiques comme étant difficiles, mais comme une perturbation du colonialisme de peuplement à travers laquelle il est possible de naviguer. Nous affirmons que non seulement les perspectives et les connaissances autochtones ne sont pas difficiles en soi, mais en plus, les élèves abordent la difficulté comme une possibilité. Les élèves vivent des perturbations, cherchent *des façons de renégocier leurs rapports au colonialisme de peuplement et aux perspectives et connaissances autochtones, et ils acquièrent une nouvelle compréhension de leurs contextes. Nous affirmons qu'en examinant ces perturbations comme chercheurs-enseignants dans nos salles de classes, nous ajoutons une nuance aux conversations sur le fonctionnement du colonialisme de peuplement et rendons plus complexe la tâche d'adopter des perspectives et des connaissances dans les classes M-12.*

As two white settlers and a racialized person displaced from Walmapu (Chile), who are researching and working in the field of education, we have found ourselves asking, how do teachers with diverse populations of students critically engage pedagogy and knowledge when making visible Indigenous perspectives and knowledges[1] in classrooms in ethical ways? In Ontario's public K-12 education system, settler-colonial norms have been naturalized, rendering Indigenous perspectives and knowledges "difficult" to teach and learn (Dion, 2004).

Coming to this work as settler educators with personal and professional interests in Environmental Education, Treaty responsibilities, and self-to-land relationships, we seek to trouble the notion that within public education, Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are positioned as difficult knowledge (Dion, 2004). We examine how students respond to classrooms where Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are made visible and presented as vibrant and contemporary ways of being in and understanding the world. This paper uses the theoretical framing of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 1998) and extends theories of difficult knowledge (e.g., Britzman, 1998; Tarc, 2011; Tupper, 2014) to highlight how settler colonialism creates conditions that influence the perception of Indigenous content as difficult knowledge. Through our theoretical framing of difficult knowledge, we argue that Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are framed as difficult in mainstream educational contexts because they challenge colonial and capitalist underpinnings of education (Battiste, 2005). We recognize that Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are diverse, multiple, varied, and specific to a particular nation and/or land (Cajete, 1999; Little Bear, 2009). Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are complex relationships between "human knowledge, heritage and consciousness" and ecological knowledge that rests in the clan, band, community or individual" (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, pp. 35-36). We use the term Indigenous perspectives and knowledges not to imply a monolith, but as a way to examine how they disrupt settler colonialism while continuing to recognize their diversity and complexity.

In the paper, we provide data from two practitioner inquiry projects where we as teachers and researchers believe it is a pedagogical imperative to include conversations about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in our classes and our own lives. During our teaching, we used a variety of media authored by a wide selection of Indigenous peoples to bring multiple voices into the classroom. With these voices, we exposed students to multiple Indigenous perspectives and knowledges: we did not speak for or on behalf of Indigenous peoples, nor did we position ourselves as authorities or provide a definitive definition for our students. Rather, when we talked about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges with students, we sought to make visible how Indigenous peoples have mutual relationships and reciprocity with the natural world (Cajete, 1999 as cited in Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). To these classroom conversations, we attempted to bring a focus on pedagogical relationships and how pedagogical encounters can be engaged to ethically relate to, and with, Indigenous perspectives and knowledges.

Students perceived this pedagogical intervention not as difficulty, but as a disruption that can be navigated through. In this paper we explore some ways that students used disruption as a site of possibility for renegotiating relationships when settler colonialism is made visible in the classroom. Students renegotiated by finding new currents for adjusting to difficult knowledge in ways that let them see their world differently. Whereas the disruption of relationships is characteristic of difficult knowledge, teaching approaches can shape disruption, provide possibilities for renegotiation, and encourage a continuation of questioning. We conclude this work with implications for how K-12 classrooms can act as sites of possibility for how Indigenous perspectives are being framed and named in educational theory and educational systems in Canada.

Positionality

Practitioner inquiry (Lytle, 2000) calls for teachers to locate themselves in their research and Indigenous protocols of relationality (Wilson, 2008), while asking researchers to identify their positionality and how they come to the work. Velta Douglas is a white settler and second-generation immigrant. She positions herself as a settler to trouble her interest in Environmental Education and to investigate her relationship to land. Fiona Purton comes to this work as a white settler and educator. This work is one way that she is trying to understand her responsibilities and learn what it means to live as a Treaty partner. The teacher/researcher perspectives of Daniela Bascuñán are informed by her status as a racialized woman. Displaced as a young child from Walmapu (known as Chile), she looks at self-to-land relationships through Treaty education. We see these positionalities as significant for how we take up our ethical commitments as researchers and practitioners. We elaborate further on our lived experiences and positionality in the methodology.

