



**Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation**

Research Report Summary

# THE NECESSARY DISCOMFORT OF POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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## Key findings

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This research affirms that the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into social studies curricula alone is insufficient to challenge stereotypical portrayals of Canada's First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) communities. Indeed, current approaches may even be creating an aversion to the topic by oversimplifying or polarising the issue. Student-centred and pluralistic approaches are recommended, in which students are able to place themselves within postcolonial narratives.

Addressing non-Indigenous students' personal positions in relation to post-colonial issues is likely to be an uncomfortable classroom experience. Our evidence demonstrates that some discomfort is an unavoidable and necessary part of Canada's 'Truth and Reconciliation' agenda. Unaddressed, discomfort obstructs learning, but, when examined in a safe environment, it can become the fuel to advance genuine reconciliation.

Students in this study demonstrated an authentic interest in learning FNMI histories and perspectives in social studies, but were resistant to current modes of delivery, which they perceived as repetitive and superficial. We observed that student-centred approaches to learning corresponded to more positive responses to FNMI content. This was attributed to the students' ability to consider multiple perspectives, and to work through their own experiences and family heritage in relation to histories that challenged their worldviews and identity.

Our findings confirmed prior research (Davis et al., 2016; Iseke-Barnes, 2005), in that existing approaches often lead to a limited and problematic understanding of Indigenous histories and contemporary issues in Canada, especially in schools where students are mostly or entirely non-Indigenous and have had limited experience of FNMI peoples or their narratives. This study highlights the need for a more sophisticated approach to this subject, including space for personal reflection. This will become more important as students throughout Canada gain more exposure at a younger age to 'Truth and Reconciliation'. Dedicated support and resources for teachers will be essential to enabling this, as advocated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015).

## Background

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In 2015, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission published 94 'calls to action' to renew the relationship between Canada and its Indigenous peoples. This includes "mak[ing] age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students" (2015: 7). As the province of Alberta has integrated FNMI perspectives into its social studies curriculum since 2009, the experiences of those teaching and learning this curriculum can offer a number of insights for teachers,

education ministries, and resource and curriculum developers aiming to address the calls to action related to education for reconciliation.

## **Emerging themes**

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The following themes emerged from a qualitative case study conducted at a K-12 independent school in Calgary, Alberta. 11 non-Indigenous secondary students aged 16-18 were interviewed about their experiences in social studies, and their resulting perceptions of Indigenous voices in Canadian history and contemporary society.

### Experiencing discomfort in social studies

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Students in this study expressed feeling tension and discomfort when learning about FNMI 'counter-narratives'. However, their negative emotional responses were not due to a lack of motivation or concern with the topic. Rather, students found the content to be superficial. The classes did not speak to their concerns, leading them to be restless and to disengage. Students acknowledged that, compared to other social studies curricula, reconciliation was more emotionally charged, leading to inhibitions. As one student explained:

When we actually talk about [Indigenous history], we get a good idea. But [...] no one wants to talk about controversial things because you don't want to say the wrong thing. Someone is going to get angry. So, these are tough conversations to have. It's uncomfortable [...] it'll bring up some emotions and ideas and stuff. The more you look into it, the more your view might change. And I think that's kind of scary for a lot of people.

### Meaningful engagement requires exploring multiple perspectives

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Students appreciated the exposure to diverse perspectives they received in the broader social studies curriculum but felt that these elements were lacking from their lessons on Indigenous issues. They wished for a more nuanced learning experience. Several compared learning about Canadian colonisation and European history. For example, when learning about Nazi Germany, the atrocities of Nazism were understood in relation to the economic, political, historical and ideological contexts of the Weimar Republic, explored through a wide variety of primary and secondary sources. In contrast, students felt they were presented with a polarised and poorly-contextualised picture of Indigenous Canadians:

Through the many years we had to study the First Nations, it seemed that they were always portrayed as being this perfect group of people [...] I think we were taught to perceive them as the people who were kind of victims.

This was felt to be repeated over the years, rather than extended as other subjects were.

I kind of want to learn more and we're just discussing the same thing over and over again. [...] As you go along, you're like, okay, we're learning about growing corn and

squash again. Like, we've seen this, like three times already. And we're not going any deeper into anything. We're just kind of doing it again.

This repetition is likely due, in part, to a lack of teacher resources for the subject, as well as risk-aversion in dealing with sensitive topics.

