

A Meditation on Current and Future Trajectories for Elementary Social Studies in Alberta

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As many readers of this journal will know, drafts of a proposed Alberta kindergarten to Grade 4 program for social studies were leaked to the CBC in late October of 2020 (French 2020c). The leaked documents offered an opportunity to pull back the curtain on the curriculum development work of an advisory panel handpicked by the current government of Alberta, led by C P Champion. The leaked documents included ongoing commentary on the competency-based social studies program that had been created by the previous government (Curriculum Advisory Group [CAG] 2020a), as well as a revised K–4 program offering a radically different vision for social studies in the province (CAG 2020b).

Of note, the leaked documents suggested that the study of the history of residential schools “can probably best be saved for later when learners are more mature and are less emotionally vulnerable to traumatic material” (CAG 2020a, 16). Whole sections of grade-level procedural and conceptual knowledge were additionally crossed out, including any references to “equity,” which was deemed “a politically partisan and charged buzzword” (CAG 2020a, 5). Pointing to the kind of pedagogy that should be promoted in Alberta elementary classrooms, the opening preamble involved a long discussion about the importance of children “retaining a significant body of information that grows into a coherent and broad-minded knowledge base” (CAG 2020b, 2).

Pointing to the intimate connection between the creation of official curriculum documents and struggles over what kind of values and ideological commitments should guide educational decision making, the advisory panel's recommendations struck a deep emotional chord among educators and the public more generally. Immediately after the release of the documents, a storm of commentary ensued via social media, radio talk shows, and numerous news articles and op-ed columns. Within two days, the hashtag #abed was trending on Twitter in Canada, and multiple national news outlets had picked up the story, including the *Globe and Mail* (Keller and Kirkup 2020) and the satirical online publication *The Beaverton* (2020).

It was clear that the widespread negative public response to the advisory panel's recommendations had an impact. Soon after the curriculum documents were leaked, the minister of education, Adriana LaGrange, claimed that the curriculum had not been finalized yet and went on to publicly reject some aspects of the advisory panel's recommendations (Bench 2020). The minister asserted that the government was "absolutely committed" to truth and reconciliation and would ensure that the topic of residential schools would be present in any forthcoming social studies program (Bench 2020, para 9). A group of 350 teachers and educational stakeholders who had provided advice on the creation of the social studies program under the previous government was subsequently disbanded. School boards, Indigenous groups and private schools were then given one week to nominate teachers and representatives to serve on a new working group to provide feedback on an updated K–6 social program, which the

government promised to release for public feedback by early 2021 and then pilot in schools later in the year (French 2020a).

In what follows, I want to engage in a kind of extended meditation on the various discourses and commentary both shaping and surrounding the advisory panel's recommendations for the K–4 social studies program. Seeking to bring a heightened sense of historical consciousness to this discussion (Smith 2006), I begin by demonstrating how the forces of “authoritarian populism” (Norris 2016) and the accompanying culture wars have influenced and shaped the advisory panel's recommendations. Providing further insight into the world view of the advisory panel, moreover, I situate their vision for the K–4 program within the wider history of social studies education in North America.

Drawing on insights from people who publicly spoke out against the leaked program, including curriculum scholars (for example, Aukerman 2020; Donald 2020; Peck 2020) and Senator Murray Sinclair, the former chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Keller and Kirkup 2020), I then highlight the profound limitations of the advisory panel's vision for social studies. Guided by this same body of literature, I conclude by outlining the kind of social studies program we as educators, whether in K–12 contexts or in postsecondary institutions, should be publicly advocating for when updated curriculum documents are released for public feedback by current and future governments.

