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Reviewing educational conceptualisations of transnational settler ignorance

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates how majority societies' common ignorance about Indigenous peoples and ongoing settler-colonial reality ("settler ignorance") has been negotiated in the educational sciences literature. Understanding settler ignorance not as a simple "lack of knowledge" but a powerful issue undermining Indigenous rights and decolonial aspirations, this review sets out to gain new understanding of its dimensions in educational settings. The reviewed literature covers 51 peer-reviewed qualitative records from six settler-colonial contexts – Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The emerging conceptualisations of the phenomenon of settler ignorance and ways of addressing it were explored through thematic synthesis. The findings suggest that settler ignorance has many faces: it is conceptualised as emotionally and ideologically contested knowledge-making, as wilful avoidance and resistance, and as a structural mechanism that transcends the question of individual cognition. Similarly, the proposed approaches to dismantling ignorance are diverse, emphasising the potential of educational content, building relationality, and critical reflection. Discussing the findings' implications, the article suggests how harnessing both context-based and transnational understandings about settler ignorance and its many dimensions could benefit reconciliatory processes between settler and Indigenous populations and signpost one approach to decolonising education.

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1. Introduction

> Imagine an ignorance that resists.
>
> Imagine an ignorance that fights back.
>
> Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an active, dynamic ignorance that refuses to go quietly – not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as *knowledge*.
> - Charles Mills (2007, p. 13)

In various contexts around the world, mainstream societies' ignorance about Indigenous peoples and settler-colonial realities (hereafter, "settler ignorance") has been highlighted

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as a significant yet long-overlooked phenomenon overwhelming decolonisation efforts and the enforcement of Indigenous rights (Cook, 2018; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance [ECRI], 2019; Taylor & Habibis, 2020). With the ongoing work of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) and emerging awareness-building policies in several settler-colonial countries, including Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, a growing number of nations are officially addressing the widespread need for greater Indigenous recognition (e.g. Prime Minister's Office, 2021; TRC of Canada, 2015). Cook (2018), among others, addresses the importance of making settler ignorance visible to create the necessary tools to interrupt it. Thus, reviewing existing understandings of settler ignorance and possible means to dismantle it could benefit policymaking across contexts and support reconciliatory processes' effective guidance to foster public awareness and Indigenous-inclusive education. This paper reports a thematic synthesis of such understanding from the field of education, one of the systems held most accountable for (de)constructing ignorance (e.g. ECRI, 2019; Godlewska et al., 2010).

In this paper, we use the international umbrella term *Indigenous people(s)* to refer to peoples who are native to and first peoples of their lands. Other concepts (e.g. Aboriginal; Sámi) may also appear in literature extracts and references to specific Indigenous groups. Indigenous peoples represent more than 5000 cultures, with presence in over 90 countries (The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2024). There is no universal definition of Indigenous people due to Indigenous populations' vast diversity and rights to self-identification. However, reference is often made to the International Labour Organisation's (1989/2007) definition of peoples that inhabited their lands/territories before colonial conquest and/or present state borders and who have fully or partly preserved their distinct cultural, economic, and/or social systems.

While colonial processes have taken many forms, here we are particularly interested in the dynamics of settler-colonial contexts – more specifically, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Settler colonialism refers to ongoing, unique colonial processes where settlers (non-Indigenous populations, here predominantly of white/European descent) "come to stay" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), seeking to establish and validate their presence in the area (semi-)permanently. Distinct from colonialism mainly aimed at resource-extraction, settler colonialism involves the settler aims of elimination, displacement, and *replacement* of the Indigenous people, forming a structure rather than an event or period (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

Education has been intricately tied to settler-colonial pursuits affecting Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). One well-known example of this is the native (residential) school systems, where Indigenous youth were taken from their communities and whose assimilationist actions and consequences for Indigenous societies have been documented across contexts (see e.g. Keskitalo et al., 2016; TRC of Canada, 2015). Discontinuation of the residential schools by the late twentieth century, however, did not mark the end of colonial education: around the world, colonially propagated Eurocentric hierarchies are embedded in the structures of education systems, which thus continue to emerge as places of Indigenous erasure (Dion, 2007). Despite the exclusionary legacy of formal education, its exceptional potential and rising efforts in promoting *de*colonisation have been recognised (Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021). Consequently,

the role of education is highlighted in reports about colonial ignorance and its manifestations in such areas as anti-indigenous politics and racism (ECRI, 2019; Taylor & Habibis, 2020).

The study of ignorance is an influential and rapidly growing field. Instead of being equated with mere *absence* of knowledge or unconscious bias, ignorance is understood here as a powerful social phenomenon of its own (Gross & McGoey, 2022). As settler ignorance is founded in socio-historical power imbalances, it has been considered alongside *white ignorance* that accompanies racially privileged and validated ways of experiencing the world (Mills, 2007). However, Cook (2018) reasons that while settler ignorance converges with existing scholarship on white/social ignorance, we should expand our considerations of its unique logics stemming from settler colonialism – logics that intertwine with both (white) settler privilege and dominance *and* the systemic Indigenous erasure necessitated by the settler-colonial "destroy to replace" agenda (see Wolfe, 2006). Thus, we embark from the starting point that (de)colonial constructs cannot be subsumed under other considerations of oppression (see Tuck & Yang, 2012), finding it highly relevant to explore the particular dimensions that make settler ignorance into a "particular kind of knowing" (Cook, 2018, p. 13).

Our review is guided by the underlying idea of *epistemologies of ignorance*, a premise acknowledging that ignorance has different forms, functions, and sustaining mechanisms, all of which are not accidental but sometimes work to sustain privilege and power (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). As a method for systematically conducted qualitative literature reviews, *thematic synthesis* (Thomas & Harden, 2008) enables us to discuss recurring conceptual patterns as coexisting dimensions within a complex issue. As we discuss the arising conceptualisations, we aim to investigate both the descriptions and explanations of how power in settler-colonial dynamics shapes "what can and cannot be known" (Cook, 2018, p. 15) and outline their implications for individuals and institutions involved in education.

2. Starting points

2.1. Research questions

Aiming to gain more understanding of settler ignorance, we hope to bring knowledge from the educational literature closer to policymaking and support actors across contexts and sectors to identify and respond to ignorance. The research questions (RQs) guiding this review are:

(1) How is ignorance about Indigenous peoples and colonial realities conceptualised in the context of education in six settler-colonial countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand?
(2) What kinds of approaches to confront settler ignorance are negotiated?

Our understanding of *conceptualisations* goes beyond explicit definitions and terminology, extending to broader discussions around not-knowing and disconnection in settler–Indigenous dynamics. Thus, we aimed to capture a broad scope of existing knowledge, as vocabularies of ignorance studies are evolving (Gross & McGoey, 2022).

2.2. Situating ourselves

Prioritising responsible involvement in Indigenous research (see Smith, 2012), we seek to respect and align our review with Indigenous peoples' calls and have reflected on our positionality as non-Indigenous researcher-educators throughout the review process. We fully acknowledge that for us, paradoxically, ignorance is both very familiar and "normalised" (i.e. made invisible), and our interpretations are impacted by our experiences as white scholars trained and employed by Nordic universities. By centring recognised nuances of settler ignorance, we seek to confront the naturalised white–settler mindset and colonial "obliviousness" both within and around us, thus aligning ourselves in the role of conscious, critical white scholars (e.g. Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019). Conversely, while our readings of ignorance do not claim to be the only available ones, they may contribute to the dialogue as they may be representative of and applicable to (white) settlers in similar positions who constitute a significant share of educators, academics, and policymakers in settler–Indigenous contexts.

