evaluation  well-informed

interpretation  important  diverse

critical-thinking  past  explore  skills  learning  study

lessons  economics  understand  citizenship  actively

curriculum  active  source  issues  perspectives

understanding  citizenship  perspectives

citizens  cultures  history  questions  civics  knowledge-based

use  evolving  ways  become  evidence  enhance

science  geography  engage  responsible  combine

methods  including  research

around  communities  social

politics  world  draw  importance

government

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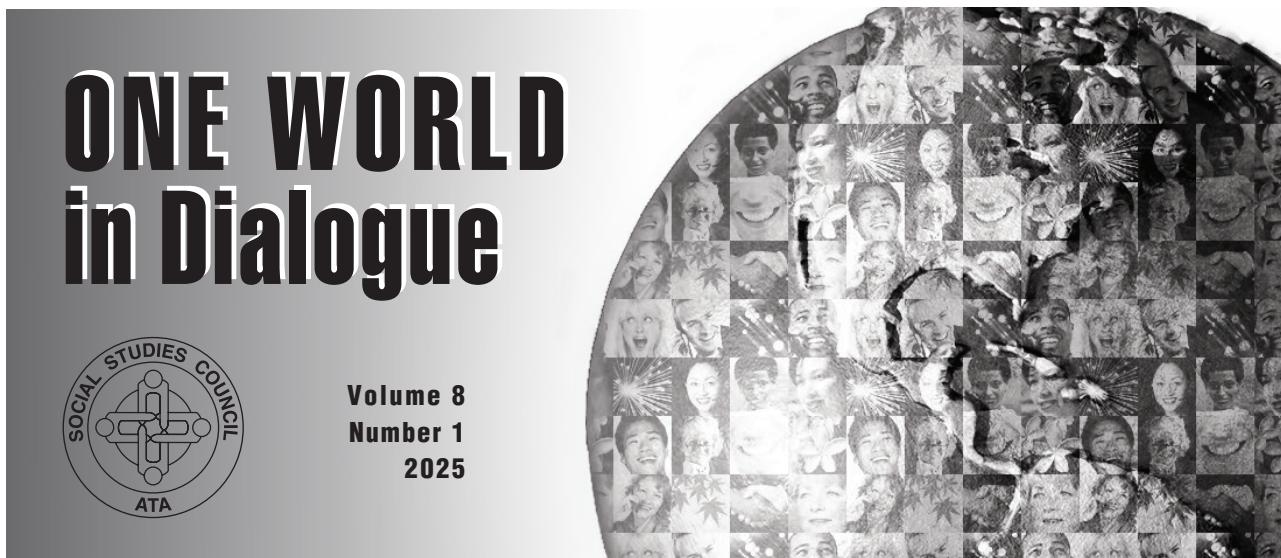  Bus 403-777-7870
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**On the Cover**

A word cloud based on the overview of the new social studies curriculum on LearnAlberta (https://curriculum.learnalberta.ca).

# ONE WORLD in Dialogue

SOCIAL STUDIES COUNCIL ATA

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# A Message from the Editor

*Craig Harding*

Over the past year, I have been thinking a lot about the global state of democracy. It's hard not to.

While I continue to be optimistic about most of Canada, it is mainly through the conscientious endeavours of teachers, with support from the concerned public, that we have been able to resist attempts to challenge what has taken decades to build. Confronting the challenges we face requires us to ask ourselves, How should we live together? This should be followed by, How can education help us answer this question? The second question has always generated substantive discussion, but lately those discussions have become even more volatile.

This issue of *One World in Dialogue* considers how to best teach the knowledge, skills and dispositions students need in order to engage in deliberations about democracy. The assumption is that social studies teachers, at all grades, have a common moral project—to build students' capacity to engage, at a minimum, in democratic growth and sustainability. Teachers should encourage critical and reflective inquiry while considering the welfare of all within the community. This requires discussions.

In fact, a large research project undertaken by Hess and McAvoy (2015) found that in the most democratic classrooms, students engaged in discussions about controversial political issues more than 20 per cent of the time. These were not just ad hoc discussions. Students were required to prepare for the discussions and to engage in significant student-to-student talk. In other words, teachers believed in students' capacity to participate.

If these conversations do not take place in schools, in democratic classrooms, we must ask, How will future citizens develop the necessary capacities to engage in such discussion? Democracies cannot exist without participation and without both *civic* and *civil* engagement. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) explain, mastering the ability to talk across political and ideological differences helps create a robust democracy. The challenge for social studies teachers is how we will take up this challenge.

This issue starts with an article by Cory Wright-Maley, chair of the Department of Education at St Mary's University, in Calgary. In "Forging Civic Armour Against Toxic Populism: An Affect-First Approach to Fostering Reflective and Resilient Citizens," Wright-Maley interrogates the concept of populism, its recent global re-emergence and why this matters, especially for teachers. More than an exposé, the article considers how teachers can address the most antidemocratic features of populism, which he describes as a "political technique," in order to help students develop a "civic armour" that allows them to engage in divisive topics even as interest groups, ideologues and corporations seek to influence education in a way that serves their needs rather than the needs of diverse communities. Social studies teachers are, he notes, on the front lines as external forces seek to stifle a healthy and engaged populace.

To contribute to the debate, graduate student Robyn Luff, a former Calgary teacher and former member of the legislative assembly (MLA), explores the assumption that education benefits democracy in her article "Intentions Matter: Education and Democracy." Interestingly, she problematizes this assumption by considering challenges

to the educative process. She also notes that to create and sustain democratic classrooms, students must develop the skills and dispositions needed to intelligently engage with one another in meaningful discussion—with a focus on enriching a democratic social order rather than supporting a narrow individual self-interest.

A common theme, so far, is that democracies cannot exist without participation from all citizens. As Kovacs (2009, 14) notes, "If students are to become citizens who participate in and protect their democracies, then schools, and social studies teachers in particular, must educate them with that end in mind."

As Indigenous scholar Quinn Healy reminds us, encouraging participation also involves critical reflection. Healy seeks to create inclusive learning spaces that honour and integrate Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. She has developed resources that guide teachers on their reconciliation journeys, emphasizing the importance of reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities.

In "The Harm of Assumptions: An Indigenous Perspective," Healy cites the adage that our assumptions are our windows on the world and we need to scrub them off to let the light in. As society and schools confront multiple challenges to democracy, she reminds us that democracy protects human rights and requires the participation of all people—regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, race and so on. Through scrubbing our windows, we can explore how our assumptions about Indigenous people have limited their participation and their ability to succeed in a democracy. Healy holds out hope that through the transformative work of reconciliation and decolonization, a future in which Indigenous youth not only contribute but also thrive is probable.

The final article is by Aaron Stout, a former high school social studies teacher and current instructor at the University of Lethbridge. Among other topics, his academic work focuses on history education and citizenship education. In "How Should History Be Taught When Confronted by Social Uncertainty? Investing in Diverse Narratives as a Path for History Education," Stout asks how we might face the issues that confront us today and challenge our way of life, including systemic racism, poverty, the need for reconciliation and political polarization. He explains that we must learn how to "struggle with complexity and consider the common good." History education, he notes, can offer such an opportunity, depending on how we conceptualize the discipline. Arguing for a humanist approach to teaching history, so that students can engage in rich discussions about topics such as social

justice, he stresses that students must experience human voice and agency. Teaching history from a single perspective cannot provide this. Instead, teachers should intentionally include the multiple perspectives reflected in a historical issue or period. He asserts, "Ultimately, history can remind us that we have so much in common with each other. Through mutual dialogue and understanding, society can be a place where we discuss and deliberate the common good."

Hopefully, the articles in this issue remind readers of what Giroux (2005) calls the "pedagogy of possibility," which allows students to reconstruct the social tropes that shape our stories, our memories and the meanings we ascribe to them. Teachers in democratic schools should examine various ideologies and forms of knowledge, ensuring that no one ideology, including democracy, ascends in order to oppress. As part of a social project that has reciprocal obligations and a shared moral purpose, education as a transformative practice requires active citizenship education with engaged and committed youth across our diverse society. I hope that this issue of *One World in Dialogue* offers insight into how this can be done.

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# Forging Civic Armour Against Toxic Populism: An Affect-First Approach to Fostering Reflective and Resilient Citizens

*Cory Wright-Maley*

Populism is rising worldwide and takes various forms in response to local, national and global concerns.

Teachers in Alberta who are seeking to address populism in their classrooms will recognize that this topic relates to various topics in the social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005–07)—particularly, civic and political institutions, participation, and deliberation.

In this article, I argue for and provide strategies for an affect-first approach to civic discourse in the classroom.

The focus is on toxic populism in Canada and the United States, but the approach I detail also applies to Brazil, Germany, Hungary, India, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Zambia and other places struggling to address this phenomenon.

## What Is Populism?

Defining *populism* is difficult, because populism is not an ideological stance. Unlike an ideology, "populism can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6).

Nor does populism belong uniquely to either the political right or the political left. In Canada, populism has manifested as both the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) (social progressivism) and the Reform, Social Credit and Wildrose parties (social conservativism).

Thus, it is more helpful to think of populism as a political technique that can be mapped onto ideologies or as a set of tools that established doctrines use as a framework for action.

The common thread in populist movements is the establishment of politically useful binaries that pit those who are deemed common, pure, honest and hard-working (often referred to as "the people") against the elites, who are seen as corrupt. Who is considered to constitute the elite, however, varies (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Take, for instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, which defined the elite economically, as the 1 per cent who siphoned wealth away from the hardworking 99 per cent (Anderson 2021). We can also look at various Alberta premiers who have blamed the federal Liberals for supporting Central Canada on the backs of "hardworking Albertans" (Russ 2023). Or we can see how the populist movement in Quebec has long identified the Anglo elite in Montreal and stoked resentment—and, ultimately, legislation—directed at racialized, non-Christian Quebecers, who are seen as threats to Québécois culture (Johnson 2007; Mann 2024).

Although we can find examples of populism from the left wing of the political spectrum, today's populism is almost without exception a right-wing phenomenon, with distinctive characteristics. Specifically, in addition to demonizing the elites, right-wing populism has a strong tendency toward authoritarianism, antiestablishment sentiment, and often nationalist/separatist and nativist/antipluralist inclinations that target vulnerable others (such as racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual and gender minorities).

## The Economic Conditions Argument

Readers are likely familiar with both of the following historical examples of populism in North America.

For many history teachers in the United States, the word *populism* conjures the agrarian People's Party movement at the end of the 19th century. This movement drew from the energy of farmers who felt that the wealthy elites (mercantile middlemen) were siphoning off their wealth, growing fat while the livelihoods of farmers grew leaner. Moreover, the farmers believed that the country's two major political parties were failing them (Ostler 1993; Winsboro and Musoke 2003).

In Canada, the CCF was founded in the early 1930s and rose (primarily in Saskatchewan) in response to concerns that the economic elites were prioritizing profits over people, which led to growing support for the foundations of our modern welfare state (McDonald 2013). At the same time, the Social Credit Party of Alberta rose to prominence, demonizing the same economic elites but with more authoritarian tendencies (Rettie 2009), which is common in right-wing populism.