How Current Conditions Came into Being

[b]Social Studies as a Site of the Culture Wars

Smith (2006) has written that in order to think about the future, “it is best to work backwards, tracing trajectories to the present moment, carefully working out the lineages that brought current conditions into being. Only then can thoughts of ‘what is to be done’ be meaningful” (p 83). Attuned to this insight, a significant reason why social studies curriculum documents in Alberta have become such a flashpoint in our current historical moment can be at least partially attributed to the rise of what Norris (2016) calls “authoritarian populism,” involving a cultural backlash against ongoing cultural changes taking place in western societies. Norris (2016) argues that western societies are becoming gradually more liberal—especially among younger generations and the well-educated urban middle class—on a host of social issues, including egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and increasing acceptance of diversity and fluid gender identities. This shift in attitudes has been accompanied by calls for justice from historically minoritized groups and demands for reconciliation and decolonization from Indigenous peoples who have leveraged the power of social media to speak out and advocate for their political aims (Anderson et al 2018; Raynauld, Richez and Morris 2018).

Norris (2016) contended that these developments have led to fears among those in society who have been historically advantaged and hold more traditional cultural values and beliefs that they are “becoming marginalized and left behind in their own countries” (para 18). Research in Canada suggests that, from a demographic perspective, what Norris terms *traditionalists* trend towards being older, white, working class and situated in rural contexts (Coombs 2017). This dynamic has given rise to the so-called culture

wars involving a struggle about whose and what values society will ultimately be organized around.

Controversies over the current and future direction of K–12 schooling have become a key site of this struggle in the United States (Perry 2015), as well as here in Canada, including in the province of Ontario, where the sexual health curriculum became a major area of contention (Cohn 2015). In Alberta, ongoing vociferous debate between the previous and current governments over the future direction of education, and social studies curriculum and pedagogy in particular, has been an ongoing part of the political landscape over the last five years.

Soon after the previous government came to power, in 2015 they announced they would begin a dramatic overhaul of the arts, language arts, mathematics, sciences, wellness and social studies programs of study. As part of this effort, they promised \$64 million to support the rewriting of these six key subject areas simultaneously across all grade levels in both English and French. The education minister at the time, David Eggen, asserted that the new programs would be organized around teaching eight key competencies, including critical thinking, communication and global citizenship, and would, moreover, focus on “climate change, the history of Indigenous people and residential schools, and gender identity” (CBC News 2016, para 6).

After a 13-page draft of proposed changes to the social studies program was released by the previous government, in 2017, Jason Kenney, who was campaigning to become

premier at the time, stated that the document was “riddled with politically correct themes” going on to say:

How do you get into the history of Métis settlements in a general outline but no reference to the First or Second World War? I’m sorry, I’m not buying it. I think we’ve caught them trying to prepare a really distorted social studies curriculum. (Zabjek 2019, para 28)

At a policy convention in Red Deer in May of 2018, Kenney declared to thunderous applause that if the government “tries to smuggle more of their politics into the classroom through their curriculum, we will put that curriculum through the shredder and go right back to the drawing board” (Zabjek 2019, para 1). Decrying “failed pedagogical fads” and “political agendas in the classroom,” he went on to denounce the curriculum rewriting process as secretive and possessing a clear socialist agenda (Zabjek 2019, para 3). During the buildup to the 2019 provincial election, Jason Kenney subsequently made educational reform one of his party’s central policy platforms.

Soon after coming to power, in July of 2020 the current government followed through on this promise. They named historian C P Champion, a former aide to the current premier, as the subject area specialist who would lead an advisory panel tasked with reviewing drafts of the K–4 program social studies program put forth by the previous government. The appointment of Champion to lead this advisory panel was met by strong opposition in many quarters, due to views he had previously expressed about a variety of educational issues (French 2020b). In an article in the *Dorchester Review*, of which he is the founding

editor, Champion asserted that curricular directives to engage with First Nations perspectives is an “ongoing fad” and that the Kairos blanket exercise—an activity used to teach participants about the effects of European settlement on Indigenous people—“brainwashes children into thinking of themselves as settlers ‘stealing’ the land” (Champion 2019, 105). He also decried the contemporary focus on thematic approaches to history and civics, which he argued was ideally suited “to transmitting left wing dogma” and should therefore be replaced with a sequential narrative that can equip students with “the great stories and give them a key life-skill by the end of high school: the capacity to think critically about men and ideas and their place in history, as opposed to imposing sterile doctrines of race and ‘gender’” (Champion 2019, 105).

