
Analysis and Critique of the Manitoba Social Studies Curriculum

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In this article, I analyze and critique the *Kindergarten to Grade 8 Social Studies: Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes* (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003) and its accompanying key document *Grade 2 Social Studies: Communities in Canada: A Foundation for Implementation* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2005).

The framework of outcomes serves as an overview and outline of learning outcomes, and the foundation for implementation is a grade-specific document intended to expand on ideas and give teachers specific suggestions for instruction (including accessible resources and printable blackline masters).

Like the current Alberta social studies curriculum (Alberta Education 2005), the Manitoba curriculum has been in use in public schools for almost 20 years. Thus, this analysis may provide a useful heuristic for considering Alberta's draft social studies curriculum.¹

Analysis

Manitoba's framework for social studies was adapted from an interjurisdictional project initiated under the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 1). According to an April 7, 2000, update from Manitoba Education, Training and Youth,² the last implemented curriculum before 2003 was from 1985, which was the main reason the 2003 curriculum needed to be newly created, alongside the influence of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) on creating global guidelines to address internationally applicable skills. In light of the increased number of high school graduates seeking to enter postsecondary institutions in the early 2000s (compared with previous decades), my speculation is that the 2003 curriculum sought to include skills relevant to postsecondary education.

As detailed by Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning,³ the process for curriculum development involves a diverse, nominated team that includes a departmental project specialist, qualified writers, and classroom teachers and scholars who work in the specified discipline. After feedback from a review panel, which consists of stakeholders and subject experts, the curriculum undergoes field testing by diverse, nominated pilot teachers to assess the curriculum document as it would play out in the classroom. The curriculum is then revised as necessary and authorized for provincial use. After implementation, the curriculum is open for continual updating to reflect changes in society.

The 2003 framework document acknowledges those who were involved in the creation of the curriculum, including the development team, stakeholders from education associations, professors (as academic advisors), the cultural advisory team, and Manitoba Education and Youth staff.

The document begins by stating that the curriculum framework "provides the basis for social studies learning, teaching, and assessment in Manitoba" (p 1) and "describes the structure, content, and learning outcomes for social studies" (p 1). This is followed by a brief background on

the framework and an outline of the document’s contents.

The framework document uses the following terminology:

- *general learning outcomes*, which are comparable to what Gordon, Taylor and Oliva (2019, 161) call curricular goals;
- *clusters*, which are comparable to curricular objectives (p 162); and
- *specific learning outcomes*, which are comparable to instructional goals (p 179).

Next in the framework document is an overview of the vision and related curriculum goals, followed by guiding principles for social studies learning, teaching and assessment.

The framework document also includes diagrams to help the reader. Figure 1 is a conceptual map of the framework. The goal is that students will become responsible citizens through viewing topics through diverse perspectives in order to build on values, skills and knowledge. Figure 2 is a cluster format guide, which explains the layout of the pages that follow, ensuring clarity for readers about the learning goals.

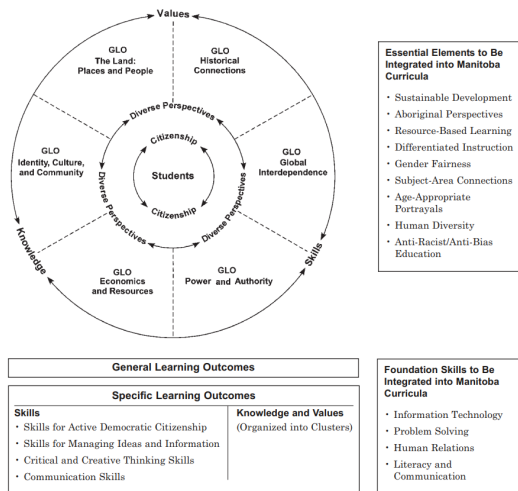


FIGURE 1. Conceptual map of the Manitoba social studies curriculum framework (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2005, 34). Contains information from the Manitoba government, licensed under the OpenMB Information and Data Use Licence (www.manitoba.ca/openmb/).

In the social studies curriculum, each grade is part of a larger cycle that intends to situate general learning outcomes throughout the grades at varying degrees, in a spiral

curriculum (Bruner 1960) that revisits specific skills in deeper complexity as the grades escalate.