2.3. Country contexts

For the purposes of this review, we pre-defined the included country contexts (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand) based on formal engagement in the processes of Indigenous reconciliation/recognition during the last decade. The included countries are (or have been) home to nationally authorised TRCs or other comparable processes to investigate historical and contemporary Indigenous experiences and colonial conduct, address Indigenous–settler relationships, and recommend ways forward[1] (Prime Minister's Office, 2021; Reconciliation Australia, 2021; Sametinget, 2023; Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen, 2023; TRC of Canada, 2015; Waitangi Tribunal, 2020). These state-level engagements highlight awareness-raising on Indigenous and colonial issues in their objectives/recommendations, informing our expectations about relevant discussions in these settler-dominant contexts. Table 1 presents information about the included contexts.

Table 1. Country contexts.

Country	Recognised Indigenous groups*	Approx. Indigenous population (% of total population)	National commitment type and status
Finland	Sámi	0.15%*	TRC; established in 2021
Sweden	Sámi	0.19%*	TRC; established in 2021
Norway	Sámi	0.91–1.18%*	TRC; final report and recommendations delivered in 2023
Canada	Inuit, Métis, and First Nations	5.0%**	TRC; final report and recommendations delivered in 2015
Australia	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	3.8%*	Reconciliation Australia (NGO), set in 2001 by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1991–2001)
Aotearoa	Māori	16.5%*	Waitangi Tribunal, permanent, established in 1975

* IWGIA, 2024.
**Statistics Canada, 2022.

Finland, Sweden, and Norway (along with the Kola Peninsula in Russia) encompass the home areas of the Sámi, the only recognised Indigenous people in the European Union. In Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, the verified histories of European colonial expansion and external state-run domination from the 1700s to contemporary settler-colonial dynamics make for an interesting contrast with the Sámi states, where the less verified onset of European settlement has facilitated a discourse that it does not represent "real colonialism" (Keskitalo et al., 2016). In essence, this review is not intended as a cross-country comparison. However, noting the differences illuminates contextual-political variations that may be present in the review.

3. Methodology

3.1. Literature search and criteria

This review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews & Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). In March 2023, we conducted a test search to scope the relevant literature and refine the applied concepts and criteria. Thereafter, we wrote a PRISMA-P protocol for the authors' shared repository to support a systematised approach. The main search was conducted in May–June 2023 on seven databases (see Figure 1).

The search query contained four parts. The targeted literature was to disclose connections to *Indigenous people* (9 alternative synonyms; "indigenous OR aboriginal … "); *ignorance* (7 synonyms; "ignorance OR 'knowledge gap' … "); an *included country context*, and the context of *education*. The diverse conceptual landscape and the heterogeneity of the hits left much to the researchers' manual inspection, which is why the full-text evaluation was conducted twice. All inclusion/exclusion criteria are listed in Table 2.

As thematic synthesis is a method for systematic reviews of qualitative studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008), and as we sought original ignorance-related conceptualisations, we excluded fully quantitative studies and review papers. Previous reviews have examined, for example, Indigenous educational experiences and possible key concepts in Indigenous studies (e.g. Moodie, 2019). However, we did not encounter existing reviews concentrating on settler ignorance itself.

As North American and Australian sources dominated the hits in English language searches, we sought to balance this algorithm bias with additional searches on the Aotearoa and Sámi contexts. We also utilised the literature mapping tool Research

Table 2. Literature inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
• Peer-reviewed article/chapter published 2013–2022. • Full text in English. • Qualitative/theoretical paper. • Conceptualises dimension(s) of and/or approach(es) to ignorance/need for knowledge in settler–Indigenous dynamics. • Context within Finland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Australia, and/or Aotearoa/New Zealand. • Connections to education.	• (Fully) quantitative or review paper. • No (original) reference to settler ignorance. • Wrong/unclear country setting. • No clear connection to education.

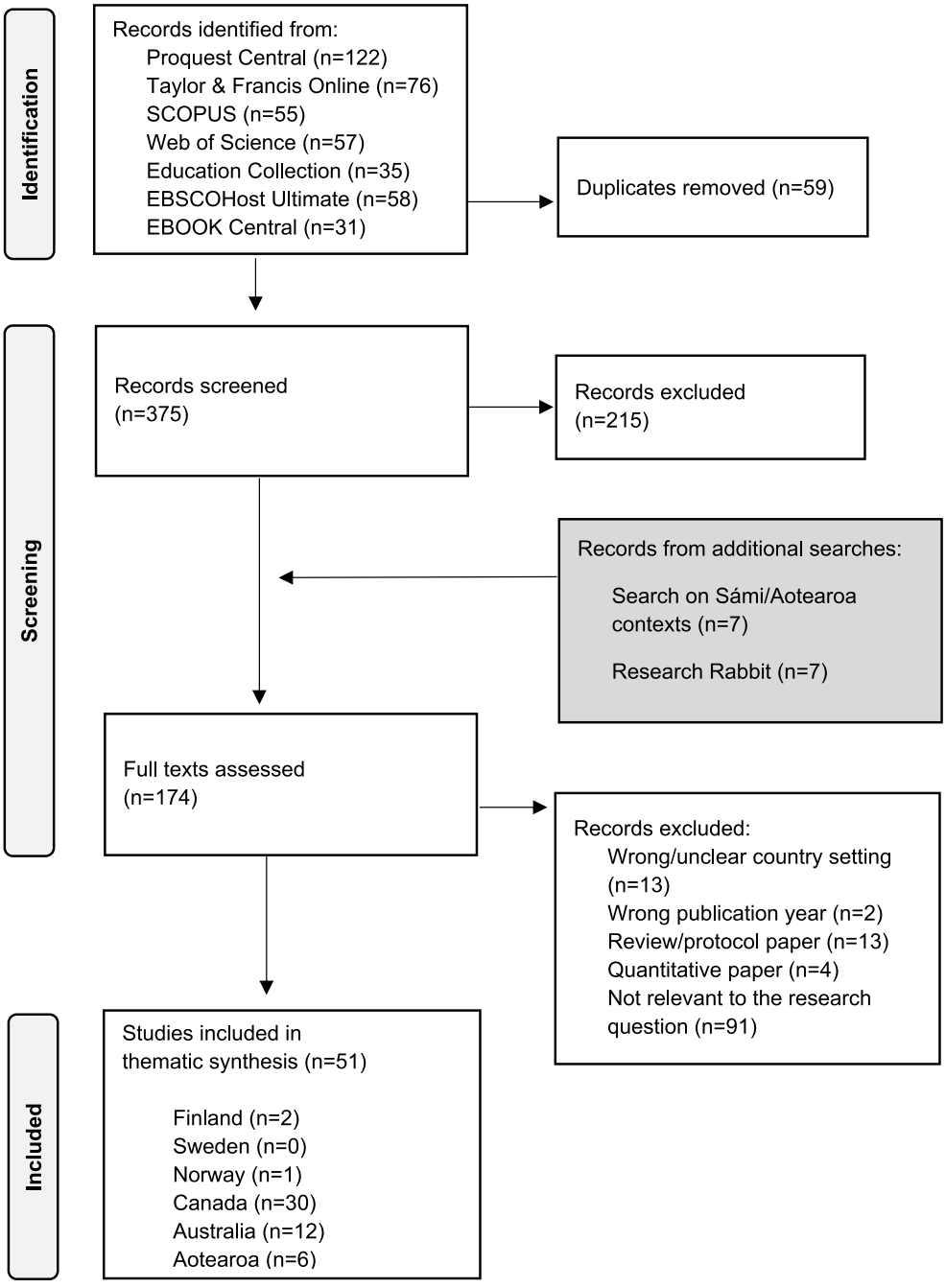

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of literature identification process (Page et al., 2021).