[b]The Recommendations of the Advisory Panel

Champion’s views on social studies were reflected in drafts of a proposed Alberta K–4 program for social studies that were leaked to the CBC in late October of 2020 (French 2020c). A document involving the advisory panel’s criticism of the previous government’s proposed K–4 program included the assertion that children in Grade 3 should not be taught about the ugliness of residential schools, which could be best saved for later years when students were “less emotionally vulnerable to traumatic material” (CAG 2020a, 16). Along with crossing out any reference to “equity,” which was deemed “a politically partisan and charged buzzword” (CAG 2020a, 5), various explicit knowledge outcomes were also deleted, including a Grade 4 section entitled “The Land Sustains Everything,” based on the comment that it “sounds like mysticism” (CAG 2020a, 10). In the advisory panel’s revised K–4 social studies program, students in

Grade 1 would become familiar with Bible and First Nations verses about creation as poetry (CAG 2020b), as well as learn to recognize “the sound of the chimes of Big Ben (Westminster)” (CAG 2020b). Students in Grade 2 would, moreover, develop an appreciation that “Canada’s ruler is The Queen ... her Majesty, Elizabeth II, and she lives in Buckingham Palace in England” (CAG 2020b).

Emphasizing the need for children to retain a significant and core body of knowledge, starting in Grade 2, students would be accordingly mandated to “memorize four dates in Canadian and Albertan history, in Grade 3 ... 14 new dates and in Grade 4 a further 18 dates, for a total of 36 by the end of Grade 4” (CAG 2020b, 2). Some of the historical dates that students would be asked to memorize included 1497, when John Cabot crossed the ocean from England on the *Matthew*, as well as 1535, when Jacques Cartier sailed up the St Lawrence River from France on the *Grande Hermine* (CAG 2020b, 18). The advisory panel noted, however, that students “do not need to understand fully the significance of these dates, just memorize them as building blocks for later” as they “will be very happy to possess this knowledge when they start learning history later” (CAG 2020b, 18).

Seen within the context of the rise of authoritarian populism, the advisory panel’s various recommendations reflect a belief that societal values are trending in the wrong direction, and the K–4 program can be used as a tool to reinstate what are perceived as traditional values and beliefs. Specifically, the advisory panel’s desire to excise from the K–4 program any reference to Indian residential schools, notions of equity and an ecological

world view can be seen as an attempt to ensure that children will not be exposed to histories, values and beliefs they associated with left-wing ideologies. Seen through this same lens, the advisory panel's recommendation that students need to memorize a particular and common body of historical facts points to fears that society is losing the authority of a legitimizing historical narrative that has sustained Canadian society in the past, which social studies has a mission to re-establish.

The world view, values and beliefs that informed the advisory panel's vision for social studies marked a radical departure from those that guided the current social studies program in Alberta (Alberta Education 2005). Considered one of the most forward-thinking social studies programs of its time when it was first rolled out in 2005 (Thompson 2004; Woytuck 2007), the program is organized around a potentially transformative notion of citizenship, directing teachers to help students become "engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world" (Alberta Education 2005, 1). To give this vision for citizenship life and purpose, the program states that students "construct meaning in the context of their lived experience through active inquiry and engagement with their school and community, [where] ... the infusion of current events, issues and concerns is an essential component of social studies" (Alberta Education 2005, 5). Notably, teachers are additionally directed to help students see contemporary issues of concern, along with specific grade level concepts, through the lens of multiple perspectives including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, as well as francophone perspectives and experiences. Moreover,

there is a strong emphasis in helping students engage with disciplinary ways of knowing, including historical and geographic thinking.

[b]Social Studies as Social Initiation

While the advisory panel's proposed K–4 program stood in stark contrast to the current program in Alberta, it is important to understand that, rather than an aberration in the history of social studies, their vision for the subject is part of a long tradition that has appeared and reappeared, in an almost cyclical fashion, throughout the history of modern schooling. Seeking to foster loyalty to one's country through an anchor of common values and beliefs, the advisory panel's proposed program aligns with what Clark and Case (2008) termed the *social initiation* model of citizenship.

