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## Exploring Impacts of Indigenous Young Adult Literature on Teacher Candidates Perceptions of Indigenous Peoples

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[See table of contents](#)

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# Critical Education

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*Exploring Impacts of Indigenous Young Adult Literature on Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of Indigenous Peoples*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the impacts of using Indigenous Young Adult Literature with teacher candidates at a liberal arts university to develop their competence in Indigenous topics and issues. Research on the use of young adult literature for examining race, culture, and equity has shown the efficacy of the genre in supporting student learning in teacher education programs. The present study expands on this work and explores the use of Indigenous authored texts to support learning and understanding of the issues, identities, and experiences particular to Indigenous Peoples with attention to both historical and contemporary forms of settler colonialism. Through the analysis of 26 student interviews and an array of classroom artifacts, including student writing, class discussion notes, visual art projects, and reflective memos, students provided crucial insights into the need for deeper engagement with Indigenous topics.*



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## Introduction

This paper explores the impacts of the use of Indigenous Young Adult Literature (IYAL) on teacher candidates at a liberal arts university. Current research on the use of children's literature and young adult literature for examining race, culture, and equity has shown the effectiveness of using these genres to support student learning in teacher education programs (Flores et al., 2019; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). The present study expands on this work and explores the use of IYAL texts to support student learning and understanding of the issues, identities, and experiences particular to Indigenous Peoples, with particular attention to the relationships between historical elements of settler colonialism and its manifestation as a structure today (Kauanui, 2016). Though the teacher candidates were examining Indigeneity broadly, the IYAL books employed supported explorations of Indigenous cultures local to the region of the Midwestern United States where the university is located. This study foregrounds student voices through interviews and analysis of classroom artifacts, including student writing, class discussion notes, visual art projects produced by students, and reflection memos I collected as author of the study and instructor of the course.

This article explores the impacts and efficacy of using young adult literature as a teaching tool in teacher education courses and argues that these texts provide valuable scaffolding for teacher candidates to develop an understanding of complex—and sometimes painful—histories, as well as to gain deep insights into present-day situations. Similar to the use of young adult literature to support students' awareness of contemporary topics and social issues such as the social movement #MeToo (Adams, 2020), this article explores how IYAL supports teacher candidates' awareness of Indigenous-specific topics, such as the history of boarding and residential schools, sovereignty, language and culture preservation, and the complex epistemologies and ontologies of Indigenous Peoples (Walter & Andersen, 2013). Through interviews the following research questions were addressed:

1. What learning did the use of Indigenous young adult literature bring about for you regarding topics of Indigeneity?
2. How did the use of Indigenous young adult literature connect to the experiences of students and youth in the world?

While these two questions stand at the forefront of this research, this article also explores deeper questions connected to teaching, learning, Indigenous Knowledge, and worldview (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Central to this research are broader questions regarding the function of teacher education and its ability (or inability) to address issues central to Indigenous Peoples' needs and desires. For example, as Saito poses, How is teacher education preparing future educators to resist settler colonial logics and the attendant racialization that occurs with settler colonial tactics (Critical Race Studies, 2020)? The degree to which teacher education can exist as a function of teacher preparation for work in schools—traditionally oppressive spaces for Indigenous Peoples—and simultaneously act as a force for change through the engagement of critical approaches (Muñoz, 2022c) is a fundamental consideration.

This work aligns with scholarship that seeks to elevate and celebrate the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) youth, which these texts illustrate. This celebration is twofold: The texts offer visions of joy and love for BIPOC folks, who can revel in the stories shared, the images of self as portrayed in the characters, and the counternarratives constructed. Simultaneously, these texts remind teacher candidates of the ever-present vigilance necessary to

protect against pathologizing youth experience, particularly that of BIPOC youth. Too often in education settings, BIPOC youth are demonized and vilified for their cultural expression, a trend also mirrored in the use of YAL solely as a bridging device to scaffold young readers toward challenging texts (Herz & Gallo, 2005). In this way, IYAL comes to be viewed as peripherally but not centrally useful in schools, employed only to provide access to “cultural touchstones such as classic literature, adult bestsellers and contemporary nonfiction” (Featherston, 2009, p. 10). This paper challenges this framing for its blatant ethnocentricity, instead calling for teacher candidates to take measured steps in regarding young people seriously (Rogers, 2001). With this study, I point to how teacher educators can “reposition urban and multicultural . . . literature . . . as tools for preservice teachers . . . central to the teacher education curriculum” (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013, p. 248).

