



# Decolonizing the Classroom: Critical Reflections on Equity and Inclusion

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# Terminology

- “**Settler colonialism** is an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures. Essentially hegemonic in scope, settler colonialism normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships. Settler colonialism includes interlocking forms of oppression, including racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. This is because settler colonizers are Eurocentric and assume that European values with respect to ethnic, and therefore moral, superiority are inevitable and natural. However, these intersecting dimensions of settler colonialism coalesce around the dispossession of indigenous peoples’ lands, resources, and cultures.”

# Terminology

- **Decolonizing:** recognizing, limiting, removing colonial worldview. In US *colonial* usually means Eurocentric. “This means that Western European-derived ways of being, believing, knowing, and doing are implicitly or explicitly presented as the standard or norm, and other ways of being, knowing, and doing are implicitly or explicitly presented as “other,” alternative, or less worthy.”
- **Indigenizing:** centering Indigenous worldviews...”moves beyond tokenistic gestures of recognition or inclusion to meaningfully change practices & structures. Power, dominance and control are rebalanced & returned to Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are perceived, presented, and practiced as equal to Western ways of knowing and doing”

# Recognition that...

- **“Colonization’s legacy is about power:** who has it, and who is denied it? Power has to do with material existence and lived experience: access to and use of resources (money, housing, transportation, energy, healthy food, clean water), knowledge, influence, self-determination and economic potential and clout.
  - Power is political. In a world profoundly shaped by colonization, because, globally, power has been divided along racial lines, politics become inherently racial—even in the classroom.
  - The classroom is a political space: power is exerted, resisted and yielded to in every classroom; every classroom is situated within an institution, state, and nation—all locations in which resources, knowledge, and access must be negotiated
  - Thus, in order to decolonize the classroom, we must: make a personal commitment to political change. To deny the racial nature of politics (and power)—both inside of and surrounding the classroom—is to perpetuate the inequities created by colonization.”

# Alaska Natives Today

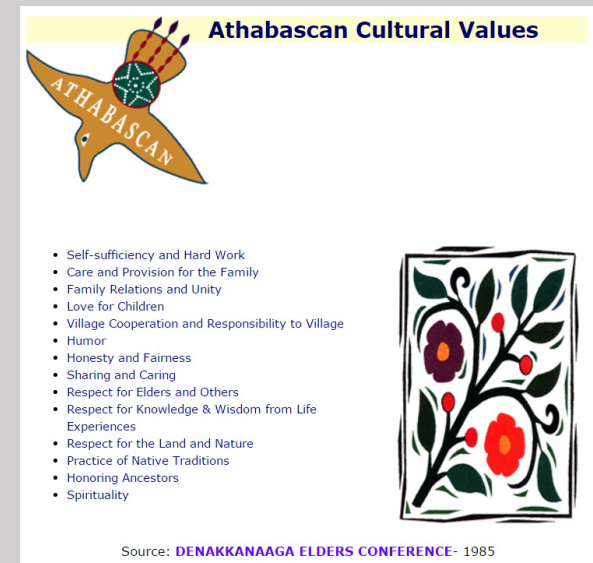
- Alaska Native Tribes are inherently sovereign– there are 231 federally-recognized tribes in Alaska
  - The U.S. Constitution recognizes sovereignty, outlined in Article 8, Section 1 of the Constitution.

*“The Congress shall have the power to...regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes.”*

- Alaska Tribes express their sovereignty in different ways: compacting for health care, advocating for culturally-relevant and/or tribally-compacted education, and promoting Indigenous governance of the lands, waters, and natural resources or “relatives”
- In essence, Tribal sovereignty/governance is a critical aspect for Alaska Native well-being

# Alaska Natives Today

- Alaska is home to 20 languages.
- Alaska Native peoples have 14,000+ years of Indigenous stewardship and care.
- We are Alaska's first people, with deep and rich histories, profound land-based and spiritual teachings, and strong familial ties.
- As Alaska Native peoples, our first educational experiences start with our families – rich, cultural, land-based experiences, in accordance with our traditional values.





# Alaska History and Indigenous Peoples

- The first Western contact with the Bering Strait region occurred in approximately 1728 in the Diomed Islands (Alaska Geographic Quarterly, 1972).
- In 1833, the Russian American Company established a trading post which became the first non-Native settlement within the region. With this trading post, trading patterns emerged between the Alaska Natives and Westerners.
- In 1848 whaling crews came to the area to take advantage of the area's natural resources. The walrus and other animal populations, which Alaska Natives depend on for survival, were greatly impacted. Much of the resources that Alaska Natives rely(ied) on were almost depleted as a result of this contact.