Arguing that the social initiation model of citizenship has been the most common and enduring tradition in social studies education in North America, Clark and Case (2008) contend that this approach dominated schooling practices throughout the 19th and the early part of the 20th century through the teaching of patriotism and character training. Social studies as social initiation was also evident throughout the 1930s and 1940s, when schools in English-speaking Canada promoted allegiance to Britain and the British Empire (Gereluk and Scott 2014). This vision for social studies then re-emerged in the 1970s alongside the back-to-the-basics movement in education calling for students to leave high school with a common body of core knowledge (Morgan and Robinson 1976). More recent proponents of the social initiation model of citizenship in Canada (Granatstein 2007; Dominion Institute 2009) have called for a shared understanding of a

national past that emphasizes teaching about the people and events central to the formation of the country.

Seen through the lens of the social initiation project, the advisory panel's emphasis on having children learn that Canada's ruler is Queen Elizabeth II reflects an attempt to re-establish allegiances to the British monarchy and the Commonwealth that were prominent within Canadian social studies curricula during the pre-World War II era. Understanding the commitments of the social initiation project also helps clarify that the topic of residential schools was not taken out of the program because the panel felt young children were too emotionally vulnerable to learn about this difficult topic: it was removed from the K–4 program because it held the potential of disrupting and challenging the history of the “great stories of the men” central to the formation of the country (Champion 2019, 105). This claim can be supported by the fact that while the topic of residential schools was taken out of the K–4 program, the panel simultaneously recommended that children should be taught about the equally difficult topic of “Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,” in which it was noted that “enslavement of ‘Slavs’ by the Turks gives us the modern term ‘Slave’” (CAG 2020b, 21).

[a]The Response from Curriculum Experts

[b]The Erasure of Indigenous Memory and Experiences

The flood of commentary that ensued via social media, radio talk shows, blog posts and op-ed columns immediately after the drafts of the proposed program were leaked to the

CBC (French 2020c) pointed to the deep limitations of the advisory panel’s vision for social studies. One of the strongest points of opposition concerned the advisory panel’s decision to exclude the teaching of the histories of residential schools in the K–4 program. In a blog post that gained significant attention on social media, Carla Peck (2020), a history and social studies education specialist at the University of Alberta, highlighted specific commentary that demonstrated a desire on the part of the advisory panel to deny the serious and lasting impacts of the residential school system in Canada.

The ugliness of Dickensian schooling, boarding schools, 19th century discipline methods, and Residential schooling that applied to some Indigenous kids, can probably best be saved for later ... For example, there could be a Grade 9 unit about benign vs. harsh schooling in the past, inclusive of all cultures not only Indigenous, but with regard to the particular problematic of Residential schooling even if it applied only to a minority of Indigenous children. (CAG 2020, 16)

Noting the minimizing language like *even if it applied only to a minority of Indigenous children*, Peck (2020) contended that lumping the history of residential schools together with other examples of what the author termed *harsh schooling in the past* is a “tactic used to erase or minimize that history of Residential Schools by combining it with other histories” (para 17).

Senator Murray Sinclair, the former chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, was one of the most prominent figures to speak out against the advisory panel’s recommendation to take out the teaching of residential schools in the K–4 program. In an

article in the *Globe and Mail*, Senator Sinclair maintained that there was a need to “call it what it is and we should fight it when we can,” namely that the introduction of this program would be a “continuation of the white supremacy which the residential schools and the public schools have historically perpetrated against the Indigenous people of this country” (Keller and Kirkup 2020, para 4). Senator Sinclair additionally asserted that waiting to introduce the difficult topic of residential schools until children are older “will perpetuate a wall of mythology about Indigenous people and their history that will be next to impossible to undo” (Keller and Kirkup 2020, para 2).