It would be instructive for Canadians to consider the recent history of deindustrialization in the American heartland (Kendzior 2018). Decades of globalization have stripped the American working class of stable livelihoods, as jobs have been automated or shipped overseas. This has led to speculation that working-class disaffection (particularly among white people) spawned, or at least fuelled, the rise of populism in the United States (Packer 2016; Pieterse 2018). Moreover, this economic destabilization has occurred in significant swing states (such as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan), meaning that it has shaped national politics.

Given this context, one could be forgiven for believing, as I did, that economic disparity or dislocation has been the driver of populist upheaval in the United States, particularly given that left-wing populism typically takes on an expressly economic mantle.

This conclusion, if correct, would lead us to believe that social studies teachers, in teaching about populism, should foreground the economic realities of people struggling with poverty. In Canada, this might mean featuring displaced workers in the oil and gas sector, who experienced a 34 per cent decline in employment from 2014 to 2021 (Roach 2022). This approach would give students ways to think about how we might remediate the situation by various means.

Likewise, considering the consequences of American tariffs on Canadian industries, teachers might want to take special care in addressing the economic dislocation of working-class people in order to prevent the further rise of populist grievance. At the same time, they might want to emphasize the importance of building empathy toward those struggling economically.

Although these approaches are economically and ethically warranted, this instrumental approach may lead us to miss a more important educational aim when confronting surging populism.

The economic explanation for the rise in populism does not hold up to scrutiny. Analyses of voters in the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union demonstrate no or a very weak correlation between class and support for right-wing populists. To illustrate, shifts toward support for Donald Trump and Boris Johnson were even across class lines (Mols and Jetten 2016; Mondon and Winter 2019). This is also evident in recent federal and provincial election trends in Canada (Graves and Smith 2020). The consistency of these findings fundamentally undermines the argument that economic dislocation is the critical driver of right-wing populism.

Further undermining the economic conditions argument is the finding that the strength of support for right-wing populists does not even correlate with a country's or state's economic strength or with actual (as opposed to imagined) patterns of immigration (Lincicome 2021).

Even if the economic conditions argument did hold up, we should stop to think critically about why right-wing populism has surged but left-wing populism has not. Diamond (2018) concludes that although economic pressures can lead to openness to populist appeals, "they do not explain why it is specifically nativist, xenophobic parties and politicians who successfully mobilize [voters'] feelings of anxiety and resentment."

This leads us to consider not economic conditions or class but, rather, a more existential sense of economic peril.

## Economic Peril and Why It Matters

The fact that right-wing populism in the United States features economic peril as a central trope is not, as it turns out, about class. Class is a red herring. What is significant is the strong correlation between support for right-wing populism and the belief that the economic system unfairly advantages the economic elite at the expense of the general populace—a view shared by the progressive left (Pew Research Center 2021).

These same political correlations bear out in research on western alienation in Alberta politics: Albertans who feel that the province is being unfairly disadvantaged,

exploited or disrespected are much more likely to support the United Conservative Party (UCP) than the New Democratic Party (NDP) (Environics Institute for Survey Research 2023).

Thus, the economic realities of class in North America (as well as Europe and elsewhere) do not appear to drive populism on either the left or the right. Rather, perceived unfairness in the economy leads to a sense of economic peril, which would-be populists exploit for their political advantage because it drives fear and anxiety.

The perception of economic peril is important and urgent where the promise of economic security is the reward for hard work. Imperilling this promise threatens the American dream (Rank and Hirschl 2014), as well as the similar, but more expansive, Canadian dream.[1] This ethos is an example of an ontological construct—a belief about how the world is and how it ought to work. Our ontological security is our "sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be" (Kinnvall 2004, 746).[2] This sense of confidence is woven into our personal and collective narratives, which help us make sense of who we are; what communities, nations, countries or regions we belong to; whose ideas and desires matter; and who maintains control over cultural and political norms.

When this narrative about how the world should work is threatened, people can lose that sense of security. Perceived threats could include increasing diversity, the departure of stable blue-collar jobs, a sense of declining patriotism or national or regional prestige, alienation from the mechanisms of influence over one's life, loss of trust in social institutions, a sense that the elite are "making out like bandits," and so on.

When our ontological beliefs are shaken, we tend to look to sources of ballast to relieve our existential anxiety. In the current political context, which is characterized by polarization, straightforward explanations (for example, "Immigrants are taking your jobs") are often more effective than nuanced explanations (such as the explanation that a variety of changes related to policy, global supply chains, profit motives and technology have displaced some workers while benefiting other workers). Straightforward explanations offer diagnoses and responses that are easier to grasp and remember—even if they are fundamentally wrong. In contrast, nuanced arguments alienate even sympathetic audiences while doing little to draw support from adversarial audiences (Siev et al 2024). In short, when individuals and groups suffer from ontological insecurity, they are vulnerable to the narrative simplicity of populist rhetoric (Bolton 2021).

It is not a stretch to assume that the economic conditions currently straining Canadians (such as inflation, housing shortages and tariffs) will foment feelings of economic peril here. We, too, will likely see pressure from populists, even if the surge in anti-American sentiment temporarily tempers it.

It is important to note that economic peril is not always a negative impetus. We should remember that the failure of political action to respond to real or perceived grievances drives populist impulses (Laclau 2005). When populist rhetoric catalyzes political action that offers redress, these positive political changes can dispel populist tailwinds.

For example, the agrarian populism of the late 19th century ushered in a wave of legislation that defined the Progressive Era in the United States.[3] Similarly, in Canada in the 1940s, the rising popularity of the CCF in the west led Liberal prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King to adopt some of its platform proposals, including an old-age pension, employment insurance and family subsidies (Bonikowsky 2013; McCracken 2019). Moreover, nearly two decades later, the introduction of universal health care in Saskatchewan, by CCF premier Tommy Douglas, led to the federal *Medical Care Act* of 1966.[4] What Canadians today view as the signature accomplishments of the welfare state were responses to populist concerns and pressures, and they served to dissipate the antipathy that populist rhetoric engendered.

Left unaddressed, however, populism can take a frightening turn. Today, right-wing populists in Canada, the United States and elsewhere use rhetoric to explain their supporters' feelings of insecurity. In addition to blaming the elites, they point to a defined other (or others), whom they blame for destabilizing the lives and well-being of their target audience, even though the people they are blaming have less power than the aggrieved group. Worse still, in a move to harness resentment, they frequently attempt to connect the two groups—the elite and the vulnerable other—in a way that paints a picture of a conspiracy against the interests of the "right kind" of people.

There is perhaps no clearer example of this than the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, which offers receptive Americans both an elite oppressor (the liberal elite) and targets toward whom they can channel their rage (typically, racial, religious, or sexual and gender minorities). This movement represents an entirely different kind of populism—a toxic populism more characteristic of nascent fascism than of economic populism (Albright 2018). Canadians are certainly not immune to this toxic populism (Leman-Langlois, Campana and Tanner 2024).

From a psychological perspective, having targets to blame for one's feelings of insecurity is satisfyingly easy—much easier than building coalitions of politically diverse people who share a belief that the economic landscape has shifted against everyday people (Kwak 2020; Saul 2017; Williamson and Gelfand 2019).

However, the consequences for those who become the targets of this manufactured rage can be devastating (Bhattacharyya, Gabriel and Small 2016; Orlowski 2011; van Kessel 2019). Moreover, the data clearly show alarming increases in hate crimes, perpetrated overwhelmingly by white people against religious, racial, or sexual and gender minorities, which often mirror the right-wing political rhetoric against those vulnerable groups (Kwak 2020; Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2024; Statistics Canada 2025).[5]

## Schools and Toxic Populism

Schools are not immune to toxic populism. The trends discussed here also affect our students and school environments.

In a study for the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA), Rogers et al (2017) found that high schools in the United States had seen increased levels of polarization, incivility and hostility toward minorities and other vulnerable groups, related to political rhetoric. As Westheimer (2019) notes, this has a negative impact on student learning and well-being, as well as students' confidence in both democracy and the rule of law.

Although I have not seen similar research in Canada, one would be hard pressed to argue that Canadian classrooms are immune to those pressures.

The pressing challenge is what teachers should do in the classroom to counter the threats to democratic norms and to our students' ability to talk across differences. Sperry (2018) and Westheimer (2019) offer some excellent cognitive strategies. In the next section, I go beyond this to offer ideas for emphasizing an affect-first approach to civic discourse.

## How Should Teachers Pivot Toward an Affect-First Approach?

Social studies teachers must first recognize that political and social antipathy is not primarily a cognitive issue. A growing body of evidence across multiple disciplines reveals that cognition takes its cues from affect, not vice versa (Justice 2021; Neumann 2019; Petty and Briñol 2015).

In practical terms, this means that we make decisions based, at least partly, on our emotional states—both acute emotional reactions related to discrete moments in our lives and chronic conditions of stress and discomfort. Therefore, when mediating difficult conversations, teachers must be prepared to meaningfully address affect.

Moreover, there is a growing recognition that in ignoring affect, teachers are not setting students up for success in the civic sphere (Keegan 2024). If teachers want to address ontological insecurity or other emotions that have emerged in response to feelings of economic peril or the rhetoric of toxic populism, we must approach the issue from multiple affective fronts, in addition to the cognitive approaches we engage in as a regular part of our practice.

Here, I provide strategies to help teachers more effectively confront the toxic aspects of populist rhetoric.

### Emphasizing Relationships

Relationships are at the heart of empathy.

Rogers and his team at IDEA (Rogers et al 2017, 30) have put forth several suggestions for fostering empathetic engagement:

- Build relationships
- Establish norms
- Model and practise
- Structure opportunities for participation
- Monitor and respond

Teachers must not assume that students in our classrooms know anything about one another. At the beginning of the school year, I use a get-to-know-you activity in which students share the important people in their lives and the activities they like to engage in. This enables them to forge connections with each other—often in ways they did not anticipate. Similar activities throughout the year can initiate and reinforce bonds of fellowship between students.

To be sure, as Eppler-Wolff and Martin (2021, 306) note, the process of relational development does "not materialize overnight," but over time teachers can foster in our classrooms the emotional safety students need in order to engage effectively in difficult conversations.

In Alberta, we would do well, too, to draw upon the relationally rich kinship teachings of Indigenous Peoples. For example, Blackfoot kinship teachings (Bastien 2004; May-Derbyshire 2019) are beginning to shape my thinking.

This kind of relational work can have wide-ranging benefits in building the social capital that strengthens trust within our communities and, subsequently, strengthens our democracies (Putnam 2000, 2020). I have seen first-hand how engaging in political talk before building relationships can be damaging, because students come to see their peers in a two-dimensional way based on political caricatures rather than recognizing the complexities of their identities.

## Addressing the Affective Domain

Social studies teachers and students must become adept at identifying how populist rhetoric uses tools of misinformation and misdirection to manipulate and take advantage of our emotional states.

Teachers must shift their practice to meaningfully address the affective domain as part of an effort to foster affective citizenship, which recognizes that we all wrestle with how we feel and how we believe we ought to feel about a range of issues and people. Affective citizenship also considers how we cope with difference and discomfort and how emotional discourses shape how we engage with issues of civic importance that often hold key elements of disagreement (Keegan 2021).

