

# Teaching Treaties as (Un)Usual Narratives: Disrupting the Curricular Commonsense

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of treaty education for students living in a province entirely ceded through treaty. Specifically, we ask and attempt to answer the questions “Why teach treaties?” and “What is the effect of teaching treaties?” We build on research that explores teachers’ use of a treaty resource kit, commissioned by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan. Working with six classrooms representing a mix of rural, urban and First Nations settings, the research attempts to make sense of what students understand, know and feel about treaties, about First Nations peoples and about the relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples in Saskatchewan. It is revealing that initially students are unable to make sense of their province through the lens of treaty given the commonsense story of settlement they learn through mandated curricula. We offer a critique of the curricular approach in Saskatchewan which separates social studies, history and native studies into discrete courses. Drawing on critical race theory, particularly Joyce King’s notion of “dysconscious” racism, we deconstruct curriculum and its role in maintaining dominance and privilege. We use the term (*un)usual narrative* to describe the potential of treaty education to disrupt the commonsense. (Un)usual narratives operate as both productive and interrogative, helping students to see “new” stories, and make “new” sense of their province through the lens of treaty.

## INTRODUCTION

Shortly after Canada was set up as a Dominion under *The British North America Act, 1867*, Canada began to negotiate treaties with the First Nations that occupied the lands and territories between the Province of Ontario and the Province of British Columbia. Between 1871 and 1921, Canada and First Nations entered into treaties that are now referred to as the Numbered Treaties. (Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2002, p. 38)

Treaties are an important part of history as they enabled the settlement of vast tracts of land, establishing the foundation for the growth and

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development of the Canadian west. The treaty medal that commemorates the signing of each numbered treaty depicts a handshake between an official of the Crown and a First Nations leader. While differing interpretations exist as to the intentions of treaty signatories, the nature of the relationship between the government of Canada and First Nations peoples on the prairies was established in and through treaties. Treaty documents shape the duties and responsibilities of the government and the spirit of engagement between the government and First Nations peoples. The handshake depicted on the treaty medals is symbolic of this relationship, a partnership between two parties, each of whom contributed to the treaty-making process.

Since the signing of the numbered treaties, there have been numerous (mis)steps by the government in discharging its responsibilities. These steps may be characterized alternatively as paternalistic, racist, or culturally genocidal. (For in-depth discussions, see Carter, 1993; Furniss, 1999; Haig-Brown, 1988; Ray, Miller, & Tough, 2000; and Siggins, 2005.) Yet these many (mis)steps and even the treaties themselves are largely missing from the curricula students in Saskatchewan encounter in schools.

Grumet (1981) has described curriculum as “the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present, and our future” (p. 115). It is important then to pay attention to the story officially sanctioned through mandated curriculum in this province and ask questions about what is missing, what students are not being told about the history of the place they inhabit. In a province that was entirely ceded through treaties, it seems logical, even commonsense, to expect students to leave school with knowledge of the historical and contemporary importance of treaties. Thus, our research seeks to explore what students in Saskatchewan know and understand about treaties, the effects that learning about treaties has on their understanding of the historical relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples and how treaties can operate as (un)usual narratives to interrupt the commonsense story of the history of Saskatchewan.

### **. . . A PRAIRIE DRIVE**

On a drive along Highway 10 from Regina to Yorkton, through Saskatchewan’s centennial splendour, the sun shines on rolling prairie sliced by the Qu’Appelle Valley. Along the route, official brown signs point to items of historical significance. Partially because of the frequency and the prominence of the signs, the Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site stands out. Recognizing the work and vision of Ontario pioneer homesteader William Motherwell and his commitment to “agricultural science,” the Motherwell Homestead stands as a testament to the ingenuity and

pioneering spirit of the early prairie farmers. It is considered a historically significant landmark, an important part of our history. The narrative of this province is imagined and produced primarily through the foundational story of the pioneer.

### **THERE ARE OTHER STORIES, HOWEVER . . .**

On a drive along the same Highway 10, through Ft. Qu'Appelle, no federal or provincial signage points to an event of historical significance, the signing of Treaty 4 in 1874; indeed, one would drive right past the spot where Cree and Saulteaux Nations entered into Treaty with the Crown. Yet the lasting impact of this event and its continuing effect on the development of the province runs counter to the attention it is paid. Over 19 million hectares of land, covering the southern third of what would become the province of Saskatchewan was ceded to the Crown for settlement and development. The absence of official signposts makes mute another history. Treaties tell an equally foundational story, but one that does not easily fit with the dominant colonial narrative.

