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# The Journal of Social Studies Research

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## “It is definitely not the priority”: A postcolonial inquiry of social studies education in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Accepted 17 October 2017

### ABSTRACT

This study employs a postcolonial lens to explore social studies education curriculum in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). By using a web-based open-ended questionnaire and an exhaustive recruitment strategy, every middle and high school social studies teacher in the CNMI had an opportunity to participate in this study. Questionnaire responses and follow-up interviews reveal the ways in which social studies education in the CNMI is convergent and divergent with mainland iterations of social studies and the complexity of continual normative renegotiation of education given its colonial relationship with the United States.

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### Geographical, historical, and educational background

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is located 1500 miles east of the Philippines and 1200 miles southeast of Japan. The CNMI includes 20 islands spread along a 500 mile arc containing 184 square miles of land distributed among 264,000 square miles of ocean. Saipan is the largest (47 square miles) and most populated island with 48,220 residents (90% of the CNMI) (Quimby, 2013) while Tinian (3136) and Rota (2527) are the other two inhabited islands among the CNMI. Recent DNA research suggests that Saipan's indigenous population arrived 4000 YBP from Island Southeast Asia (ISEA) and developed in isolation (Vilar et al., 2013).

In 1521, the Spanish colonized these islands, named them after Queen Mariana of Austria, and through disease, as well as war, the native population was reduced from 50,000–100,000 to 1000. The Spanish forcibly relocated the surviving native population to other islands (Vilar et al., 2013) and only in 1816 did Chamorro from Guam and the Caroline Islands began to repopulate Saipan (de los Santos, 2010). These Chamorro and Carolinians attempted to maintain their indigenous identities, languages, and cultures, while “acculturating to Spanish Catholicism, urban settlement, wage labour, and Westernized life styles” (Quimby, 2013, p. 465). As of 2010, the CNMI had 53,883 residents, including Filipino (19,017), Chamorro (12,902), Chinese (3659), Carolinian (2461), and “other Pacific Islanders” (3437). Korean (2253), “other Asian” (1979), “other ethnic origin” (1343) and two or more ethnic origins (6832) compose the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

After its loss in the Spanish American War (1898), Spain sold Saipan, as well as other islands, to Germany who held and occupied these islands until 1914, when Japan declared war, invaded, and occupied the present day CNMI. After WWI, the League of Nations assigned Saipan, as well as all the Mariana Islands, to Japan to be held in a trust (de los Santos, 2010). Whereas the Germans treated the islands as trading stations, the Japanese engaged in administration of their mandate “with

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2017.10.003>

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Please cite this article as: Misco, T. “It is definitely not the priority”: A postcolonial inquiry of social studies education in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. *The Journal of Social Studies Research* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2017.10.003>

an intensity of attention, purpose, and industry unrivaled elsewhere in the Pacific" (Peattie, 1988, p. 68). In 1944, the United States took possession of most of the present day CNMI, after the Battle of Saipan, which resulted in the death of over 3,000 U.S. troops, 30,000 Japanese troops, and 22,000 civilians (Goldberg, 2007).

Following the war, the United States maintained control of the islands that would become the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), the Federal States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau (ROP). Because the United States had taken possession of Guam prior to the war (1898) and reoccupied it in 1944 after losing control of it in 1941, it remained unincorporated. In total, these islands constitute the geographic construct of Micronesia (Heine, 2002). In an agreement with the United Nations, the U.S. held these islands under the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) with the understanding that the islands would eventually become self-determining and that the United States was "obligated to prepare these entities for self-government" (Heine, 2002, p. 2). The trusteeship disbanded in 1986, eight years after the CNMI voted for, and received, commonwealth status as an unincorporated territory of the United States. As such, the CNMI has its own government and constitution, as well as local control of wage, tax, and immigration policies. Chamorro, Carolinian, and English are the three official languages of the CNMI.