Along with concerns of settler colonialism, resistance, and the celebration of youth, this paper contributes to questions central to conceptualizing Indigenous Peoples’ epistemologies and ontologies (Walter & Andersen, 2013). One area of this inquiry is the interplay of oral and written language and the multiple meanings of *story*. A second area of consideration is exploring and transforming the views teachers maintain of youth, particularly Indigenous youth, so that teacher candidates expand their vision to see the genius of young people (Muhammad, 2020). This paper also speaks to the work examining teacher perception and expectations, which have been explored for their impacts on student achievement (Andrews & Gutwein, 2017). Research has documented how teachers’ views of students are affected by their awareness of students’ social identities and has highlighted how teachers’ views can be negatively impacted by indicators such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). Flores and Smith (2009) point out that not only is the presence of difference significant but it is “teachers’ knowledge of and beliefs and attitudes about difference that creates the negative effect on minority-student outcomes” (p. 324).

### **Positionality**

Before shifting to the remainder of this article, it is important for me to take the space to share about who I am and the way my identity shapes my relationship to this article and its ideas. I do this in respect to my academic foremothers and forefathers, who draw explicit attention to naming our multiple identities as one part of a critical lens (Reyes, 2020). At the same time, the naming of our subjectivities and positionalities resists the myth of objectivity and instead locates research and scholarship as connected to our relationships and communities. This is especially necessary for me as a scholar who writes about race and culture, to foreground how my social identities shape, and are shaped by, my interactions with power and privilege.

My identity as an Indigenous (Pascua Yaqui Tribe) and Chicano person plays a direct role in how I live, teach, and learn. I was born and raised in what is colonially referred to as Arizona and now live in what is colonially known as British Columbia. As a teacher educator, I work to develop pedagogies for future teachers to recognize concepts central to Indigenous experiences. This includes working within anti-oppressive educational frameworks (Kumashiro, 2000) that open spaces to celebrate Indigenous ways of being and survivance while resisting settler colonial logics (Powell, 2002) and unsettle tendencies towards “epistemological hegemony” (Brant-Birioukov, 2021, p. 254). As an Indigenous person, story and storytelling figure prominently within my epistemological and ontological frames of reference; like Brayboy (2005), I contend that stories and theories are not mutually exclusive. And within the work of teacher education, story can be as effective—if not more so—at communicating crucial knowledge and understanding. As

a cisgender, heterosexual man, I selected the texts for the course guided by the need to highlight Indigenous women's views of the world. This action was in response to feminist critiques of the academy for the lack of texts written by women or narratives centering women, especially in classes taught by cis-hetero male teachers. Responding to this critique required extensive research and engagement with a number of colleagues to highlight the analyses of women of color to combat erasure.

### Story Time

In November 2019, I participated in a conference panel with a number of Indigenous educators and colleagues working in Indigenous communities (Muñoz, 2019). The session was an opportunity for educators to discuss their philosophies and techniques in the classroom. I elected to share an intersection of this work, focusing on articulating my standpoint (Walter & Andersen 2013) and how it informed my pedagogical and curricular decisions.

In keeping with the conventions of the presentation, I created a PowerPoint slide. The slide was my best attempt to articulate the thinking process that informed my classroom actions. The slide I shared is recreated here:



In treating the slide as an artifact for examination and analysis, two things are clear: First, the creator of this slide clearly articulated the influences directing their curriculum and pedagogy decisions. Second, relying on texts, websites, and philosophical perspectives to select literature, the creator of the slide curated a collection of diverse Indigenous perspectives, illustrating a diversity of genres, author identities, and identities of represented Indigenous Peoples. What is needed—and arguably the most important element—is a comprehensible communication of the computation that led to choosing the focal texts.

Reflecting on that presentation, at that time it would have been exceptionally challenging to articulate the elements of the framework that led from one side of the slide to the other. I think this experience is strongly indicative of the challenge that many educators face, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Still, we must become more skilled at communicating the frameworks present regarding texts, text selection, and text use in the classroom. The central portion of the slide, the mental process represented as a tangle of lines, is the direct inspiration for this paper. How do I untangle the web of mental processing and share it with others, that other educators might see and engage with the thinking process as well as offer feedback and critique on the assumptions contained in the tangled mess?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This project developed through a framework that incorporated elements of Indigenous and Indigenizing education (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020), decolonizing approaches (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 1999/2021), critical literacy and pedagogy (Freire, 1968/2000; Giroux, 2011), and anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000). Outlined in other studies (Muñoz, 2022a, 2022b), the framework has shown potential for supporting the work of both non-Indigenous and Indigenous teacher candidates, as well as for the development of critical capacities in teacher education programs more broadly.