### **ANOTHER SASKATCHEWAN SCENE**

Saskatchewan Learning has taken a non-integrated approach to social science curricula, offering students a myriad of choices in secondary grades, including history, social studies, Native studies, law, psychology, philosophy, geography and economics. The majority of students at the high school level (grades 10, 11 and 12) enrol in history courses (53%) with a much smaller percentage enrolling in social studies (20%) and an even smaller percentage in Native studies (14%) (Saskatchewan Learning, 2006). While offering Native studies as a stand-alone course for students might appear to be well intentioned, the reality is that this separation further marginalizes the lives and experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Saskatchewan. As a result of his research and work in First Nations education, Orr (2004) argues that this separation may allow social science teachers to spend little time on Aboriginal issues. Similarly, Furniss (1999) argues that

It is significant . . . that such challenges to the dominant nationalist histories are being introduced on the fringes of the educational system: in a supplementary curriculum rather than in official textbooks and in elective courses rather than in required courses. (p. 61)

We believe that the existence of Native studies as a stand-alone course, always in relation to history or social studies, contributes to the sense that

students are able to make of this province. It mirrors the provincial signs constructing the pioneer narrative as the only story worth telling. Consider that the goals of colonialism included cultural genocide and the physical separation of Aboriginal peoples onto reserves. Now consider that cultural genocide can be achieved through the erasure of disparate worldviews, unique histories and knowledge traditions. The role of schools has helped to ensure that Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies are never part of the mainstream (Battiste, 2000; Furniss, 1999). Arguably, in Saskatchewan schools, because social science courses exist as distinct entities, Native studies will always be a “solitude” (Ermine, 2005) separate from and perceived as less important than history or social studies.

Amongst educators, there seems to be a perception that only those schools with a significant number of Aboriginal students, including First Nations schools, should offer Native studies as a choice. Arguably, it is even more imperative to offer, and even require a Native studies course, in school populations that are mostly non-Aboriginal. As Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) eloquently state, all human beings must have “equal dignity and essential worth” (p. 292). We worry that for Aboriginal peoples in Saskatchewan, this is an impossible aspiration unless foundational social structures, particularly education and schools, engage more actively in a process of re-valuing Aboriginal knowledge, understanding and experiences.<sup>1</sup>

In response to concern for the absence of Aboriginal content and perspectives in curriculum, the Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC) felt it imperative that teachers and schools be given a resource whereby treaty education could be integrated across disciplines and across grades. To that end, a resource titled “The Treaty Resource Kit” (hereafter referred to as the Kit or Teaching Treaties) was developed for dissemination to all schools in Saskatchewan. The general orientation of the Kit maintains the importance of understanding treaties as foundational to contemporary relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples. In the Kit is a binder containing curriculum connections and resource materials for grades 7–12. Three books highlighting the treaty-making process are also included, ranging from the perspectives of treaty elders to the perspectives of white historians and academics. One book takes up treaty issues as a bridge to the future, examining possible policy and social implications. Additionally, three videos chronicling First Nations perspectives on treaties are also offered as resources. The Kit is housed in a “white box”; we use this as a metaphor to describe the curricular experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan. Curriculum is itself a “white box,” created by and for the dominant group to solidify and sustain privilege. We choose to speak in racial terms, white and non-white, rather than cultural terms, European and non-European, because we believe, as Schick and St. Denis (2005) do, that

In Canada, especially on the prairies, a common code for racial difference is “cultural difference”—a quality that racial minority children, especially Aboriginal children, are said to have and which is given as the reason of any lack of school success. The phrase, “cultural difference” connects education failure to the “other” by shifting emphasis away from how dominant identities are implicated in the production of “difference.” (p. 306)

In social studies, history and Native studies curricula in Saskatchewan, the emphasis is often on cultural rather than racial differences, and the historical and contemporary experiences of racism permeating the province often remain unnamed and unchallenged in these documents. The materials created by the OTC, housed as they are in a white box, seem to mirror the conditions that Aboriginal peoples have faced, always navigating a world defined by whiteness. Donald (2004) describes this as a process of colonialism whereby the “identification of the character of the colonized” is suppressed in favour of the “colonizer’s version of events and people, and consequently the colonized have been defined in European terms” (p. 27). Mainstream education is an extension of colonization insofar as it has been used to promote a dominant narrative of the past and privilege certain ways of knowing (Tupper, 2005).

### **INSIDE THE WHITE BOX**

As noted, the OTC created the Kit in 2002 to provide teachers with a means through which to educate all students about treaties. Every school in the province received a Treaty Resource Kit and a large number of teachers have participated in in-service training on the use of this Kit in grades 7–12. Typically, teachers attend a series of workshops that help them understand and familiarize themselves with the materials and find ways to use these in their own classrooms.