Within the purview of the TTPI, the U.S. Navy established a K-8 educational system that operated six days a week and introduced English as the sole language of instruction (Taylor, 1948). English represented a major obstacle for meaningful education because Japanese was the educational lingua franca for the previous 30 years and most Carolinians did not speak Chamorro, Korean, Japanese, or English (Taylor, 1948). Given that the U.S. Navy lacked a supply of trained English speaking teachers, and because all of the Japanese were repatriated, the navy "simply imported what they remembered of the American model from their own experience and imported it wholesale" (de los Santos, 2010, p. 122), of which social studies education was a part. Since the end of WWII, education in the Mariana Islands "has been prodded and coaxed toward a general U.S. model, with varying degrees of success" (de los Santos, 2010, p. 131).

## Relevant literature and framework

### *Postcolonialism*

This study is informed by a theoretical framework of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism is not simply a rupture in colonialism, but rather a contestation whereby people challenge oppressive elements of colonialism by reclaiming the voice of the once colonized and "decentering the locus of power" (Urrieta, 2004, p. 435). Postcolonialism offers a rethinking of knowledge and social identities which are "authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination" (Prakash, 1994, p. 1475). It helps to make visible the legacy of colonialism and how it "continues to shape most of our contemporary discourses and institutions" (Razvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006, p. 250).

The power of the colonizer is evident in many forms and institutions. Of particular interest within this study is how the legacy of colonial power shaped, and continues to influence, education within a currently colonized context. Colonization is not only physical, as there are psychological renderings of colonization and "unresolved feelings of inferiority" (Urrieta, 2004, p. 436). Education is where the legacies of colonialism and globalization intersect (Lavia & Mahlomaholo, 2012) and a decolonizing approach to curriculum and instruction seeks to "uncover, deconstruct, and interrogate the insidiousness of colonial discourses in the perpetuation of relationships of domination and subjugation" (Camicia & Bayon, 2012, p. 74).

The CNMI is situated within a colonial construct "located, bounded, defined, and described by a series of different colonial regimes whose efforts were self-serving and exploitative" (Clark, 2003, p. 155). Those within the CNMI face a long history of colonialism and powerful cultural influences including school curriculum, expatriate teachers not versed in local culture, and a potential lack of culturally relevant teaching (O'Neill & Spennemann, 2008). Postcolonialism does not treat the colonized as passive recipients, but rather as agents who can interpret, accommodate, and resist colonizer discourses while highlighting new and different contested stories (Bristol, 2012; Razvi et al., 2006). Decolonizing curriculum shifts educational intentions away from seemingly incontrovertible and universal enlightenment principles (Camicia & Bayon, 2012) and towards indigenous epistemologies (Razvi et al., 2006; Urrieta, 2004). As such, the research question guiding this study is: To what extent are the canonical principles of the mainland's iterative form of social studies education responsive to indigenous cultures and contexts of the CNMI?

The ultimate goal of conducting research within a postcolonial paradigm in education is to highlight those in societies with historical oppression to "apprehend their practice in a historical context and being to change it" (Bristol, 2012, p. 23) as well as "trouble, confront, contest, dismantle, and reconstruct old and new enclaves of colonialism" (Lavia & Mahlomaholo, 2012, p. 6). Postcolonialism is therefore pragmatic as it seeks socially just policies and practices through the excavation of relationships that exist among education and culture within a global context (Bristol, 2012; Camicia & Bayon, 2012).

If students have worldviews that differ from the western or mainland canonical learning materials, then they are "more likely to find themselves in conflict with the curriculum being taught" (Jones, Pang, & Rodriguez, 2001, p. 36). Because personal and cultural knowledge contain the "concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures" (Banks, 2016, p. 183), school and societal knowledge in the CNMI is quite salient given that much of the school knowledge is transplanted from the mainland United States. In this way, the culture of school in the form of curriculum and its enactment may not act in a synchronized way with the culture of ethnic groups (Gay, 2000). Given the history of colonialism and multiple oppressors, the idea that NCSS aims and goals

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