

# Terrain of Settler Colonialism in Education

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## Introduction

Native American nations have inherent sovereignty rights that include language and cultural rights affirmed by the United Nations in 2007 (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Reyhner, 2012). Yet, due to the long history of colonialism and United States policies, language and cultural losses continue to be a struggle (Reyhner, 2012; Lomawaima 2000; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Historical assimilation policies operated under the rhetoric of humanitarianism and the myth of inevitability to justify a deluge of oppressive policies resulting in extensive losses of Native American rights, including land, resources, and lives (Wildcat, 2001; Jaimes, 1992; Schaepli & Godlewskaja, 2019, p. 222). In order to critically understand the implications of this history in education today, this article draws on Wolfe's (2006)

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analysis of colonialism, maintaining that colonialism is not a singular event; rather, it is a structural system that continues to be embedded in society's political, economic and social institutions still today. Accordingly, the structural nature of settler colonialism is grounded in the intentions of settlers to establish "permanency" through institutions that eliminate "Indigenous peoples and their cultures" (Barker, 2017, p. 23; Wolfe, 2006, p. 288).

Building on this structural ground, educational institutions were aimed at eliminating Native Americans through absorption into the settler state, resulting in significant loss of traditional languages and cultural knowledge still impacting communities today. Critical Indigenous scholars Jennifer Denetdale and Angela Cavender Wilson (Waziyatawin) assert that these assimilation policies were acts of genocide with the intention of "ethnic cleansing" (2017, p. 71). This critical framework challenges legal and social rhetoric that dismisses these historical and continued losses, contributing to complacency in American society as it continues to spiral deeper into neoliberal politics and capitalist driven environmental crisis.

Since the passage of the Indian Self-determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975, significant strides in reclaiming education sovereignty have contributed to critical language and culturally relevant curriculum development, including immersion schools within Native American territories. However, generational language and cultural knowledge loss continue to permeate the social, political and economic fabric within most Native American communities (Klug, ed., 2012; Reyhner, 1992; Szasz, 1988; Shenandoah, 2006). These losses within Nation land where cultural, social and spiritual centers have greater insulation and buffers for negotiating mainstream influences, suggest even greater losses for Native American families residing outside home territories. In fact, eighty-seven percent of Native Americans, according to the 2020 census data, reside off Native American territories, leaving children's education in the hands of the public school system (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This creates a dangerous terrain with a long history of education failure tangled in the continuous binds of cultural genocidal forces under a homogenous system choked by neoliberal politics and high stakes testing (Klug, ed., 2012). Although Renya Ramirez's (2007) studies of urban Native American communities highlights the valuable fluid movement between urban sites and Native American communities in supporting cultural identity and resiliency, it does little to counter systemic erasure within the public school system.

In mainstream public education, researchers continue to expose

the underlining cultural genocidal tendencies within this hegemonic, oppressive structure. Increasing far-right extremism and politics in education threatens to exacerbate the marginalization of diverse populations (Astor, 2023; Peele, 2023; Weiner, 2022). Weiner's (2022) analyses of this hierarchical structure exposed the alignment of neoliberal politics and capitalism and illuminated a prophetic vision of the implications for diverse populations. Weiner (2022) juxtaposed two parallel education paths: one following the current neoliberal trends and the other following a democratic, progressive path, revealing a fork in the road. His predictions of a neoliberal, fascist state created a warning call for action. Literature on settler colonialism suggests that this neoliberal fascism has been at the core of Native American education history and remains entangled within mainstream pedagogy still today.

In order to counter settler colonialism within education, this article draws on insights from critical and epistemological theorists to examine the alternative pedagogy of The Big Picture high school in Upstate New York. Focusing on this progressive, public education model with nearly half Haudenosaunee enrolled students, this preliminary, explorative inquiry seeks to elucidate and describe the school's leadership, community building and pedagogy. In what ways might progressive education models work toward creating space that counters Native American erasure and settler colonialism? More specifically, what pedagogy honors and valorizes student's Indigenous knowledge and creates meaningful spaces of empowerment for learning communities?