The tools teachers use to address the affective domain often fold into socioemotional learning (SEL). However, also required is a critical engagement that goes beyond the individual response in order to critically evaluate the political sphere that can trigger certain feelings. So, although SEL skills may be helpful, teachers must consider how affective responses and the messaging intended to elicit them are endemic in a polarized society and how the capacity to reflect critically about affective responses in real time is essential to effective civic reasoning and discourse. This affective learning is essential because it fosters a focus on emotional reactivity, self-regulation, relationship development and executive function in the context of issues that are meaningful to students' identities and concerns about the world (Fullmer et al 2022; Immordino-Yang et al 2024).

Effectively engaging students in this work means taking the time to unpack their emotional responses so that they will not be attempting to understand or respond to contested issues while in a hot emotional state. It also means overcoming student apathy driven by the feeling that "it is not worth the persistence, frustration and exhaustion that inevitably comes with addressing political discord" (BridgeND 2023).

Fostering students' capacity to reflect on what has caused them to become affectively activated and responding in ways that help bring them back to a cool emotional state appear to be necessary for fruitful engagement with emotionally challenging civic conversations (Bass 2022). As Immordino-Yang et al (2024, 2) argue, "This means that educators must consider how students will connect and relate emotionally and intellectually to the curriculum, along with, or as part of the question of, what [they] should know and be able to do." Indeed, affect almost certainly must be addressed before evidentiary proceedings can begin to be useful (Zembylas 2020, 2022).

The capacity to help students navigate these challenges is an area for growth for many teachers, especially considering that they may not possess those skills themselves. According to Brown (2021), most people do not. Nevertheless, in the context of increasing polarization and reduced resilience in the face of ideological conflict (Haidt 2024), teachers may be called upon to be more-effective mediators of affective and relational development as a core function of preparing students to be effective citizens.

The goal, ultimately, is to help students become more cognizant, capable and resilient in managing and responding to their emotions in the face of ideas that evoke affective responses. This will help them respond more effectively, even when doing so is difficult (Haidt 2024; Magness 2022).

## Setting Students Up for Discursive Success

When teachers establish a foundation for good relations and begin building the capacity to navigate the affective terrain of the civically minded classroom, they create a basis of trust upon which to have the kinds of conversations we want civically engaged students to have.

Students, however, need guidance and structure for these conversations. Teachers should establish norms for engaging in political conversation, including teaching listening skills. These skills involve listening for what is being said instead of framing a rebuttal; demonstrating understanding of both the content and the intention of what has been said by summarizing, asking clarifying questions and requesting elaboration; and reading body language.

Various models may be helpful. One straightforward approach is using accountable discussions, which require evidence-based arguments, respect and polite conversation.[6] Teachers can help students do this work by modelling conversation for and with them. This can involve scripted role play in which the teacher or observing students may intervene at critical moments to provide feedback or suggestions for responding more effectively.

Once students have had whole-group practice, teachers should provide them with structured opportunities to have conversations, with support. These conversations might take the form of structured academic controversies, fishbowl discussions or Socratic seminars. Teachers can be present to model, reframe and demonstrate various ways of phrasing statements or to offer suggestions about how students might respond to their peers.

Being fully present throughout these conversations allows teachers to reinforce high-quality discussion and reframe areas where students struggle. In time, students will become more efficacious without this continuous scaffolding. This is the essential work of social studies—to help secure the quality of discourse necessary for a

functioning democracy. Once the foundational norms are established, addressing affect head-on becomes easier to accomplish in a supportive manner.

## Conclusion

Through an affect-first approach, teachers can help students recognize how toxic populist rhetoric makes them feel, as well as how that rhetoric is designed to manipulate their feelings. Students can then learn how to step back in order to regulate their affective states so that they can more readily engage cognitively. This will help them engage in productive political discussions, even across divisive topics, as well as navigate an increasingly complex and contentious world.

Developing these skills and dispositions is necessary not only for the healthy functioning of democratic societies but also for remediating the toxic state of political discourse. Social studies teachers are on the front lines of preparing students—indeed, forging their civic armour—so they can confront an increasingly perilous world without falling prey to the viciousness that these times often bring to the fore.

## Notes

1. "Has the Canadian Dream Replaced the American Dream?," Path to Canada, https://pathtocanada.com/has-the-canadian-dream-replaced-the-american-dream/.

2. See also Valente and Pertegas (2018).

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# Intentions Matter: Education and Democracy

*Robyn Luff*

Educational expansion [is] a prerequisite for liberal democracy. (Torres and Puiggrós 1995, 9)

*Public schooling* has long been understood as holding fundamental citizenship responsibilities. (Bullough 2022, 1–2)

Students will understand the rights and benefits of democratic citizenship and their personal and community responsibilities. (Alberta Education 2020)

Can education help us get the democracy we want? Does it serve to create good citizens? In a world that seems to lean more and more toward autocracy, should we refocus our efforts on civics education?

An assumption long held is that public education benefits democracy and is, in fact, crucial to the ongoing health of a democratic society. Evidence of this assumption exists all around us—in political speeches, in academic writing, in popular culture and in articles that point to the election of Donald Trump as a failure of civics education (Kahlenberg and Janey 2016). Horace Mann, one of the founders of public education in the United States, argued that producing good republican citizens was a key goal of education and that public education was necessary for ensuring the survival of the fledgling republic (Carleton 2009). Philosopher Bertrand Russell believed that "education was the lever of reform. It was the means for transforming civilization and for democratizing, humanizing, and bridging empathic distance between people" (Stander 1974, 447).

It's an easy narrative. After all, the socialization of students has been an aim of education for nearly all its existence. It's also easy to blame the fall of robust civics education for an increasingly autocratic world.

However, both education and society are affected by many variables, and some feel that education may not influence society much at all. For example, Biesta (2007, 765) notes, "Schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities."

In an autocratic society, where people face real barriers to freedom and choice, schools may not be able to do much. However, I would argue that unless schools choose to break down the walls of control and commodification in education, we have much less chance of living in a society without those same features.

Consequently, exploring the connection between education and democracy is worthwhile. Many social studies teachers are looking around and asking ourselves if what we do matters. I know many passionate teachers who love government and civics and value our cultural and democratic institutions. But they wonder if their students value those things similarly, or if they as teachers are having any impact.

A significant correlation exists between education levels and democracy, but some places with seemingly good education systems do not support democracy at all. It is also clear that some pedagogical practices support student agency more than others. Overall, while too many variables exist to make a clear call on whether education can effectively create democratic citizens or support democracy, it is clear that education can support the reproduction of

social values. Thus, if Canadians value democracy, we must teach in ways that support democracy.

It is important to define what I mean by *democracy*.

At a high level, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's definition of *democracy* is instructive: a country "in which political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed" (Herre 2022).

However, it is also important to consider the actions of democracy and what constitutes the actions of a citizen in a democracy. What does it mean to be a democratic citizen? Can you be a democratic citizen in an autocratic country?

Gandin and Apple (2002) conceptualize thin versus thick democracy. A thin democracy offers the illusion of choice (such as citizens voting in elections), whereas a thick democracy "focuses on an emancipatory education for the excluded" (p 102). A student engaged in the work of thick democracy learns about the oppression of others by the state and society and works to develop solutions that enable full participation in society by everyone.

Exploring the connection between education and democracy raises the following questions: In what countries has education enabled the roots of democracy to take hold? What countries use education to build patriotism but not democracy? What stories are we telling students, through a hidden curriculum, about what they should value?

Through this exploration, I hope to make clear that we must be intentional about what we want out of civics education. As Biesta (2007, 747) notes, "Schools may have exemplary curricula for the teaching of democracy and citizenship, but if the internal organization of a school is undemocratic, this will undoubtedly have a negative impact on students' attitudes and dispositions towards democracy."

## The Correlation Between Education and Democracy

In discussing the role of education in the Arab Spring, Campante and Chor (2012, 168) observe,

A vast body of evidence confirms that individuals with a higher educational attainment consistently exhibit a greater propensity to participate in the full spectrum of political activities. . . . This positive relationship holds true in virtually any survey dataset that asks about political engagement, even after controlling extensively for other individual traits such as age, gender, and income.

A narrative that came out of this series of revolutions was that when there is a rapid elevation in education levels, people will cease to support undemocratic regimes.

A strong correlation exists between well-functioning democracies and well-functioning education systems. In fact, the correlation coefficient between the democracy index and years of schooling is 74 per cent (Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shleifer 2006). Moreover, many studies positively correlate higher levels of education with an increasing likelihood to participate in democratic life (Sondheimer and Green 2010).

Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shleifer (2006) discuss two key explanations for this correlation. The first is that civic participation follows naturally from increased ability to communicate (that is, to read and write). The second explanation is based on human capital theory: educated people are likely to see better results from their activism and civic participation and are, therefore, more likely to spend the time necessary to participate. These two explanations come together when we look at a situation such as the Arab Spring.

Further, the correlation between education and political activism is even higher in societies with relatively low economic opportunity (Campante and Chor 2012). This aligns with social capital theory. In a well-functioning economy, educated people, who are relatively well off, are more likely to use their time to better their individual circumstances, rather than seeking collective political action. However, when people have fewer opportunities, such as in Tunisia and Libya before their revolutions, the incentive to increase one's personal well-being through collective action is much higher.

Education also raises communication capabilities. Because the citizens of Arab countries were educated, they were better able to take advantage of their social capital to communicate with each other through meetings, speeches and social media. In other words, they had the skills to effectively organize, as well as the incentive to do so.

On a microlevel, there is also substantial evidence that certain types of civics education help increase both student agency and the likelihood of students' participation in civic and democratic life (Luff 2022). As Kahne and Sporte (2008, 754) note, "What happens in classrooms can have a significant impact on students' commitments to civic participation."

Teachers can adopt several practices to support the civic engagement of students. They should endeavour to create a democratic classroom, where students feel comfortable asking questions and where their input and knowledge are valued. As well, they should seek to engage students in hands-on, community-focused service projects (Kahne and Sporte 2008; Rogers 2009; Sobel 2014). A focus on

justice-oriented civic activity makes students aware of historical and current systems of oppression and encourages activities that break down those systems (Hernández and Castillo 2022).

Overall, the research reveals a strong correlation between education and democracy and also shows that specific types of civics education can successfully increase democratic participation in young people. However, this is often not the case in the classroom. As Biesta (2007) points out, "Many young people singled out the school as the environment with the least opportunities for taking initiative, having a say and being heard—the environment with the least opportunities for action and being a subject."

# Education as Social Reproduction

What about autocracies with widespread and high-quality public education? There are several clear exceptions to the overall trend that more education means more democracy.

## China

China is an obvious example of an autocracy with a high-quality education system.

In the 2018 test cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where tested, China ranked first in nearly every category (OECD 2019). China offers free and compulsory public education for nine years, for children aged 6–15. A large share of students (around 30 per cent) go on to attend university.