This study relies on literature as a curriculum tool to develop critical awareness in teacher candidates, with an emphasis on developing nuanced understanding of Indigenous Peoples' epistemological and ontological frames (Walter & Andersen, 2013). One crucial component is the explication of IYAL as story, which requires awareness of the purposes of Indigenous story beyond entertainment or information transferal. King asserts that the significance of story in Indigenous communities is in the communication of a series of "co-operations" (2003, p. 25), and Rice (2020) points to the capacity for text-based story to communicate reference points significant to Indigenous communities. Framed this way, IYAL offers the potential for teacher candidates, through careful reading and thoughtful engagement, to build the capacity for considering and grasping the topics and issues central to Indigenous communities.

It is important to avoid the pitfall of benign multiculturalism, which often assumes that simply showing diversity in the authors on a reading list is sufficient to relay understandings of Indigenous communities and their issues. An Indigenous critical literacy approach that emphasizes the experiences of Indigenous Peoples is necessary, along with a lens of understanding and critiquing power (Foucault, 1975/1995; Freire, 1968/2000). This requires developing awareness around historical and contemporary issues impacting Indigenous communities, including settler colonialism, colonization, and displacement (Lowman & Barker, 2015). A dual purpose exists here, both prongs crucial for competency development in teacher candidates: to comprehend the impacts of power and oppression on Indigenous Peoples and to undergo reflexive self-critique (Kumashiro, 2000). The self-critique process is essential for translating acquired knowledge into tangible action steps. In this way, awareness of power and oppression—and teacher candidates' personal relation to them—creates the potential for teacher candidates to bring into the classroom disrupting texts and teaching methods to help students in their own awareness of the history and experiences that have been marginalized or erased from the grand narratives of White, mainstream culture (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2019; Takaki, 2008).

A further consideration at work is the practice of privileging frameworks which celebrate youth and resist constructs that pathologize young people, in particular Indigenous youth, Black

youth, and youth of color more broadly. Following in the wake of other critical literacy scholars, this work directs inquiry toward youth and texts, and the ways these texts can produce “implicit ideologies . . . of power, normativity, and representation” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123). In this case, the use of IYAL supports teacher candidates in questioning how youth are viewed, and the ways youth are often pathologized. Their behaviors, actions, and agency are often regarded through a deficit lens, such that their positive actions are not taken as legitimate in their own right.

Providing teacher candidates access to stories, texts, and materials directed to young adults opens spaces to engage the meaning-making processes of young people in more nuanced ways. And portrayals of youth in such texts can help teacher candidates consider the complexity of the lives of young people without dismissing them as underdeveloped, immature, or childish. As Borsheim-Black notes, critiquing dominant images of adolescence is crucial “to help teacher candidates imagine alternative expectations for their future students, as well as for themselves as future teachers” (2015, p. 29).

A caveat is necessary here, one embedded in the work of critical literacy that Kumashiro (2000) has developed in his work in anti-oppressive education. It is critical that educators are aware of the power dynamics that can be created, and hierarchies reinforced, when people of color and historically marginalized peoples are the focal people in a text or source. Kumashiro argues that “Education about the Other” (2000, p. 31) can lead to the unacknowledged maintenance of an us/Other dichotomy that continues to uphold the sense of difference or distinction from an unmarked norm, namely, Whiteness.

Learning about and hearing the Other should be done not to fill a gap in knowledge (as if ignorance about the Other were the only problem), but to disrupt the knowledge that is already there. . . . Changing oppression requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge. . . . Lessons about the Other need to include learning to resist one’s desire to know, to essentialize, to close off further learnings. . . . Lessons about the Other should be treated as both catalysts and resources for students to use as they learn more. (p. 35)

Kumashiro’s points direct us to carefully consider text selection, usage, and the crafting of pedagogy. The questions developed for discussion should also direct learners to these disrupted stances, asking, for example, how texts like *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017) call the reader toward learning about Indigenous people in the settler-colonial imagination, to critique essentialized views of Indigenous characters (and by extension, Indigenous Peoples). Teacher preparation work needs to compel teacher candidates beyond the “desire to know [and] to close off further learnings. . . . The goal is not final knowledge [but] disruption” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 34).