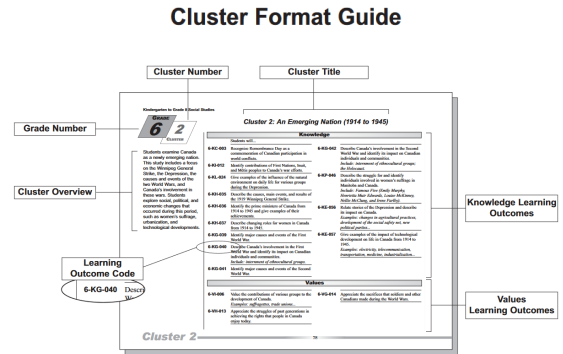


FIGURE 2. Cluster format guide for the Manitoba social studies curriculum framework (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 22). Contains information from the Manitoba government, licensed under the OpenMB Information and Data Use Licence (www.manitoba.ca/openmb/).

Through kindergarten to Grade 8, the sequence of general themes moves in line with the developmental growth of the student, starting with self-identity and belonging and moving to community and awareness of others, local and world geography and diversity, and, finally, comprehensive exploration of national and ancient history (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 2).

The content focus is “citizenship as a core concept in social studies” (p 9), which encompasses four related topics:

- Active democratic citizenship in Canada
- Canadian citizenship for the future
- Citizenship in the global context
- Environmental citizenship

By the time students complete the K–8 social studies curriculum, they should be able to fulfill the knowledge, skills and values requirements in the six general learning outcomes:

- **Identity, Culture, and Community:** Students will explore concepts of identity, culture, and community in relation to individuals, societies, and nations.
- **The Land: Places and People:** Students will explore the dynamic relationships of people with the land, places, and environments.
- **Historical Connections:** Students will explore how people, events, and ideas of the past shape the present and influence the future.
- **Global Interdependence:** Students will explore the global interdependence of people, communities, societies, nations, and environments.

- Power and Authority: Students will explore the processes and structures of power and authority, and their implications for individuals, relationships, communities, and nations.
- Economics and Resources: Students will explore the distribution of resources and wealth in relation to individuals, communities, and nations. (p 18)

Drawing from the general learning outcomes, the specific learning outcomes are listed under three categories:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Values

The knowledge learning outcomes outnumber the skills and values learning outcomes combined. For example, the Grade 2 framework lists 40 knowledge learning outcomes compared with 13 values and 18 skills. However, unlike the knowledge learning outcomes, skills and values are revisited throughout the grades. The specific learning outcomes distributed throughout the framework and foundation documents build toward meeting the goals of the general learning outcomes.

Grade 2 Social Studies: Communities in Canada: A Foundation for Implementation (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2005) expands on the specific learning outcomes outlined in the framework and provides strategies for activating, acquiring and applying learning (the Triple A model), offering a selection of what Gordon, Taylor and Oliva (2019) call instructional objectives parallel to the specific learning outcomes.

These instructional approaches offer many hands-on activities that support multiple intelligences. Some suggest methods of cross-curricular integration. For example, one instructional strategy is “collaborative groups of students create a ‘Canadian Place Names’ alphabet book” (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2005, 132). Other instructional strategies include creating maps, reports or art; playing games; engaging in scavenger hunts; and conducting interviews. For example, one strategy states, “On a community walk, students list various place names . . . Students suggest ideas for the origins of place names” (p 130).

Beside the strategies are icons that indicate that a strategy may involve assessment through student portfolios or that direct the reader to Appendix A in the document.

Appendix A consists of almost 50 pages of evaluation methods, each with a list of outcomes related to skills, followed by a philosophical description of the topic or method of assessment and suggestions for measurable evaluation, in line with assessment *of* and *for* learning (p 26).

The other appendixes include printable blackline masters, charts, vocabulary, accessible learning resources and

learning resources specific to Indigenous communities—all for Grade 2.

The curriculum’s democratic influence and instructional response to diverse learners suggest progressivism as a philosophical base for instruction—“appealing to students’ needs and interests, providing for individual differences, and emphasizing reflective thinking” (Gordon, Taylor and Oliva 2019). Fittingly, the framework document states that “learning is the active process of constructing meaning” (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 5), considering that “constructivism complements progressive philosophy” (Gordon, Taylor and Oliva 2019). The content itself has a historical emphasis on Canada and is infused with current democratic ideology; thus, the curriculum also seems essentialist in nature by “transmission of the cultural heritage” (Gordon, Taylor and Oliva 2019).

Together, the curriculum framework and the foundation for implementation aim to help teachers understand the intentions of the discipline of social studies, which values and skills are tied to specific knowledge outcomes, how the clusters or grades articulate across levels, and how to approach controversial issues, as well as supporting teachers in implementing the curriculum by offering an organized list of activities, printable worksheets and accessible resources. Both documents are a staple in social studies classrooms.