China goes to great lengths to point out just how progressive and democratic its education system is. For example, a government-funded research paper (Li and Chen 2013) uses John Dewey's ideas as a basis for explaining how the presence of a *banzhuren* (homeroom teacher) and "classrooming" (classroom governance) create a classroom that is "a real world to live together, to develop individual and community, and to experience and experiment [with] democracy."

This government-approved view contrasts with the account of Mosser (2010), an American who served as a visiting professor at a Chinese university, teaching a course on the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. Mosser describes how Chinese students never spoke in class and how questioning the instructor was considered disrespectful. This account is more in line with the overarching view of China as an increasingly strict autocracy, where "there is an overwhelming submission to power, involuntary or voluntary, among Chinese people including intellectuals;

and this submission to power leads to widespread censorship and self-censorship in academia" (Yu 2020, 16).

Several authors note that China lends itself to authoritarian government more easily due to the influence of Confucianism (Mosser 2010; Yu 2020). This philosophy, which is a core part of Chinese culture, values strict adherence to rules and social hierarchy as a means of maintaining harmony and order. Since the late 1980s, perhaps as an action against rising student activism, the government of China has identified a form of Confucian values to be taught in schools, such as "loyalty to one's country, commitment to serving one's people, social responsibility, respect for authority, and self-discipline" (Yu 2020, 20).

Beyond the infusion of authoritarian values into education in China, another factor to consider is China's strong economy. As Yu (2020, 17) notes, "The one-party political system is married to a market economy, and that marriage has produced unprecedented economic prosperity which has, in turn, justified the current political system for many."

Thus, a strong economy that keeps people relatively wealthy, combined with the culture of authoritarian values taught in school and an overall fear of the state, may keep people in China from acting against their government.

## Cuba

Another country to consider when thinking about education and democracy is Cuba.

Cuba is widely considered to have the best education system in Latin America (Bridges 2020). Postrevolution, an early initiative of Fidel Castro was to ensure that the entire population of the island was literate (Blum 2011). Today, Cuba has a literacy rate of 99.7 per cent.[1]

Cuba is a particularly interesting case. Given that it has gone through long periods of very low economic prosperity and also has a highly educated populace, one might think that Cubans would have overthrown their communist government by now. That Cubans remain steadfastly patriotic despite the country's lack of economic success may be partially attributed to the core values taught in their education system.

Bridges (2020) interviewed people in Cuba and identified the values the Cuban education system purposely and intentionally focuses on: "honesty, solidarity, and patriotism" (p 142). Intentional teaching of these values, combined with youth service organizations and government propaganda, "provided Cubans with such a strong sense of identity that they were willing to go through what was the most difficult period in their history knowing that they could survive together" (p 143).

Additionally, Cuba has continually been on the receiving end of American foreign policy meant to devastate its economy. This gives the Cuban government an antagonist

to point to—a common enemy of the people. Having this common enemy may also be part of why Cubans have not been quick to revolt.

As the example of Cuba shows, education can serve as an excellent means of reproducing social values rather than a means of reproducing democracy. That Cuba explicitly includes the aims of patriotism and solidarity in its curriculum may be a reason the country has been so successful at staving off another revolution.

## Saying One Thing, Doing Another: The United States and Civics Education

Let's turn now to the United States. The country repeatedly emphasizes its commitment to democracy, yet it has taken a strong turn toward authoritarianism, both with the election of Trump and in overall attitudes toward democracy.

A 2011 survey found that around a quarter of young Americans thought that democracy was a "bad" or "very bad" way to run a country (Kahlenberg and Janey 2016). Many fingers in academia point to the idea that this trend is due to a changing landscape in education since the 1980s that has both de-emphasized the teaching of civics and emphasized increasingly individualistic values, often through a hidden curriculum (Hernández and Castillo 2022; Hytten and Stemhagen 2020; Kahne and Sporte 2008).

As we saw with China and Cuba, education appears to be an effective tool for social reproduction. Thus, what we choose to emphasize matters.

Hytten and Stemhagen (2020) note that since the 1960s, the United States has repeatedly chosen to emphasize science and math over the social sciences (specifically, civics). This was originally a purposeful response to a perceived deficit after the Soviets appeared to be winning the Space Race with the launch of Sputnik. However, the trend has continued long after the point when the United States managed to land a man on the moon.

A key element of this continued trend was the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. This legislation paired funding with test results and focused on testing only reading, math and science. Since then, the United States has seen much less emphasis on teaching civics (Bullough 2022).

All these shifts reflect how education is valued as a way to increase economic productivity and to get a job, rather than as a way to create civic-minded citizens of a democratic nation. They can also be traced to the increasing neoliberal mindset that if something doesn't directly benefit the economy, it isn't worth our time.

Overtly, the United States has been actively removing civics education from curricula in favour of more "marketable" subjects, such as math and science. But what is the hidden curriculum saying?

Most schools and classrooms in the United States are still what one could call authoritarian. Schools generally follow a strict hierarchical structure: principals, teachers, students, custodians and so on. Classrooms are generally led by teachers, who choose what will be taught each day and lay out the rules of conduct. McDaniel (1982, 246) asserts, "That is the nature of a school, and teachers by definition must exercise the authority of their office. This is their major responsibility as an employee of the school system."

Apple (1975) emphasizes that schools choose to shy away from conflict. Students who follow the rules are generally rewarded. This is the hidden curriculum.

In a current trend in the United States, charter schools that target low-income and often racialized populations tend to be the most strict and authoritarian. These "no excuses" schools have strict rules and high expectations. However, their pursuit of high scores on standardized tests means that they often leave out aspects of a well-rounded education (Lamboy and Lu 2017).

It is very telling that those who are targeted by the most authoritarian education are those who would be most likely to protest systemic injustices and racism. Moreover, these students are being kept away from a democratic education that would give them more tools for engaging in such activity.

Since the research shows that more-democratic classrooms are more likely to create democratic citizens (Kahne and Sporte 2008), teachers must consider what the structure of their schools and classrooms is implicitly telling students. It is not surprising to me that those who spend 13 years being rewarded for following the dictates of authoritarians continue to choose authoritarian-style leadership after graduation.

## Neoliberalism: The New Hidden Curriculum

Labaree (1997) describes what he sees as three overarching aims for education that have been prevalent in the United States since the onset of free public schooling:

- Democratic equality (student as citizen)
- Social efficiency (student as taxpayer)
- Social mobility (student as consumer)

We could ascribe these aims to Canada and other places, as well.

This concept goes to the heart of why the assumption that schools support democracy is problematic. How countries conceptualize schooling and its purpose is a fundamentally political issue. Do we want schools to create citizens that uphold our democratic institutions? Or are we looking for citizens who steadfastly follow rules and authority?

Torres and Puiggrós (1995, 5) write, "Since public education attempts to create a citizen as a 'disciplined pedagogical subject,' the role, mission, ideology, and training of teachers . . . are all marked by the prevailing philosophy of the state." The prevailing philosophy of most states in the Western world over the last 50 years has been neoliberalism, which seeks to increase control by private enterprise and decrease the control of the state. A political war has been waged for the hearts and minds of citizens on behalf of corporations and international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Luff 2023). As a result, we see more and more focus on schools as sites that reproduce the values that reflect Labaree's (1997) third aim of education—social mobility and student as consumer.

An example of this hidden neoliberal curriculum is found in the rise of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) schools. These types of programs are popular across the Western world. Parents have been told that we have a skills gap and that we should prioritize these subjects over others, because people with STEM skills will be more employable and able to find high-paying and high-status jobs (Hytten and Stemhagen 2020).

However, Hytten and Stemhagen (2020) address the shaky foundation on which STEM schools are often built. There is not a real gap in skilled workers for STEM jobs, and the United States is not actually behind in global competitiveness in this area. They find, ultimately, that "it is not hard to show that a hidden curriculum of STEM education is to elevate a market ethos above a human one, and to fuel corporate greed" (p 29).

The language of competition and employability, spurred by international testing (such as PISA), can be found everywhere, and students could be forgiven for assuming that the only purpose of school is to make them economically viable once they leave it. Students constantly ask teachers, "How will I use this in real life?" and "How will this help me get a job?" They have internalized the neoliberal position that school is there to help them succeed as a consumer in the economy, not as a well-informed citizen in a democracy.

All of this is part of an effort—sometimes subtle and sometimes overt—to actively redefine democracy as capitalism and to suggest that as long as citizens have choice as consumers, they live in a democracy (Apple 2017).

## What Now?

While the evidence shows a high correlation between education and democracy, there is stronger evidence that education reproduces the values that are taught explicitly (through the curriculum) and implicitly (through the hidden curriculum). This concept of social reproduction helps explain how some countries remain autocratic even while having a highly educated population. It also explains how countries such as the United States are developing autocratic tendencies through schools that reproduce consumerism and authoritarianism.

I think it is fair to say that while a highly educated populace helps to maintain a democracy, and even to create one, whether education benefits democracy is highly dependent on the values a country chooses to instill into its curriculum. Countries that educate for democracy, such as Finland, generally get good democracy (Murgatroyd and Sahlberg 2016). Countries that educate for obedience, such as China, generally get obedience.

Is what we call education actually education? If education is not reproducing democratic social principles, is it more like indoctrination? This is an interesting question. I think that there is some space between social reproduction and indoctrination, but as with so much in education, that space is fuzzy. The question warrants further consideration.

Overall, the lesson teachers should take away is that we must take teaching and what we teach seriously. We must be extremely conscious of the values we are reproducing, and we should ask ourselves what students are learning in our classrooms and schools, particularly through the hidden curriculum.

Additionally, citizens should ask themselves what they want out of public education. How valuable is democracy to you? Do you want to see democracy reproduced?

Finally, those who create curricula must re-evaluate their commitment to life in a democratic society. A vast body of evidence shows that even a "good" democracy, such as Canada's, is not very democratic (Loat and MacMillan 2014; Wilson-Raybould 2021). How can we expect our citizens to fully participate if our elected members of Parliament are not even enabled to do so?

If it is important to us to live in a democracy, there are many areas on which we can focus. Much work still needs to be done in terms of sustaining and improving democracy as a whole. However, if we wish to maintain the rights and freedoms we possess in the Western world, we must be much more intentional about what we are doing in our schools.

# Note

1. "Literacy Rate by Country 2025," World Population Review, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/literacy-rate-by-country.

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# The Harm of Assumptions: An Indigenous Perspective

*Quinn Healy*

Actor Alan Alda (1980) once said, "Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come in."

Through making efforts toward reconciliation and cultivating relationships with Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people are beginning to scrub their windows and let the light in—the light that is Indigenous culture and ways of knowing and being.

Nevertheless, many assumptions about Indigenous people persist. Those assumptions guide some in how they think about and construct Indigenous identities. Assumptions, especially toward youth, can be incredibly harmful.

This article explores how assumptions about Indigenous learners formed, which assumptions about Indigenous learners continue today, and how we can create more hope and an environment that promotes and celebrates Indigenous success in education.

The issue of assumptions and stereotypes imposed on Indigenous people—both laterally and, primarily, by non-Indigenous people—is much larger than can be fully addressed here, yet the conversation is necessary.

## My Positionality

Before continuing, I must share my positionality in relation to this work.

I am a Cree/Euro woman, reclaiming her Indigeneity in real time.

