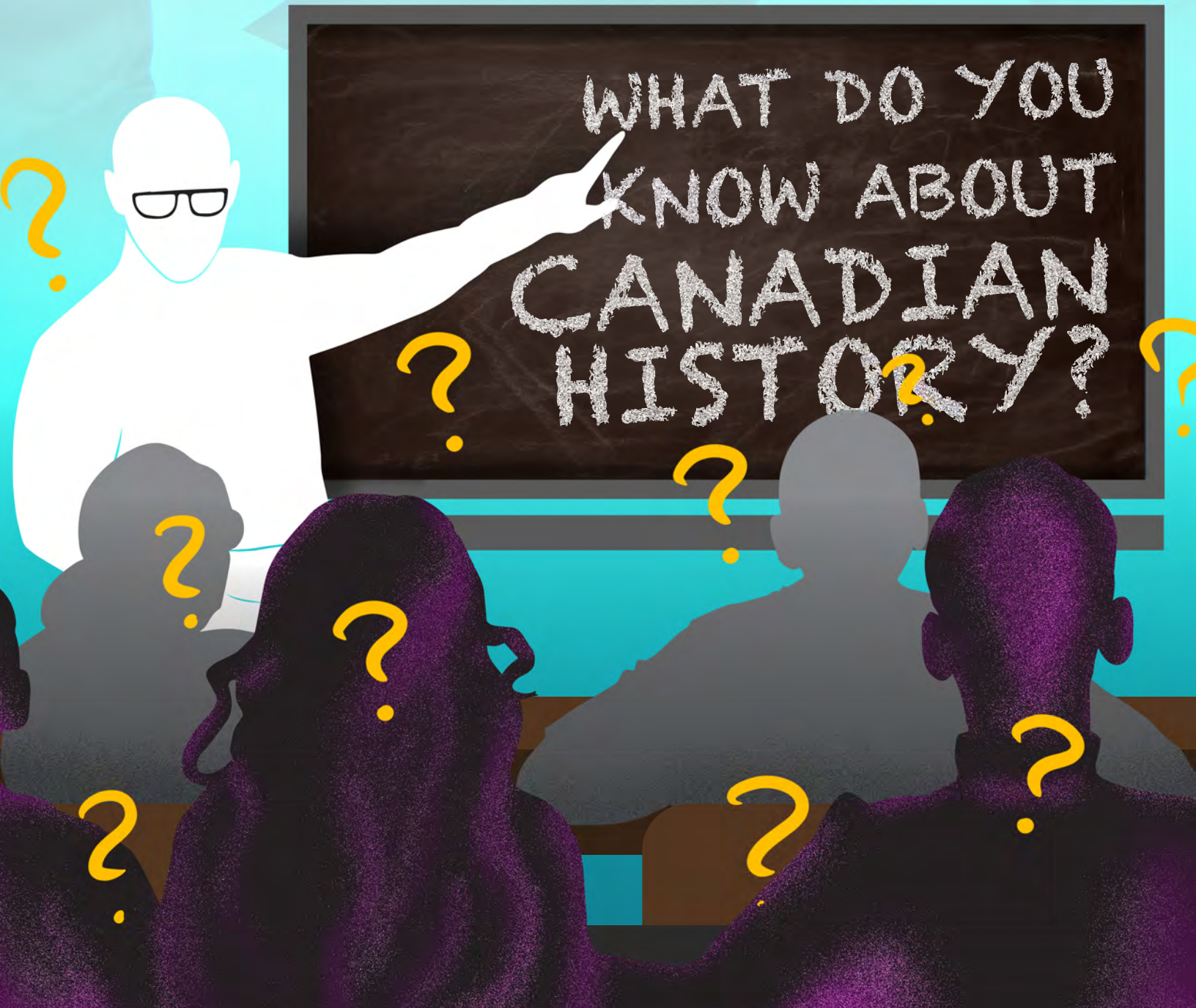


Canadian History Untold

Assessing the K-12 Curriculum Guides in British Columbia and Ontario

Michael Zwaagstra



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Introduction

Over twenty-five years ago, the renowned Canadian historian J. L. Granatstein published a scathing book questioning whether students were receiving an adequate education in Canadian history (Granatstein, 1998). Granatstein reviewed curriculum guides from all Canadian provinces and found that they contained a very limited amount of Canadian history content, and surprisingly, most provinces did not even require high school students to take a dedicated Canadian history course. Students could graduate from high school without receiving an adequate grounding in Canadian history.