Critique

The following critique of the curriculum framework and foundation for implementation documents will examine their layout and arrangement, consider their content deficits, and offer philosophical steering suggestions.

Throughout, this section will refer to Gordon, Taylor and Oliva’s (2019, 34) eight concepts of curriculum construction and organization:

- Articulation
- Continuity
- Sequencing
- Integration
- Relevance
- Transferability
- Scope
- Balance

The framework document contains charts for organization and overview, labelled guides for navigation, and a conceptual map to strengthen the meaning and relationships of framework components, which provides strong *articulation*, ensuring that “the next grade level begins where the previous one left off” (Gordon, Taylor and Oliva 2019, 42). These visuals, combined with the document’s

arrangement and ease of navigation, allow for an uncomplicated read-through and referencing experience.

Separating skills and values outcomes from knowledge outcomes reflects a method of *continuity*, which is “the repetition of content at successive levels, each time at an increased level of complexity” (Gordon, Taylor and Oliva 2019, 41), as explained by Bruner (1960). The curriculum appears to use increasingly comprehensive knowledge as a stationary target for which skills and values are revisited, employed and strengthened to achieve learning goals.

As mentioned in the analysis, the thematic cluster *sequencing* seems appropriate to the development of the student.

The documents offer philosophical perspectives on teaching social studies and provide a plethora of instructional strategies, which is crucial for new educators. For example, the framework rightly assumes that “a teacher’s personal beliefs and convictions influence the presentation of [social studies] content” and states that “complete neutrality is not always possible in the classroom; however, teachers need to be aware of the implications of presenting their own beliefs and perspectives as fact rather than opinion” (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 6). This fact remains unchanged despite constant shifts in society since the documents were produced.

The framework states that “social studies is conducive to a variety of teaching styles” (p 6), and the foundation for implementation offers teachers flexibility in deciding which instructional and assessment strategies would be effective with a specific class or group. It does not restrict a specific learning outcome to one strategy and one assessment method; instead, it suggests several strategies for the targeted outcome, categorized by the Triple A model (activate, acquire, apply). Each suggested assessment method directs teachers to a section in Appendix A, which provides a list of methods, resources and blackline masters.

In the analysis, I pointed out an example of an instructional strategy using a method of cross-curricular *integration* with literacy (creating an alphabet book). The foundation for implementation contains many other strategies in the form of artistic representation, scientific graphic organizers, initiating healthy relationships or numerical analysis of data.

Thus, the documents together provide sufficient information for effectively implementing the curriculum.

A flaw of the framework lies in its selection of knowledge content (which is indicated by the cluster titles). The curriculum has a severe deficit of information related to residential schools. The past couple of decades have seen a growing awareness about residential schools and related injustices perpetrated by the Canadian federal government.

While media coverage of these issues has rapidly gained momentum in the last decade, there was no indication that students had learned about them through Manitoba’s social studies curriculum.

Under the heading Rationale for Citizenship Education, the framework states that “throughout much of history, citizenship has been exclusionary, class-based, racist, and sexist. In Canada, for instance, First Nations parents were forced to send their children to residential schools in the interests of citizenship” (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 9). However, the curriculum itself excludes the topic of residential schools. For example, the foundation for implementation for Grade 6 (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2006) mentions the topic of residential schools twice but only as an optional instructional strategy. Consequently, a student may go through this curriculum and have no knowledge of residential schools at the end.

Indeed, this was the experience of many until Canada’s formal apology in 2008 (Pauls, Hampshire and Allen 2014) and subsequent mandates to teach about residential schools in Grades 9 and 11 in Manitoba (Martin 2010). In 2021, Manitoba Education published a list of resources on the topic of residential schools, including books, videos and websites for early and middle years learners, as well as for educators. This information should be fused into the curriculum itself to ensure *relevance* to learners and society and to promote reconciliation.

Also, as the content emphasizes history, the curriculum seems to place lesser value on technology knowledge, skills and integration. Grade 6, Grade 5 and part of Grade 4 are spent on the history of Canada, requiring memorization of dates, locations and the names of colonists related to Canadian Confederation, as well as an overly detailed cluster dedicated to the economic influence of the fur trade, with few disruptions to settler identities, as discussed by Tupper (2011).

Furthermore, the curriculum lacks emphasis on environmental sustainability, an issue of significant relevance to students and society. Curiously, the framework’s rationale for citizenship as a core concept notes the importance of environmental responsibility (Manitoba Education and Youth 2003, 10), yet only a few specific learning outcomes relate to sustainability. A skill objective that appears in various grades mentions responsibility for the environment, yet the knowledge clusters instead target the influence of the environment on people. Knowledge about *how* to sustain the environment is lacking in the framework.