Senator Sinclair contended that young children are able to handle the difficult topic of residential schools if it is done in a way that is age appropriate (Keller and Kirkup 2020). This view was supported by Maren Aukerman (2020), a literacy specialist at the University of Calgary, who argued in an op-ed piece in the *Edmonton Journal* that deciding if the teaching of residential schools was appropriate to teach children should not be left to the “gut feelings” of curriculum advisors but, rather, should be based on high-quality research on children’s development (para 4). Aukerman highlighted research from the American context by Lewison et al (2001) that has shown that “controversial books” provide viable and age-appropriate ways for young children to engage in rich dialogue about topics related to diversity and difference, including issues of racism, class conflict and violence (p 215). While such topics often remain outside the realm of elementary classrooms, findings from this study suggest that using story books to have conversations about difficult topics with children has the power to “breathe new life and

democracy into the curriculum by allowing students to bring their life texts to school” (Lewison et al 2001, 224).

[b]The Decline of Francophone Perspectives and Histories

Noting that the current social studies program in Alberta includes the directive to engage with francophone perspectives and experiences (Alberta Education 2005), there was a considerable amount of commentary within the French-language media in Alberta about the leaked documents. In an interview with Radio Cité (2020), Raphaël Gani, a doctoral candidate at the Université d’Ottawa, highlighted the significant differences between how francophone people were positioned in the program put forth by the previous government compared to how they are positioned within the one proposed by the current government. Instead of exploring the links, contributions and integration of francophone people in Alberta and Canadian society, Gani asserted that there is a diminished and more superficial focus on events and celebrations held by francophone people (Radio Cité 2020). Further remarking on the significant decline in the history and contemporary realities of francophone peoples and communities in the advisory panel’s proposed program, in an interview with Radio-Canada, Peck contended that the proposed program does not give students the chance to learn about francophone culture or francophone people who, along with Indigenous peoples, are one of the three peoples fundamental to the establishment of Alberta and Canada (Kadjo 2020, para 4).ⁱ

[b]The Limitations of Focusing on Memorizing Disconnected Facts

While much of the public commentary about the proposed K–4 program focused on curriculum concerns involving what was and was not included, there was also a significant amount of criticism centred on the program’s pedagogical vision. As both Peck (2020) and Aukerman (2020) pointed out, the advisory panel’s recommendations that children should memorize an increasing number of facts and dates as they progress through elementary school goes against a long and established body of literature on how children learn. Peck (2020) similarly stated that “rather than memorize dates, names, and landmarks that hold little meaning for students and will soon be forgotten, a purposeful and powerful Social Studies curriculum focuses on building students’ capacity to connect and apply knowledge through meaningful learning experiences” (para 13).

This assertion was supported by Aukerman (2020), who maintained that an approach to social studies that “fetishizes disconnected facts does not promote deep learning” (para 4). Aukerman argued that the research clearly shows us that children learn knowledge deeply through connecting to coherent themes and important questions. Specifically, as outlined in a recent study (Scott et al 2018), a significant body of research suggests that deep and meaningful learning occurs when young people have the opportunity to (a) engage in learning tasks involving the original application of knowledge and skills, rather than just the routine use of facts and procedures; (b) take part in disciplined inquiry into issues and problems; and (c) create products and presentations that have meaning and value beyond success in school (Newmann, Bryk and Nagaoka 2001, 14).

Donald (2020), a curriculum scholar at the University of Alberta who is a descendent of the amiskwaciyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree, offered further insights into the problem with the advisory panel’s pedagogical and curricular stance. In an article in the *Conversation*, Donald (2020) argued that the focus on memorizing historical events and dates frames Indigenous topics and themes in the past—“as though we as Indigenous Peoples don’t exist in the present” (para 7). Highlighting that this positioning of Indigenous peoples devalues and marginalizes the significance and importance of Indigenous knowledges, experiences and histories, Donald (2020) called for a “focus on leading students to understand relationships with each other, with Indigenous communities and with the world in qualitatively different ways” (para 8).

[b]A Lack of Genuine Dialogue

Educators publicly speaking out against the proposed K–4 program additionally voiced deep concerns with the curriculum-writing process itself. Alison Van Rosendaal (2020), a curriculum specialist and PhD student at the University of Calgary, for example, posted on an open letter on Twitter highlighting the fact that during the curriculum-writing process for the current social studies program (Alberta Education 2005), the former Progressive Conservative Government undertook an “in-depth, research-supported, community-engaged process of curriculum development” involving hundreds of teachers, academics and community stakeholders who worked together over the course of four years (para 9). However, Van Rosendaal (2020) noted that, in contrast, the current review process involved only 12 people, hand-picked by the current government, who had a very limited period of time to set the future direction of social studies in Alberta for potentially

decades to come. This criticism of the curriculum-making process was shared by Aukerman (2020), who argued that decisions about what and how social studies will be taught must involve “genuine dialogue with the people of Alberta, not dictated by a single individual or even a hand-picked group” (para 7).