Background

Since before Canada's inception, there have been policies and laws in place that have sought the erasure of the First Peoples of Turtle Island, including attempts to wipe out Indigenous perspectives and knowledges. The logic that justified these actions was motivated by colonizers' requirement for commodifiable land upon which to expand, and an attitude whereby the colonizer designated themselves as sovereign and the "arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 73). This form of colonization is referred to as settler colonialism. As the logic upon which Canada was built, Canada is a settler-colonial nation (Paquette, Beauregard, & Gunter, 2015; Smith, 2012; Veracini, 2011, 2014; Wolfe, 2006). Dion (2004) has argued that non-Aboriginal Canadians continue to 1) dehumanize Aboriginal[2] people through stereotypes, 2) challenge how the past relates to Canada's present, 3) claim that stories of the past are too hard to listen to, and 4) to listen to the atrocities of the past is unnecessary because there is nothing that can be done.

Because curriculum is socially constructed and produced, ministry-mandated K-12 curriculum in Canada's provinces and territories is informed by and founded upon settler-colonial ideals, norms, logics and ideologies (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Therefore, what is predominantly taught about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges reproduces historical oppression against Indigenous people and cultures (Battiste, 1998, 2002, 2005). While these curricula are rife with absences of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, they are also replete with inaccurate and incomplete depictions of Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples. In this way, current curricula fail to make explicit the realities of the impacts of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples both historically and in the present day. This curricular focus renders all things Indigenous as non-normative (Battiste, 1998). According to Battiste (2002), the "asymmetrical structure of curricula" (p. 17) has advanced settler-colonial logic while devaluing Indigenous perspectives and knowledges—which substantively informs students' understanding of the world in which they live. Introducing settler colonialism explicitly can come up against students' (mis)understandings. For many students, knowledge of Indigenous presence is difficult to reconcile with what they knew of the world up to that point (Dion, 2007, 2009). Thus, when teachers present information that reinforces and amplifies the voices of Indigenous people and shares their perspectives and knowledges, the new information often contradicts students' previous learning. As such, when teachers intentionally push back against the erasure of Indigenous presence, students can respond in ways that on the surface appear to be resistance.

We find it useful to imagine the entrenched system of settler colonialism as an ocean and educators and students as fish in the ocean. Settler colonialism is made to feel as natural as water feels to fish, even though it is constructed and imposed by settler nations. Even though fish are immersed in, and impacted by the water, they are not determined by it. As Battiste (2005) has described it, we have all been "marinated" in colonialism and Eurocentrism. In our capacity as educators, we are making efforts to recognize the vast colonial waters around us and see our work with students as calling their attention to the water that holds and sustains them. As students become aware of the water, they experience the ocean differently. We imagine it as seeing ripples or threads of light, revealing that there is, indeed, water surrounding you—much like when we can see the air around our bodies because of mist or fog. This awareness can be disorienting, as the ripples reveal something about the water that was previously hidden. As students acclimate, they find avenues to swim forward and engage with the awareness of settler colonialism. We liken students seeking out ways to navigate through the disruptions as finding a new current in the ocean, which allows them to swim through the ocean differently. When the student is able to recognize the ripples (or disruptions), that individual can come to terms with the water they are immersed in, how they are entangled with the ocean, and how they experience it. We think of it as renegotiated relationships with the ocean. Although the water has not changed, the ways we relate to it has. These renegotiated relationships do not replace previous ways of seeing the ocean, nor are they final. We hope that the metaphor of the ocean offers allegorical ways of bridging the theoretical framework with our data and contributes to how teachers and students take up Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

For this work, we find ourselves at the intersections of cognitive imperialism, difficult knowledge, and pedagogy. Within the context of our research, Battiste's (1998) cognitive imperialism has helped us understand one of the ways that settler colonialism continues to manifest and reimpose/reproduce itself through the mandated curriculum. Difficult knowledge sheds light onto what happens to an individual when they encounter knowledge that is epistemologically disruptive (Tupper, 2014). Pedagogy, as the channel through which settler colonialism and difficult knowledge is introduced and (re)produced in classrooms, is intentional, relational, and ethical (Gaztambide-Fernández & Arráiz-Matute, 2014). Cognitive imperialism creates the conditions for Indigenous content to be read as "difficult" in classrooms, justifying the pushing aside of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, simply because they are read as "difficult." Naturalizing Indigenous perspectives and knowledges "can neutralize racism, colonialism, and assumptions of the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples" (Little Bear, 2009, p. 24). Couching certain knowledge as "difficult knowledge" produces a set of assumptions and expectations around what ways, under what conditions, and by whom, it can be taught. Battiste (2002) has called on educators to address "the immediate challenge [of] how to balance colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with Indigenous Knowledges and pedagogies" (p. 7). Teachers must make room for Indigenous voices while exposing injustices in colonial history and examining the reasons for the silencing of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in the curriculum. To say that Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are not difficult does not diminish their complex nature.