Our research, funded by the Aboriginal Education Research Network of Saskatchewan Learning and the OTC, involved an exploration of teachers’ use of the Kit to facilitate student understanding of treaties. The project followed an action research model whereby the research team (four researchers and six teachers) identified, elaborated on and worked to implement best practices for teaching treaties. Because of the collaborative and participatory nature of action research, the whole research team was involved in the creation of goals and instruments (Mills, 2003). For the teacher participants, engaging in action research is about taking action and effecting positive educational change based on what they learn through the research process. In this case, the teachers committed to using the Kit to facilitate student understanding of treaties in authentic and engaging ways. At the outset, it was agreed that all students would have opportunities to better understand the spirit and intent of the numbered treaties through historical investigations. There was agreement amongst the teachers and

researchers that merely teaching treaties as content knowledge would do little to facilitate such understanding. There was also agreement that because of the range of grades, locations and students, a variety of pedagogical approaches would be necessary. Thus, while we shared common objectives and commitments to teaching treaties, the experiences for students would vary. As action researchers, the teachers experienced freedom to take pedagogical risks and to approach the materials in the Kit in ways they felt best supported students' learning.

The teachers and classrooms for this study came from a variety of locations. The first two locations were a middle-years community school and high school in a smaller urban centre. Issues of treaty land entitlement and the presence of a large number of First Nations people in the community meant that students came to the classroom with some (pre)conceptions. Both teacher participants at these schools were white. The next two sites in a larger urban centre, included a middle-years and high school designated as a community school. Issues around First Nations peoples and treaties were not as obviously prevalent or pressing here. Again, both teacher participants were white. The final two sites were both First Nations schools on reserve, one middle-years and one high school. These teacher participants were First Nations.

Students were enrolled in a variety of courses including Native Studies 10 and 30; Social Studies 7 and 8; English 20 and Law 30. A central focus of the research was to explore what students across grade levels understood, knew and felt about treaties, about First Nations peoples and about the relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations people in Saskatchewan. Students in the six classrooms were invited to respond to survey questions intended to gauge their historical and contemporary attitudes and understandings of treaties prior to their teachers' implementations of the Kit. The same questions were asked once students had participated in in-depth learning about treaties.

The survey was divided into three sections and took approximately 30 minutes for students to complete. Part I of the survey asked students to respond to eight open-ended questions including: What is a treaty? Why were treaties necessary in Saskatchewan? What examples can you provide of the benefit of treaties to the peoples of Saskatchewan? Are treaties important today—why or why not? Part II of the survey asked students to assess their level of agreement to seven statements pertaining to treaties including: I think existing treaties are fair; I think that existing treaties should be left alone; and I believe the Canadian government fulfilled its treaty obligations. Part III of the survey asked students to read a short vignette about the negative experiences of a First Nations youth attending residential school and then indicate their level of agreement with eight statements pertaining to the vignette including: Events like the one above are rare in Canadian history; When I read about this event I feel badly; and Past events like this affect us today.

In addition to survey responses, a group of students at each research site participated in audiotaped focus group discussions with researchers. On average, focus groups lasted 45 minutes and involved between six and ten students. In each focus group, students were asked to talk about what they learned while the Kit was in use, what was most meaningful to them during this time, what they liked or did not like about treaty education and what they believed was the importance of treaty education. While these questions were designed to provide some consistency amongst focus groups, other questions that emerged from the discussions were asked by the researchers in each context.

### **(MIS)UNDERSTANDING TREATIES: PRE-TEST ANALYSIS**

Prior to using the Teaching Treaties Kit, 50% of the 168 students surveyed did not know what a treaty was or misunderstood what a treaty was. The other 50% of students were able to identify a treaty as an agreement, but the majority of these students understood the agreement as existing between nation-states. Thirty-three percent of students could not identify why treaties were necessary in Saskatchewan. Many students identified treaties as necessary because of the number of First Nations people living in Saskatchewan at the time of treaty, or for the protection of settlers in the province. Thirty-eight percent of students did not know who signed the treaties and 60% of students did not know how treaties affected them, their families, friends and neighbours. Several students responded to the question with a perception of unequal treatment to the benefit of First Nations people. For example, they indicated that because of treaties, First Nations people do not have to pay taxes and/or enjoy free post-secondary education. Students seemed unaware of the ongoing economic benefits of the treaties to white people. Sixty-five percent of students acknowledged that treaties are important today, but 73% of respondents could not provide examples of the benefits of treaties to the people of Saskatchewan, nor did they identify having had experiences and/or involvement with Aboriginal cultures and ways of knowing.