Rabbit (including keyword checks in Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian languages) to ensure our review did not miss a significant cluster of literature. The flowchart in Figure 1 illustrates the literature identification process.

Our quality assessment relied on the trust that the peer-review process upheld common quality criteria alignment with the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist for qualitative research (CASP, 2018). We nevertheless considered the quality and risk of bias for each record, especially concerning reflections of colonial dynamics and author positionality. The review includes records with Indigenous author(s) ($n = 22$), solely non-Indigenous/settler author(s) ($n = 16$), and some with undisclosed author positionalities ($n = 13$). No title was removed from the review for being too "low" in quality/reflexivity.

3.2. Data synthesis

We approached the literature in the framework of thematic synthesis, an approach based on identifying recurring notions from qualitative literature. Thematic synthesis proceeds in three stages; (1) the detailed coding of the text, (2) the construction of *descriptive themes* (DTs) remaining "near" the primary literature, and (3) the generation of *analytical themes* (ATs) that cluster relevant descriptive themes and move "beyond" them, enabling the development of new interpretive constructs (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The first author had the main responsibility for coding and theme generation, but the themes were modified and agreed upon between all authors. The Atlas.ti qualitative research tool was used in the coding process.

In this paper, each data excerpt acknowledges the context of origin to locate each conceptualisation and its "translatability" to the theme. However, by operating within several contexts and the theoretical realm, a synthesis can deliberately move to a higher level of abstraction (Britten et al., 2002, as cited in Thomas & Harden, 2008). Therefore, in the following chapters, we discuss the reviewed literature (identifiable from the country context in the reference) as well as complementary literature (with standard reference) that expands our understanding.

4. Findings

Exploring educational conceptualisations of/around settler ignorance (RQ1), we constructed three analytical themes that each introduce a conceptualised "dimension" of settler ignorance: *Settler ignorance as contested knowledge-making; Settler ignorance as a wilful position;* and *Settler ignorance as a structural legacy*. In Figure 2, we outline the interconnections between the analytical themes and the descriptive themes that anchor them.

As we shifted our attention to possible approaches to interrupting settler ignorance (RQ2), we found that the literature had identified a range of means signifying three analytical themes: *Rethinking content, Promoting relationality,* and *Accepting accountability*. In Figure 3, we illustrate these conceptual themes and their founding descriptive themes.

For the sake of clarity, the themes are discussed here separately. However, as the overlap in our figures illustrates, the sub-sections should be read as interconnected dimensions and pressure points of the epistemological "knot" of settler ignorance (see Rice et al., 2022, Canada).

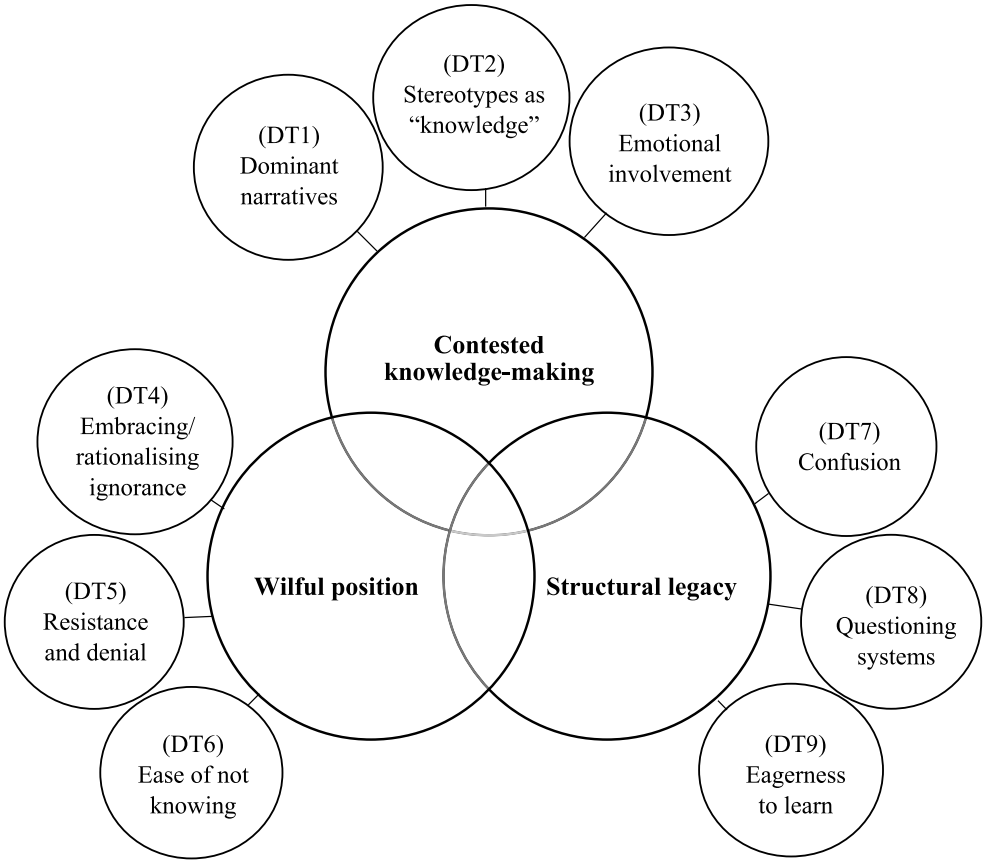

Figure 2. ATs and DTs on conceptualisations of settler ignorance (RQ1).