### **Lenses of Critical Theory and Epistemology Theorists**

To create cracks in the settler colonial structure at the foundation of education, I turn to the works of critical, progressive theorists and Indigenous scholarship. Critical theorists draw from progressive education founder John Dewey (1916) who recognized the interactive and dialectic process between teachers and students in "constructing meaning through experiential learning" (Putney, 2012, p. 138). The various democratic, transformative models emphasized the importance of creating a dialectical space where students can be supported in intellectual and reflective exploration as they create their own meanings. Some critical theorists models seek to create an educational structure that is guided by democratic principles of participation, intellectual engagement and reflection. Michael Apple and James Beane's (2007) ground breaking work in democratic education points to the fundamental principles of the participatory structure that allows for meaningful engagement in decision-making (pp. 15-20). Part of engaging in

meaningful decision making requires nurturing a space of mutual respect and encouragement of diverse views and knowledge base through intellectual engagement and reflection. Through these opportunities for dialectic exchanges and critical inquiry where mutual respect is nurtured, student can be active in making their own meaning about the world and issues impacting them and their futures. Along these lines, a democratic learning environment shifts away from a hierarchical structure to one in which teachers act as models and facilitators in nurturing safe spaces for dialogue and meaning making as part of the decision processes (Apple & Beane, 2007, pp. 15-26).

Paulo Freire extended these progressive concepts in students' role in meaning making by critically examining the hegemonic structure that enforces colonial knowledge, dismissing students' diverse knowledge through treating them as mere empty container in which teachers control and deposit knowledge (Freire, 1970; Grande, 2004; Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Orelus, et al., eds., 2014; Putney, 2012). Freire's (1970) work raised critical question concerning who benefits from this banking concept model prevalent in mainstream pedagogy. While Freirean pedagogy influences brought a wave of multiculturalism that attempted to embrace diversity through various rudimentary, add-on curriculum programs, it did little to rattle the structural core (Delpit, 2006; Grande, 2004; Nieto, 2018). Challenging the limits of the democratization of education, contemporary and Indigenous theorist Sandy Grande (2004) points to the continued role of settler colonialism that function to privilege what she refers to as "whitestream" education with strong ties to capitalism. These forces are antithetical to the distinct cultural needs of Native Americans as separate, sovereign nations.

Additional evidence from epistemologists' theory draws us in closer as they trace the internalization process of settler colonial's hierarchical structure within education (Seawright, 2014; Schaepli & Godlewska, 2019). Seawright's (2014) findings maintain that white supremacist epistemology is perpetuated through social and structural institutions that transmit and normalize settler "habits, beliefs, values, and practices...that perpetuate hierarchized notions of the world, privileging white-hetropatriarchy" (p. 557). In order to break free from this self-perpetuating system, theorists maintain that "critical epistemic introspection" is needed in order to reimagine an alternative epistemic reality (Seawright, 2014, p. 570).

Amid the ecological climate crisis, many are looking to Indigenous epistemology that offers a more sustaining reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Schaepli and Godlewska (2019) work was compelled

by Indigenous leaders and activists argument that an epistemology of ignorance “works to uphold the ontological hierarchies from which racism and colonialism thrive” (citing Calderon, 2014, p. 223). Through an intensive, collaborative study of First Nation students, Schaeffi and Godlewska (2019) findings confirmed that educational institutions grounded in colonial epistemology works “to render the dispossession of Indigenous bodies and territories as just, certain and inevitable, by portraying Indigenous worldviews and practices as moral and intellectually” inferior (p. 222). Schaeffi and Godlewska (2019) highlight the role of self-examination to expose colonial entanglement and the value of Indigenous epistemology of reciprocity in unsettling pedagogy (pp. 226-236). In other words, dismantling settler colonial epistemological system calls for engaging critical introspection and space for remaking a meaningful world that reflects reciprocity.

A valuable site for meaning making within Indigenous critical theory centers on opening space for alternative meanings that can counter settler colonial supremacy. Student centered pedagogy creates structural shifts that counter the banking model of education and move toward dismantling some of the settler colonial system through honoring students’ cultures and strengths, educators uphold the inherent cultural rights of the Native American students and support the possibilities for healing families’ and communities’ relationships to education and students experiences within schools (Borck, 2020; Delpit, 1995; Rishel et al., eds., 2007).

Sefa Dei and Delaney (2014) draw on the critical insights of Frantz Fanon’s (1967) scholarly work on the pedagogy of violence across “racial, gender, sexual, and disability” and provide valuable insights for creating transformative pedagogy” (pp. 32-50). As such, in order to counter the white hegemony of settler colonialism, education praxis must be guided by “the needs of the individual as a multiply being...” (p. 49). This structural shift and re-centering pedagogy on individual students aligns with progressive education models. This stance on settler education provides a valuable analytical framework for identifying breaks in the structure in order to dismantle white supremacy and pedagogy.