When asked to consider the fairness of treaties, 33% of students disagreed slightly, moderately or strongly with the statement "I think existing treaties are fair." Thus, the majority of student responses, 67%, suggest a belief that treaties are fair. When asked whether they agreed that the British Crown was fair to First Nations people in the treaty signing process, 59% of students agreed slightly, moderately or strongly and when asked if the Canadian government has fulfilled its treaty obligations, 69% of students agreed that it had. Finally, 61% of students expressed a limited knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history (Cappello & Tupper, 2006).

In our considerations of what the research reveals, we are concerned that in a province where the land was entirely ceded through treaties, there is little historical or contemporary understanding of treaties and by extension little understanding by these students of the colonial legacies that continue to shape the province of Saskatchewan. Further, we would argue that based on the survey results, non-Aboriginal students do not have a sense of how their own economic and social privileges can be connected to, and produced through, treaties. While we are troubled by these findings, we are not surprised by them. They are salient examples, evidence if you will, of the commonsense.

### **WHY TEACH TREATIES?**

In this context, constructed and constrained by and through a particular history, productive and constraining of both dominant and marginalized subjectivities, why might it be important to teach treaties? One important reason for teaching treaties is to disrupt the way in which curricula are connected to the production of dominant culture.

### **CURRICULUM AND DOMINANCE**

At a simplistic level, curriculum documents privilege certain content over others: some material gets included and other material gets left out. Necessarily, curricula are limited and therefore give preferential treatment to some visions/content/stories over others. Historically, curricula have overtly served the purposes of social engineering (Apple, 1990). Around the time of Confederation, for example, the federal government saw schooling as “a vital part of the plan for the transition of First Nation children towards inevitable assimilation. . . . First Nation children were to be taught . . . the skills of citizenship in the style of the British Canadian” (Littlejohn, 2006, p. 66). This overt emphasis on civilizing or “Canadianizing” was not just for First Nations people.

The immigration boom at the turn of the century necessitated an education system that would fashion English-speaking, skilled citizens of the Empire from disparate people from all over Eastern and Western Europe. Pastoral pedagogies, increasingly embedded in curriculum documents (and tacitly in teacher practices), attempted to “foster the propriety, decorum, and social graces of the patriotic citizen in children” (Cavanagh, 2001, p. 408). One of the overt, historic functions of curriculum, then, was to induct students into a particular, largely homogenous, culture, as schools carried out the socializing function of their mandate.

More recently, scholars have described the role of education systems, and curriculum specifically, as playing a large role in the reproduction of



economic strata (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), the passing on of particular social and cultural capital (Bernstein, 1975), and the reproduction of dominant ideology or hegemony (Apple, 1990, 1996). Not in crude or deterministic ways (mechanically teaching point by point) but in complex ways, curriculum and the ways in which teachers enact curricular documents are implicated in the tacit and overt reproduction of dominant cultural norms: attitudes are shaped, knowledge is sanctioned or castigated, relationships to knowledge are formed or deformed, access to cultural capital is given or denied (or both) across the boundaries and intersection of the multiple identities in which students are located.

This reproduction begins to explain why and how the one pervasive vision of Saskatchewan, pioneer homesteaders, supersedes all others, especially land shared through treaties. Curriculum development is connected to the ways in which dominant groups think about and value knowledge, and what knowledge these groups value.

Durkheim (1965) suggests that the veracity of knowledge is not enough. If ideas do not reflect the “mass of other collective representations (the concepts taken for granted by most people in a given time and place) they will be denied” (p. 246). It is these taken-for-granted concepts, the sociologists’ notion of commonsense, that is deeply connected to both Apple’s (1990, 1996) work and Williams (1976) notion of hegemony as “deeply saturating the consciousness of a society” (pp. 204–205). One of the ways that this ideology/hegemony is reproduced is through curriculum and its mediation of the social stock of knowledge; curriculum acts as both repository and taskmaster of commonsense. The challenge of curriculum, suggests Minnich (1990), is understanding what it is we wish to change “in more than a narrow, superficial way” (p. 1).

Teaching treaties in the classroom offers a perspective that is largely lacking in commonsense understanding, and in curriculum. By focusing attention on the signing of treaties, and therefore recasting that historic relationship between First Nations and the Crown in a more historically accurate light, students’ lack of understanding is addressed. By addressing the ideas, ambitions and interpretations of treaties from the First Nation signatories, another part of that historic relationship is enabled to come to light. The aspirations and frustrations since the signing of treaties are also set in relief, placed in a context that makes better sense of present realities.

More than facts and dates and names, teaching treaties can be a visceral lesson in the partiality of knowledge; the social construction of understanding these events is made available in powerful ways. Encouraging students to consider the variations of interpretation of these events, and the results, also enables students to imagine what things might be like; demonstrating the choices that have been made over the validity of knowledge provides a space where the curriculum (as the vault of commonsense) can be less hegemonic. Teaching treaties in the classroom represents a response to the production of dominance through curricula.