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# Alaska History and Indigenous Peoples

- The Bureau of Indian Affairs (an agency of the US Department of the Interior) ran boarding schools in Alaska.
- Missionaries from various denominations essentially carved up Alaska.
- The goal was similar though, to assimilate Alaska Native children
- Children as young as 5 years old were taken away from their parents.
- Sheldon Jackson, established Presbyterian mission schools in Alaska and encouraged other denominations to do the same. He later became the general agent of Education. One of these schools was Wrangell Institute

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# Present Day Implications

- American Indian/Alaska Native students have lower postsecondary persistence rates than any other ethnic group. Of the AI/AN students who enrolled in postsecondary education, 43% compared to 33% of White students did not persist in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Of AI/AN students who persisted, 12% compared to 37% of Whites earned, at least, a bachelor's degree in 2010 (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2019)
- American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students continue to be significantly underrepresented in institutions of higher education and continue to face barriers that impeded their academic success (Brayboy, 2012).
- The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2015) reported that the retention rates for 1st-year Native students in 4-year colleges were 70.5%, significantly lower than the rates among White (82.2%) and Black students (75.1%). These numbers highlight that Natives are the racial/ ethnic group least likely to persist beyond the 1st year.



# Present Day Implications

- While most studies on AI/AN student success focus on individual student factors that impede their college completion such as academic difficulties, low ACT/SAT scores, low GPA, and low motivation, not a lot of research focus in on the external factors that impede college progress.
- In particular, the prevalence of racism, microaggressions, and stereotypes negatively impact AI/AN college students (Brayboy, 2015; Caplan & Ford, 2014).
  - The frequency of microaggressions has a cumulative impact that can adversely affect academic achievement, foster feelings of isolation, and promote depression (Sue, 2010).
  - Among Native students, their experiences with racism can intensify feelings of isolation and marginalization (Jackson et al., 2003).
- Lastly, social media has increased the frequency of overt racism targeted at Native students (Flynn, Duncan, & Jorgensen, 2012).

## Present Day Implications

- Despite the challenges previously mentioned, there are also factors that have increased Native students' likelihood of persistence and success in postsecondary education including:
  - Connections with family and home
  - Participation in traditional ceremonies at home
  - Some studies have found that Native students' practice of spiritual teachings has been found to be associated Native student persistence
  - Native-centered campus resources are also a key factor for persistence, such as a Native specific center, providing a space where Indigenous students can create relationships with other Native students and staff. These centers can serve as a "home away from home" and mitigate against student isolation.
  - More broadly, Native students who attended colleges that supported their cultural identity not only increased efforts in their coursework, but also experienced a greater engagement of ideas with non-Native peers and faculty.

# We are still here

- Despite colonization, land theft, theft of our children and all attempts to “solve the Indian problem”, we are still here.
- We are actively pursuing our true histories, embracing “who we are” and correcting false narratives that pathologize us.
- Our histories and our strengths teach us that our cultures are beautiful and embody all that we need to heal and become “who we are”, once again.
- Universities and secondary education institutions can serve as strong allies, supporting Indigenous sovereignty and programs that seek to reawaken and teach Indigenous practices and teachings by Indigenous peoples.





# Transformation in Education is Needed

“On the one hand, the pairing of colonial domination with Western education has had a devastating effect on Indigenous students, contributing to a contemporary educational deficit that expresses itself in lower academic success rates and experiences of racism and alienation in the classroom. On the other, institutions of mainstream education have fostered high levels of ignorance regarding Indigenous issues within the non-Native student and educator community.” Wildcat et al. 2014

“We are part of a higher education system – in Alaska and beyond – that has for centuries marginalized Native cultures and peoples.” Mercurieff and Roderick 2013



“Many challenges exist for Indigenous students in higher education. Persistent intentional and institutional racism makes universities and colleges unsafe or unwelcoming places for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Indigenous worldviews as relational and collective do not easily align into Eurocentric worldviews based on individualism, linearity and reductionism.” Cross et al. 2019

“Ongoing colonization of land and peoples are in fact embedded within educators’ and researchers’ practices and understandings of (environmental) education around the globe.” Tuck et al. 2014

“Understanding Native college students and their experiences is important to the broader goals of improving equity in higher education; however, too often, research provides only an asterisk or footnote about Native students because their numbers are so small that many argue they cannot be studied. Thus, Native students are excluded from educational conversations and thereby are rendered “invisible” Consequently, higher education professionals seeking to enhance the access and success of Native students receive little to no specific guidance about how to better serve them” (Brayboy, 2004; Fryberg & Stephens, 2010; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017).