Cognitive imperialism is based on excluding and discrediting Other/Othered ontologies and epistemologies, through the presence of "silent" and tacit Eurocentric assumptions made available to learners as knowledge-constructors (Battiste, 1998). When Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are assimilated into Eurocentric definitions in an attempt to (re)assert and (re)impose the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge systems, their complexity and nuance are simplified because of the epistemological disruption they present to Eurocentric worldviews (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). Cognitive imperialism is manipulation used to discredit other knowledge systems and values, while simultaneously validating Eurocentric knowledge through public education (Battiste, 1986). In other words, cognitive imperialism "has been the means by which the rich diversity of people has been denied inclusion in public education while only a privileged group have defined themselves as inclusive, normative, and ideal" (Battiste, 1998, p. 20).

Although Indigenous content is no longer altogether absent from curriculum, Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are still often ignored and approached in ways that perpetuate a questioning of the legitimacy and experience of Indigenous peoples (Dion, 2004). The result is an invisibilizing of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in the service of settler colonialism. One avenue of invisiblizing is what Dion (2007, 2009) has called the "perfect stranger" position. She argued that when white teachers claim to know little or nothing about Indigenous peoples and cultures, it becomes a way to shield them from difficult knowledge and to opt-out of integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledges into the curriculum. Non-Indigenous teachers must refrain from behaving as experts on Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, recognize their limitations, and follow Indigenous protocols where appropriate and necessary.

In this paper, we approach difficult knowledge as knowledge that disrupts an individual's understanding of their relationship to others in the present, past, and future, by shaking and rattling firmly held epistemological convictions. It is not the knowledge itself that is inherently difficult; rather, the knowledge becomes difficult when it challenges peoples' epistemological certainties. This understanding of difficult knowledge and, specifically, Indigenous perspectives and knowledges as difficult knowledge, builds upon Tupper (2014) who, in reference to Treaty education in Saskatchewan public schools, referred to difficult dialogues as a "potential to disrupt foundational bodies of knowledge that shape particular epistemologies" (p. 1). When we turn to people who have taken up the task of teaching Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in higher education, we are told that they regularly encounter students' guilt along with "anger, grief, dismissal, and outrage" (Tarc, 2011, p. 362), and their students become unwilling or unable to engage in class discussions (Aveling, 2002; Dion, 2009; Lorenz, 2014, Tarc, 2013). These commonplace responses are indicative of the students' struggles to make epistemological sense of what they are learning. When Dion (2004) tried to bring her family's stories of settler colonialism into the classroom, she was told by teachers and students that her stories were "too hard to listen to" (p. 58). It is these responses and reactions which have resulted in Indigenous perspectives and knowledges being categorized as difficult knowledge and placed in binary opposition to hegemonic Eurocentrism and settler colonialism, which normalizes the experiences of settlers at the expense of Indigenous individuals and communities. As a result, when Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are taken up in classroom settings in education generally, it is done in ways that are intended to be palatable and not "too difficult" for students. The reaction to the teaching of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in classrooms impacts their perception as "difficult," rather than complex epistemologies that ground and center cultures that have thrived for millennia.

Gaztambide-Fernández and Arráiz-Matute (2014) have argued that those engaging in pedagogical work should seriously consider "how to intentionally enter into relations premised on the ethical imperative of the encounter" (p. 52). As educators/teachers/practitioners, we are mindful that we engage through, and in relationship with our students. This relationship was mediated by an ethical desire to place Indigenous perspectives and knowledges at the forefront of learning and make settler colonialism and cognitive imperialism visible. We make this pedagogical orientation explicit because it was intentional and informed by the ethical commitments to address cognitive imperialism, as Battiste (1998) has articulated, and to challenge common assumptions about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges as being "difficult knowledge."

Battiste (1998) has called for a pedagogy that seeks to address the asymmetry of the curriculum by teaching Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in ways that do not "Other" it. Pedagogy, when approached as relational, intentional, and ethical, is well-positioned to take up this task. By mobilizing pedagogy in this way, educators can centre knowledge which is considered "difficult," and challenge the embeddedness of cognitive imperialism in curriculum documents and teaching practice. For these reasons, we draw on cognitive imperialism, difficult knowledge and pedagogy to inform the theoretical lens through which we approach this work.