## RACE AND DOMINANCE

A second, related reason for teaching treaties concerns the nature of dominance: historically, dominant culture has necessitated both the racialization of people and racist practices. Commonsense includes both overt and nuanced understandings about the nature of race, the value of race and shifting differences (Goldberg, 1993; McCarthy, 1998).

Under more humanist notions of education, we are encouraged not to see the racialized nature of that commonsense. But as Lawrence (1987) has stated, we

. . . share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of this shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual's race and induce negative feelings and opinions of nonwhites. To the extent that this cultural belief system has influenced all of us, we are racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. (p. 322)

It is important to root racism (and ideology and hegemony) within the commonsense, within what is culturally sanctioned but unexamined. Overt racist actions are easy to determine and relatively simple to deal with (legally), but the complex notions of race and privilege that remain central to the functioning of our society are much harder to locate.

Rather than saying that dominant society is unconscious of its racialized past and present, it is necessary to use King's (1991) notion of dysconscious racism. "Dysconsciousness is an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (King, 1991, p. 135). This uncritical acceptance of the existing order is encouraged by and through curricula and schools where the racial realities of society are unable to enter as objects of study.

The uncritical acceptance of commonsense (embodied in curriculum) shuts down possible alternative visions for what society might look like by consistently reifying a dominant vision. Curriculum therefore is one significant place wherein the culturally acceptable attitudes (and sanctioned responses) are workshopped and transmitted, "tried on" by students and approved. It is not surprising to learn that a majority of the students participating in this research project knew almost nothing about treaties before the project began.

*The only thing I knew before we started was, instead of calling them "Native," was like "First Nation," instead.*

*Well honestly, I had no clue about treaties. I don't think I had heard the word before we started this.*

Most students responded that they knew *nothing* or *very little* or *not much* before the teaching began.

*I remember when we first did that little test . . . I just had no clue, and I put "I don't know" for all of them—I think I knew what one of them was.*

What sense can these students make of this province, its history and the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples? Largely, our students do not know and cannot make sense of this place through the story of treaty. There have been no signs there to instruct them, to direct their reading of the world.

We would argue that the "seeing" of the Motherwell historic site signs on the prairie drive is possible because the commonsense of students is confirmed in their seeing; this is what Saskatchewan is (and therefore what it is not). A similar assertion might be made with respect to the students' responses to the survey questions. For the most part, students were not able to identify the personal, social or economic benefits of treaties for white people because they have become accustomed and conditioned to see the "benefits" of treaties to First Nations peoples. Yet another commonsense is revealed in the 67% of students who "saw" existing treaties as fair. This percentage included First Nations students who were *more* likely than their non-First Nations peers to identify the treaty-making process as fair (Cappello & Tupper, 2006). We might expect First Nations schools and students to more fully embrace the material in the Kit. Mary, one of the research participants, herself a First Nations teacher, spoke about the challenges of teaching treaties in a First Nations school:

Just because your students are First Nations doesn't mean they are going to warm up to it. Some of them are not interested and they don't care . . . and you get kids who come back who have never lived on a reserve, the treaties don't mean nothing to them, who cares, that kind of attitude.

Those who had the least to gain from upholding this commonsense, First Nations students, reveal the ubiquity of the dominant narrative. Given the social and economic realities of First Nations people in Saskatchewan, for example, substandard housing, lack of employment, tainted drinking water, and over-policing, what is fair remains contested. Because society sanctions this (mis)reading of its social stock of knowledge, it can be read this way.

Teaching treaties might be a place to address the absence of awareness of racism and racialization in the curriculum; the means and the necessity of these processes could be demonstrated and brought to the forefront. Moreover, the maintenance of dominant thinking/perspectives that supported and continue to support racism could also be examined. Teaching treaties in the classroom represents a response to the production of racialized dominance and marginalization in society.

### (UN)USUAL NARRATIVES

Teaching treaties would enable the creation of an (un)usual narrative. This telling of a different story—enabling students to wrestle with the “dysconscious” roots of racism in society, instead of merely believing the usual story that racism just is (or is not)—reveals to students how racism is supported, what it looks like in society through the conscious choices that people have made throughout history.