Attention to the anti-oppressive curriculum and pedagogy recommendations of Kumashiro lends precisely to developing classroom experiences that resist settler colonialism and settler-colonial logics (Muñoz, 2022a), which create problematic understandings of Indigenous Peoples vis-à-vis their experiences of oppression. These understandings position Indigenous Peoples’ concerns and struggles as archaic and inevitable. These “settler narratives” (Lowman & Barker, 2015, pp. 33–34) situate Indigenous Peoples’ issues today as the unfortunate outcome of the acts of individual, unenlightened ancestors whose lack of clarity led to genocidal consequences. Teacher candidates engaging with settler narratives and identifying them as systematic or structural situations, makes them resolvable, through ensuring that empathy is developed in the awareness

of the dominant mainstream to prevent further barbaric acts. Educators must keep violent and harmful narratives in mind and work to develop educational approaches that challenge these conceptions, to build empathy for the purposes of action—to help learners develop awareness of their power and privilege and to equip them with tools to disrupt both.

## Method

### *Participants*

The data set for this study included the recorded and transcribed interviews of 26 students enrolled in a teacher's college at a private Midwestern US liberal arts university. Each student was a participant in a section of the course described. Most participants were graduate students ( $n = 15$ ), with the remainder ( $n = 11$ ) being undergraduate students. Students varied in racial and ethnic demographics, with nine students—seven female and two males—identifying as BIPOC. The other 17 students identified as White, with 13 identifying as female and four as male. The percentage of White students, then, was roughly 65% and not representative of the state, with over 95% of its teachers being White. Students ranged in age, though this data was not collected explicitly. Instead, students frequently referenced their age in relation to historical information. For example, Dana qualified the potential inaccuracy of her information by saying, “But I’m 50 years old,” and Kennedy referenced how things had changed over the “30 years since I went to school.” Each student had participated in the course in a 2-year time span, the most recent course held the summer the interviews were conducted. Crucially, some responses were influenced by the events of summer 2020, including the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Minneapolis Uprising following the murder of George Floyd.

### *Indigenous Young Adult Literature for Teacher Learning: The Focal Texts*

For the purposes of this paper, the texts students engaged with and referenced throughout the interviews are *The Birchbark House* (Erdrich, 1999), *Fatty Legs: A True Story* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010), and *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017). They are by no means the only texts that can be used in this way; indeed, teacher educators should diligently explore IYAL texts specific to their location and contexts. However, using IYAL in contexts or regions different from their own can be acceptable, as long as this information is clearly communicated to the students. Not all Indigenous Peoples' experiences are the same, and while they may share some similar experiences—such as responses to settler colonialism—it is crucial that teachers avoid ascribing a pan-Indigenous identity to all peoples, which erases critical distinctions and experiences (Vowel, 2016).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Because of the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in the summer of 2020, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Each interview was recorded, and the audio data was transcribed via the Otter transcription application. The interviews ranged in length from 22 to 55 minutes, with a majority of the interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. All interviewee names were replaced with pseudonyms.

To explore students' experiences of the texts and the potential impacts on their learning, I read and coded the 26 transcribed interviews utilizing In Vivo coding, emotion coding, and holistic



coding (Saldaña, 2013). Whenever possible, I used the students' specific language throughout the findings, including as titles of section headings and of this article. I coded and organized the transcripts first within the raw transcribed data, with In Vivo and affective codes emerging from the reading of the transcriptions. I then organized the transcriptions using holistic coding in several separate files. In this way, student responses to specific questions or prompts could be examined together as well as in reference to in vivo codes produced previously. Using this process, I identified patterns as themes emerged from responses to the interview questions.

## **Findings**

The remainder of this paper examines the responses to questions exploring the students' self-evaluation, previous knowledge, expansion of critical knowledge, and self-evaluation at the end of the course. These questions are essential considerations for teacher educators working to engage students in Indigenous knowledge and ways of being. Asking students to reflect on their knowledge before and after experiencing a course allows the impact of course readings and activities to be ascertained. Furthermore, understanding students' knowledge levels prior to and following a course helps teacher educators to develop curriculum in response to the presence (or, as this study shows, the lack) of knowledge of Indigenous topics, issues, history, and culture. Having students reflect on their shift in awareness also gives them the opportunity to consider their own role and responsibility as future educators in remedying for others the deficiency in learning they themselves experienced in their K–12 careers.