[a]Re-Storying Social Studies in Alberta

[b]The Importance of Advocacy.

In this final section, I would like to bring together the two main threads of this paper to consider the opening provocation by Smith (2006)—the question of “what is to be done” (p 83). One of the key lessons from how the saga of the proposed K–4 program played out is that engaging in public criticism and commentary is crucially important, as it has had an impact on government decision making. As noted in the introduction, after the fallout from the leaked curriculum documents, the minister asserted that the government was “absolutely committed” to truth and reconciliation and promised that the topic of residential schools would be included in all forthcoming social studies programs (Bench, 2020, para 9). The minister further promised to release an updated K–6 program for public feedback in early 2021 (French 2020a).

This development only partially satisfies concerns by Van Rosendaal (2020) and Aukerman (2020) about the lack of input from stakeholders in the curriculum-writing process. The fact that the current government hand-picked C P Champion to lead this process makes it likely that any curriculum document the government ultimately chooses

to approve will have a number of significant continuities with the advisory panel’s vision for social studies.

Understanding the historical conditions and educational traditions that have shaped the curriculum-writing process to date offers insights into how these continuities might become manifest, in both overt and nuanced ways, in any future curriculum documents. Scholars and leaders who spoke out publicly against the proposed changes to the program offer guidance into the kind of social studies program we as educators, whether in K–12 contexts or in postsecondary institutions, should be advocating for when engaging in public dialogue and commentary about any future curriculum documents released by the government.

[b]Rejecting White Anglophone Supremacy.

Understanding the commitments of the social initiation project, as well as insights from Peck (2020), helps us appreciate that even if the topic of residential schools is taken up in any future curriculum documents, it will probably be done so in ways that seek to minimize the impact of this system on Indigenous people. It is also likely that no connections will be made between the histories and realities of the residential school system and ongoing colonial processes in the present, including land theft and ongoing Treaty violations. To counter this tendency, there is a need to heed the call of Senator Sinclair to name such omissions in any future curriculum documents, which can only perpetuate a “wall of mythology” about Indigenous peoples and their histories (Keller and Kirkup 2020, para 2).

While Senator Sinclair saw the advisory panel’s decision to erase the topic of residential schools from the K–4 program as a manifestation of white supremacy, the significant weakening of francophone histories, culture and linguistic traditions within the proposed program (Kadjo 2020; Radio Cité 2020) suggests that the curriculum-writing process to date may be better described as an attempt to reassert white *anglophone* supremacy. Specifically, the erasure of francophone perspectives, alongside Indigenous memory and experiences, from the proposed program reflected an attempt by an advisory panel dominated by descendants of English-speaking settlers from the British Isles (that is, anglophones) to impose their language, culture and historical memory on a diverse population (Kymlicka 2007, 61).

Aligned with this project, it is likely that minoritized identities will be integrated into any future curriculum documents in ways that either adopt what Banks (1989) termed a *contribution approach*, focusing on their contribution and service to the nation, or an approach that promotes a superficial focus on cultural practices such as festivals and celebrations, as was the case with francophone culture (Radio Cité 2020). Noting the emphasis in the curriculum-writing process to date on having students remember a long list of historical events and dates, there will also be a strong probability that, within the context of the historical narratives, minoritized identities will be integrated into an already established anglocentric “grand narrative” (Stanley 2007). Mirroring the view of history promoted by C P Champion, Stanley (2007) outlined the major counters of this narrative as follows:

First, history proper begins with the arrival of Europeans, currently most often with Leif Ericsson and the Vikings. Second, [the] grand narrative almost completely disregards non-Europeans, and focuses on the progress of European resettlement, emphasizing “nation building” by far-seeing “great men” and, even today, the occasional “great women.” The Confederation of four British North American colonies in 1867 is taken as its major turning point. (p 34)