These flaws reveal the curriculum’s lack of *transferability*. The 21st-century learner needs a curriculum that provides

- knowledge about residential schools in order to understand the tragedy and take informed steps toward reconciliation,

- a stronger emphasis on technology and its use in primary qualitative data collection and analysis, and
- explicit cause-and-effect relationships in terms of environmental responsibility.

Concerns also exist regarding the curriculum's philosophical alignment, especially its *scope*. Social studies often focuses on knowledge acquisition, as its emphasis lies in the study of history. The foundation for implementation suggests strategies for cross-curricular integration; however, teachers who are not professionally trained to deliver instruction in this manner will not tend to select those strategies. Furthermore, as in Alberta, the time allotted to social studies in Manitoba elementary schools is less than the time allotted to math and literacy, which are emphasized in both provinces. Consequently, the curriculum's broad scope presents challenges for teachers who are unfamiliar with how to apply cross-curricular instruction in smaller time slots.

Knowledge equips learners to make informed decisions, but the rise of technology has changed the way Canadians store and retrieve information. Whereas rote learning and memorization used to characterize the study of history, we can now quickly and easily look up facts, dates and so on using technology. Thus, instead of rote learning, 21st-century learning should focus on three goals.

The first goal should be to develop in learners greater concern and a deeper sense of humane communication about injustices and tragedies throughout history and in the present.

The second goal should be to enhance students' critical awareness of the use of technology in order to prioritize ethical practices to develop an accurate understanding of the past. History should no longer be written by the winners but, rather, seen through the eyes of witnesses (for example, through accessible primary sources and archival records and through the collection and analysis of primary qualitative data). Through this awareness, students may come to realize the strategic ignorance underlying social studies education, in which settler identities are disrupted to a lesser degree, perpetuating white normativity (Tupper 2011). This goal is especially important in light of digital data, in which records are easier to input, organize, store, edit and delete.

The third goal should be to explicitly emphasize cause-and-effect relationships in terms of individual and societal action on the environment. This may include understanding what actions students can take themselves. Although the curriculum documents do offer moments for student reflection on environmental questions, more information now exists about how students can become partners in addressing environmental concerns. The tendency toward essentialist curricula in public schools supported by the government is

predictable; still, a move toward a more progressivist philosophy would add longevity to future curricula.

These suggestions can help realign the *balance* that is lacking in the curriculum—moving away from stagnant curricular objectives and toward ethical innovation in a diverse society; reaching across disciplines to accentuate the transferability of knowledge, skills and values between subjects and outside of school; and pushing for the needs of learners to prepare for the ever-changing world.

Considerations for Alberta's Draft K–6 Social Studies Curriculum

The Manitoba social studies curriculum framework and foundation for implementation can offer a lens for Alberta teachers.

On one hand, the Manitoba social studies curriculum documents offer instructional strategies for cross-curricular fusion, critical-thinking opportunities, flexibility for a variety of teaching styles, and a spiral curriculum to consistently address skills and values alongside knowledge, which offers a degree of thematic teaching. These provide a fertile basis for healthy citizenship education.

On the other hand, Alberta teachers can be wary of the broad scope of the Manitoba social studies curriculum, which contains irrelevant rote-learning requirements, lacks emphasis on environmental sustainability and perpetuates the strategic ignorance of settler identities. Because of this ignorance, and the historical glossing over of residential schools, many in Manitoba (and, indeed, across the country) were emotionally unprepared for the discovery of unmarked graves on the grounds of former residential schools across Canada in 2021 and subsequently.

Social studies education has great potential to strive beyond colonist-centred ideologies, workforce preparation and economic gain to the detriment of the environment. Alberta's proposed curriculum seeks to produce "graduates who have been taught to maintain the status quo" (Peck 2022), and students in Alberta may very well be left behind if certain jobs become obsolete as a result of the innovative freedom of critical thinkers outside of the province. Maintaining the status quo will quickly be disregarded as a standard in the face of evolving global influence as technology ties people and events closer together. After all, our duty as educators should not be to maintain our status quo but, rather, to prepare our students for their future values.

Notes

1. "Draft Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 6 Curriculum," Alberta Education, 2021, <https://curriculum.learnalberta.ca/printable-curriculum/> (accessed April 4, 2023).
2. "Educational Update 2000," Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, April 7, 2000, p 26, www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/edupdatedocs/edchnupdate2000.pdf (accessed April 4, 2023).
3. "Curriculum Development Process," Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, August 8, 2020, www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/process.html (accessed April 4, 2023).

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