Methodology

Two of the authors conducted practitioner inquiry research in K-12 classrooms in an urban area of southern Ontario, Canada. We have taken up inquiry as a stance to engage in recursive questioning about our own practice and to interpret the relationships at work in our classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ghiso, Campano, & Simon, 2013; Lytle, 2000; Simon & Campano, 2013; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). As a methodological choice, practitioner inquiry is uniquely positioned to make visible our pedagogical commitments and engage in recursive questioning of how social relationships emerge in classroom spaces (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). We used inquiry to make an explicit connection between the stance of the teacher and learners, who draw on their positionalities to create knowledge (Lytle, 2000). By treating knowledge production as a collective inquiry that involves students and teachers, practitioner research frames "dissonances in practices as a platform for theorizing" (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015, p. 35). This paper explores how the knowledge generated in these two practitioner inquiry studies speaks to, and with, theories of difficult knowledge.

Practitioner inquiry is a deliberate attempt to make visible how the classroom is a contact zone "where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). Anzaldua (1987) has described this space as a borderland where two or more cultures edge each other though differently situated people who occupy this same space. In our classrooms, teachers and students bring in what Lytle (2000) has called “legacies” of social, cultural, political, historical and educational frameworks. The presence of the contact zone creates a situation in which discrepancies and contradictions arise, leading practitioners to respond to a “felt need” (see, e.g., Ballenger, 1999). In this study, we responded to the “felt need” of investigating how students experience Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in classrooms. Teacher research identifies critical issues in the epistemologies we take up in our classrooms by looking at how both we and our students emerge from the conflict zone and make sense of our experiences (Lewis, 1993). The methodology both created the conditions for our findings to emerge and allowed us to see these processes operating.

Our practitioner inquiry projects yielded multiple first- and second-order data sources (Freeman, 1998) such as student work, classroom actions, and teacher reflections. We also made use of qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative approach (Freeman, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and emergent coding based on a reflective and recursive approach to data analysis. Each project received ethical approval from the corresponding university’s Research Ethics Board, and school boards the teacher-researchers taught in. Both students and parents signed separate consent forms to have their classroom work and interviews anonymously shared.

The first practitioner inquiry project took up social and cultural environmental issues through a critical literacy lens by teaching Environmental Education in Grade 11/12 English at an alternative high school during the second semester of the 2016/2017 school year. The researcher co-taught with the classroom teacher over two units, or 10 weeks of class; about 30 students were enrolled, ranging in age from 16 years (Grade 10) to 18 years (Grade 12+). Of these, 20 consented to share their classroom participation. Twelve students participated in follow-up focus groups; of those students, the researcher asked six to participate in individual interviews. The researcher developed the pedagogical tools and materials used in the units with input and assistance from the classroom teacher. Teaching emphasized the often-unacknowledged relationships between environmental issues and Indigenous perspectives on land, particularly how environment and Indigeneity are both present in urban areas. These pedagogical commitments were driven by the researcher’s extensive experiences as a teacher in a northern village in Nunavik, and by her commitment make visible how settler colonialism impacts Environmental Education in schools. Students reflected on their relationships to land by engaging with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges through research, art, and poetry, and attending a guest lecture by an Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Keeper. Emergent coding of follow up interviews revealed disruptions, cracks, and renegotiation. The focus on Indigeneity was woven throughout each unit as well as the follow-up focus groups and the interviews; therefore, each data set contributed to the overall understanding of how students were engaged in and interacting with Indigenous perspectives. This paper uses interview transcripts from one student, Zach (pseudonym), as a representation of the overall classroom experience.

The second inquiry used research that was conducted in two grade three classes in a diverse urban public school, on land that serves as a living and meeting place for several Indigenous nations as well as immigrant and settler populations. In the pilot study with the first cohort during the 2015/2016 school year, students deconstructed historical accounts of material and symbolic violence in Indian residential schools in Canada. This was done through children’s literature, poetic interventions, treaty walks and tours, visits with Elders, expression of ideas through visual arts, and listening to survivor testimony, as well as discussions about survivor artwork. The second study during the 2017/2018 school year followed a similar trajectory, but also delved more deeply into relationality and more-than-human kinship based on reflections to students' ancestral origins, combined with stories and teachings of Indigenous presence. In both studies, critical questioning of settler-hood and identity were an entry point for resisting colonial logics. Issues of race, difference, privilege, and power were forefront. Importantly, most teaching sources and springboards were authored by Indigenous-first voices to mitigate the classroom teacher's identity as non-Indigenous to Turtle Island. In both cohorts, the emphasis was placed on student-driven creation of curricular ideas. Students generated themes as well as questions and wonderings for further learning. The data pulled from various student sources including written, oral, and visual texts and follow up group interviews. This was followed by emergent coding of students' work and teacher self-reflection.