### **Results: Alternative, Transformative Pedagogy**

In order to counter the failures of public education in meeting the needs of diverse learners, many alternative education models offer distinctive approaches in curriculum and community building. Within the original territories of the Onondaga Nation, one such model is

the Big Picture Schools as part of the “National Big Picture Learning Network and the Coalition of Essential Schools” that consist of more than sixty schools in the United States (Doran, 2010). By examining this alternative education model, a better understanding of how structural changes within leadership, community based opportunities and spaces, and student-centered pedagogy and praxis have potential for countering forces of settler colonialism. According to a Report by Kathryn Bradley and Laura Hernández (2019) the network consists of an additional one hundred schools internationally. As an alternative school, they maintain an enrollment of approximately 65% Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous who often struggle with “marginalization” within mainstream high schools. The founders, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor had a vision for creating schools grounded on John Dewey’s progressive education model. The Dewey’s theories advocated for field based experiences and curriculum that centered on students’ interests (Bradley & Hernández, 2019; Dewey, 1916; Williams, 2017).

Bradley and Hernández’s (2019) extensive report of the Big Picture Schools provided a comprehensive overview of the key democratic pedagogy that guides the schools practices, structure, and leadership. Specifically, the Big Picture Schools created a democratic, participatory education structure guided by ten pedagogy principles they call the “Ten Distinguishers.” Accordingly, this pedagogy centers on student interests through engaging, hands-on, personalize approaches integrated in academics, community services, and social-emotional development. The student-centered focus is reflected in the guiding concept, “One student at a time.” Following the interests, needs and passions of students, advisors and leadership work to build resources and tools, including a network of professionals and mentors and community sites where students have the opportunity to participate in a weekly field internship (Bradley & Hernández, 2019).

To support these guiding principles the school structure emphasizes building a community through small class sizes where learning is facilitated through an advisor who maintains a four-year collaborative relationship, building trust, problem-solving and communication skills while supporting students’ learning goals throughout their high school years. Bradley and Hernández’s (2019) findings point to the importance of school leadership reflect democratic learning principles, including problem-solving and flexibility for building trusting relationships with and among faculty, staff, students and families.

In Upstate New York State within homelands of the Haudenosaunee, in the central territory is the Big Picture (BP) high school. Six-miles from the Onondaga Nation Territory (People of the Hills), the

Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, BP School was established within the LaFayette School District in 2008 with fifteen enrolled at-risk students (Osborn, 2018). Today, they have approximately fifty students with nearly half of the enrollment consisting of Haudenosaunee youth (LaFayette Schools). The School's initial locations shifted during its early startup, but today it is nestled in the newly constructed southern wing of the LaFayette Jr/Sr. High School building with its own Five Nations flag. While it initially was established to serve at-risk students, its distinctive model as a small learning community with a student centered curriculum and internship components have drawn wider, diverse learners from across the region. The school continues to demonstrate high academic success with nearly ninety percent graduating with a Regents Diploma (LaFayette Schools, 2023; Osborn, 2018).

This alternative education model reflects a more progressive, transformative student centered pedagogy, guided by a democratic structure, leadership and decision-making processes, actively working to build a strong sense of community. This structure allows for student, co-created learning plans that embrace students' personal knowledge and interest, including traditional Haudenosaunee language and cultural knowledge. Indeed, according to the principal, who has been a leader for the school since its inception, Susan Hart (personal communication, September 7, 2023) noted that the student centered model supports Haudenosaunee students' interests, including space for them to pursue their cultural interest and participatory events, such as ceremonies and historical annual gatherings that affirm students' connection to their traditional way of life.

Through following and supporting student's interests, passions and valuing their personal knowledge and experiences, the BP pedagogy creates meaningful learning, empowering students' voices, ideas, and making their contributions to the school community matter. This model counters the banking model of education. Rather than view students as mere empty containers, students' knowledge and experiences are valued and honored. Rather than view students diversity as a deficit or barrier to learning, they are recognized as strengths and gifts that contribute to the learning community. This exchange allows for an openness that can create shifts in perceptions of diverse students and communities not only among the students, but also amid the teachers and staff. This approach can further contribute to building relations with the families and Nation. Such home-school connection further supports not only academic success, but also emotional and social well-being (Borck, 2020; Rishel et al, 2007).