Reclaiming who I am as an Indigenous woman, finding and meeting immediate family, and cultivating and meeting immediate family, and cultivating relationships that allow me to hear stories of lived experiences are opening my heart and eyes to the realities faced by Indigenous people and guiding me to where I want to be, personally and professionally.

## The Statistics and the Assumptions

Statistics regarding Indigenous people paint a picture of the inequalities and dichotomies that exist in the settler state known as Canada.

With regard to education, Statistics Canada reports that 91 per cent of non-Indigenous youth (aged 19–30) have a high school diploma or equivalent, but only 46 per cent of Indigenous youth who live on reserves do. For off-reserve Indigenous youth, the percentage is higher (73 per cent) but nowhere close to their non-Indigenous peers (J Layton 2023).

These low rates of graduation contribute to assumptions that Indigenous youth are lazy and incapable and that they lack the intelligence of their non-Indigenous peers.

The statistics tell a story—but not the full story. What is missing are the people, their stories and their lived experiences, as well as acknowledgement of the impacts of Canada's racist and colonial history.

When that history is understood, as well as how violence and oppression toward Indigenous people have been maintained, it becomes clear how stereotypes and assumptions are constructed and then perpetuated over time.

# How We Got Here

As discussed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC 2015), Canada was built as a nation through racist and colonial acts committed against Indigenous Peoples.

In 2014, the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH), now known as the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, published a fact sheet on anti-Indigenous racism in Canada. As the fact sheet emphasizes,

> Inaccurate or inadequate education about Canada's colonial history and its role in creating the disadvantages currently facing Indigenous communities essentially transfers responsibility for economic and social problems to Indigenous peoples' presumed failure to evolve, rather than to the socially and economically damaging effects of colonialism and racism (Harding, 2006). (p 4)

The NCCAH (2014, 2) defines *racism* as follows:

> Racism is a social injustice based on falsely constructed, but deeply embedded, assumptions about people and their relative social value; it is often used to justify disparities in the distribution of resources (MacKinnon, 2004). Racism manifests in multiple ways that allow some groups of people to see themselves as superior to others and to claim and maintain multiple forms of political, sociocultural, and economic power.

Colonialism, which "involves imposing a culture on a group of people while attempting to erase their own existing culture" (Houle 2022a, 6), is a form of racism. When they first encountered Indigenous Peoples in the 16th century, Europeans established reciprocal relationships. However, they soon began using any means necessary to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Eurocentric society and ideals.

Structural racism is the way "economic, social and political institutions and processes of a society . . . create and reinforce racial discrimination (Jackson, McGibbon, & Waldron, 2013; Lawrence, Sutton, Kubisch, Susi, & Fulbright-Anderson, 2010)" (NCCAH 2014, 5). Many institutions and structures across Turtle Island—including housing, health care, education and law enforcement—involve deep manifestations of racism against Indigenous people.

In Canada, structural racism has its roots in the *Indian Act* of 1876, which imposed strict control over Indigenous people and perpetuated stereotypes of incompetence (NCCAH 2014). This act laid the groundwork for policies that have left many First Nations communities with substandard housing, overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure, which have contributed to ongoing health and social inequities (Olsen, Merkel and Black 2021).

Moreover, the structures in place serve to reinforce and perpetuate assumptions. For example, many students who live on a reserve attend school on the reserve up to a certain point. Once high school approaches, they may have to commute every day to an off-reserve high school, or even move away from their family home and relocate to a new city. This is not the experience of most urban and rural non-Indigenous students. Students living on reserves are, thus, at a disadvantage in accessing the provisions for furthering their education (J Layton 2023).

One policy of the *Indian Act*—the residential school system—is an overt example of structural racism. In the late 19th century, knowing that education was a powerful tool with a national reach, the federal government created residential schools as institutions of assimilation and then mandated attendance for Indigenous children.

Residential schools were built on negative stereotypes about Indigenous societies (Young et al 2010). While Indigenous students were forced to attend residential schools, where they were stripped of their culture, European students heard a narrative that perpetuated the idea that Indigenous people were savages who needed to become like "us" (TRC 2015).

This overt narrative continued for over 150 years, meaning that the harmful, hateful stereotypes used to excuse the atrocities committed against Indigenous children and their families have had an impact on about seven generations.

In June 2008, Jack Layton, then leader of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP), offered an apology in the House of Commons to residential school Survivors:

> It was this Parliament that enacted, 151 years ago, the racist legislation that established the residential schools. This Parliament chose to treat First Nations, Métis and Inuit people as not equally human. It set out to "kill the Indian in the child." That choice was wrong. Horribly wrong. It led to incredible suffering. It denied First Nations, Métis and Inuit the basic freedom to choose how to live their lives.

Many effects of the residential school system continue. The damage caused by residential schools created intergenerational trauma that is still visible in the lives of Indigenous people (NCCAH 2014), and "even when children were permitted to leave residential school, there were no supports for re-entering their communities so the transition was not always smooth and family relationships could often not be reestablished" (p 9).

Residential schooling, interacting with other forms of social and cultural displacement, has contributed to

generations of family disruption and social turmoil that have fostered and been fuelled by racialized stereotypes and discrimination, institutionalized racism, and systemic social exclusion (Milne and Wotherspoon 2020). Trauma responses include "alcohol and substance abuse, violence, parenting problems, depression and suicide (Nagy & Sehdev, 2012)" (NCCAH 2014, 9).

Today, the children and grandchildren of Survivors sit in our classrooms, fearful and mistrusting of engaging in the system that once broke their people. As the NCCAH (2014, 9) notes,

> It often falls on children to absorb the feelings of loss and frustration felt by their parents and grandparents. Even though these children did not experience the trauma of residential schools first hand, they are experiencing it indirectly through the effects on their families and communities (Volkan, 1997).

The history of residential schools presents a difficult reality for today's Indigenous learners, who must grapple with the knowledge that Indigenous children and youth have sat (and, in some cases, continue to sit) in classrooms that teach a history that is not true. These narratives distort the truth and attempt to position Indigenous youth as being at fault. They perpetuate the harmful assumption that Indigenous youth lack the desire for something better.

## How Assumptions Harm Indigenous Learners Today

As the NCCAH (2014, 2) notes, harmful assumptions "not only [degrade] the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and their legitimate right to be self-determining, but [have] damaged the self-concept of countless generations of people who unfortunately, at times, internalize such demeaning stereotypes (Harding, 2006)."

These assumptions are the result of maintained colonial structures that position Indigenous people as "other." For well over 200 years, racism has been "experienced by [Indigenous] individuals, families, communities, and nations through interactions and structures of the everyday world" (NCCAH 2014, 2).

Indigenous people have been subjected to structural racism from all facets of a colonized school system. Today, we are the first generation of Indigenous people who did not attend residential schools. However, I have been taught that it takes seven generations to heal from trauma.

Literature on how Indigenous people may feel victimized in the school setting exists, but little primary evidence has been collected. Scholarship has missed opportunities

to create an understanding of Indigenous experiences that could combat negative assumptions.

However, one informative study exists that sought to investigate microaggressions toward Indigenous postsecondary learners, through the collection of primary documentation. Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani (2019) asked Indigenous postsecondary students in Canada about their experiences with microaggressions. The language used in the questions incorporated the stereotypes and assumptions affecting Indigenous students as they navigate the education system. The following themes emerged: *"overt discrimination; assumption of intellectual inferiority; assumption of criminality; invalidation or denial; second-class citizen; racial segregation;* and *myth of meritocracy"* (p 41). The researchers concluded that the participants had been subjected throughout their schooling to conscious acts of racism, including mockery, name-calling, physical violence and exclusion from education.

The assumption of the intellectual inferiority of Indigenous students fosters the belief that they have lower academic potential or lower expectations of themselves as learners than non-Indigenous students. One participant in Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani's (2019) study shared that, no matter what he did, one of his high school teachers always found a way to belittle him or discredit his accomplishments, implying that the barriers were too great to overcome. He internalized the message that he was not qualified to receive acceptance to university, which negatively affected his sense of self-efficacy.

Another participant shared how when he disclosed the reserve he was from, people immediately assumed that he was affiliated with a gang. In another situation, a non-Indigenous client refused to let an Indigenous bank teller complete a transaction (Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani 2019).

These acts of discrimination, rooted in race, are harmful, alienating and lonely. A person can take only so much projection before internalizing the beliefs and assumptions other people hold about them.

Painting all Indigenous people with the same brush is problematic. Generalizations foster the false assumptions that all Indigenous people are the same and that they all follow the same traditions and customs. A pan-Indigenous view minimizes the complexity and diversity of Indigenous experiences, encouraging stereotypes and minimizing empathy and understanding from non-Indigenous sources.

After a particularly violent racist encounter, one participant in the study said, "You could try to tell them how that makes you feel but they will never be able to grasp it. They'll never be able to transcribe it properly into their understanding" (Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani 2019, 53).

# Reconciliation and Decolonization in the Classroom

We need to scrub our windows while also acknowledging the statistics regarding Indigenous learners. Data from Statistics Canada show that Indigenous youth have lower graduation rates and higher poverty and unemployment rates (J Layton 2023; Statistics Canada 2021). The weight of these statistics is heavy.

However, hope for this generation of Indigenous youth emerges through education and a foundational knowledge of Indigenous cultures. As the late Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, often stated, "Education is what got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it." This education seeks to value and understand the power of relationships and how they can foster true reconciliation.

In Canada, Indigenous youth and their families have for hundreds of years been made to feel shame about their cultures—shame created and perpetuated by the education system. It is no wonder, then, that fear, uncertainty and trepidation accompany Indigenous families into the educational context. Reporting on a study by Milne and Wotherspoon (2020), Boklaschuk (2020) notes, "The legacy of settler-colonialism and residential schools in Canada continues to fuel distrust of the education system by some Indigenous parents and hinders the goal of reconciliation in this country."

Trust has been deeply broken and, going beyond land acknowledgements, relationships between Indigenous families and non-Indigenous teachers and other members of the school community must be cultivated in a way that demonstrates reciprocity. In Boklaschuk's (2020) article, Wotherspoon says, "Fostering a dialogue between the school system and Indigenous organizations and community members is key to developing trust and ensuring schools are perceived as a safe space for all students in the future."

As Young et al (2010) discuss, Indigenous teachers also experience "being excluded or silenced by dominant historical, institutional, and social narratives positioning them as not 'real' teachers" (p 285). These teachers themselves were once students experiencing either residential schools or colonial curricula. In a tragic anecdote, one of the authors, Mi'kmaq teacher Jennifer Williams, shares, "I feel embarrassed for my attempts to embrace my cultural traditions, and for not knowing them to begin with" (p 297). Not only can I relate to this, but I believe that Indigenous students and teachers probably have those feelings of shame all the time, and that can breed loneliness and isolation.

Along with mutual and reciprocal relationships, decolonization and the disruption of power relations that perpetuate Eurocentric beliefs are fundamental in the classroom. Decolonization efforts help eradicate assumptions and stereotypes.