Practitioner inquiry is rooted in collaborative practices of teachers opening their accounts of classroom-based research to others, not only for comment and validation but to examine, critique, and evaluate (Lytle, 2000). Before beginning the research projects outlined in this paper, the authors engaged in multiple conversations, both privately and publicly, emerging from our "felt need" to examine what our roles as educators and researchers mean for us in the context of settler colonialism (Bascuñan & Douglas, 2016). Through a series of iterative conversations emerging from the classroom teaching, researchers engaged in a dialogical interaction between the theoretical framework and what was happening with students. These conversations produced the metaphor of the ocean to help us frame the interactions we had as teachers and researchers learning together with students in classroom spaces, and to shape our work as we go forward. Our conclusions, therefore, are meant to illustrate the process of interaction with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges and offer ways for other teachers and researchers to think about and enter into this work. The data presented below focuses on a few students who are representative of the overall experiences and whose data provided rich examples of the themes.

Discussion

These two practitioner inquiry projects shed light on how students perceive, experience, and navigate Indigenous perspectives and knowledges when they are integrated using interdisciplinary methods by two non-Indigenous teachers. Specifically, we pull from classroom experiences to provide context for how students experience disruptions arising from difficult knowledge in nuanced ways, how students seek out new currents to navigate the disruptions, and how they use these currents as ways to renegotiate their relationships. This process of moving from nuanced disruptions to renegotiation through new currents opens up space in the theoretical framing of difficult knowledge to explore how students take up difficulty as a possibility. In the following section, nuanced disruptions, new currents, and renegotiated relationships will be conceptualized and expanded upon with examples from each practitioner inquiry project.

Nuanced Disruptions

Students experience disruption when the settler colonial context in which they are embedded becomes visible through pedagogical interventions that bring cognitive imperialism to light. These disruptions distort how the student perceives their context, making visible contradictions in historical and social narratives, revealing previously hidden narratives, and producing alternative visions of their lived worlds. While experiencing distortion, students appear to experience a sense of discomfort that manifests in questioning or distancing themselves from Indigenous perspectives and knowledges being presented in class. Instead of characterizing these disruptions as resistance, we see it as how students initially wrestle with disruption in attempts to uncover a path forward.

“Why should I trust you?” In the high school English class, many students expressed their disruption as disbelief in non-Indigenous educators’ capacity to speak on the topic and by questioning the authenticity of Indigenous voices. In class, students watched videos and read articles, poems, and novels created and produced by a range of Indigenous writers and artists. They questioned the intent and bias behind the information and sources given to them by non-Indigenous educators. Instead, they viewed the presentation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges given in class as a crusade by a non-Indigenous educator and saw the resources as a reflection of a particular bias of the teacher.

Zach expressed this disruption as questioning how white educators, who did not have first-hand experiences of settler-colonial violence, can convey Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in the classroom.

> It's kind of difficult for me to express but it seems really weird for us to randomly talk about Indigenous studies … it seemed like a little weird, like a little off. What do we really know about Indigenous studies? And like, I don't mean this in an offensive way, but why should I trust you [non-Indigenous teachers] to know that much about it? There was a bunch of things where I was like, how are we going to cover this, and how would you guys know this? … you guys are both white. Not having like … it's just an experience thing, like not being Indigenous and not having that perspective unfortunately means that like people just won't have the same amount of trust in like what you say.

Zach wondered how non-Indigenous students and educators can learn and teach about Indigenous perspectives without the presence of an Indigenous person in the room. Despite reading pieces, watching films, and exploring art made and authored by Indigenous writers and artists, Zach maintained this suspicion of authenticity. His lack of trust in non-Indigenous educators resulted in a questioning of the content itself, even though the media he was exposed to in class authentically represented the perspectives of the Indigenous individuals who created it.

Zach reflects a tendency of the class to position non-Indigenous educators as “perfect strangers” (Dion, 2007) to Indigenous perspectives and people. Dion has asked, “What does the perfect stranger position offer? What is the appeal?” (p. 331) When Zach identified non-Indigenous educators as a perfect stranger, he can then say it feels “weird” or “a little off” to take up this material in class. As settler colonialism became visible, he assigned a perfect stranger position to himself and the non-Indigenous educator.

“It’s like they’re still trying to make them extinct.” In the grade three class, students experienced nuanced disruptions when they distanced themselves from settlerhood while developing an awareness that selfhood needed to be acknowledged and questioned. By far the most common way in which students showed nuanced disruptions was acknowledging their settler privilege by speaking critically about it. Students explicitly identified their place of living as being a part of active and living history by developing an understanding of linkages between historical violence and current events. One student mentioned,

> It's like they're still trying to make them extinct. It seems like they had the land and put them in residential schools and now they're polluting their reserves. Now where are they supposed to live? And our culture and government doesn't let them in to our society.

Students remained highly critical of systems of power and oppression that were forcibly being used today, including harm inflicted by child welfare systems, and disparate access to healthcare and schooling services for Indigenous children on reserves. Importantly, students engaged in many discussions about current events and environmental racism enacted against predominantly Indigenous communities across the country.