The importance and contribution of students learning is further exemplified in the assessment model. BP assessment are built around students learning plan in which specific learning goals grounded in students' interests are integrated with the New York State education standards through a framework guided by five area: social reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, empirical reasoning, and reflecting problem-solving (Bradly & Hernández, 2019). Along these lines, students are guided in self-assessment and proactive measures and pathways for continued growth revisited periodically as they prepare, present, and reflect on exhibitions demonstrating their learning growth and processes. This assessment model counters neoliberalism and white supremacy concepts of knowledge through valuing student generated learning goals and interests. Rather than emphasis teaching, learning and assessment according to standardized test that are formulated outside the learning community's distinct knowledge base and experiences, individualized learning plan and assessment approaches create space for alternative meaning-making. In contrast, within a mainstream education, where little space within pedagogy allows for student defined knowledge and learning goals, Haudenosaunee knowledge would be delegated to limited, add-on curriculum approaches.

This democratic atmosphere where teachers and students voices coalesce, a community of mutual trust and reciprocity is fostered. Space is structured and given priority in the school schedule to create opportunities for nurturing this sense of community, including daily gatherings, seasonal and annual events such as their annual overnight camping trip at the beginning of each school year. Additionally, this community structure is fostered through the physical space itself. For instance, the school maintains community spaces within the building and outside the facility, including a greenhouse, garden, outside dining areas and basketball court. Inside the building are large, open meeting areas and classrooms where students have freedom to use the kitchen and pantry facilities and enjoy social spaces for eating, conversing and talking with teachers, including comfortable seating that gives the school a home-like feel. Gender-neutral bathrooms and cabins at the camping site further support this inclusive environment (Hart, 2023). The pedagogy and geographic spaces foster communication, collaboration and instill opportunities for building trusting relationships that is welcoming to the learning community and their families.

These central elements that build the foundation at BP counter Native American erasure. Students and the cultures of their families and communities are honored and celebrated through exhibitions and school community events. Student centered pedagogy counters erasure



and creates meaningful space for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Additionally, this student centered approach creates a dynamic space where students can explore and discover their own passions and strengths across various disciplines including, music, creative writing, visual and culinary arts, film and animation.

This transformative pedagogy creates dynamic space for identities that may not necessarily align exclusively with traditional knowledge, nor be bound within the strict mainstream rubric. As such, students are actively engaged in making and re-make meaning that is both anchored in tradition and responsive to modern demands based on their own terms. This critical, democratic space can better support opportunities for more meaningful and sustainable understanding of the future when critical inquiry is deepened within these dialectical spaces. Above all, this progressive, transformative model of education holds some promise for loosening white supremacy and heteronormativity.

### **Pathways for Re-making the Future**

Settler colonialism as a structural system embedded within education impinges upon the minds of all individuals within such a system, regardless of various cultural, racial, class, sex, gender and language differences. While its implications at the individual, collective and community levels vary, benefiting some while perpetuating disadvantages for other, all are susceptible to its hegemonic forces. Thus, ultimately, all need to be part of a transformative movement in order to create sustainable changes. Structural changes within the leadership and decision-making processes that breakdown hierarchical structures of control can foster open dialogue, participatory engagement and create safe spaces for honoring diverse views.

This preliminary research brought to the forefront dynamic, fluid surfaces where Native American youth are redefining and embracing their identity in ways that counter essentialism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Within this convoluted terrain, Sandy Grande (2004) points out that “in the liminal spaces of everyday life they [Native American youth] are the ones on the front lines, forced to navigate the ongoing and dilatory effects of colonization at the same time the continued saliency of the colonialist project is denied” (p. 5). Grande (2004) further notes that these opaque crossroads are especially thickened by “the relatively recent emergence of the doubly marginalized voices of urban, detribalized, and gay and lesbian Indians compels a rethinking of the public voice of Indian-ness” (p. 3). Moreover, she challenges us to confront the less vocalized struggles within communities. What are the ways in which some youth struggle within an exclusive

Haudenosaunee learning community and how might these be countered through structural changes?

In addition to studying educational spaces that challenge Indigenous erasure and essentialism, I am particularly interested in extending this research to center on pedagogy and praxis that counter heteronormativity. Further follow up research is necessary for a deeper analysis of the hushed ripple of internalized community violence running through various social, political and cultural spaces within education. In order to open the doors to the eighty percent of our Native American populations residing outside Nation territories, safe spaces that are inclusive and accessible and viable need to be created. Are there silences, and silenced voices within transformative school spaces? If so, how might these silences be broken to loosen this internalized violence within? In addition to critical questions about the social, political, economic, gendered and cultural violence, there is the continued need to create meaningful sites of resistance against capitalism through exposing and shedding its tangled web embedded within the fabric of our society. Are there opportunities to expand cross-cultural boundaries that can further challenge the limiting framework grand narratives echo throughout our daily lives? What partnerships can further foster exchanges to build a common ground toward the collective need for more sustainable futures?