4.1. Many faces of ignorance

4.1.1. Settler ignorance as contested knowledge-making

Our review found cross-contextual recognition of the complex nature of knowledge-formation. Knowledge-making in settler-colonial contexts was seen mediated by the (inter)-subjective forces of national and subjective beliefs (i.e. our existing "knowledge") and emotions. Informed by the recurring notions of such contestations, this analytical theme builds on three descriptive themes – *dominant narratives* (DT1), *stereotypes as "knowledge"* (DT2), and *emotional involvement* (DT3). The following literature example conceptualises the internalised narratives and the unsettling process of challenging them, thus exemplifying both DT1 and DT3:

> Decolonising discourse is unsettling. By asking students to consider that the things they "know" about Australian history are not only limited by the exclusion of certain "facts", "events" and "evidence" from dominant national narratives, but also by historically and culturally specific forms of recognising knowledge, meaning and truth, we ask them to step into that unsettling space. (Musgrove & Wolfe, 2022, p. 132, Australia)

Alongside the above, reviewed studies reported that contextualised understanding of Indigenous and colonial realities entails reconsidering the narrow narratives that have

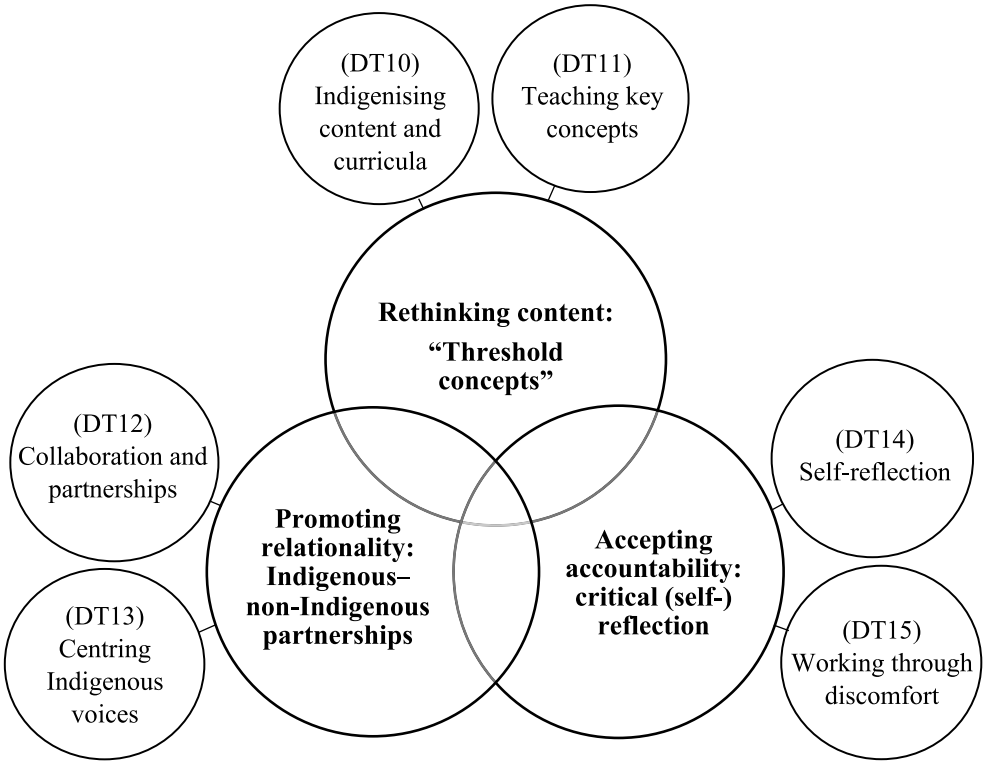

Figure 3. ATs and DTs on educational approaches to settler ignorance (RQ2).

long excluded and stereotyped the Indigenous population and are yet validated in settler-colonial education – including discourses of colonial "innocence" and settler entitlement to lands and assimilatory strategies (e.g. Davison, 2021, Aotearoa; Godlewska, Schaefli, et al., 2013, Canada; Kohvakka, 2022, Finland). The negotiations pinpoint how what we "think we know" about Indigeneity and settler–Indigenous histories can mediate ignorance: our existing knowledge, even flawed, remains privileged in our thinking and guides our judgements about new evidence (Alcoff, 2007). One recurring example of "knowledge" based on misrepresentation was the positioning of Indigenous realities in the *past*, as if colonial violence was a regrettable but now distant episode in history:

> Embedded within Respondent 4's discussion of residential schools is the often-mistaken assumption that Canada's colonial relation to Indigenous peoples is a thing of the past. Understanding the present as a break from our collective colonial past obscures the social, political, and economic continuities that enable a critical contextualization of Indigenous and settler realities under settler colonialism. (Sylvestre et al., 2019, p. 4, Canada)

This excerpt negotiates not only the prevalence of the past-placing narrative, but also its power in obscuring the contemporary context and relevance of Indigenous perspectives. This theme thus echoes Mills' (2007) explanation of ignorance as not only a shortage of "true" beliefs, but also a presence of "false beliefs". Endorsing "false" accounts of settler–Indigenous dynamics that allow distancing from settler-colonial

processes were conceptualised as benefiting settler interests (Schaefli et al., 2018, Canada; White & Castleden, 2022, Canada).

Affective interests emerged as particularly noteworthy regarding acceptance of knowledge and, by extension, ignorance. As Rice et al. (2022, Canada) observe, "it is unlikely that people develop deep commitments to dominant accounts through cognition alone. Knowledge and ignorance are also tethered to emotion" (p. 16). The following excerpt addresses the emotional interests in embracing "knowledge" based on stereotypical/past-placing Indigenous imagery:

> When white teachers hold "knowledge" of the "vanishing Indian", it has the effect of downplaying the devastating impacts of ongoing colonisation on Indigenous peoples and assuaging feelings of guilt through preservation of that which is perceived as destroyed. (Higgins et al., 2015, p. 266, Canada)

The affective dimension can manifest in many ways: Yukich (2021, Aotearoa) describes how information about local colonialism "[may irrupt] emotional responses […] including anger, loss, anxiety, indifference, resentment and guilt" (p. 186). Fear was also identified as reproducing settler ignorance (e.g. Giovanangeli & Snepvangers, 2021, Australia), rising from addressing "difficult" matters which permeate Indigenous studies. The "difficulty" stems from several factors: dealing with stories of trauma and power is discomforting, especially when it involves groups with which learners identify, and may trigger a dilemma about how to respond to these unsettling insights (Bullen & Roberts, 2019, Australia; Zembylas, 2017). As Indigenous studies address injustices that come close in terms of space, time, and identity, the emotional reactions they propel may be "out of proportion to those of students studying other traumatic histories such as the Holocaust" (Musgrove & Wolfe, 2022, Australia, p. 126).

The affective mediation of knowledge was backed by a variety of theoretical perspectives, including Sara Ahmed's work with affect theory (e.g. 2004) and ideas of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Despite the heterogeneity in theoretical locations, there was considerable alignment regarding the relevance of affect in knowledge formation, both as a factor that can block knowledge and, simultaneously, as one that can be essential in creating catalysts for change (Ahmed, 2004). This double-sided power was recognised, for example, in Aotearoa:

> Compulsory teaching of Aotearoa New Zealand histories is an exciting step towards broadening consciousness of past and present injustice, but teachers must be attentive to the ambivalent emotional terrain that will both *help* and *hinder* Pākehā [non-Indigenous New Zealanders] students' learning. (Russell, 2021, p. 50, Aotearoa, emphasis added)

The dilemmatic confluence of new knowledge, existing beliefs, and emotions may inform investments in *resistance*. This observation bridges us to our next theme: negotiating settler ignorance as *wilful* ignorance.

4.1.2. Settler ignorance as a wilful position

Our review revealed recurring reports of resistance and "claiming" ignorance in settler–Indigenous educational contexts, implying the presence of a wilful and active dimension. This analytical theme grounds on three descriptive themes that together provide insights into conscious processes: *Embracing/rationalising ignorance* (DT4), *Resistance and denial*

(DT5), and *Ease of not knowing* (DT6). Thus, this theme reinforces the notion of colonial ignorance as distinct from a passive "lack of information" (also Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) and instead acknowledges settler incentives and opportunities to engage in not-knowing.