Whereas most students showed disruption by being critical about historical events and systems of oppression and openly discussed their opinions, others did the same but sought to distance themselves in a temporal manner. Despite being exposed to various historical dimensions, those who sought to distance themselves from the concept of continual structural violence did not understand the present as a continuation of the past. They envisioned settlerhood as a past event, not a current structural relationship. Given the efforts made by the teacher-researcher to frame this otherwise, these students experienced incongruities between who they were and what they thought settlerhood represented vis-a-vis how they envisioned settlerhood to be represented in the present. Although they were often the most outspoken about settler violence, these few students rejected the term "settler" as a way of defining themselves or others. This discord or bypassing of the settler self was not commonplace among most students, but it did surface occasionally.

Both forms of distancing may have been made possible because of the privilege that some of them held as settlers who have not been exposed to material and symbolic violence. It is equally important to acknowledge that several students in both cohorts had histories of violence, repression, and refuge, and these students, for the most part, could not count on their privilege to move innocently through a distancing mechanism.

The experiences of the students in these two projects have shown us that the distancing they engage in when they come into contact with histories of forced encounter in conjunction with learning Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are manifestations of the disruptions they are experiencing, and these distancing tactics can be highly nuanced. In high school, Zach distanced himself by assigning a perfect stranger position to both students and non-Indigenous educators and questioning the authenticity of the Indigenous voices in the resources he was exposed to in class. In the grade three classroom, students experienced disruption as recognition and acknowledgment of violence against Indigenous nations. Although all could recognize the injustice as a historical occurrence, students had varying responses when they were asked to consider the impact of this violence on their selfhood.

New Currents

As students start to experience disruption, they also begin to seek out and navigate new currents that allow them to continue to engage with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, despite the discomfort caused the visibility of settler colonialism and cognitive imperialism. The currents each student charts for themselves is unique to them and varies across the two classes. The decision to enter a current is recognition of possibility for navigating around and through disruption.

"He was like, super raw." High school students sought out new currents through personal connections that allowed them to take in the disruption. Some students identified listening to a guest lecture by a Traditional Knowledge Keeper when he came to speak with the class as a particularly powerful way for them to become personally connected and to work through disruption. Zach echoed what many students expressed about this experience:

> That was a really good talk, one of the best talks I've had for sure. It really enlightened me on stuff. And, I really like just having ... it switched to, ok, we're not just going to randomly indigenize this curriculum, but actually bring in somebody who is unfiltered and raw. He was like, super raw. If he came in and he spoke about generic history, it's different because it's something we learned out of textbooks anyways. He made it personal and that is something that we can't ignore because he has so much validity in what he says, because he's Indigenous and he's experienced these things. We don't see Indigenous people. I've seen like two Indigenous people in my whole life, you know?

An in-person connection presented Zach with an opportunity to navigate a new current through the disruption. He described it being outside of textbook learning, a break from generic history. For Zach, this created "something that we can't ignore" in the way that he could step back from information or resources given to him by non-Indigenous educators.

While seeking out a new current, Zach still placed himself in the middle, where a particular level of authenticity and validity is required for him to find ways to navigate through disruption. Receiving validation of the authenticity of the information he had read or seen in work by Indigenous writers and artists and heard from non-Indigenous educators, he could then move forward and undertake work to challenge his disruption.

Zach's current creates a set of circumstances in which Indigenous people are obligated to teach non-Indigenous students about the impacts of settler colonialism. This obligation sets precedent that Indigenous people must legitimize the pain of colonial experiences for a settler audience. As well as forcing Indigenous people to relive trauma and invest a great deal of emotional labour, having to hear directly from an Indigenous person to legitimize experiences prioritizes settlers' need to be convinced of the impacts.

Contradiction as generative. Students in grade three navigated new currents through disruption by mobilizing an in-depth understanding of settlerhood to recognize, seek out, and question contradictions in their own lives and work through them. Accompanying this were strong expressions of anger at injustices from class discussions that surfaced issues of race, privilege, negligence, and harm. As students explored settler-colonial histories, they also explored their own identities. In tandem, student identities and settler-colonial histories provided a backdrop for the development of understanding "difference" which added to their emerging understandings of place-self-other relationships.