### *"A little bit, not enough?" Self-Evaluation of Awareness Prior to the Course*

Self-evaluation questions were asked in regard to students' describing their own level of understanding about Indigenous history, culture, language, and ways of being. As an anecdotal assessment of their knowledge, the students were asked to self-evaluate their knowledge, either having "a little, a lot, or somewhere in the middle." Frequently, students responded with their self-assessment, then volunteered information about what they had learned, when they had learned it, and how. The students often evaluated the quality of the information and characterized the learning they had received.

Most students responded that they had little, low, or no awareness or knowledge of Indigenous Peoples prior to arriving in the course. Tessa, like some other students, noted that she learned very little, and was also aware of the deficiency, saying, "A little bit, not enough?" Only five of the students assessed themselves as being in the middle range of knowledge, stating they knew "a fair amount." The least number of students, four, self-assessed as knowing "a lot" or "a fair amount," though, again, these students recognized a deficiency in their knowledge. One student noted that she knew "a lot, but a drop in the bucket in terms of what I need to know." Eight respondents noted beliefs of deficiencies in their knowledge base, saying that they "still had so much to learn." These responses provide evidence to teacher educators of the need to expose students to Indigenous knowledge, history, and culture, in contrast to many calls to remove this curriculum from the K–12 student experience.

In examining the differences across racial categories, six of the nine BIPOC-identifying students categorized themselves as having little, low, or no knowledge of Indigenous issues, culture, or topics. Three of the nine BIPOC students responded with having some knowledge or placing themselves in the middle, though all three also qualified their assessment with articulating

a sense of need or desire for more knowledge. As Kiara noted, her level of education “wasn’t sufficient to what I should have known or where I should have been.”

Students who self-identified as White or European overwhelmingly responded that their knowledge base of Indigenous topics was little or none. Twelve of the 17 White students self-assessed at low levels of understanding, with most saying they knew a little bit or had very little knowledge. One student characterized his knowledge as in the middle, while four students characterized their knowledge level at a lot or quite a bit. These four students also qualified their high self-assessment, saying there was still much to learn. Julia, for example, responded that her self-assessment level was “quite a bit” but “still not nearly enough as I should ever know. I need to keep learning about it. . . . I feel very confident that I knew quite a lot, but not enough.”

Another theme that emerged in the students’ self-evaluation of their learning was the assessment and critique of their exposure to Indigenous history, culture, language, and ways of being from their education career prior to the start of the course. Many students recalled learning they had experienced in early elementary school, like Evie and her memory of doing a project on a Navajo village. Students characterized their prior learning in vague terms. For instance, Nora said that “nothing that comes to mind specifically,” while Maya characterized her prior learning as “not a ton of info.” Several White-identifying students referenced experiences with early education focusing on Indigenous history or culture, but often in unclear ways. Only four students referenced specific Indigenous communities when describing their knowledge, for example, while two mentions were made of Indigenous people only in relation to Christopher Columbus.

In exploring knowledge level and prior learning further, many students said they had little to no direct learning or experience of Indigenous Peoples, and especially a lack of specific knowledge regarding the communities local to their state. Notably, most of the students made references only to historical conceptualizations of Indigenous people. As Kayla pointed out, her elementary experience included a “fun course” that involved the experience of food, games, and music of American Indian people. Later, though, she noted that “as I got older in high school and what not, it was pretty much the learning was centered on, like, you know what happened to American Indians rather than teaching about them, if that makes sense.” The events that “happened” was a nearly unanimous theme throughout the responses. Only one student referred to any learning pertaining to present-day or contemporary experiences. One other student referred to contemporary language, as one Indigenous language was offered in her high school courses. One student, mentioned previously, constructed a Navajo village, though it is unknown if this was a historical or contemporary rendering.

Nearly half of the students interviewed referred to their learning regarding Indigenous Peoples as being historical in nature, with multiple mentions of Christopher Columbus and references to the Trail of Tears. Seven students characterized their learning with a particular awareness of Whiteness and white supremacy, as some students noted the coverage of Indigenous topics in history from a White perspective. Kiara, for instance, noted some learning in history classes but characterized it as “not in-depth and . . . always very whitewashed, very colonized, like language, very colonized.” Amelia appreciated her learning in high school, which included an AP US History course. In this class, the teacher taught a great deal about “how colonizers came on to US soil,” giving her knowledge about “reservations and industrial schools for assimilation.” And Samuel said the history in his courses was taught from a White perspective and very “White heavy.” In an interesting foreshadowing of the course, Alison told a story of her education

experience. It was marked by a “dominant narrative of US history,” she said, which included her experience in an English class. She reported:

I remember in 10th grade in English class we read *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich. And, like, no one understood it. I don't think the teacher understood it...and we were really kind of confused. And I think we knew that it was important. . . . We knew that it was important that we would read this, but we didn't really quite understand why we were reading it or what we were supposed to get out of it.