In addition, Granatstein noted that all Canadian students were being shortchanged by social studies courses that presented only a fragmented version of Canadian history. Granatstein also argued that history departments at Canadian universities placed too little emphasis on constitutional and political history, and that this omission negatively affected the quality of K-12 social studies curriculum guides.

Because Granatstein's book is now more than twenty-five years old, it is important to examine whether things have changed since his analysis. To do this, we will examine the current curriculum guides in the two largest English-speaking provinces—Ontario and British Columbia. Since these are the first and third largest provinces, respectively, they make up a considerable proportion of all Canadian students. Quebec, the second largest province, is excluded from this study because of the language difference and because it intentionally places a much stronger emphasis on Quebec history than on Canadian history.

It is important to note that all schools that receive provincial funding are required to follow the provincial curriculum. Ontario does not provide funding to its independent schools, so those schools are not required to follow the provincial curriculum unless they intend to offer secondary credits that count towards an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. However, only a small percentage (6.9 percent) of Ontario students attend independent schools. In contrast, British Columbia does fund independent schools and it has the largest share of any province in Canada (13.2 percent) of students enrolled in independent schools (Zwaagstra, Emes, Ryan, and Pilagros, 2023). Thus, most students in both provinces attend schools where the provincial curriculum is, in fact, mandatory.

Why Learning Canadian History is Important

One of the primary objectives of education is to help students become critical thinkers. However, critical thinking is not an abstract skill, but is heavily dependent on subject-specific knowledge. For example, people can only offer an informed comment about the appropriateness of erecting statues of Sir John A. Macdonald if they know about Macdonald and the cultural context he lived in.

Macdonald is considered a Father of Confederation because of the very important role he played in bridging the divide between anglophones and francophones in mid-nineteenth century Canada. He also spearheaded the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which brought additional provinces into Confederation, and fiercely protected our country from American military aggression. These are significant accomplishments.

At the same time, Macdonald was a deeply flawed man. He drank too much, took bribes from railroad companies, brazenly handed out patronage jobs to his political cronies, and, most disturbingly, created a residential school system that caused profound harm to Indigenous people. These flaws cannot be ignored. Rather, they must be weighed against his accomplishments.

In short, only people who know about these basic facts can offer an informed opinion about Macdonald's legacy. The same is true about many other controversial issues from our past. If we want an educated citizenry that can think critically about the challenges facing Canada today, we must ensure they graduate from high school with a solid understanding of Canadian history.

Essential Elements of Canadian History

According to Granatstein (1998), it is important for Canadian students to learn about history in chronological order, beginning with the ancient world and continuing to the present. Chronology is important because it makes it possible for students to understand why one event led to the next event. For example, it would be hard to understand the causes of the Second World War without first learning about the Treaty of Versailles that was signed in 1919. Similarly, Quebec's Quiet Revolution makes little sense without first learning about the long premiership of Maurice Duplessis that preceded it.

Manitoba is one of the few provinces that requires all students to take a mandatory Canadian history course in high school. (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014). While this course is not perfect, it does provide a comprehensive overview of the key aspects of Canadian history. Thus, it can be used as a reference point for identifying some of the key people, places, and events that one would expect to see students learn about in a Canadian history course.

Specifically, the Manitoba Grade 11 Canadian history course requires students to learn about Indigenous people and their interactions with European settlers, French and British colonial rule, the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, the westward expansion of Canada, the prominent role that Canada played during both the First and Second World Wars, the establishment of the contemporary Canadian welfare state, and the ongoing evolution of the Canadian Constitution. The recommended textbook for this course provides plenty of background information that fills in many of the details about these crucial events (Connor, Hull, and Wyatt-Anderson, 2011). While the curriculum guide says that the course can be taught either chronologically or thematically, the topics are organized in chronological order, which makes it easier for students to put the events in a logical sequence.

These are the minimum facts that we could expect to be covered in a reasonably comprehensive Canadian history course. Now, let us examine the K-12 curriculum guides in both Ontario and British Columbia to see whether they meet these minimal requirements.