Centering studies on the dynamic spaces of identity and indigeneity can help to limit what Silva (2007) calls ethnographic entrapment (cited by Andrea Smith, 2011, pp. 44-45). Through allowing students to draw from their own experiences and understanding of meaningful sites, including their cultural knowledge as they negotiate meaning within contemporary capitalist settler colonial state, students are empowered to recreate their own meanings. This alternative space leans away from the limits of essentialist ideas about Native American culture and knowledge, loosening the binds that define and confine Indigeneity. Moreover, through the collaborative approach in learning and sharing, this model can create crossroads where diverse learners, and teachers, come together and exchange knowledge and experiences. Similar to Mishuana Goeman's (2013) concept of re-mapping where place and experience are made new. A transformative pedagogy model opens up space for this exchange of the minds, so to speak, while also supporting youth as they redefine themselves.

Many scholars including the work of Mishuana Goeman, Sandy Grande, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Andrea Smith highlight this dynamic, fluid middle ground of meaning and identity that are neither assimilative, nor those that lean toward essentialist ideas of

culture and tradition. Drawing from Doreen Massy's (2005) concept of space as a "meeting up of histories," Goeman's analysis of Native American woman's literature offers insight on "territorial dimensions of power" that "(re)map out relationships to land and one another through narratives that unsettle settler colonial structures (Goeman, 2013, p. 3-39). Extending these concepts of creating meaning to Native American youth, a progressive, transformative education model can support student's personal agency as they expand knowledge and engage in critical learning within a diverse community, they partake in making meaning from the world around them. Not only are they changed by an engaging, meaningful spaces, but they also contribute to the change in perception, understanding and meaning for those around them, including peers, teachers, and staff. This exchange and remaking of meanings and relationships create new possibilities and meanings.

This direction of research centered on youth can extend to further analysis of what Muñoz (1999) calls "shifting terrain of resistances" (cited by Andrea Smith in Qwo-Li Driskill et al., eds., 2011, pp. 52-53.) Such sites potentially reflect the transcendence of time and place. In other words, the present and future maintain ancestral rootedness within individual and collective experiences. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) touched on this in her discussion of resurgence where there is no "division between 'tribal' and 'new' ... and no hybrid existence, rather there is a continuity" (p. 196). Embracing and affirming this principle of continuity asserts a strong stance against essentialism and ethnographic entrapment. Further inquiry into Indigenous queer theory and the social, cultural negotiation of identity can bring to the forefront spaces within the educational structure that support and celebrate alternative, dynamic, gender fluid identities.

It is time to heed the call for accountability of public schools through stronger partnerships grounded in Native American nation's sovereignty. To refuse these terms is to perpetuate cultural genocide. The reshaping of the educational structure that values Native American language and culture while supporting space for students' self-creation counters ethnographic entrapments and essentialism. Through such shifts, progressive transformative education models allow for movement away from settler colonialism. Still, even these measures of asserted sovereignty and traditional rootedness, the consumptive nature of capitalism to engulf through coopting and infusion has a power of entrapment. This entrapment creates a dependency that spreads like a cancer through the political, economic and social structures, and within the lands and people themselves. Grande (2004) warns of this dangerous nature of capitalism stating that "capitalist, imperialist

aims of unfettered competition, accumulation, and exploitation,” she calls for the need of “a pedagogy that cultivates a sense of collective agency, both to curb the excesses of dominant power and to revitalize Indigenous communities” (p. 26). Ultimately, future research is needed to shed light on pathways for creating schools where intellectual engagement of diverse learners challenges the dominant capitalist system we have all become entrapped in.

Such research can extend the insights brought forth by epistemology theorists who call for fostering critical self-introspection and reimagining a world built on reciprocity. In searching for this balance, I am reminded of traditional elders and leaders within the Haudenosaunee communities who illuminated to our spiritual connection as a grounding center that can guide our path (Shenandoah, 2006). Recalling Weiner’s (2022) prophetic warning against the trends of neoliberal, fascist education, I am reminded of a Haudenosaunee story of the two serpents who attracted the people with their glint of silver and gold so that many come to abandon their ceremonial responsibilities to creation. The people become weakened and unmoored, the serpents’ growing strength threatens to devour everything, including the people. This movement out of the capitalist entrapment requires a collective journey united by our reciprocal responsibilities to Creation, as our very future depends on it.

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