The negotiations in the literature addressed the connection between ignorance and active denial of Indigenous experiences, inclusion, or relationships (e.g. Hardwick, 2015, Canada; Macdonald et al., 2018, Australia; Tupper, 2014, Canada). Wilful ignorance also appeared as more subtle avoidance of or resistance towards Indigenous perspectives in teaching and learning. The following excerpts exemplify these issues in their conceptualisations of, first, the avoidance of "difficult" colonial issues in teaching, and second, the prevalence of resistance among both current and future educators:

> New Zealand's colonial history includes many injustices and contentious issues that are perceived as difficult to approach in the history classroom and therefore avoided by some teachers. There is also a sense that history teachers are more comfortable engaging either with largely uncontentious New Zealand history […] or a contentious past when it is safely drawn from an overseas context. (Davison, 2021, p. 93, Aotearoa)

> [O]ne thing that pre-service teachers are being introduced to, in their educational journey towards teaching in Australia, is the concept that they are now required to at least have an understanding of the Indigenous students and content that they will be expected to teach in Australian schools. With so much fear and resistance in the existing teaching workforce, it is no surprise that pre-service teachers also experience and often exhibit similar behaviours in their teacher training at university. (Rogers, 2017, p. 34, Australia)

Conscious resistance surfaces in how personal ignorance and withdrawal are actively *rationalised*. Rationalising indicates a purposive inclination to self-assure and negotiate a way (back) to the unknowing position that then becomes unexplained by mere access to information. The literature reports that rationalisations often appeal to questions of background and positionality, questioning whether it is relevant, fair, and appropriate to address Indigenous and colonial matters by/among everyone (e.g. Higgins et al., 2015, Canada; Marom, 2016, Canada). The above-quoted Rogers (2017, Australia) continues to describe this questioning:

> Questions have been asked of me as a lecturer in this space including, why such content is necessary […] and why all teachers should be forced to include Indigenous perspectives if they don't all teach Indigenous students? (p. 34)

Another identified rationalisation invoked the question of (un)accountability for ignorance, indicating an awareness of its presence yet a reluctance to claim agency:

> [W]e compiled a large repository … to expand [teacher candidates'] awareness on all matters Indigenous or, at the very least, to preclude the inexcusable yet oft-repeated rationale that many teachers hold: they cannot teach this material or content since they never learned it during their own K-16 educations or they cannot source appropriate resources. (Korteweg & Fiddler, 2018, p. 259, Canada)

The prevalence of these evasions reflects what Dion (2007) has called the settler "ease" in embracing the "perfect stranger" position towards Indigenous peoples; Dion explains how ignorance may not only be about what we do (not) know, but also what we *refuse* to know and feel comfortable knowing. Experts in decolonial education have discussed how denying relationships to and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and colonialism is

a response to the uncomfortable realisation of how much effort and temporal liability may accompany limited knowledge and colonial complicity (Tuck & Yang, 2012; also Dion, 2007). Consequently, some reviewed conceptualisations defined wilful ignorance as having a "strategic" foundation. "Strategic amnesia" in settler-colonial societies validates the settlers' sense of belonging and innocence (MacDonald et al., 2021, Aotearoa) but at the cost of creating particularly preserved forms of ignorance (Godlewska et al., 2020, Canada).

Resistance and reluctance were found to be overwhelming responses to engagement with Indigenous–settler dynamics, especially among non-Indigenous educators/instructors (e.g. Doria et al., 2021, Canada; Grant, 2016, Aotearoa; Higgins et al., 2015, Canada). This finding is worrisome, given the acknowledged autonomy educators have over Indigenous perspectives' inclusion in education, an emphasis often neither directly supported nor limited on the institutional level (Lamb & Godlewska, 2021, Canada; Mattila et al., 2023). Highlighting the prevalence of resistance is not to place disproportionate blame on educators, nor to argue that the barriers regarding lack of educational preparation, resources, and confidence are not real issues. Given the level of ignorance that saturates social structures, which we will explore next, hesitation is unsurprising. However, in the light of contemporary understanding, there are few valid reasons for leaving leeway for denial and self-validating avoidance: as Povey et al. (2023, Australia) state, "claiming ignorance does not absolve the individual or the institution of accountability" (p. 1).

4.1.3. Settler ignorance as a structural legacy

While the notions of (settler) interests underpinning the previous analytical themes appear as a considerable dimension of settler ignorance, the third emerging theme suggested a distinct and complementary viewpoint. The reviewed literature conceptualised that wilful and actively navigated ignorance exists in educational settings alongside expressions of *confusion* (DT7), *questioning systems* (DT8), and *eagerness to learn* (DT9). These perspectives contribute to an understanding of ignorance as a systematically and institutionally fuelled phenomenon, that is, one also unintentionally adopted from the settler-colonial system.

The literature discussed how the patterns of questioning, surprise, and even shock when individuals encounter new knowledge about Indigenous and colonial matters signal a surfacing of structural ignorance. Confusion was identified across contexts; in Aotearoa ("' … at the moment you hear all of these people saying, 'Why didn't we learn [our history] at school?'" [Yukich, 2021, p. 189]); in Australia, ("'Why didn't I know this? What's going on?'" [Bullen & Roberts, 2019, p. 484]); and in Canada and Finland:

> The majority of non-Indigenous educators interviewed were vaguely aware of the history of mistreatment and discrimination against Canada's Indigenous Peoples. […] As one teacher stated, "I was so ignorant to it; why don't people know more? I can't believe that I didn't know". (Milne, 2017, p. 6, Canada)

> Many of the students reported […] that it was surprising to realize that they had not previously problematized their lack of knowledge regarding [the] topics [of Arctic visual culture and Sámi culture]. (Hiltunen et al., 2021, p. 273, Finland)

Instead of acting as a pretext for purposive avoidance (the "*ease" in not knowing* discussed above), questioning *why* signals an onset of awareness and problematisation of the

surrounding knowledge structures. Battiste (2013, Canada) describes how the colonial hierarchies embedded and promoted by our institutions have subjected most settler-colonial societies to deeply collective ignorance and thus obscured it as an unchallenged "norm". This notion of a structuralised dimension is expanded when ignorance is conceptualised as "more ideologically neutral than what the aforementioned examples [on wilful opposition to decolonial initiatives] imply" (Aitken et al., 2021, p. 102, Canada). Further, settler ignorance is inherited not only by settlers but Indigenous peoples as well, despite ignorance being a much less convenient structure for the "ignored" (Alcoff, 2007):

> [The survey] is not aimed at First Nations, Metis, or Inuit students, though some did take the survey and as most have been educated in the provincial systems, many had the same gaps in their education and understanding. … Arguably, unawareness of Aboriginal realities by Aboriginal people is disheartening. (Godlewska et al., 2017, p. 606, Canada)

Recognising that ignorance may be inherited involuntarily does not shift contemporary accountability, nor does it downplay its consequences. Rather, identifying the structural dimension suggests that ignorance is a complex problem transcending the individual and their interests; it is the outcome of a long systematic socialisation in collective silences, which also produces ignorance *of* ignorance and is intertwined with broad social inequalities (see Godlewska et al., 2017, Canada; Mills, 2007). In the context of higher education, Kuokkanen (2007), too, cautions against collapsing ignorance of Indigenous worldviews to epistemic tendencies or "cultural conflict" – instead, attention should be drawn to ongoing acts of colonial power embedded in institutions.