The telling of other stories, particularly from the perspective of non-whites, is necessary if we are to interrupt the commonsense understandings. Critical race theory has championed the importance of stories, especially in relation to legal struggles. Tate (1997) states that “The dominant group of society justifies its position with stock stories. These stock stories construct realities in ways that legitimize power and position” (p. 220). Treaties can provide (un)usual narratives that offer up a different history, other “stock stories,” or at least allow students more nuanced readings of the history being taught in provincial courses. Delgado (1990) argues that people of color in our society speak from locations and experiences framed by racism. These stories work to interrupt the commonsense stories that reify power and dominance. Delgado (1989) states:

Stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half—the destructive half—of the creative dialectic. (p. 2415)

Dismantling dominant narratives is essential to anti-racist education. (Un)usual narratives, like teaching treaties in the classroom, encourage learning that is “critical of othering” (Kumashiro, 2000). Teaching treaties provides students with an education that makes visible the mechanisms through which legal and social categories of “other” are created, maintained, and why these processes were deemed necessary.

Treaties as (un)usual narratives function in at least two significant ways. First, they function as corrective to dominant stories: (un)usual narrative as productive. They work to fill in the blanks left by dominant narratives, nuancing those privileged stories, raising questions about the claims to veracity and the tacit consent of an impartial approach to knowledge. Second, they function to question that dominance: (un)usual narrative as interrogative. They question dominance by making the privileging of the dominant narrative part of the inquiry, part of the story itself. Why and how did these stories come to be representative? Treaties as (un)usual narratives, as productive and interrogative, trace stories detailing the mechanisms through which dominance is enacted, privilege secured and marginalization produced.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE TEACH TREATIES IN THE CLASSROOM?

Throughout this discussion we have asked, “Why teach treaties?” and our response details the theoretical connections between curriculum, racism and dominance. The notions of (un)usual narratives as both productive and interrogative have emerged from both our theoretical considerations of dominance and the practical experiences of students and teachers. What follows is an exploration of these ideas as they are manifest through the lived experiences of the students in this study. We want to re-visit the ideas of curriculum and dominance and race and dominance to frame the possibilities for (un)usual narratives.

### CURRICULUM

#### (Un)Usual Narrative as Productive

At the time students began participation in this research project, it was apparent that their understandings of treaties were limited and limiting. As we have illustrated, this lack of understanding can be traced to curriculum that relies on the commonsense to tell its stories and teachers when they are uncritical conduits of those stories. The (un)usual narrative of teaching treaties endeavoured to produce new knowledge for students, not only of treaties, but of First Nations perspectives. This not so common “commonsense,” or (un)usual narrative as productive was elucidated through our focus group discussions with students and their responses to the post-test questionnaires. One grade eight student shared the following comment with us:

*It's cool what he [First Nations Elder] said about the circle—about how each culture is meant to protect [something]. Like the First Nations are meant to protect the forests and the Earth.*

We acknowledge that this comment reflects a simplistic and somewhat essentialist understanding of First Nations' cultures. However, for the student, it was a place to begin (better than overt racism or complete cultural ignorance); a positive and productive response to learning about First Nations peoples.

When asked what they found most meaningful about teaching treaties, another student offered:

*Well, honestly, I had no clue about treaties, I don't think I had heard the word before we started this and now I know all these different things about it—and even lots from learning about the Native culture and learning about Canada and what happened to make us become a country.*

Many of the students we talked with expressed new understandings of Aboriginal culture and were excited by these learnings. They found con-

versations with Elders particularly meaningful as Elders spoke with wisdom and from experiences. The (un)usual narrative of treaties produced a recognition for many students that the curricular stories they had learned about Canada pre- to post-Confederation were incomplete. It also helped them to better understand the contemporary realities of First Nations people and how they continue to be produced by dominant culture. For example, one student commented:

*I have friends who've told me that their parents have taught them that Native people don't pay taxes and they don't have to get jobs and they have these cushy lives but they choose to do bad things anyway. And it's not always true—actually it's quite often not.*

These comments begin to question the veracity of the “story” of First Nations people being advanced through curricular commonsense narratives. Because of the students’ encounters with teaching treaties, this questioning, this beginning process of interrogation, is made possible.

Along with what we learned from the students in our focus group discussions, the results of the questionnaires administered at the end of this project were telling. Whereas students struggled to articulate the effects of treaties on them, their families, friends and neighbours prior to teaching treaties (63% did not know or believed treaties to have no effect), following teaching treaties, this number dropped to 45% of students. While we would have liked a larger percentage of students to understand the personal and social effects of treaties, these statistics reveal some development in students’ thinking (Cappello & Tupper, 2006). A development in thinking was also manifest in students’ post-test response to the question of treaty importance today. Eighty-four percent of students perceived treaties to be important today, versus the 65% on the pre-test questionnaire. The almost 20% increase together with the drop in the number of students who thought treaties unimportant, affirms a significant learning for these students (Cappello & Tupper, 2006). While we acknowledge that a yes-or-no response does not necessarily get at the degree to which students understand the importance of treaties, we believe that recognition of importance is a productive place from which to move forward. It is a place for the persistent possibilities of (un)usual narratives.