Decolonizing starts with the self and then can be applied outwardly, such as in the classroom. Houle (2022b) discusses how when teachers have an understanding of their own biases and how to relearn ideas, they can help shape what happens in schools. Teachers must continually revisit what they think they know and re-examine their lesson plans, school and classroom events, and materials in light of their new insights and experiences. By decolonizing their thinking, teachers will be better prepared to construct an understanding of Indigenous learners as they are, not as how they are assumed to be.

Houle (2022a) notes that, in her experience, teachers approach decolonization with interest and a willingness to change. If they resist, it is usually because they are unaware of the goals of reconciliation and what it entails.

This resistance can halt the work of reconciliation. Ideally, reconciliation would be facilitated by teachers taking active steps in their journey. Yet I have heard seasoned colleagues label reconciliation as "a new teacher problem." This is discouraging and may be more common than one may think. Perhaps those teachers do not see much Indigenous representation in their classrooms, or perhaps their bias privileges one view over other world views (Brant 2017).

Regardless of any resistance or trepidation toward the work required for reconciliation, a sense of urgency is imperative if this work is to be done. Consistent effort in cultivating reconciliatory initiatives can and must be developed not only in schools but in all aspects of Canadian society.

Decolonization is some of the most valuable and most transformative work we can do. Like seasons, life and the Medicine Wheel, all things are cyclical and can be revisited, but the learning never stops. Teachers are helping shape the future.

## Survive to Thrive

Preservice teachers today receive an education that includes the truth about Indigenous histories and current realities. It is encouraging to think of a future with willing teachers who desire to do better and who are excited to learn and teach about a population that Canada has mishistoried, as well as to move forward in a way that benefits Indigenous learners.

Young et al (2010) share a trend that gives us further cause for hope. They discuss how, after leaving residential schools, Indigenous children were encouraged by their

families and communities to come home for healing and to not leave again. Today, if Indigenous youth desire more education, they are encouraged to leave the reserve, fulfill their dreams and then come back home.

This shift in the narrative about education and reserve living is a beautiful reflection of the rebuilding of trust. New "intergenerational narrative reverberations" (Young et al 2010, 285) are being created through every Indigenous person who achieves their goals and shares this spirit with their families. Though it is not the responsibility of Indigenous people to challenge stereotypes, the increase in Indigenous representation will begin telling a new story of people who were here, are still here, and are thriving for themselves and their communities.

Returning to the statistics, the data reveal positive trends, in small increments, toward increased high school graduation and entry into postsecondary education among Indigenous youth (J Layton 2023). Statistics also show that Indigenous youth are a fast-growing population in Canada (Statistics Canada 2022, 2023).

As more non-Indigenous people understand Canada's history, strive for reconciliation and unlearn misconceptions, hope builds for current and future generations of Indigenous youth.

## Conclusion

Collective wounds are difficult to heal. For Indigenous people in Canada, the support and care needed to heal the hurt are the responsibility of everyone.

The horrific history endured by Indigenous people is part of Canada's story, but it no longer has to be part of the present or the future. While time is needed to heal, hope can be found in the stories, in the statistics, and in teachers' decolonization efforts (both in the classroom and in their own thinking).

What is so exciting for the future is that education is available, accessible and interesting. If relationships are to be cultivated and maintained so that a new narrative, free of harmful assumptions, can emerge, all Canadians must understand not only the history of Canada and how assumptions about Indigenous learners came to be but also how we remain hopeful.

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# How Should History Be Taught When Confronted by Social Uncertainty? Investing in Diverse Narratives as a Path for History Education

*Aaron Stout*

Uncertainty is a staple of life in the modern world. The media continues to report on challenges such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, poverty and unemployment, systemic racism, Indigenous concerns and the need for reconciliation, and political polarization.

At the heart of all these issues are questions about what it means to be a just society. How might we, as a society, face these issues?

Unfortunately, many people do not know where to start.

In the largely neoliberal Western world, we have bought into a story about individualism, which promotes the potential of individuals to look after themselves. Yet the problems we face are beyond the ability of individual people to confront. When we consider issues that touch on the fundamental composition of society, we face questions that have deep historical roots, encompass generations of people and are global in scope. These issues cannot be solved in the confines of one's home—or even within the narrow mandate of a four-year political term.

To address the significant challenges of our time, we must learn how to struggle with complexity and consider the common good.

Whereas the study of ethics provides fertile ground for debating what is right and wrong in society, the study of history provides the human context necessary for deliberating on agency and social justice in these uncertain times. The study of history allows students to encounter difference, to understand the colonial structures of society, and

to weight the influence of the underlying concepts of progress and individualism (Cutrara 2009; Marker 2011).

Yet the efficacy of history education is dependent on how we conceptualize the discipline. History, as a school subject, is inherently misunderstood by many students, teachers, academics and curriculum writers.

These misunderstandings about history education are blatantly clear in the province of Alberta, which has been working toward sweeping curriculum revisions across subjects from kindergarten to Grade 12.

From 2005 to 2009, Alberta implemented, in stages, a new K–12 social studies program of studies with an issues-based and inquiry structure that prioritized multiple perspectives and intentionally placed skill development at its core (Alberta Education 2005–07; Gibson and Peck 2018).

Beginning in 2009, Alberta's Progressive Conservative government conducted numerous interviews with education stakeholders and then published *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* (Alberta Education 2010). This document outlined a progressive approach to education that was continued under the Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) government, which came into power in 2015.

The 2019 election brought the newly formed United Conservative Party (UCP) into power. The UCP sought to undo the progressive approach to education and, instead, embraced reactionary dialogue about the values of traditional education. The subsequent publicized disputes about

the nature of social studies education revealed diverse assumptions about what history education should be.

From these disputes, often referred to as the history wars, I would like to examine key misconceptions that undermine the role of history education in developing "engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens" (Alberta Education 2005–07, 1).

The first misconception has roots in the belief that content transmission is the most effective way to teach history. In this pedagogical structure, teachers provide students with the content they need to know, through strategies such as lecturing, note-taking and textbook reading, in order to convey a predetermined view of the past. Although curricula across Canada do not prescribe this rote approach to learning history (Alberta Education 2005–07; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education 2018), some politicians and teachers continue to demand that students learn predetermined content.

In October 2020, French (2020) reported on reactions to leaked drafts of the UCP's curriculum proposals. That August, then education minister Adriana LaGrange had revealed that a "core knowledge" approach would be applied to Alberta's curriculum revision. French's article quoted Michael Zwaagstra, a teacher in Manitoba, who argued that prioritizing core historical facts would ensure that "students have enough common knowledge so that they are able to engage with the world around them [and] understand some of the basics of our country." Conversely, Amy von Heyking, an education professor at the University of Lethbridge, asserted that "the expectation that students memorize lists of facts is contrary to everything we know about meaningful learning."

Simply presenting facts is not only uninspiring for students but also an ineffective way to learn. In 2007, Ipsos Reid and the Dominion Institute (2007) surveyed young adults (18–24) on what they knew about Canadian history through a 30-question exam. Subsequently, they reported that 82 per cent failed the exam, which was designed to check for basic knowledge.

These results are similar to an experiment conducted in the United States in 1917 (Bell and McCollum 1917), in which 1,500 students were tested on their "ability to answer factual questions about historical personalities and events" (Wineburg 2005, 190). On average, all age groups scored below 50 per cent.

There is little evidence to suggest that students retain historical knowledge through the content transmission method. This pedagogical misconception trivializes history education.

Another misconception about history education is that students should be required to learn an approved historical canon so that they may become knowledgeable citizens. This perception emerges when public figures, academics and institutions argue for an essential nationalistic narrative.

Recent years have seen much discourse in Alberta around whose history is important. In 2017, Jason Kenney, then a UCP leadership hopeful, criticized the NDP's draft social studies curriculum, saying that it left out the military history of Canada (Champion 2019; Graney 2017). The next year, Staples (2018) bemoaned the proposed curriculum's lack of nationalistic language, stating, "There's not one explicit reference to Albertans or Canadians, let alone any notion that there's value in teaching Alberta history or Canadian history."

Subsequently, drafts of the UCP's social studies curriculum, leaked to the media in 2020, proposed that young children "learn about feudalism, Chinese dynasties and Homer's Odyssey," as well as memorize a "lengthy list of names, landmarks and events," while stating that learning about residential schools would be "too sad" for young children (French 2020).

This debate is not new. In the late 1990s, Canadian historian J L Granatstein (1998) published *Who Killed Canadian History?* In that book, "he accused social and cultural historians of undoing the coherence of the national narrative" (Seixas 2009, 26). The act of uncritically propagating a colonial nationalistic narrative, which perceives present structures as normative, perpetuates "binary notions of insiders/outsiders" (Anderson 2017, 5). If teachers are to take seriously the increasingly pluralistic nature of society, history education must present alternatives to the master narrative in order to critically deconstruct it.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC 2015) outlines an urgent need for all students to revisit the colonial structures of the past. As the preface states,

> Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. (p vi)

A history curriculum that represents colonialism as the norm will continue to cast Indigenous people "as victims

of progress and as unwilling to adapt to the social transformations of the nineteenth century" (Marker 2011, 109).

The content studied in history classrooms is important. When curriculum writers and teachers choose content that embraces multiperspectivity, a pluralistic impression of Canadian society emerges. This approach allows students to "explore these hidden dimensions of our collective stories safely, ethically, and collaboratively" (Cutrara 2009, 100).

Additionally, the portrayal of history as a fixed collection of facts or a single stable narrative does not accurately reflect the fundamental characteristics of the discipline. Burton (2005, 8) asserts that because of the problematic nature of the preservation of archives and historical accounts, historical narratives embrace the subjective aspects of "selection, interpretation, and even creative invention." Segall (1999, 371) argues that "history—a process of inscription rather than description—the emerging literature in critical history has shown us, is active, not passive. Hence, its study requires contestation, deconstruction, and action, not passivity, blind acceptance, and retention."

Historians realize that an objective account of the past does not exist (Novick 1988). Therefore, history is a collection of various accounts, some in conflict with others. The role of the historian is to ask questions, seek evidence and construct arguments about the past. Historians use their expertise to assess and collect available artifacts, archives and oral histories to weave a coherent narrative that addresses their inquiry (Seixas 2017). As time passes, historians ask different questions, find missing perspectives and construct different narratives.

The way we approach the past is not immutable; it is dynamic. Commemoration controversies, such as the removal of public monuments to John A Macdonald (*Globe and Mail* 2018), reveal the necessity of revisiting our understandings of the past in light of the inquiries of the present (Gibson 2017).

I raise these misconceptions not because they are unique but, rather, because they are pervasive. History has been, and continues to be, a subject that reinforces a nationalistic narrative and a colonial way of thinking. Our students face the tension of learning about a colonial past while living in an emerging postcolonial world. As examples, in the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter movements orchestrated protests across North America, calling for a recognition and dismantling of structures of institutionalized racism, and nonprofit organizations and media outlets report on the federal government's broken promises to provide safe drinking water on many reserves in Canada (Gerster and Hessey 2019). If students are to understand and connect with the many diverse voices in society, we must rethink how they engage with the past.

History education is essential. As Osborne (2003, 585) states, "Issues of identity, heritage, and citizenship, all rooted in competing conceptions of the past, have become the stuff of politics." History has the potential to connect students to the complex world they currently live in, but their level of engagement depends on how history is portrayed.