[b]A Call for a Perspectival Approach to Social Studies

While a single authoritative anglocentric interpretation of the past or view of Canadian identity, as promoted by the advisory panel, aligns well with an authoritarian political culture, this view of Canadian identity is not appropriate for the democratic and multinational realities of Canada. To counter this dynamic, there is a pressing need to advocate for spaces within any future social studies curriculum that retain what could be called a perspectival approach, seen in the current Alberta social studies program (Alberta Education 2005). Although many social studies programs across North America direct teachers to help students engage with multiple perspectives, one of the elements that made the current social studies program in Alberta (Alberta Education 2005) unique is that it specifically named francophone and First Nation, Métis and Inuit nations as the perspectives that should be engaged.ⁱⁱ

In contrast with the view of the country expressed by the advisory panel, the territory known as Canada has always been one of deep diversity that has included the ongoing presence of francophones and First Nation, Métis and Inuit nations who possess

collective rights enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. In the case of francophone groups in Canada, the *Official Languages Act* of 1969, made Canada a fully bilingual country, whereby French was given equal status to English in all federal institutions. In the case of First Nations, such as the Blackfoot and Plains Cree, Treaty rights guarantee these nations the right to self-government, as well as control over education and resource development on their traditional territories. In this way, the Canadian federation has never been organized around the European-derived monolithic Westphalia model of the nation-state predicated on uniformity of sovereignty, historical memory, culture and language (Abbott 2014, 78).

Through honouring this reality, future social studies curricula in Alberta can offer opportunities for young people to encounter ways of seeing the past and the nature of the country that exists outside the horizons of the “Anglo-Canadian Grand Narrative” (den Heyer and Abbott 2011). For instance, recent empirical studies have documented the ways large number of francophone adolescents and adults possess understandings of the past and present that differ from their nonfrancophone counterparts (Gani and Scott 2017). According to this research, when francophone people are asked to tell the story of their community, the majority of participants draw on a *la survivance* (survival) narrative template. With this understanding of the past, the British conquest of New France in 1759 or the deportation of Acadians by the British from New Brunswick in 1755 set off a long struggle by francophone peoples to preserve and protect their unique language, culture, religion and identity against the continual incursions of the greater anglophone

community, who sought to assimilate them into an anglo-dominated Canadian state (Lévesque, Croteau and Gani 2015).

Differing understandings of the past in relation to the founding of the country are particularly prominent in Indigenous understandings of Treaty relationships. According to Gaudry, a Métis scholar, within the context of the Plains, Indigenous histories of Treaties tell a story in which the newcomers “were invited into pre-existing territories as treaty partners, as brothers and sisters to share in the bounty of the land, to live peacefully with one another and to envision relationships where we all benefitted,” which he asserted runs counter to what actually occurred, namely “a settler colonial dynamic where Canadians have benefitted largely at the expense of Indigenous peoples, our territory and the value that our territory generated, which comes with monetary wealth” (as cited in UAlberta, 2017, para 11).

Insights from Aukerman (2020) and Lewison et al (2001) point to how controversial books can advance a perspectival approach to teaching social studies in ways that centre the voice of minoritized peoples in their own words and on their own terms. With the support of books like *The Water Walker*, by Anishinaabe author and activist Joanne Robertson, and *Speaking Our Truth*, by Cree and Lakota writer Monique Gray Smith, for example, complex conversations about Indigenous environmental activism and the ongoing destructive legacies of the residential school system can become possible in the elementary social studies classroom. Paralleling recent research in elementary contexts in the United States (Keenan 2019), such an approach offers the possibility of presenting

elementary-aged students with “counterstories” that can be used as a pedagogical tool for challenging taken-for-granted dominant stories of those in power that have become a natural part of societal discourses (p 5).