# Pluralism of Worldviews

## Indigenous worldviews

- multiplicity of knowledge or knowing a little about many subjects
- relationality (e.g., people are related to all of creation, balance thru appropriate thoughts and actions)
- dynamic energy and spirit of all things
- nonlinearity and cyclic nature of time; and wholeness
- common sense values: sharing, cooperation, stewardship, equity

## Western worldviews

- knowledge specialization
- time as a linear, measurable quantity or descriptor
- separation of nature and culture
- disconnection and reductionism
- marginalization or erasure of relationality, energy and spirit, or wholeness
- common sense values: efficiency, competition, conservation, equality



Zack Martin (Ahtna)



# Practical Steps to Decolonization in the Classroom – Self Work

- Explore and challenge your own understanding of colonization and its multifaceted impacts on Indigenous peoples – within Alaska and across the globe.
- Understand your own positionality – both within the classroom and in the world. How has your personal, family, and community history interfaced with colonization and its ongoing impacts? How does that show up in your work/presence in the classroom?
- Take time to learn about and reflect upon communication styles – your own and those of your students. How do different students communicate? Are you listening?
- As previously stated, “the pairing of colonial domination with Western education has had a devastating effect on Indigenous students”. This self reflection is critical to creating equitable spaces where every student can “thrive”. This requires educators to understand how students learn and creating space for different learning styles to emerge.
- Act to influence systemic changes that address the impacts of colonization, racism, and inequity on students who have historically and presently marginalized. Do not remain silent.

*An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary or an oppressor.” Lerone Bennett Jr.*

# Practical Steps to Decolonization in the Classroom – Classroom and Institutional Work

- Organize classroom “spaces” in a way that recognize and include Indigenous students feeling of belongingness (e.g., circles) or shared tables.
- Include readings and curriculum materials that pulls from diverse knowledge systems (Indigenous authors, Elder speakers, Project Jukebox, Indigenous podcasts). This is not only good for the Indigenous students but all students.
- Use visual art (with permission or purchase from artist) that represent Indigenous students, communities, and cultures. Ask them [students] for their opinion regarding [the] art and whether it resonates with them.
- Create respectful space(s) to engage in critical dialogue(s) with students, making “visible” the trauma that colonization, poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression can and do cause for Indigenous and marginalized students.

# Practical Steps to Decolonization in the Classroom – Classroom and Institutional Work

- Engage the “community” that Indigenous students originate from in their education, understanding the fundamental worldview that knowledge is acquired for the “good of the whole” and not for individual gain. This connection will ensure students feel supported, their education relevant, and connection to their Elders and community leaders.
- See students for their strengths – instead of pathologizing them – what knowledge and unique perspectives do they bring to the classroom space? How can our lectures/curriculum pull threads from diverse student experiences that honor multiple perspectives?
- Create opportunities for Indigenous students to return home and connect with their family and community. This can be done through research projects, recruitment trips, or simply a visit. These trips help to fill students up, so they can continue strong in their academic pursuits for the remainder of the school year.
- Hire Indigenous faculty and staff, who can support and relate to Indigenous students. Hiring a critical mass is essential, so that the faculty and staff can support one another and advance initiatives together. It is hard to “lift” heavy objects by oneself, but together it is possible.
- Push on Institutions of Higher Education to support and implement policies that seek to Indigenize and Decolonize spaces – to learn true histories, to sit with discomfort, and engage in critical discussions for the betterment of students, the institution(s), and society.



# Tamamta (All of us)

Transforming western and Indigenous fisheries and marine sciences together



# ISM



Research that seeks to  
Decolonize and Indigenize

# ISM Project Goal

Document the breadth and depth of Indigenous values, knowledge, and governance systems connected to salmon across Alaska, and to use this wisdom to improve current salmon science and management processes for all



# Methodologies

## Process-focused

- Indigenous-led
- Building & strengthening ethical relationships
- Connect to local priorities / ongoing work
- Indigenous students/partners in home region

## Indigenous approach

- Circle dialogues
- Multigenerational interviews
- Cultural exchange & deep learning



# Decolonizing Methodologies

*Stories remind us of who we are and our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations (Kovach, p. 94)*



# Tamamta

## Goals:

- Provide supportive program for next generation of Indigenous & allied scientists & managers
- Provide supportive program for next generation of Indigenous & allied scientists & managers
- Engage decolonizing & Indigenizing approaches widely across UAF & partners