Still, a hopeful theme emerged of students discussing their own learning development. Several students mentioned learning they conducted on their own, often through social media or through community connections. Rafael, for example, noted some of his knowledge came after college when he “started looking it up on my own.” Both Aurora and Julia spoke of the learning they gained through social media exposure of activist movements, such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (#mmiw). Opal and Jessie also described this component of self-teaching, with Opal remarking, “Anything that I have learned has primarily been, like, on my own.”

### *“Just, like, the more you know is, like, better”: Student Reflections on Crucial Learnings from the Course*

Kira's quote in this section's heading provides a perfect summation of the student reflections on learning during the course. Central to the argument of using IYAL as a learning medium for students is developing their awareness and articulation of learning around key topics. Near the end of the interview, students were asked if there was anything “crucial or critical” they had learned about Indigenous people from the class through the reading of our focal texts.

Some students reflected on their personal connections and experiences, often referring to similarities and empathy towards Indigenous Peoples, and referencing action and agency. A sizable proportion of the students described how reading the focal texts helped in developing awareness of Indigenous Peoples' identity, language, and culture in ways that expanded their understanding to encompass contemporary contexts. Many of the students reflected on the more cultivated understanding they gained of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in relation to the violence of settler colonialism through the author's works.

Andrew questioned his “own place in this colonial system, like, me as a beneficiary of it.” Ava connected this sentiment to her work as an educator, noting that her reading of *Fatty Legs* ignited in her unawareness and desire to not enact those experiences reflected in the story. “It really hit home for me,” she said. “I never want a student to feel like this. . . . It [*Fatty Legs*] just, like, really reminded me of, like, I will never want students to have to go through something, like, to go through this.”

Several students referenced their new understanding of the violence experienced by Indigenous Peoples. Reading *Fatty Legs* and *The Marrow Thieves* facilitated a deeper consciousness of the resulting trauma and its impact. Kennedy, for example, reflected on the theme of “innocence being taken away” as a result of colonization, while Opal reflected on how Indigenous Peoples have experienced and continue to experience unequal treatment in this country. Alex noted a great part of his learning was the reinforcement of the destruction of Indigenous Peoples “physically and culturally, linguistically” and how “pervasive and widespread and multifaceted the attacks of Indigenous Peoples” had been. Julia connected her crucial learning of

the erasure of Indigenous cultures and experiences to her work in schools. Describing her research on special education and Indigenous students, she questioned and critiqued the lack of information and resources. She noted that this deficit “goes along the idea that I’m just, like, erasing the experience, like, kind of makes it not a problem then.”

Ten of the students interviewed referenced a more robust understanding of and respect for Indigenous culture after reading in the class. Many students commented that the readings helped them to develop or reinforce understandings of cultural differences in terms of values, epistemology, and ways of being. Alison and Maya referenced the significance of story and storytelling for authors telling their own stories (as in *Fatty Legs*) and in the significance of storytelling as a pedagogical approach (as in *The Marrow Thieves*). Many spoke of an appreciation for the value of family and relationships, as when Amelia shared:

How they treat each other as family . . . it’s so different from kind of this, I don’t know, toxic masculinity and career-oriented society that we are in. It was much more in the moment and, okay, we are doing this to live ethically and survive ethically. . . . I really appreciated learning more about that.

Several students connected this learning to their work as future teachers, speaking to the importance of these crucial learnings to understanding contemporary Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and issues. Kiara articulated this sentiment in her reflection on *Fatty Legs*:

Knowing the history and then also how that very much carries into people who identify as Indigenous or Native American, like, how that all carries into now, like, generations now. I think that that’s a very important takeaway for me, and I think that’s a very important takeaway for, like, anyone to have or, like, anyone and everyone to have.

Aurora provided unique commentary on her crucial learning by also considering new possibilities for reading and studying. Her wish for a future course included not only readings of historical and contemporary issues but also of a different future. Her request was for one book “that’s, like, a complete fantasy, a better future,” the invention of a new normal.