Without underestimating the structural dimension, the ripples of confusion may be concurrently read to signal receptivity to anti-ignorance work. The reviewed studies identified an emerging eagerness to learn about/with/from Indigenous peoples and discussed how such learning can trigger transformations of perspectives and attitudes:

> These techniques encourage students to think critically about and engage with their relationships and knowledge about Indigenous peoples. Overall course feedback demonstrates student satisfaction […] "This is a fantastic course. I feel like this should be compulsory for all […] The significance it has on our lives, and the potential benefits it has for indigenous peoples and western peoples alike, is astounding". (Nursey-Bray, 2019, p. 336, Australia)

In line with Johnson's (1996, as cited in Taylor & Habibis, 2020) findings, this theme thus explores how negotiations in settler-colonial education should not be approached with the (rather discouraging) accusation of solely "chosen" ignorance, but with an acknowledgement of the capacity for curiosity and solidarity. Conceptualisations like these raise hope that educational tools and interventions, which we turn to next, may have a measurable impact. It is a hope in which studies such as the present review, focusing on making ignorance addressable, are located (also Taylor & Habibis, 2020).

4.2. Many roads to (un)learning

4.2.1. Rethinking content: "threshold concepts"

Proceeding to examine negotiated approaches to addressing settler ignorance, we found recurring recommendations to provide more comprehensive and sustainable teaching of

Indigenous/decolonial educational content. While a predictable suggestion, *indigenising content and curricula* (DT10) was mentioned as having the potential to raise settler awareness and provide assurance that may relieve initial resistance (e.g. Deer, 2013, Canada; Hogarth, 2022, Australia). In some records, the authors negotiated the special meaning of *teaching key concepts* (DT11) in Indigenous studies:

> [Indigenous studies'] core content, methodologies, and epistemologies do not count among the "common knowledge" of most of its students. Consequently, Indigenous issues require teaching basic content to a degree perhaps not seen in many other disciplines. We can expect students to have a basic understanding of the chronology of Canadian history, for instance; but experience has demonstrated that we cannot expect them to understand the fundamental concepts of colonialism. (Augustus, 2015, p. 5, Canada)

The literature supplied the interesting notion of "threshold concepts" to describe such (potentially difficult) key concepts that are critical to understanding the studied Indigenous perspectives (Meyer & Land, 2006, as cited in Augustus, 2015, Canada; Page, 2014, Australia). For example, basic facts about (ongoing) colonialism were observed as threshold concepts for understanding Indigenous/decolonial realities, both in the above extract and elsewhere: Kohvakka (2022, Finland), for example, discusses how unlearning exclusive narratives necessitates "thorough examination of … Finland's role in colonialism overseas and in Sápmi (the Sámi home region)" (p. 89).

Indeed, threshold work is also a question of *un*learning, as the adoption of key concepts may require unpacking and transforming existing "knowledge". The role of unlearning is described, for example, in the context of an Indigenous studies course made compulsory in a Canadian teacher education programme:

> A main objective of the course is to "fill the gaps" in the pre-service teacher's school experiences in regards to the lack of knowledge about Aboriginal education, […] [O]ne of the first stages in entering this new "space" consists of "unlearning" certain ways of understanding the world; appreciating that the knowledge that emerges from such an examination will inescapably challenge students to explore and interrogate their own ways of understanding. (Rodríguez de France et al., 2017, pp. 91–92, Canada)

Negotiations within, and the creation of, individual courses, programmes, or project-based initiatives are identified as common strategies for creating spaces to (un)learn Indigenous and colonial concepts. Such additive or short-term approaches are perhaps perceived as "easier" than fundamental educational reforms but have also been criticised for their limited efficacy in interrupting ignorance and inequality (Kasa et al., 2024; Lamb & Godlewska, 2021, Canada). Studies argued for more coherent inclusion of Indigenous content across educational units (e.g. Laliberté et al., 2015, Canada) and reported that in some contexts, this had been enforced by national or institution-level educational policy:

> The curricular obligation given to all teacher education institutions to provide knowledge about and perspectives on Sámi society, history, language and rights is an important driving factor. […] This means that such knowledge and perspectives need to be part of all aspects of the programme. When teaching national history, students need to be asked […] how the Sámi were impacted by Norwegian independence […] Inclusion through systematic articulation may be a fruitful measure. (Somby & Olsen, 2022, p. 11, Norway)

Enforcing Indigenous content at the policy level is seen as a generally well-received strategy that benefits both non-Indigenous and Indigenous people (Milne, 2017, Canada). However, as Stewart (2016, Aotearoa) warns, policy reforms cannot be expected to turn the tide immediately, as old conventions tend to persist among stakeholders and educators. Sámi scholars Somby and Olsen (2022, Norway) stress the translation of policy into practice and call for the teaching of Indigenous concepts to be supported by the training of teachers. Any reform of educational content should indeed acknowledge that many educators are themselves implicated in the common ignorance and resistance and that mere policy statements may, consequently, prove fruitless (see Dion, 2007; Zembylas, 2017). The coexisting importance and complicity of educators places demands on teacher education: as Hogarth (2022, Australia) articulates, "if 'they [students/future classroom teachers] must learn', then [Initial Teacher Education] academics *must teach* [Indigenous] histories and cultures" (p. 9, emphasis original). Hogarth goes on to elaborate:

> The assumption that policy makes – that academics are either knowledgeable and/or comfortable in embedding Indigenous peoples' knowledges and perspectives – needs to be addressed and strategies to assist and support academics collated and considered. This requires a transformation within institutions, a shift in the ways they work and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, knowledges, histories, cultures and languages. (Hogarth, 2022, p. 14, Australia)

Given this understanding and the recent scholarly insights into teacher education systems' limitations in interrupting cycles of ignorance (e.g. Mattila et al., 2023; Williams & Morris, 2022, Australia), Indigenous content support is also relevant for educators *of* educators, further demonstrating the need for simultaneous advances on many levels. Further, content negotiations regarding *what*, *how*, *where*, and *to whom* Indigenous matters should be taught involve power of definition, and thus there is a need to ensure that power is channelled (back) to Indigenous peoples themselves (Kuokkanen, 2007). The purposeful redistribution of authority overlaps with our next theme regarding *partnerships* and *relationality* in confronting settler ignorance.

