

# A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching the Colonization of the Americas

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## Culturally Responsive Teaching

Preparing for the emotions that may arise from discussions of genocide and oppression can help teachers avoid traumatizing students.

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Trauma-informed teaching isn't just about reaching students who have a history of adverse childhood experiences and may have specific learning needs as a result. It's also about managing the emotional reactions that both students and teachers may have when sensitive topics are introduced into the classroom.



Teaching about the colonization of the Americas means tackling tough subjects such as genocide, the abuse of Indigenous children in boarding and residential schools, the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, slavery, systemic racism, and oppression. These topics are a necessary part of the curriculum if we are to make sense of the world today, but they can also be difficult for some students to handle.

Emotional reactions are part of learning. When students feel anger, confusion, or sadness, teachers can use well-crafted discussion questions to help them make meaning of their feelings and create new understanding. While teachers can't always predict which topics will create emotional reactions, they can come prepared with strategies for generating good discussions.

## An Approach to Teaching Students About Indigenous Peoples

When teaching the history of the Americas, excessive empathy for Indigenous peoples often impedes inquiry and learning. This happens when the feelings of non-Indigenous students and/or the teacher become the center of the lesson. This can derail the discussion—which should be about power relations—and limit student

understanding. When Indigenous peoples are portrayed as victims of history and students see the history of the Americas solely through an emotional lens, inequitable power relations are reproduced. As Potawatomi-Lenapé educator Susan Dion has written, empathy-centered teaching reduces historical inquiry to “a binary of self/other that situates the self/reader unproblematically as judge.”

Teachers can avoid this situation by creating discussion questions that work outward from the self in the present day and backward toward a nuanced understanding of the events of history. This teaches students how to think (not what to think) and shifts the discussion from non-Indigenous people and their feelings toward relationships and responsibility. The following outward-looking questions help non-Indigenous students process their feelings, avoiding the vicarious trauma that can result from studying racism and genocide in the Americas. They also recognize the agency of Indigenous peoples, which avoids re-traumatizing any Indigenous students who may be present in the classroom:

- What does this story mean to me?
- What does it mean to my understanding of what it is to live in this country right now, today?
- What does this story mean to my understanding of Indigenous peoples today?
- How does my experience in this country differ from that of Indigenous people?
- What aspects of the past do non-Indigenous people have to try to understand?
- What does this story tell me about who has power in this country and who does not?
- How does power relate to hardship and suffering?
- How are Indigenous peoples addressing the challenges they face? How have they done so in the past?

One of the most common myths about Indigenous people in the Americas is that they all live on reservations (in the United States), on reserves (in Canada), or in rural communities. In reality, 60 to 70 percent of all Indigenous people live in urban centers. Despite this fact, Indigenous students tend to be invisible in urban classrooms, or they are often lumped in with other communities, including Latino, Black, or Asian. (Check the United Nations website for a primer on Indigenous identities.) For all of these reasons, teachers must assume that they have Indigenous students in their classrooms, which means they also have to consider how Indigenous students may respond when teaching this material.

The horrific events of colonization and the contemporary effects of racism and discrimination have had negative effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous people. Unresolved emotions such as anger, fear, and grief, as well as the everyday impacts of intergenerational trauma, can create difficulty for Indigenous students who are in the classroom when colonization is discussed.

### **Strategies to Avoid Re-traumatizing Indigenous Students**

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- Share potential triggers with students before each lesson, and offer an alternative space or assignment for students who may not be willing to participate.
- Do not insist that Indigenous students watch films related to colonization in a classroom setting.
- Do not ask Indigenous students (or families) about their traumatic experiences. When Indigenous students choose to share personal stories and experiences, take the time to listen closely and validate the emotions and the impact.
- Cultivate a relationship with school- and community-based resources for Indigenous students.

### **Additional Resources for Further Study**

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- Mushkego Cree educator Candace Brunette-Debassige’s “An Indigenous Pedagogy for Decolonization” for effective strategies that support students in dealing with their feelings.
- Métis professor Natalie Clark’s principles of trauma-informed practice with Indigenous people across the life span.
- Mi’Kmaq professor Marie Battiste’s call to develop a critical consciousness about colonization and decolonize your pedagogy.
- Clinical psychologist Jacob Ham’s Purpose Attuned Goal Emotions, or PAGE, approach to staying mindful and creating safe spaces. His work should help you develop self-awareness about your own emotional triggers.

Fear of introducing sensitive topics—and of managing student reactions—often causes educators to avoid teaching the true history of the Americas, settling instead for a glossed-over timeline of settler colonial adventures. Using trauma-informed practice enables teachers to create safe spaces that allow Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to work through their feelings, unpack their connection to historical events, and create relationships based on respect and responsibility. Teaching Indigenous subject areas and stories might sometimes be challenging, but it doesn’t have to be stressful.