[b]The Need to Foster Deep Learning

Turning to the kinds of pedagogy the government is likely to introduce in future social studies curriculum documents, it is highly likely there will be a strong emphasis on having children learn core facts and knowledge. Noting that the advisory panel’s recommendations included a particular focus on having children memorize an increasing number of historical events and dates, this pedagogical approach would return social studies to a time over half a century ago when a “bland consensus version of history” dominated classroom practice that, moreover, failed to help students make connections between the past and present (Hodgetts 1968, 24). As outlined by Aukerman (2020) and Peck (2020), such a pedagogical stance runs counter to an established body of research that has revealed that knowledge learned in this way is soon forgotten. This body of research has shown that deep learning, in contrast, occurs when students have the opportunity to deliberate on questions, problems and issues that exist in the community and the world beyond the school, and engage in rich tasks that are worthy of their time and attention (Friesen 2009; Scott et al 2018).

[b]Adopting a Relational and Storied Approach to Curriculum

Offering further insights into the overall curricular vision that could animate the creation of deep learning experiences, Donald (2020) points to a need to advocate for a future

social studies program that provides guidance for the key issues of our times, including climate change, systematic racism, wellness and economic sustainability. In providing space in social studies for the young to engage with these issues, Donald (2020) asserts, “we need stories that teach how humans can relate to each other and to all life forms rather than reinforcing inherited colonial divides” (para 10). In contrast to an informational approach to curriculum and pedagogy, this more storied and dialogical approach offers a way to uphold the significance and importance of Indigenous knowledges, experiences and histories (Donald 2020). This vision for social studies also offers a way to counter the tendency of curriculum documents in Canada to either ignore Indigenous participation and presence in Canadian society or, when included, to present Indigenous peoples as frozen in the past as if they are no longer living in the present (Clark 2007; Donald 2009; Francis 1992; Manitoba Indian Brotherhood 1974).

Seen through the lens of the need to promote more storied approaches to curriculum and pedagogy to help young people to learn how they can relate to one another and the ecological systems that sustain and give us life in more sustainable and ethical ways, the advisory panel’s recommendation to teach Bible and First Nations creation stories might actually be unexpectedly helpful (CAG 2020b). The productive possibilities opened up by engaging with such stories can be seen in the work of King (2003), who contrasted the Biblical creation story of Genesis with the Wendat (Huron) and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story of the “Women Who Fell from the Sky” (p 10). Because each of these stories recounts the creation of the world and how humans came into being, King argued that a theologian might claim that these two creation stories are basically the

same. However, he asserted that from the perspective of a storyteller, these two stories are significantly different in that they each convey distinct messages regarding the nature of the world and the kinds of values that should guide life and living. King (2003) wrote in this regard that “elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies ... that celebrate law, order, and good government,” while in the Indigenous story, in contrast, “the universe is governed by a series of co-operations ... that celebrate equality and balance” (p 23–24).

Conclusion

The inspiration for writing this article stemmed from a noon-hour CBC News (2020) discussion I was invited to participate in; members of the public had the opportunity to phone in to discuss their questions and concerns about the proposed changes to the K–4 social studies program in Alberta. One of the things that struck me during this conversation was how passionate and engaged people were about this topic. While the work of curriculum development is often seen as dull and of little relevance to people’s lives, it was clear that people cared deeply about the fate of social studies in Alberta.

One of the significant gifts that has thus emerged out of this saga is a renewed public interest and debate about the future of social studies in Alberta. In politically polarized times, these debates, however, cannot be ultimately resolved through appeals to research, because they are fundamentally about competing beliefs and values about who *we* are and what *we* wish to become as a community. Ongoing debates about the future of social

studies in Alberta thus require sustained public deliberations about the curriculum question of what the purpose of social studies should be in our contemporary times or, to put it another way, what stories we believe it is vital to tell the young about what it means to be citizens on this land (Donald 2020).

Notes

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ⁱ Paraphrased from the original French: Cela ne donne pas la chance aux élèves d’en apprendre sur la culture francophone ou le peuple francophone qui est un des trois peuples fondamentaux à l’établissement de l’Alberta ou du Canada, dont les peuples autochtones.

ⁱⁱ Interestingly, the program does not name the dominant (white/Eurocentric) perspective on which these two new perspectives are to be added (den Heyer and Abbott 2011).