4.2.2. Promoting relationality: Indigenous–non-Indigenous partnerships

The literature discussed the confrontation of settler ignorance as fundamentally shared work involving *collaboration and partnerships* (DT12) and *centring Indigenous voices* (DT13). The conceptualisations forming this theme emphasised addressing a relational problem alongside an informational one (Kerr et al., 2022, Canada): we reviewed advocation for diverse forms of Indigenous–non-Indigenous dialogue, including promotion of Indigenous-led spaces for teaching and thoughtful engagement with Indigenous perspectives via film, art, and/or storytelling (e.g. Castleden et al., 2013, Canada; Hiltunen et al., 2021, Finland). The conceptualisations emphasised the foundational nature of partnerships, seeing the capacity in non-superficial agendas, in particular:

> [P]erhaps one way to [create spaces that include Indigenous worldviews, cultures, practices, and values alongside non-Indigenous ones] is through partnerships. […] [I]t must be noted that for Indigenous communities, establishing partnerships means something much more than consultation and collaboration; partnerships often refer to the establishment of long-term equitable relationships based on mutual desire, need, and benefit, and on mutual sharing and responsibility. (Aitken et al., 2021, p. 106, Canada)

The literature included invitations to advance the recruitment and support of Indigenous teaching faculty. Opportunities to learn from and connect with Indigenous teachers and experts were conceptualised as valuable for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as Indigenous experience and knowledge were seen to bring validity, relevance, and vital representation to Indigenous education (Deer, 2013, Canada; Rogers, 2017, Australia). First-hand contacts were also negotiated to facilitate experiences of (inter)personal connectedness, or relationality (Donald, 2012), the significance of which was elaborated across contexts:

> [T]here were examples in each research site that demonstrated the educative and relational potential of authentic engagement between teachers and Aboriginal people. It was clear that these relationships brought staff and community members into a relational trajectory that underpinned productive interactions and significant educative collaborations. (Lowe, 2017, p. 49, Australia)

Since colonial logic and ignorance draw from the *denial* of relationality – the pattern of thought that contemporary settlers have nothing to do with colonialism and have insufficient experience to relate to Indigenous realities – understanding of and engagement with relatedness to the lives of others can be powerful in reframing perspectives (Donald, 2012). The literature exemplified how a stance on shared reality parallels evolving relationships with Indigenous rights:

> [T]he participants had evolved an active stance towards the distinct and entwined histories of Māori and settlers, an orientation that existed alongside their hopes for a more just future involving an activated Treaty relationship. (Yukich, 2021, p. 195, Aotearoa)

Bissell and Korteweg (2016, Canada) further emphasise relationality in the context of reconciliatory education: the authors report that education benefits from the normalisation of first-hand Indigenous connections rather than mere reproduction of detached, abstracted, or textbook accounts. First-hand testimonies may be particularly valuable in interrupting settler ignorance, as they may also destabilise emotional defences (Rice et al., 2022, Canada). However, prioritising Indigenous teachership does not equate to unequally divided work. Assigning the Indigenous-relevant emphases fully to Indigenous teachers "isn't always possible[,] [n]or does it absolve non-Indigenous teachers from the responsibility of educating themselves" (McCauley & Matheson, 2018, p. 298, Canada). Thus, while centring Indigenous leadership is key in relevant relationship-building and awareness-raising, non-Indigenous people should also be available and involved:

> Given the serious under-representation of Indigenous academics and leaders in Western academia, the solution must be sought collaboratively, rather than assuming Indigenous people will carry the full burden to guide and manage the process of education and reconciliation and engage in appropriate research and teaching to see it go forward in a meaningful way. Again, it is important that allies be invited to serve, support, and collaborate on further Indigenous interests and perspectives, rather than assuming primary leadership in this work. (Morcom & Freeman, 2018, p. 829, Canada)

Other reviewed records echoed the precondition of settlers' and institutions' aptitude to reposition themselves as collaborators and listeners so that the work does not simply (re)centre settler agency over Indigenous agency (e.g. Russell, 2021, Aotearoa). Thus, the critical interrogation of long undisputed positionalities is also central to relationality

work – we cannot fully (re)orient towards or understand each other (and the world) if we disregard our own roles. This notion brings us to our final analytical theme, namely, *(self-) reflection* and *accountability* over colonial outlooks.

4.2.3. Accepting accountability: critical (self-)reflection

Acknowledging the many conceptualised faces of settler ignorance – simultaneously working at personal, institutional, and social levels (Schaefli & Godlewska, 2019, Canada) – our reviewed literature reported the need for critical processes of *(self-)reflection* (DT14) and *working through discomfort* (DT15). The literature recognised that, in addition to an examination of Indigenous and colonial circumstances, the critical gaze challenging the contemporary ignorance should be turned inwards:

> Tutors acknowledged the vital role of self in the critical reflection process: "[by the second assessment students realise] … actually this is about me. And about how I am engaging. Not so much about learning about Aboriginal people". The same tutor extended […] "I think it's that invitational process that enables them to actually realize that the whole question of cultural safety is actually about how a person sits in themselves really". (Bullen & Roberts, 2019, p. 485, Australia)

As introduced in this extract and reiterated elsewhere, incorporating invitations for the locating-of-the-self process was considered vital for Indigenous-relevant education. Reflections on the responsibilities, limitations, and influences of one's own starting points facilitate (and are even essential for) the effective recognition of prevailing colonial realities, as is underlined in Canada:

> [S]ettler-colonial regimes reproduce and indeed, require ignorance on the part of those who carry it out. This dynamic explains why no amount of evidence alone will remedy historical erasure or reconcile relationships with Indigenous peoples until settlers become aware of and challenge their culpability for colonial conditions. (Rice et al., 2022, p. 18, Canada)

The meanings given to self-awareness and reflection imply the simultaneous obscuring of the minority *and* majority standpoints within the self-perpetuating circle of ignorance, for which key concepts and roles may stay obscured without a deliberate "nudge" in the right direction. According to Alcoff (2007), a type of "crisis" is needed to initiate the interrogation of one's existing knowledge and self-image. Crisis as a concept signals a deeper and more uncomfortable learning process, and consequently, the literature expects both invitations and support from education to sustain the reflective processes. As the literature conceptualises, anti-ignorance approaches may be rendered ineffective (or even counterproductive) if they disregard the dimensions of reflective and affective struggle (also Zembylas, 2017):

> [G]iven the ideological implications of learning about New Zealand history and the challenge this poses to a narrative of racial harmony, there may be a doubling-down of settler affirmations if the emotional and affective work accompanying difficult histories is not taken seriously. (MacDonald et al., 2021, p. 177, Aotearoa)

> Our findings further underscore the risk that a lack of genuine critical reflection by education students, particularly critical self-examination, could play in widening existing educational gaps. (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017, p. 20, Canada)

Supporting reflective processes in education is a balancing act: Korteweg and Fiddler (2018, Canada) report the challenge in "provoking real points of discomfort in revealing truths of history between Indigenous and Canadian, while providing a safe enough affective environment in the university classroom" (p. 260). Amidst the need to navigate affective and wilful defences, there are calls to exercise caution regarding overly accommodating approaches that prioritise settler emotions over the injustices testified by the marginalised – that is, to approach the emotional difficulties and subsequent resistance strategically, yet critically (see Dion, 2007; Zembylas, 2017). Once the first unsettling threshold of recognising ignorance is crossed, educational openings to transformative reflection have been shown to inspire personal passion and a sense of agency toward Indigenous/colonial issues that may trickle beyond the official education moments (Godlewska, Massey, et al., 2013, Canada; Mackinlay & Barney, 2014, Australia; Mashford-Pringle & Nardozi, 2013, Canada).

5. Discussion

For Cook (2018), settler ignorance is something that the settler colonial order requires to sustain and justify itself, and thus the version of the world that has detached and discredited Indigenous experience has been systematically cultivated into a settler "common sense". The deep-rooted resistance and socially normalised disconnection identified in this review parallel this notion, signalling the influence and adaptability of colonial structures in education. Following our synthesis, we comprehend the value of broad conceptual frameworks in the study of colonial ignorance and its underlying mechanisms. Higgins et al. (2015), for example, use the metaphor of "colonial cloak" alongside ignorance to illustrate how settlers shield themselves from unsettling knowledge and deny the complicity and impacts white/settler privilege imposes on their lives (also Dion, 2007). The term "ignorance" encompasses numerous connotations, and it is essential not to conflate a concept so deeply intertwined in the fabric of settler colonialism with cognitive shortcomings alone.