#### Students' positionality makes content meaningful

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Students struggled to identify and articulate their own interpretations of Canada's Indigenous histories and felt the need to address this. Some had actively considered their relationship to power and privilege. Some had related the injustices faced by Indigenous peoples to their family history. These students were most likely to engage with FNMI content. Understanding their own social reality and situating themselves in relation to other Canadians, specifically FNMI, made their learning meaningful and relevant. However, other students' identities prevented them from engaging fully with these topics. In the words of one student:

[W]e talked about European [colonisation in Canada] and I have a very European ancestry. So, just thinking about how maybe my ancestors could have done something like that, it was very, ya, uncomfortable. Ya, I don't like being seen as the bad guy. [...] And maybe it's because I also feel sorta ashamed that maybe, possibly, my ancestors did it or something like that, and maybe I just don't want to talk about it anymore.

Exploring their individual and family relationships helps students consider how their families' lived experiences shape their beliefs. Without reflecting on their identities or learning how to use their emotions to tease out underlying beliefs and assumptions, students are unable to engage fully with Indigenous content.

#### Taking a student-centred approach

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Students felt that didactic instruction on FNMI issues led to frustration and resentment, which prevents learning and can reinforce prejudice. In contrast, student-centred approaches offered much more, because of the inclusion of the students themselves in the narratives. Such student-centred activities, including classroom discussions and inquiry, evoke feelings of sadness and empathy; emotions that have been associated with reduced prejudice (DeSteno et al., 2004; Pedersen and Hartley, 2015). Some students also reported feeling guilt or shame. Some reported uncertainty or anxiety regarding what their position should be, or fear of making an inappropriate response. These are not emotions conventionally associated with positive learning experiences, but nonetheless need to be processed if they arise. If addressed appropriately, they can create the conditions for deep learning because of the personal significance of the subject matter. Engaging with conflicting thoughts and emotions can help them make sense of the what's causing the tension, and to consider their positionality.

When students reject overly-simplistic views of FNMI Canadians, asking them to explain how learning material contradicts their understanding, and why, may provide an interesting entry-point into deeper engagement. Through the process of questioning and sharing viewpoints, students are able to consider the sources of contrasting beliefs, including their own. When called to explain their views or respond to destabilizing content, they must consider the relevance of their arguments. Students are more open to hearing opposing views when they feel they are given the option to hold plural perspectives, rather than tying themselves to one. Therefore, student voices and Indigenous knowledge should not be framed as oppositional, even if they espouse different views. In this sense, the notion of narratives and counter-narratives may be outdated and unhelpful, especially to young people. When students recognise multiple perspectives, and account for their own, they place themselves within these narratives. They may begin to see themselves as actors in the process of reconciliation as it unfolds across generations.

### **Implications and future research**

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Our findings support the TRC's demands for improved teacher training and access to learning resources related to Indigenous histories and perspectives. This study highlights the need for non-Indigenous students to explore more directly the beliefs and assumptions they hold as settler Canadians, how these influence their perspectives of Indigenous people and communities, and their role in the processes of Truth and Reconciliation.

In order to deliver engaging and authentic curricular integration of FNMI content, teachers need access to more nuanced resources, especially for older students. Existing materials too often assume that students do not have a basic understanding of Canada's history with its Indigenous peoples. The lack of scope in existing educational resources and curricula is largely responsible for non-Indigenous students' apathy toward FNMI perspectives in social studies. We hope that the renewed interest in Indigenous narratives leads to the creation of a broader range of more sophisticated learning resources.

Professional training in the methodologies of critical pedagogies, and strategies for managing and helping students navigate their emotional responses to contentious course material would also be helpful. We recommend that targeted training include opportunities for teachers to share and discuss their own experiences and positions in a 'safe space', in preparation for teaching such sensitive topics. This would help teachers rehearse potentially problematic scenarios and gain confidence to address uncomfortable issues. This would help counter the overly cautious approaches that lead to superficial engagement.

As this study focused on the interpretations of one teacher-researcher at a single, socioeconomically privileged school, further research in a wider variety of contexts would be helpful in considering the generalisability of these findings. Existing research on responses to the inclusion of Indigenous content has focused primarily on teacher and post-secondary student perspectives. Elementary, middle and secondary students' responses remain understudied and increasingly important as Canada and other countries

attempt to build reconciliation by embedding Indigenous histories and perspectives into K-12 curricula.

More broadly, there is a need for a greater understanding of the role of discomfort in learning and responding to subjects like post-colonial studies as problematic histories are increasingly included in international curricula.

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## About the project

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These findings are based on an analysis of the author's field notes, and interviews with 11 students in grades 11 and 12 at an independent high school in Calgary, Canada.

This research is carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: [socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk).

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