# Tamamta

## Program Activities:

- **New Courses** Indigenous Fisheries of Alaska (Fall 2021), Graduate Seminar in Fisheries Governance, Professional Skills
- **Elders-in-Residence** Elders invited to help shape our program and to share their knowledge with classes and in seminars and dialogues. Mentor trainees.
- **Visiting Indigenous Scholars** thought leaders help shift pedagogies & increase student success.
- **Fish Camp / Cultural Immersions** graduate students, faculty, state and federal scientists and managers week-long cultural immersions.
- **Dialogues** Hosting difficult conversations on racism and racial equity.
- **Art Installations** Indigenous art to provide creative engagements with this work and increase the visibility of fisheries and marine systems of Alaska are Indigenous systems -- always have been, always will be.



# RHS-> HUMS -> Social Work Pipeline

- “RHS offers a culturally grounded training and university education designed for rural, village-based human service workers. Skill development, education, and training are provided in services such as crisis intervention, suicide prevention, community development, and counseling in mental health, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, grief, and healing” (UAF, 2020).
- With the support of RHS faculty, Elders, and staff, students progress through their RHS occupational endorsement and certificate with the option to move forward with their Humans Services Associates and Social Work Degree. This degree pathway, accompanied with culturally grounded supports, has graduated hundreds of students, living and working in their home communities.
- Indigenous methodologies are utilized in the classroom and critical reflection a part of each class - where students reflect on how their education impacts the individual, family, and community, ensuring their education is not only relevant but needed.



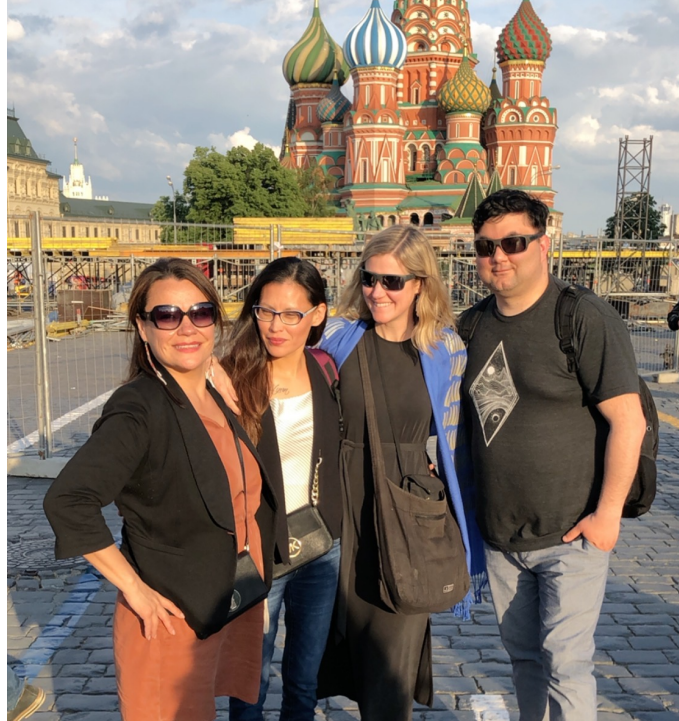
# Putting Thought Into Practice

- Terry Kawi from the PBS Teacher's Lounge, 2020
- Educators can start a process of decolonizing by taking a moment to write down a teaching ideology as it pertains to students and their abilities. Questions to guide this process can include:
  - How do you view success?
  - What are your expectations for your students?
  - Now, think about your seating arrangements and the types of learning activities you plan and have your students engage in. Are students seated facing you at all times?
  - Do students collaborate and engage in interactive learning structures?
  - Think about if and how you actively amplify student voice and build student agency in the classroom. Do students have a voice and do they have a say in their learning?
  - Think about the student to teacher talk ratio and the nature of discussions in your classroom. Are you the sole or loudest voice in the classroom?
  - Think about how you talk to your students and about your students. Do you use deficit-based language or hold assimilationist beliefs?
  - Think about how you resolve issues in the classroom. Are you inquiry-stanced and solutions oriented?
  - Do you engage in power struggles with students?
  - How often do you give students referrals and how quickly?



# Putting Thought Into Practice

- What strategies do you have or use for decolonizing or indigenizing spaces?
- What are significant barriers to decolonizing or indigenizing spaces?
- In what ways do you honor the unique knowledge(s) that your students or research advisees possess?
- What is the value of indigenizing and decolonizing from your perspective?



*'Mahsi Choo' to my students, who have taught me and helped to shape my own process of decolonization. I am forever grateful*