Barton and Levstik (2004, 35) argue that "students will be best prepared for democratic citizenship if they receive a broadly humanistic education." In postsecondary education, history is considered a humanity, as history centres on the establishment of human societies, primary evidence is created by human hands, and history endeavours to retell human stories. Yet my postsecondary students reveal that, in K–12, their experience of history revolved around absorbing content. This is a reality that K–12 teachers also comment on.

In 2015, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA 2016) surveyed social studies teachers across Alberta on the state of social studies education. Most of the teachers believed that much of their class time was dedicated to presenting information for students to acquire, with few opportunities for an in-depth investigation of topics. Teachers perceived this pedagogical approach as being necessary, given the amount of content in the program of studies. As one teacher articulated,

> The Grade 7 curriculum is bogged down with too many knowledge outcomes. I have to make the decision to teach them all poorly or to teach some of them well. Alternative: I would like to see fewer outcomes in the Grade 7 social program of studies, as the time allotted to the course is insufficient to cover them in the depth they deserve. With the amount of content that needs to be covered, it becomes difficult to work in as much critical thinking process work as should occur. (pp 33–34)

If teachers conceptualize history as a humanity, then they need to reframe how history education is experienced by students. To portray history as a humanity, teachers need to reconceptualize what *humanism* means.

For my purposes, I describe humanism as an approach to education that seeks to appreciate the voice, creativity and potential of human beings.

Barton and Levstik (2004) explore the concept of humanism through a few lenses. Classical humanism embraces a philosophical approach that seeks to underscore human perfection, romantic humanism looks to the inner world of the individual, and democratic humanism encourages the deliberation of social justice. These perspectives

all hold in common an appreciation for the agency, integrity and actions of humanity.

Nussbaum (1998, 40) suggests that a humanist education encourages students to see agency and dignity in their own lives and to live an "examined life" in which they are "self-aware, self-governing, and capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings."

Barton and Levstik (2004, 229) argue that humanism fosters a passion and concern for the world that are essential not only for education but also for democracy:

> Without care, we could not possibly engage [students] in humanistic study: Students will not bother making reasoned judgments, expanding their views of humanity, or deliberating over the common good if they don't care about those things. All our concerns—whether as historians, teachers, or students—must originate in the present, because that's all we have; anything we know or believe about history derives from the questions we ask in our own lives today.

Getting students to care about people in the past is a challenge for teachers. It requires an awareness of the power of diverse narratives, as well as historical context. When teachers select individualized historical perspectives that are significantly different from the dominant narratives, students come face to face with the experiences and lives of others.

As revealed by their responses to the ATA's (2016) survey, social studies teachers in Alberta are calling for a curriculum that allows them to honestly incorporate and explore multiple perspectives with their students. As one teacher said,

> If the high school social studies curriculum is going to seriously address issues from a multiple perspectives approach, then it needs to be prepared to accept controversy on VERY sensitive issues in the classroom: for example, Aboriginal history and government policy, multiculturalism, immigration policy, racism, religion, social issues around social progressivism versus conservatism and government policy, sex, sexuality, and gender rights and issues. All these issues are mentioned in the high school social studies textbooks, especially in the SS 301 approved resources, yet they are very often addressed in only the most superficial, politically correct or sanitized manner. Either truly robust multiple-perspectives resources for both students and teachers must be made available in basic-level resources, or teachers will be under-resourced and, potentially, vulnerable to professional conduct attacks. The current focus on issues and inquiry as well as the multiple perspectives are central to learning. (pp 32–33)

Encounters with "the other" have the power to disrupt students' individualized perspective of themselves and, by extension, their group. Farley (2009) characterizes this process as the movement from illusion to disillusion. Once students can encounter the perspective of another, they are ready to embrace a "re-illusion" (p 544) that attempts to resolve the discord. Encountering narrative tension and seeking to resolve it requires humanist attributes such as respect and concern (Nussbaum 2010). Active encounters with the narratives of others develop empathy in students, and empathy can lead students to care (Endacott and Brooks 2013).

Whereas developing care is an externalized reason for a humanist approach to history education, Nussbaum (1998) argues that an interest in the lives of others is an extension of our own humanity. Referencing the Roman philosopher Seneca, she argues that a humanist education frees students to "take charge of [their] own thinking, leading to a Socratic, examined life, and becoming a reflective critic of traditional practices" (p 40). Realizing that the examined life goes beyond individualistic self-examination, she expands:

> Seneca goes on to argue that only liberal education will develop each person's capacity to be *fully human*, by which he means self-aware, self-governing, and *capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings* [italics added], no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin. "Soon we shall breathe our last," he concludes in his related work, *On Anger*. "Meanwhile, while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity." (p 40)

The essential aspect of humanism is the encounter with other people, other perspectives and other world views. The humanist seeks to understand not only themselves but also others. In this construct lies an assumption that although people might live in different times or places, worship different gods, or hold different values, a shared humanness binds them together. Rather than perceiving people as objects or statistics, a desire to seek this shared humanity brings meaning to the past and the present.

Finally, adopting a humanist approach to history education is a corrective to instrumentalism. When historical narrative is used to illustrate a concept, theme or principle, the people involved become faceless actors or literary objects, rather than expressions of human agency. In this use of historical narrative, the study of history becomes an impersonal view into the past.

Conversely, a humanist approach takes a primary source at face value. Although it is important to confirm the veracity of the narrative through other sources, the voice of the

narrative is powerful in itself. Through encountering the voices and experiences of people of the past, students in the present can relate to the past rationally, emotionally and imaginatively.

Thayer-Bacon (1998) argues that critical thinking is often misunderstood as a purely rational process. She writes,

> Reason and imagination do the invaluable jobs of generating and critiquing, but they rely on imagination and emotions to help them. If we forget about our imagination and emotions, we forget about what motivates and inspires us and helps us achieve beauty, goodness and truths. All inquiry begins with emotions and imagination. (p 141)

In educational settings, students are often encouraged to distrust the role of emotions and imagination in thinking processes. In history classes, in particular, they are warned to beware of how presentism (the tendency to view the past through the lens of the present) can distort impressions of the past.

This warning is appropriate, but balance must be sought. Embracing an uncritical presentism can distort our impressions of people in the past, but recognizing our shared humanity can deepen our appreciation of human agency and actions. Therefore, a humanist approach that recognizes the rational, emotional and imaginative capacities of people will consider the study of history as a way to encounter other people who possess passion and dignity.

Given that a pedagogical approach centring on the deliberation of human agency in historical accounts can be defined as a humanist pedagogy, I would like to consider the implications for history teachers.

At the heart of a humanist pedagogy is the content teachers select for their students. Teachers should present students with narratives and accounts that offer a window into an issue or a period in time. These narratives become the starting point for historical inquiry.

Early in my career as a social studies teacher, I was required to teach the concept of national interest. Alberta's social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005–07) specified the use of the First World War as a case study. So I prepared presentations on the causes of the war that reflected the secondary sources I had consulted, and I adapted and developed various textbook reading guides to support my lectures. I also borrowed some Risk game boards so we could re-enact the historic event. During the class, I delivered a lecture that outlined the geopolitical causes of the war in an interesting and informative way. As a result, my students discussed the various geopolitical countries in an anthropomorphized way, seeing them as primary actors in the drama. Many students were engaged in the content and the facts, but others were lost in the barrage of information.

An alternative approach would be to begin with the specific experience of a soldier in the trenches and then extrapolate to the geopolitical forces engulfing him. The Canadian Letters and Images Project website (www.canadianletters.ca) is an archive of personal letters that can be useful for this.

For example, read soldier Harry Morris's letter to his family, written on April 5, 1917 (www.canadianletters.ca/content/document-1972). The letter expresses the tension of the war through the experience of the individual. Although a personal account such as this may lack objective distance, it can reveal human intention, feelings and experiences and offer a uniquely human gateway into the past. Reading from a primary source allows students to enter into a dynamic experience and welcomes them into the historical inquiry process: Why was Morris in such a terrible situation? Why were bombs exploding all around him? Why was he relieved to hear that his injury would send him back to Canada?

Stories from or about individual people not only engage students but also foster deep discussions about concepts such as social justice. In their argument for a humanizing pedagogy, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) stress that students must experience human voice and agency. Stories that humanize (or dehumanize) provide a context for critical engagement.

As an example, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) share Thandi's story. At 14 years old, in South Africa, Thandi was required to write an exam to gain entrance into secondary school. Unfortunately, her family was unable to pay the exam fee. Not writing the exam would, effectively, halt her education. In her narrative, Thandi confesses that she was depressed. When she went outside to be alone, her fellow students ran out to get her and brought her before the teacher. The teacher listened to her story and then paid the exam fee for her. Thandi expressed what that gesture meant to her: "The teacher has given me an opportunity and I grabbed it with both hands. At secondary he followed me and checked my work all the time, and I did not want to disappoint him" (pp 81–82).

Through this short narrative, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) provide a window into the difficulties of poverty, the human act of charity and Thandi's resolve. The narrative, again, raises a number of questions: How does this story reflect political and social apartheid in South Africa? What was Thandi's race? What was education like? What opportunities were open to people? We want to know Thandi's experiences because we have heard her voice. Her story invites students to ask critical questions in a quest to

understand. Rather than a primary source being an addition to a generalized narrative, beginning with a specific story invites students to relate to concepts such as poverty, discrimination and injustice.

Although an individualized narrative can offer a window into the broader historical context, as well as raise important concepts and themes, teachers should intentionally include the multiple perspectives present in a historical topic or period.

Nussbaum (1998, 43) states that people "who cultivate their humanity need a further ability to see themselves as citizens of some local, regional group—but also, and above all, as human beings, bound to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern." The study of history can enable us to embrace a complex view of society.

Van Nieuwenhuyse (2017), in his critique of Eurocentrism, argues that multiperspectivity is essential in the study of history. History education must reflect the tensions of multiple cultures and competing interests in a single context.

Consider how teachers portray colonialism to their students. The narrative of settlers discovering the New World is fraught with problems and inaccuracies. Teachers have a responsibility to highlight the diverse and contradictory perspectives that surround colonial expansion. This involves looking closely at the interconnection and competition experienced by Indigenous communities with the arrival of settler populations. As I have written elsewhere,

> The goal of this approach is to arrive at a discussion of the distinctions of "us" and "them" and potentially arrive at a new "us." This pedagogical theory intentionally contrasts diverse perspectives in history education as a way to explore a broad understanding of human action and intention. (Stout 2019, 126)

As students become aware of conflict, struggle and compromise, they can grasp that current attitudes are informed by antecedents that must be encountered in all their complexity. This humanist encounter with difference allows students to think about the past and present with greater complexity and make sound judgments about the construction of our current society.

In addition to the intentional selection of humanizing content, a humanist approach to history education embraces a critical-thinking approach that values metacognition and imagination.

Nussbaum's (1998) articulation of humanism stresses the value of seeking to understand others in a globalized context.