The diverse themes discussed in this paper have implications for current and future education and policymaking. Primarily, building cultural capacity involves increased commitments to relationality, accountability, and cooperation, rather than incorporation of facts *about* the "cultural Other" in curricula (also McCandless et al., 2022). Further, constructive engagement with the affective dimension in settler–Indigenous education could benefit from a twofold structure: acknowledging mutual vulnerability and connectedness regarding difficult settler-colonial lessons, while simultaneously recognising the distinct asymmetry of colonial burdens (Russell, 2021, Aotearoa; Zembylas, 2017).

The reviewed studies centred particularly on settler ignorance in specific contexts – which is paramount, given the diversity and context-specific nuances of settler–Indigenous societies. However, while we are wary of making generalisations from contextually asymmetric literature (and of reproducing colonial logic of universalisation), the apparent consistencies identified in this review suggest that engaging in transnational solution-seeking could benefit educational endeavours and, thus, the scarcity of cross-contextual dialogue signals a gap in educational scholarship. Consulting both local and global understandings could help us navigate the contextuality *and* (semi-)universal mechanisms of the settler standpoint – that is, how advantaged group identities can, paradoxically, be

epistemically disadvantaged, as a privileged position creates obliviousness to and disinterest in dominant social scripts and their critique (Alcoff, 2007).

Further, opportunities to learn from a range of initiatives and Indigenous knowledges, not essentialised to solely "traditional" and "local" but with global value (see Battiste, 2013, Canada), could advance the development of anti-ignorance interventions especially in contexts where research is still limited. The Nordic Sámi countries represent such contexts: it is a finding in itself that the Nordics accounted for a minimal share of the identified literature (Finland $N = 2$, Sweden $N = 0$, Norway $N = 1$). This imbalance does not propose that ignorance is less of a problem in this region than elsewhere, as addressing public knowledge about the Sámi has been highlighted, for example, in local TRCs' main goals (Prime Minister's Office, 2021; Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). Rather, it pinpoints the deep-rooted (mis)conceptions of the Nordics' colonially "untainted" histories (e.g. Keskitalo et al., 2016) and "exceptionalism" regarding societal and educational equality (Kasa et al., 2024) which contribute to why mainstream discussion on decolonisation in the Nordics is recent – or, arguably, yet to truly begin.

Stronger recognition and inclusion of Indigenous peoples is critical, as Indigenous rights are under constant pressures from prevailing racism, climate change, and political and economic transitions (ECRI, 2019; IWGIA, 2024). Education may not be the sole cause of settler ignorance, but it continues to be responsible for its continuation (Godlewska et al., 2010). As discussed, formal education has been a central instrument of the colonial project, and scholars have rightly questioned existing educational endeavours' true alignment with decolonisation (e.g. Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, our reviewed literature appears hopeful on educational interventions' potential and discusses how knowledge-raising and decolonisation efforts "can have the greatest effect in the educational system" (Godlewska et al., 2017, p. 607, Canada). To find a balance between educational potential and the prevailing need for decolonial critique, we could adopt what Russell (2021, Aotearoa) calls "critical hope": naïve hope tends to embrace the status quo and settler aspiration to "reconcile and move on", but *critical* hope can serve to co- and rebuild society while encompassing the (unsettling) notion of a fundamental reform of power (also Ahmed, 2004). Thus, our review joins the calls to confront the distress and fundamentality of colonial processes and suggests that undertaking settler ignorance is one – but *only* one – frontier in the process of decolonisation.

6. Limitations

This cross-contextual review was approached with an openness to differences and similarities in negotiations of settler ignorance, the latter emerging with such prominence that they became the focus of the thematic approach. While each theme would have been worthy of more detailed exploration, the scope of this review was to provide an overview of recurring conceptualisations and to enhance understanding of a relatively unexplored phenomenon. Thematic synthesis can hardly be expected to provide a "perfect" synopsis of a complex topic or an exhaustive account of the literature's heterogeneity, but for such concept-formation purposes it offers a valuable method (Lucas et al., 2007).

We chose the databases and set the inclusion and exclusion criteria with careful consideration, for reasons related to ensuring a systematic and retraceable review procedure.

Consequently, however, we acknowledge partaking in certain colonial/Eurocentric practices: established English-language and peer-reviewed formats may favour studies of certain conventions, voices, and methods (Smith, 2012), and thus including non-English and "grey" literature could have acted as a diversifying approach. Further, we acknowledge that the overrepresentation of Canadian literature may impact our conclusions, as Canada's distinct Indigenous aspirations and circumstances may not be fully translatable to other contexts. We have strived to be mindful of the Canadian influence and to ensure that each of our themes is informed by multiple contexts. More research is needed on the specificities of settler ignorance in the less studied contexts, as well as the reasons behind the literature discrepancy. Is the stage of the local truth process, for example, influencing the scope of educational debate?

Our choices and interpretations depend inseparably on our positionality as non-Indigenous scholars and are mediated by the languages, experiences, and contextual information available to us. We have sought to compensate for our positional bias by holding our review to high standards of transparency and data-drivenness. Otherwise put, we did not impose a pre-(settler-)defined framework on our thematisation, and we offered abundant literature extracts to enable assessment of our scientific thought. This review should be considered one thread in a broader conversation, and we encourage future studies (especially from Indigenous starting points) to complement our findings.

7. Conclusion

Our thematic synthesis, through which we examined how settler ignorance and means to confront it are conceptualised in the educational literature from six settler-colonial countries, identified how settler ignorance is negotiated as a complex phenomenon with epistemic, ontological, and affective dimensions. The most relevant dimensions and approaches should be assessed on a contextual basis, but based on the recurring themes, we can summarise our findings and their broader implications for education as follows:

(1) The active and structural layers of settler ignorance require multifaceted approaches that are simultaneously challenging enough to catalyse the interrogation of dominant assumptions, and sensitive enough to navigate the mutual – yet distinctly asymmetric – vulnerability.
(2) Appropriate anti-ignorance efforts recognise the relevance of Indigenous leadership, true dialogue, and relationality-building, anchoring in a contextual understanding while also learning from transnational debate.
(3) Working with critical hope is valuable when supporting the necessary (self-)reflection and constructive change in educational institutions.

The critical question inherent in addressing the relationship between education and ignorance is whether knowledge can have the capacity to generate the desired future (Godlewska et al., 2017, Canada). We cannot offer a definite answer, but our review signalled optimism about the power of increasing knowledge: as Augustus (2015, Canada) advocates, "awareness alone can lead to the kinds of changes we are seeking, or at the very least offer a first step" (p. 6).

Note

1. Truth/reconciliation processes can also be found in other contexts, but the focus of this study was on settler-colonial countries where formal reconciliation objectives direct particular attention to colonial mistreatment and Indigenous people(s). Commenting on the reconciliation processes is outside the scope of this paper, but such processes acted as indicators of which countries *should* be committed to negotiations of settler ignorance.

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