### *“I know more and I know less”: Student Reflections on Changes in Awareness and Understanding*

22 of the 26 respondents offered reflections on their learning and experience at the end of the course. Most reported a change in their understanding, with 21 of the 22 reporting an increase in knowledge. Two students noted they felt they had gained understanding but not enough to change their previous level.

In responses to the prompt, “How would you say your knowledge level has changed?” two themes emerged, giving indicators of learning as well as offering a challenge to the teacher educator field. 13 students described a change in their knowledge but also recognized holes in their learning. Andrew remarked about learning “enough to be curious” and having “a desire for more knowing.” Other students remarked similarly, noting that the class alerted them to what they “still would never know” or raised an awareness that “now I know I don’t know,” as Rafael stated. Some students returned to a reflection of their previous education, saying there is “so much that there is to know that I have been neglected from this view.” Other students spoke to potential future

inquiry, noting that the class inspired “curiosity and searching” about Indigenous experiences as well as advanced their skills such that “I learned how to learn about it.”

Julia connected to aspects of both Indigeneity and youth, pointing out that she learned to “see young people differently” and that the course inspired her to look more carefully “at books and characters who are BIPOC,” with attention to “intersectionality.” These reflections are both hopeful and helpful as students communicate their desires for more robust knowledge about Indigenous Peoples’ topics and issues and provide a way forward for teacher educators.

Another theme that emerged that aligns to Kumashiro’s (2000) challenge of anti-oppressive education and resisting teaching about the ‘Other’ was students questioning, challenging, and critiquing their own positionality. Alison spoke of a realization of “the importance of cultural perspective” and the need to “de-center myself and to center other points of view.” Maya contemplated her own lack of experience as a White-identifying woman and described how the course inspired inquiry and investigation into the experiences of others. Evie reflected directly on the IYAL studied, noting that the reading evoked reflection of her own position as a White woman. She noted that “while you’re never going to fully understand—if you’re a White person—being a person of color, it really changes that because you get attached to these characters, and you know, you want, you just get invested in them and in their experience of the world.” This sentiment resonated with Aurora, Alison, and Maya, who questioned and critiqued their experience of the world as compared to that of BIPOC youth.

### *"Why didn't it align?": General Reflections of Teacher Candidates on the Course Material*

Finally, it is helpful to explore two evaluations of the course overall. These two students’ experiences are indicative of many interviewed students’ reflections on the course. They also mirror many of the comments found on formal and informal evaluations of the class, collected through the university, but also from regular, anonymous check-ins I conducted with students throughout each semester. These reflections confirmed hypotheses made at the beginning of the course: that students find reading, discussion, and learning centered on IYAL engaging in ways that other courses are not; that the stories communicate crucial information about underrepresented and historically marginalized communities that has been largely missing from the rest of their educational career; and that the course serves as a starting point for more inquiry.

Nadia, an elementary education student at the time of the study, reflected on the reading assignments. She described the significance of a curriculum that is inclusive; that explores multiple, complex narratives; and that meets the need for an environment conducive to holding conversations about difficult topics:

We read a lot of books that talk about, specifically, like, racial and ethnic inclusion . . . and that’s something I really find . . . significant in my life, and [I’m] talking about it a lot. . . . I’m hoping to take something away, even though I know it’s not representative of, like, a whole aspect. I think I want to be more informed because I only know my own narrative . . . and really seeing . . . this is one of the many narratives. It’s not a whole narrative, but it’s one of the many. And I really wanted to dive in and understand it more.

Nadia's reflection on each story not being "the whole aspect" but only "one of the many" is one desired outcome from the use of IYAL texts. Nadia has taken Kumashiro's advisement that learning not lead to essentializing and assuming knowledge but to embracing "unknowability, multiplicity, and looking beyond the known" (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 3).

Kiara reflected on the missing elements in her learning prior to encountering this course and on how she valued experiencing multiple forms and origins of knowledge. Like Nadia, she expressed an appreciation for the course's capacity to build spaces for discussing topics related to race, white supremacy, and settler colonialism. She wondered why her high school courses "didn't align" to her understanding as an Indigenous/Latina woman and found that she

was really bored in history class. . . . You know, it made more sense because it was, like, all of this is whitewashed, all of this is colonized. . . . It was really interesting seeing those books (our diverse YA fiction) there first and then being like, Oh yeah . . . I'm excited what this is going to bring, you know, like, how, how are we going to redefine . . . not even redefine, but, like, how we're going to, like, find other ways in which we can get knowledge.