### **(Un)Usual Narrative as Interrogative**

In focus group discussions, students grappled with new understandings in relation to prior curricular and school experiences. They began to question dominance as they traced racial divisions in the curriculum. One student we spoke with questioned his Native studies teacher and struggled with the differences between what he was learning in his history class and the material he encountered in the Native studies course. He shared:

*But history is very one-sided, too. So you're trying to find where to go and that's where I'm confused. Which was the right way? Which was the way it actually happened? Or is it both ways? We're actually having the knowledge from the Native's point of view and so that helps us understand it but then you hear the history side of view and you're like "Oh, that's different than from in Native studies." So what do you go by?*

This student (and others from the class) identified this divide and wondered about having to tailor his answers on these issues depending on which class he was in. It seemed like being in the Native studies class caused him to question whose knowledge he was supposed to be learning. This depth of insight, connecting the disjointed and competing claims to veracity with a deep conflict in the value and production of knowledge is very significant. Even when treaties are included in official curriculum, the manner of this inclusion must be interrogated. Is it merely cursory? Does it advance superficial and limited understandings of treaties? Does it continue to support the dominant narrative of settlement and progress (over and against the continued marginalization of First Nations peoples)? Again, we must argue that the existence of stand-alone courses in history, social studies and Native studies does little to ameliorate the "two solitudes" Ermine (2005) is so concerned about. That white students who take both courses are experiencing tension is no surprise. These tensions are salient examples of the work of (un)usual narratives.

Many of the students, particularly those in the middle years, began to recognize the privileging of the dominant narrative they had come to accept as commonsense. Along with this recognition came an awareness of how the "other" is constructed through language, always in relation but marginal to, dominant identities. During a focus group discussion with several grade eight students, one young woman interrupted the conversation to offer this insight:

*When I listen to us—even still—it's like "them"—I don't know—I was thinking about it as we were going around, it's almost like everyone says them or they like they're all one group, and I'm sure—and I just did it too—it's something that I'm going to have to adjust to now that I'm thinking about it.*

The consternation with which she spoke highlights a desire to revisit what she thought she knew prior to teaching treaties. Again, we see this as a productive space of learning whereby (un)usual narratives disrupt dominance so long entrenched in curriculum as it is written and as it is lived.

## **RACE**

### **(Un)Usual Narrative as Productive**

More than curriculum and its role in dominance, we can trace the effects of teaching treaties into confronting racism. Teaching treaties can be seen as productive in at least two ways.

First, our research demonstrates that sharing these (un)usual narratives in the classroom can be productive of empathy. On the pre-test, we noted that female students tended to think that some “moderate level of unfairness was present” in the way in which First Nations people have been treated in Canadian history. Males, on the other hand, tended to “think that little or no unfairness in treatment was present” (Cappello & Tupper, 2006, p. 10). These statistically significant findings disappear on the post-test as male students move closer to their female counterparts in their empathy towards First Nations peoples. At the risk of making this point too strongly, exposing students to (un)usual narratives seems to have the effect of encouraging an empathetic response. Learning this material, encountering these other ways of looking at history, enabled at least these male students to respond with increasing sensitivity. Earlier, we noted the responses of First Nations students on the pre-test regarding the fairness of treaties. These responses changed significantly on the post-test questionnaire (Cappello & Tupper, 2006). First Nations students were more likely than their non-First Nations classmates to see the unfairness of treaties and the treaty-making process following completion of teaching treaties. Again, this is a salient example of (un)usual narratives as productive.

More than this, (un)usual narratives can also produce a classroom that more honestly reflects the lived reality of students. One student in the study, herself white, shared a story about committing some crimes with an Aboriginal friend. Her Aboriginal friend ended up serving jail time, while she herself did not, even though the crimes she committed were, in her perspective, much more serious than those the friend was jailed for:

*I don't care what anyone says; it was all about colour. White people do discriminate a lot—I hate it I can't stand it. I'm starting to get mad, I can feel it.*

Students at all grade levels, 7–12, white and non-white, could speak about specific incidents of racism. A grade 7 student told this story:

*At the volleyball game I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and hear they say like—Oh yeah, did you see all those Indians, what are they going to do, sing a powwow before the game?*

This same student commented:

*There's a lot of racism in [this town], not just at one school. It's even out of school.*

His comments suggest awareness that racism permeates the community, transcending the walls of schools, to be performed both subtly and blatantly. Many of the students showed a nuanced sense of how racism unfolds and far from being naïve, these students saw and dealt with the results of a racially divided community.