Some students grew an understanding of "difference" by utilizing their own spiritual and religious worldviews as a starting point to understanding settler-colonial history. Exploring the history of Indian residential schools with students precipitated an understanding of the role of organized religion in settler statehood. At first, one student named Jak (pseudonym) seemed to experience quiet dissonance when we traced back notions of responsibility and accountability with respect to genocidal histories. Jak was often inward and quiet when we discussed the role of the Church. There was a shift in this when we read through apologies made by the Church in our class, which created a new current or possibility to think through notions of responsibility and action. One Monday morning, shortly after reading the apologies, Jak told our class that he had discussed the history of Indian residential schools with his Church congregation on the previous Sunday. The student retold how his Church had invited an Elder do a Four Directions teaching. He understood this as an attempt from his place of worship to make amends with the past. When it became clear that the members of the congregation had not faced this history before and knew very little about it, Jak made an on-the-spot decision to speak informally and share what we had learned together in our class. This impromptu lesson was well-received by members of his congregation. His parents, on various occasions afterwards, spoke to me about the impact this moment had on how he understood the world. It is helpful to draw on Simon's (2006) work on remembrance as a way to understand the past in order to reconfigure a future sense of responsibility and to understand Jak's actions in his community that day. The experience of confronting contradictions between his own life and the world around him placed Jak in the position to be able to receive and be accountable for the "terrible gift" that is to know, to remember, and to act on the past-present (Simon, 2006).

New currents allowed students to navigate past disruption. In high school, students used a personal connection with an Indigenous guest speaker to understand their disruption and begin to undertake work to change their understandings. However, students continued to centre themselves and their own needs in this process, recreating problematic cycles of legitimization that require Indigenous people to relive trauma for the benefit of a settler audience. In grade three, students made sense of their classroom learning by connecting it to their own lived experiences and beginning to have conversations about their learning in their other community and family spaces.

Renegotiated Relationships

As students began to navigate around their disruptions, they renegotiated relationships and related to their contexts in new ways. To put it another way, the students, now aware of the ocean, find new ways to relate to the water. The ocean itself has not changed, but the student experiences it differently. These renegotiated relationships are not final, and they do not replace previous understandings and knowledge of the ocean. Instead, these relationships allow for understandings of both ways of seeing the ocean.

"We have such a huge emotional connection to the land." In the high school class, students renegotiated how they see the relationships between land and people. For Zach, this meant realizing that the two are linked through an emotional connection: "The land and people are emotionally living together. If you affect one, it depresses the other. We have such a huge emotional connection to the land that we don't even know of. And that's so important to us."

He specifically tied these new connections to how he has recognized his responsibility as a treaty person.

> We ended off saying we're all treaty people. And part of their worldviews is to accept humans for who they are because it's not their land, it's not our land, it's all of our land. Like, the land doesn't belong to anyone … Looking at [land] as really important, representing traces of cultures being here, cultural elements, how certain power dynamics that have been affected, certain people have been marginalized, some other people have been given too much power over others. If we just look outside, as long as we have that information, we'll understand that this wasn't our land to begin with.

Zach saw this new relationship as being embedded in multiple systems of power and privilege. He has thought about being in relationship with the land but also recognized that land has been exploited to justify settler colonialism. By acknowledging that we are all treaty people, he has accepted that this connection is also part of his responsibilities.

In his final project for the term, Zach created a pop-up art piece depicting a grey and white city against a vibrant backdrop of a celestial night sky (Figure 1). With spray paint, he hoped to demonstrate the layers of connection between human beings and their urban habitats and other aspects of the universe. Zach explains:

> I wanted to take what [the guest speaker] said to heart, when he said humans are the liquid minerals of the earth and being is the relationship we have with the sun, sky and universe … we are all connected to land even though we distance it sometimes with cities.

Zach saw himself as having a role in a bigger interconnected universe, not only as a person dwelling in the city. Zach renegotiated his relationships by acknowledging how humans are connected and in relation with the earth because we are made up of the same "liquid minerals."

"Why would you do that to someone else's family?" As students worked to understand interrelated forms of oppression and privilege, and as students learned about and brought into their lives Indigenous treaty teachings, they became aware of more expansive ways to define their relationships to the world. This allowed them to conceive of a broader set of relationships to others. Specifically, they were able to widen their conceptions of kinship to Indigenous peoples. Students started noticing the interrelated webs between current issues and questioned conceptions of settler-initiated harm and violence. In class discussions, many conversations cycled around the notion that hurting someone else was akin to hurting oneself. One student

Figure 1: Zach's Pop Up Art

noted, "In the future, you'll look back and say 'who am I? What have I done to all these people?'" In most responses and work, students envisioned accountability and ethicality as a starting point to all personal action. One said, "At the end of the day people that you are killing have families to go home to, and so do they. Why would you do that to someone else's family?" Their ideas were grounded on a strong understanding of self-other relationships, a theme that students co-developed and that became foundational to their learning. For students, this manifested itself as the theorizing about societal complicity and communal responsibility with a core that considered the past-present-future as one entity. By the end of the year, they pointed the way for the next cohort by insisting that the teacher ensure to open the door for others to learn through Indigenous notions of relationality, as a starting point for all ethical behaviour.