Canadian History in the Ontario Curriculum

The current Grades 1-8 Ontario social studies curriculum was published in 2023 and was officially adopted by all publicly funded Ontario schools at the beginning of the 2023/24 school year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). Unfortunately, Canadian history content is quite limited in these grades. For example, students in Grades 1 and 2 are not to be taught any Canadian history but instead focus on broad themes such as the roles and relationships of people in society and how community traditions (such as holiday celebrations) have changed over time. This is, of course, a missed opportunity to ensure that young students acquire foundational knowledge about their country that can be accessed in higher grades. In addition, there is a strong causal relationship between content knowledge and reading comprehension (Smith, Reid, Serry, and Hammond, 2023). As such, the reading skills of Ontario students would improve, no doubt, if they had a stronger knowledge base, especially in Canadian history. This is particularly important considering the substantial decline in Ontario reading scores on PISA tests from 2003 to 2022 (OECD, 2023).

In Grade 3, students learn about the communities that existed in Canada between 1780 and 1850. Unfortunately, there is little content specified in the curriculum guide. There is no expectation that students will learn about any specific individuals or events from this period, nor is it obvious why this specific historical era was selected. The sample inquiry questions provided in the curriculum guide focus on things such as getting students to compare everyday life today with what life would have been like in Upper Canada in the 1800s. But vague generalities that students are likely to learn in this course are not helpful if we want them to understand Canadian history. Having students make broad comparisons between their lives today with those of settlers in 1800 does nothing to help students understand how those colonies came into existence, nor does it help them understand how Canada changed from the 1800s to the present.

Things get even more confusing in Grade 4, during which Ontario students are expected to learn about early societies from 3000 BCE to 1500 CE. In other words, after spending a year comparing their lives today with those of Canadians living from 1780–1850, they suddenly jump back to study ancient civilizations. Undoubtedly, this makes it harder for students to put people, places, and events into a proper historical context. To confuse matters further, the Grade 5 curriculum focuses on learning about key characteristics of various First Nations and European settler communities in New France up to 1713. Now,

the students are expected to learn about the expeditions of early explorers such as Jacques Cartier and Samuel Champlain after spending Grade 3 learning about life in the colonies that developed after their first settlements. Meanwhile, the Grade 6 social studies curriculum is a hodgepodge of topics and issues through which students “explore the experiences and perspectives of diverse communities in historical and contemporary Canada, including First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and settler/newcomer communities, such as the Jewish community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023: 222). Some of the suggested topics include the Chinese head tax, international accords such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Underground Railroad, and the contributions of labour unions to the development of Canada. Jumping from topic to topic across different historical periods is virtually guaranteed to confuse most, if not all, students.

The Grades 7 and 8 social studies curricula appear more historically coherent than those in the early grades. Grade 7 students are expected to learn about Canadian history from 1713 to 1850, while the Grade 8 curriculum focuses on the period from 1850 to 1914. Unfortunately, the specific learning outcomes in the curriculum guide are so broad that teachers can do anything with them. For example, students are expected to “analyze aspects of the experiences of various groups of people and communities, including First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Communities, in Canada between 1713 and 1800, and compare them to the lives of people in present-day Canada” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023: 245). Another broadly worded outcome requires students to “describe significant examples of cooperation and conflict in Canada during this period” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023: 289). While the curriculum guide suggests some examples (e.g., increasing resistance among Indigenous peoples to being educated in residential schools), nowhere does it specify what content teachers must cover with their students to develop a sensible historical understanding. It is left up to individual teachers to decide what their students will learn.

Once students get to high school, only one required course covers Canadian history—*Canadian History Since World War I*, which is offered in Grade 10 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). All other high school social studies courses either deal with other topics such as geography, or are electives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The Grade 10 curriculum is better than what is provided for earlier grades in that it does have some specific things about Canadian history that all students should know. For example, it requires students to know about the main causes of World War I. However, most of the outcomes identified in the curriculum guide are still overly broad and open to various interpretations. Stating, for example, that students should be able to “describe some key social changes in Canada during this period” and “describe some key economic trends and developments

in Canada during this period” still leaves much open to interpretation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018: 116).