It is clear from our sample that students do know about racism and are able to see it at work in their communities and lives. (Un)usual narratives open up classroom space wherein that reality is taken seriously and forms a constituent part of the subject of study. Teaching this (un)usual narrative produced a classroom that better reflected the experiences that students had of the world, especially concerning racism. Teaching treaties in the classroom honoured students' lived experience and enabled them to speak out loud the things that previously would have been ignored or silenced. This approach produced a classroom that made better connections between the past/historical processes and the present/experiences of these students.

### **(Un)Usual Narrative as Interrogative**

Teaching treaties in the classroom also enables the questioning of racism, creating a space where the production of racialized identities can be interrogated. A young woman who identified herself as First Nations, Italian and French shared that before the Teaching Treaties unit, she would tell people that she was Italian. She did this to protect herself from the racist behaviours of her white classmates toward Aboriginal students. She had witnessed such behaviour and seemed to believe that it was shameful to be Aboriginal. Her self-preservation in school required that she deny her Aboriginality, pretending to be that "other" part of herself she deemed acceptable to white people.

*For me I'm Italian, Native and French, so I stuck with the Italian and never told anyone I was Native because I got made fun of. It was hard. I was ashamed of it for so long.*

This student identified the content of the course as enabling her to begin to appreciate this part of herself that had been sublimated. She shares:

*I was ashamed of it [being] Aboriginal for so long and now that I've been taking this unit it has made me change my whole perception on it. I like it now and I like to say that yes, I am Native because they are so open with themselves.*

Understanding some of the historical processes, of which her identity is a part, enabled this one student to interrupt some of the negative effects of racialization.

To be clear, these are not the results of radical teacher interventions. (Un)usual narratives, attended to with some seriousness and care, provide potential opportunities for students to begin to think and question in increasingly complex ways. Teaching Treaties as an example of (un)usual narratives functions to enable students to better account for their own experience/understanding of racism, and to provide a place

where alternatives to dominance can be acknowledged, tried on and explored.

### **(UN)USUAL NARRATIVES: (RE)READING THE SIGNS**

Dominant discourse has no room for (un)usual narratives:

We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then our identity . . . is fragmented. . . . Such a self lacks access both to itself and to the world. . . . Its sense of history, gender and politics is incomplete and distorted. (Pinar, 1993, p. 61)

The presence of only dominant ways of knowing and only dominant history produces students who are less able to think about the complexities of the world they inhabit, less able to integrate those experiences into a growing “making sense” of that world. To pretend that students do not experience racism, or to create curricula that obfuscates these experiences, is to yet again privilege the vantage point of the dominant (white) students who do not experience racial discrimination, and who can remain unaware of the privilege they carry. While many of the students were able to identify acts of racism, they were unaware of the ways they themselves are implicated in colonial practices. When treaties are taught simply as historical artefacts, when students do not understand the ongoing significance of treaty relationships, it matters little the number of times the word *treaty* appears in curriculum documents. In Saskatchewan, the officially mandated curriculum does little to encourage students to take account of their own privilege, or lack thereof.

We could take another trip down Highway 10 from Regina to Yorkton. The beautiful drive, augmented by the signs that shape our collective vision of Saskatchewan has been interrupted. Where once we were able to ignore the discrepancy represented by the signs because they confirmed/represented/reproduced the dominant vision of the Province vis-à-vis the lens of pioneer, it is not so easy to drive as if our sight and internal sense of place matched perfectly. It is clear that the world is not exactly as seen, the story not so smooth as once imagined.

This is the potential of teaching treaties in the classroom. Not merely the telling of a new narrative (adding a few new signs to “balance the equation” and tell the rest of the story), but an interrogation of the original narrative—the white box. Students need to understand how these (usual) stories came to be representative and how other (un)usual stories were dismissed. The Kit represents an opportunity for students to engage in an unmaking of the dominant narrative.

This unmaking also provides an opportunity for remaking. Students need stories both to make sense of their world and to enable them to

contribute to their world; they need to both *understand* and have places from which to *stand*. The Motherwell Homestead is a familiar story, but it is not the only story. It is a story in need of interrogation; its nuances named and understood. Students need to understand the signs that are present, the signs that are absent and the stories that connect them. This might begin to give students a place from which to stand that would open possibilities of different stories being written. (Un)usual narratives, like teaching treaties represent ways to begin developing new sets of relations, new sets of understandings and the possibilities for change.

## NOTE

1. We recognize the politics of language around naming and acknowledge our own struggles with naming throughout this research. Thus, we use First Nations when we are referring specifically to treaties, and Aboriginal as the more inclusive term covering First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. Students will often use the term *Native* to refer to Aboriginal peoples. When quoting students, we do not change their usage.

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