When students begin to renegotiate their relationships, they peel off distancing behaviours and place themselves in context with what they are learning. In high school, this meant expanding notions of humans as part of a bigger set of relationships with the universe. Specifically, Zach talked about the continued existence of emotional connections between humans and land despite the build environments of urban areas. In grade three, students made sense of themselves as part of interrelated webs that linked them and their lived experiences to those of other communities, past and present. These renegotiated relationships—instead of revolving around the student—centre relationships, interconnections, and relationality.

Conclusion

In a system that normalizes the logics of settler colonialism, Indigenous experiences become Othered in classroom teaching. In this paper, we use theories of cognitive imperialism, difficult knowledge and pedagogy to trouble how students in two practitioner inquiry projects made sense of settler colonialism through pedagogical interventions that centred Indigenous perspectives and knowledges. The content that was taught in both classes is commonly couched as difficult knowledge; it is material that is often disrupting because it asks students to think about the world differently and to consider how notions of settler colonialism have shaped their worldview. The content also calls on students to recognize that these ways of knowing are not benign—they can harm—and that there are multiple ways of knowing and being in the world. We argue that not only is there nothing inherently difficult about Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, but also that students enter into difficulty as possibility. Although students experience disruptions, they seek out new currents so that they can renegotiate relationships and come to new understandings about their contexts.

Practitioner inquiry, as a methodological choice, revealed how students and teachers build knowledge about engaging in disruption, navigating currents and renegotiating relationships. Although students do indeed experience disruption when settler colonialism is made visible by their teachers, this epistemological rupture is taken up by students as a possibility. The "conflict" that teachers might observe may not be a manifestation of students' rejection. By adopting an inquiry stance as practitioners, we were able to notice that students do experience discomfort when settler colonialism is made visible, but also work to incorporate it into their lived experiences and familiar contexts. The level and quality of engagement is individually driven by students, but impacted by the choices of practitioners. We found it fruitful to engage with each other in an inquiry stance despite teaching in the different contexts of elementary and high school. During conversations about our pedagogical imperatives and classroom experiences, we began to notice how both groups of students experience disruptions, navigate new currents, and renegotiate their relationships, albeit in different ways. We took up inquiry as stance by speaking across our experiences to theorize how we as classroom practitioners understand our classroom practices. It helped us to recognize similarities across our contexts and recognize nuance instead of focusing on how perceived differences in students' backgrounds, subjectivities, experiences, and articulation may impact our classroom experiences and observations.

We contend that it is timely for educators to rethink and re-evaluate approaches to including Indigenous perspectives and knowledges and making settler colonialism explicit in our teaching. To do this teaching, educators must do work to understand our own relationship to settler colonialism. As we continue forward as teacher researchers, we endeavour to continually seek out ways to teach that acknowledge the capacity of students to create and do beyond what is typically expected. Thinking of our future work, we wonder how to balance calls to contribute to Indigenous thriving (Bang, Montaño Nolan, & McDaid-Morgan, 2018; Yazzie Mintz, 2007) with the tension that arises between the introduction of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges and the subsequent visibility of settler colonialism and cognitive imperialism. Battiste (2002) has argued that "the central purpose of integrating Indigenous Knowledges into Canadian schools is to balance the educational system to make it a transforming and capacity building place for First Nations students" (p. 29). How does the juxtaposition of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges with the realization of settler colonialism impact Indigenous thriving in our classes and education more generally?

Rather than calling into question existing theorizations on difficult knowledge we hope to show how practitioners and students can add to the conversation based on their classroom experiences, like in the projects presented here. Practitioner inquiry approaches teaching by zooming in on "puzzling moments" (Ballanger, 1998) in order to highlight and tease out complexities. What we can draw from the representative samples illustrated above is a commitment on the part of both students and teachers to continue to find alternative ways of seeing themselves as part of a world where settler colonialism is made visible. Whereas disruption of relationships is characteristic of difficult knowledge, teaching approaches shape how students manifest their disruption, possibilities for renegotiation, and continuation of questioning. As educators, this should embolden us to take up this curriculum with confidence, knowing that students' responses are not rejections or confrontations but manifestations of disruption that can lead to new relationships. As teachers and researchers, we are committed to continuing to find ways to integrate Indigenous perspectives and knowledges into classrooms, beginning by "unsettling" settlerhood (Regan, 2010). This research is humble evidence that we can explicitly tackle settler colonialism in our classes and include Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in our teaching in meaningful ways. Even though some students may struggle to negotiate how to make sense of the new knowledge, the possibility of renegotiation remains.

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Notes

1. Within the context of this paper, we use the phrasing Indigenous perspectives and knowledges as a shorthand which is intended to be read to be inclusive of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, experiences, histories, and worldviews. We recognize that Indigenous knowledges are nuanced, complex, and fall outside of a typical Eurocentric epistemological demand for definitions (see Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000)

2. We us the term Aboriginal here instead of Indigenous to be consistent with Dion's articulation.

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