Endacott and Brooks (2013), explaining the development of historical empathy, assert that students should approach the past through a dual-dimension conceptualization of empathy. They propose that students cannot easily empathize with historical perspectives without engaging in three key considerations:

- First, students need to contextualize the narrative historically. This requires developing a "deep understanding of the social, political, and cultural norms of the time period under investigation as well as knowledge of the events leading up to the historical situation" (p 43).
- Second, students need to construct the perspective they are trying to understand through appreciating a shared humanness. This involves "understanding of another's prior lived experience, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to understand how that person might have thought about the situation in question" (p 43).
- Third, students are encouraged to develop an affective connection, which the authors summarize as "consideration for how historical figures' lived experiences, situations, or actions may have been influenced by their affective response based on a connection made to one's own similar yet different life experiences" (p 43).

Thus, developing empathy for those in the past involves more than just comparing experiences. It also requires critical thinking.

*Critical thinking* can be defined as reasoning through an issue or a problem to arrive at a reasonable judgment. This intellectual approach embraces metacognition, references intellectual standards, centres on authentic issues and is open to reassessment (Nosich 2012). A focus on critical thinking reinforces essential dispositions, such as open-mindedness and fair-mindedness, that enhance one's ability to engage with complexity (Bailin and Battersby 2010).

Barton and Levstik (2004, 36) make a direct connection between critical thinking and the study of history: "For the study of history to be humanistic, students must be involved in weighing alternatives, determining significance, and reaching conclusions." Students need to be engaged with the problems of history and exposed to the messy or contradictory narratives, the inevitable silences, and the lack of conclusive evidence. The hope is that students, in struggling through this complexity, will be able to construct reasoned, well-supported judgments.

Critical thinking does not occur in a vacuum; it resides in a cognitive domain. A critical-thinking approach can be applied to the rules of scientific inquiry in the same way it is applied to historical inquiry. Each domain has guiding principles that govern how one conducts inquiry, gathers evidence and demonstrates conclusions. This competency-based approach is recognized as historical thinking.

In Canada, the historical-thinking approach has become dominant in history education (Lee 2004; Seixas 2017; Seixas and Morton 2013). This pedagogy is designed to engage students with the procedural concepts, or considerations, historians use to construct and critique historical narratives (Seixas and Morton 2013). Historical-thinking concepts have been included in some provincial curricula in Canada (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education 2018) and continue to be referenced in academic literature (Lévesque 2011, 2016).

Studies have revealed that a pedagogical focus on historical-thinking procedures coincides with students developing more-complex understandings of the concepts of evidence and perspectives and of historical narratives as being constructed (Barton and McCully 2010; Lee and Ashby 2000).

If history education revolved around understanding the construction of historical narratives alone, the historical-thinking approach would be sufficient. However, Barton and McCully (2010, 174) urge teachers to also make history relevant to their students:

> For history teaching to fully meet students' needs, the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills is not enough. Teachers should be conscious of fostering particular dispositions in students through which to frame their engagement with history, however complex and challenging it appears. This would involve making more direct connections between past and present.

This connection between past and present allows students to conceptualize and construct a personal connection to history (Endacott and Brooks 2013; Rüsen 2004).

Further, Cutrara (2009) raises the criticism that the historical-thinking approach overemphasizes "neutral" procedures, while the power relationships and colonial presuppositions embedded in historical-thinking concepts themselves are left unexplored.

Therefore, although historical-thinking concepts can reveal the complexity of historical narratives and encourage students to think critically about the nature of evidence, they themselves can be overemphasized and not appropriately scrutinized. If history education is to embrace a humanist approach, students of the present need to relate to the narratives of the past. They need permission to imagine. Emotions and imagination are essential.

Nussbaum (2006) discusses the importance of literature and the arts as vehicles for exploring and expressing humanist perspectives.

In their consideration of the use of historical fiction in the classroom, den Heyer and Fidyk (2007, 145) define *historical agency* as "an imaginative capacity for shaping intentions, forming choices, and undertaking actions." Historical fiction presents students with a researched historical context in which characters express their intentions, actions and limitations. As students invest in the story and the characters, they have the opportunity for "explorations of beauty, goodness, nobility, and their opposites" (p 150). Although historical fiction may contain historical inaccuracies, the medium, nevertheless, allows students to recognize the agency of people in the past and relate it to their own agency in the present.

For teachers who oppose the use of historical fiction, effective primary source narratives or well-written nonfiction narratives can also be powerful avenues for fostering the deliberation of human agency. Embracing a history education pedagogy that invites students to relate imaginatively and emotionally to historical characters reinforces the argument for fostering historical empathy.

Endacott and Brooks (2013, 45) summarize the value of introducing students of the present to people of the past:

> Historical empathy can ultimately promote a dispositional appreciation for the complexity of situations faced by people in the past and the need to act for the good of others. . . . As a cognitive and affective endeavor, historical empathy can help students develop a stronger awareness of needs around them and a sense of agency to respond to these needs.

History classes can be structured to give students permission to engage their imagination. Students can read and create historical narratives, while embracing an appreciation for the guiding principles of evidence and historical context (Seixas and Morton 2013).

Cronon (1992, 1372), commenting on his own process of writing history, recognizes "the immense power of narrative while still defending the past (and nature) as real things to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it cease being history altogether." If history education reflected meaningful encounters with people of the past, students' imaginations would be as essential as their intellect. Such an environment could engage students in meaningful inquiry and deep conversations about identity and society.

Earlier, I discussed the ongoing debates about history education in Alberta. More than just an academic exercise, discussions around what history students learn and how they learn reflect presuppositions about society.

During curriculum revision, the Alberta government appointed advisors to offer recommendations about how the proposed curriculum should be revised (Appel 2020; Climenhaga 2020; French 2020). The social studies advisor was Chris Champion. In a short piece he wrote for *The Dorchester Review*, Champion (2019, 105) commented on

the focus on including multiple perspectives in Alberta's social studies program of studies:

> The ongoing fad is that we need "more" First Nations "perspectives." Far from being new, this must date from at least the 1970s if my own repetitive West Vancouver experience with *oolichan*, cedar masks, and trickster stories is any guide. The plug must be pulled on the deplorable *agitprop* of the "KAIROS Blanket," which brainwashes children into thinking of themselves as "settlers" stealing the land—the kind of "truth and reconciliation" that is not evidence-based but relies on "knowledge keepers" to "foster truth."

These remarks disregard the perspectives of those who were disinvested of their land, language and way of life. Instead of considering Indigenous perspectives, Champion argues, children should memorize "our stories" and be educated with "Classical, European, and US history because North American societies are offshoots of Europe's" (p 105).

I vehemently disagree with Champion's take. What troubles me most, however, is that his misconceptions about history and society are resonant of the perspectives of others. The Alberta government appointed a person who holds dismissive views about those different from him to provide input on the provincial curriculum that will influence diverse students for the next decade.

Further, Champion's views reflect neither a deepening respect for the complexity of Canadian society nor a realization that there never has been a homogeneous norm in Canadian history. The colonial nationalistic narrative was constructed, and minority perspectives are not prominent in that narrative because they were intentionally excluded.

Axelrod (1997) notes that early education systems in Canada were instrumental in assimilating immigrant and Indigenous populations under the lofty goals of unity, loyalty and duty toward the British Empire. I am deeply concerned that a curriculum based on content memorization and a nationalistic narrative will similarly undermine the vision of a complex society comprising many stories and perspectives.

Contrary to Champion's (2019) view of education, Augie Merasty's (2017) residential school memoir demonstrates how a humanist connection with the past can change people's perspectives.

Merasty reached out to an English professor, David Carpenter, to help him write a book about his experiences at St Therese Residential School, in Saskatchewan. Through the memoir, Merasty conveys the complexities of his residential school experiences, his struggles later in life and his love for those around him. Merasty and Carpenter tell a story that recognizes the complex nature of residential schooling in remote communities, as well as the diverse experiences of children.

In the postscript, Carpenter (2017) reflects on his 14-year collaboration with Merasty and how he allowed his own "white-guy guilt" (p 79) to create a divide between him and his friend. He describes what it means to have a humanist encounter:

> This brings me to the ultimate reward of writing and re-reading Augie's story: I've discovered that it's not just a narrative about victims and victimization, not just a tale of woe in which Euro-whites attempted to force their will on Indigenous people, not just a story that highlights the differences between "us" and "them." This book is also about the things that bring people together. When you strip away the outside appearances, you are left with the common humanity of people locked in a classic struggle to save their children from the evils of coercion, abuse, and cultural extinction. Sometimes I am dogged by questions about how reconciliation might work in a permanent and meaningful way in our country, and when I do, I think about Augie's people, who are always willing and able to show me the way. (p 80)

A humanist encounter with history is an encounter with the people and contexts of the past. History can introduce us to new people who live in a different time. History can encourage us to ponder the world and appreciate complexity. These encounters have the power to be both rational and emotional. As a result, this pedagogical approach has the potential to promote historical empathy, as the present collides with the narratives and contexts of the past. Ultimately, history can remind us that we have so much in common with each other. Through mutual dialogue and understanding, society can be a place where we discuss and deliberate the common good.

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# Review Board

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## Reviewers

**Lindsay Gibson, PhD**
**University of British Columbia**

Lindsay Gibson is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. His research focuses on historical thinking, history education and assessment of historical thinking. For 12 years, he was a teacher in Kelowna, British Columbia, where he taught secondary school history and social studies and worked on the district's instructional leadership team. He has worked on a variety of provincial and federal history education projects with the Historical Thinking Project and The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC[2]).

**Craig Harding, PhD**
**Ambrose University and Mount Royal University**

Craig Harding is an instructor at various universities across Canada, where he teaches curriculum and instruction and other courses with a social studies focus. He is the coauthor of five textbooks used in Alberta, in addition to a series of books currently in press that explore social concerns. He also teaches online graduate courses in research methodology and issues in education for the University of New Brunswick. His work focuses on aspects of history education, citizenship and democracy education, and curriculum issues (including the politics of education).

**Kathryn Lawson (Crawford), EdD**
**Ambrose University**

Kathryn Lawson (Crawford) is an associate professor in the School of Education at Ambrose University, as well as an adjunct professor at Cape Breton University and course lead at Yorkville University. She teaches and conducts research in curriculum studies, with a focus on teacher identity formation, teacher education, authorizing policies, and preservice teacher evaluation and socialization. She is particularly interested in scholarship that fosters curiosity and justice while centring stories from in-between spaces; scholarship that bridges theory and practice; and challenges, assumptions and taken-for-granted perspectives in curriculum studies. She is also editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*.

**James Miles, PhD**
**University of Alberta**

James Miles is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on historical thinking, memory studies, and the role of history education in movements of redress and historical justice. His scholarship has been published in journals such as *Theory and Research in Social Education, Memory Studies* and *Rethinking History*. He is also a member of the executive committee of Thinking Historically for Canada's Future. Before completing his PhD at the University of Toronto, he taught secondary school history and social studies in British Columbia for 10 years.

**Carla Peck, PhD**
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Eric Perrault is an adjunct professor in the School of Education at Ambrose University. His research interests include the development and leadership of human learning ecologies that integrate contemporary neurodevelopmental constructs and diverse cultural perspectives, particularly from an emerging Indigenous world view.

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