Kiara had spoken frequently in the class about the "whitewashing" of curriculum she had experienced and her frustration with this process. Arriving at the university and learning theory about race and racialization had given a name to what she knew but also made her question why it had been left out of her K–12 experience. She had mentioned feeling cheated, lied to, and misled when discovering these ideas in college. Her reflection speaks to the current context of the United States, where policy to block the use of critical race theory in schools continues to gain traction. Kiara's reflection, like those of many students in the span of this course, communicates a desire for accessibility to this information.

### **Conclusion**

One challenge for the teacher candidates was their affinity for analyzing the fiction texts through a literary frame rather than a historical or cultural lens. Though I scaffolded students into recognizing this distinction, it was not uncommon for conversations to focus on elements of the effectiveness of the writing, with students sometimes missing the information the author is sharing. This led to the greatest difficulty of the course—students continually struggling with recognizing the colonial structures that define knowledge as consisting only of objective facts and apolitical history, both of which have been shown to be functions of culture (Loewen, 1996). However, I think the effort is worthwhile, given Brayboy's (2005) reminder from his mother that "our stories are our theories." His mother goes on to reject the notion that one who does not know story is inherently smarter than one who does know story. She clearly articulates for us the importance of awareness and humility toward other ways of knowing and being.

A further challenge, as evidenced by multiple student responses to critical learnings from the class, is the frequent—and sometimes complete—historicization of Indigenous Peoples (Battiste, 2013; Justice, 2018). The persistence with which non-Indigenous people conceptualize Indigenous folks as existing only in history, without contemporary experiences or issues for consideration, was evident in the interviews and throughout the course. It is key that the future development of this course helps students to contextualize histories of trauma and violence while connecting them to contemporary visions of resistance, resilience, and survivance. While it is certainly necessary to understand the contemporary experience of Indigenous Peoples, caution must also be taken to consider the attention to violence, which may only serve to pathologize

Indigenous People and engendering a White benevolence approach to education (Gebhard et al., 2022).

Like critical students in this course noted the areas of strength and growth they possessed in relation to Indigenous topics. They communicated viewpoints and practices that resist hegemonic and reductive views of Indigenous Peoples. The teacher candidates were not seeking simple answers, the proverbial add diversity and stir approach (Walter & Andersen, 2013); rather, they were seeking to “go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface level information about another culture” (Short, 2009, p. 2) to develop deeper insights into the experiences of Indigenous youth, and youth more broadly. Instead of focusing on Indigenous youth as the Other, the students sought what Rice (2020) calls the cultural landmarks found in Indigenous story and text, and for some students, a growing interest in further learning about the colonial logics of society was evident.

The students’ reflections on the expansion of knowledge, awareness, and understanding regarding Indigenous Peoples’ topics and issues demonstrate a partial success of the course objectives, and point out areas for further development. Several students spoke to how reading IYAL helped them develop a broader and more holistic perspective. Jessie noted, “This is their culture. This is what they did, you know, it’s just putting the whole picture together that helped me understand their history and their perspective.” Nadia noted the awareness that “it’s sort of the way I process and sort of see different groups of people, because I know it in itself is always going to be an ongoing process,” a statement of respect echoed by Rafael and others. These comments spoke to the success of the course to support teacher candidates in becoming culturally relevant and sensitive teachers.

This research offers insights into the practice of engaging teacher candidates in multiple text experiences to develop their understanding of Indigeneity as well as to develop critical, anti-oppressive stances in future educators. Using IYAL offered teacher candidates the opportunity to learn and engage topics like racism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism in an inclusive and safe environment. Using IYAL modeled equity, inclusion, and justice practices in the classroom, which can help future educators to incorporate narratives of diverse experiences. The course framing sought to model how to develop understandings of Indigenous Peoples without relying on members of marginalized communities to educate others. Students were thus able to engage their learning through the medium of the texts and to explore their own reactions and growing awareness.

The texts selected for the course focused on Indigenous authors writing about Indigenous Peoples; centering Indigenous characters and their epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies; and representing a breadth of experiences. This deliberate practice of selection enabled teacher candidates to encounter texts that speak against the colonial logics of Indigenous history by illustrating historical, contemporary, and future views of Indigenous characters, and celebrate their ongoing beingness.

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