Most problematically, the Grade 10 curriculum only covers Canadian history from 1914 to the present. Even if students learn a lot of facts about Canadian history, the Grade 10 curriculum guide does not cover anything prior to 1914. While the curriculum writers may assume that this material would have been adequately covered in earlier grades, the vague outcomes in those grades do not inspire confidence that it will happen. As such, it is unfortunate that Ontario high school students do not have to take a Canadian history course that covers the full history of Canada.

Canadian History in the British Columbia Curriculum

The curriculum in British Columbia recently underwent a complete overhaul. In short, the new curriculum places less emphasis on content knowledge and focuses instead on the so-called process of learning. A promotional brochure from the BC government even goes as far as stating that its redesigned curriculum places “more emphasis on the deeper understanding of concepts and the application of processes than on the memorization of isolated facts and information” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.: *BC’s Redesigning Curriculum*). At root, this is a false dichotomy since there is no reason to assume that memorizing specific facts precludes developing a deeper understanding of any topic.

Even less content knowledge is provided than in the Ontario curriculum, and the impact of a postmodern educational philosophy on the social studies curriculum is apparent. The British Columbia curriculum focuses on “big ideas” that are, in fact, so vague as to be meaningless. For example, a big idea from Grade 2 is that “Canada is made up of many diverse regions and communities” while a big idea from Grade 9 is that “(c)ollective identity is constructed and can change over time” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016: 9, 43). These vacuous statements are so open to interpretation that they provide no guidance to teachers who genuinely want to ensure that their students are learning what they need to know. The lack of specific content in the curriculum guides is a clear sign that teachers are on their own when planning their lessons. Thus, students with different teachers will get quite different material.

At the K-8 levels, the only grades where students will have an opportunity to actually learn some Canadian history are Grades 4 and 5. The Grade 4 curriculum states that students will learn about early contact between Europeans and Canada’s First Peoples, the fur trade, and the factors behind British Columbia’s entry into Confederation. In Grade 5, students are to learn about the development and evolution of Canadian identity, the changing nature of Canadian immigration policy, and past discriminatory government policies and actions. Interestingly, the only outcome with specific examples provided is where students are required to learn about past discrimination. The examples given are residential schools for Indigenous students, the Chinese Head Tax, the *Komagata Maru* incident, and the internment of various people. While these are important topics, it is thin gruel indeed if these are the only Canadian history details required for students to graduate.

Unfortunately, the high school curriculum guides are not any better. Interestingly, Grade 9 students are also expected to learn about “discriminatory policies and injustices in Canada and in the world.” Surprisingly, the same examples are provided as in the Grade 5 curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016: 47). Apparently, the British Columbia government wants to make sure students learn about Canada’s discriminatory past but does not have a similar zeal for ensuring that students learn about more positive aspects in Canada’s evolution as a country (e.g., the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the Statute of Westminster, the 1960 Bill of Rights, etc.). As for the Grade 10 social studies curriculum, the learning outcomes are equally vague, with one exception. The Grade 10 curriculum requires students to learn about “discriminatory policies and injustice in Canada” with the exact same examples as appeared in the Grade 9 curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018: 5). One can only wonder why anyone would think this content must be repeated at least three times throughout a student’s time in school while omitting most other details about our country’s history.

Grades 11 and 12 students only need to complete one social studies course, and it is up to them to decide which course they will take. Unfortunately, none of the high school courses focus exclusively on Canadian history. Instead, students can choose from a smorgasbord such as 20th Century World History, Comparative World Religions, Contemporary Indigenous Studies, Genocide Studies, and Social Justice (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d., Social Studies). Of course, none of these courses are likely to give high school students much of a grounding in Canadian history, which is necessary for preparing them for citizenship in our country.

In short, the new social studies curriculum in British Columbia makes it unlikely that BC students will learning much about the history of our country. Focusing on big picture ideas without filling in the necessary details (except for examples of discrimination) is a recipe for an inadequate education for students.

Conclusion

It is important that all Canadian students learn about the history of Canada, just as it is surely desirable that anyone seeking Canadian citizenship should have a basic understanding of our country's history. No student should graduate from high school without having a good understanding of how our country came into existence and how it evolved, at least since 1867. Because all publicly funded schools must follow provincial curricula, it is important to ensure that teachers and students are not being shortchanged by poor curriculum guides. At a minimum, this means rewriting curriculum guides so that they contain much more knowledge-specific content.

While adopting a mandatory Canadian history high school course like what is currently offered in Manitoba—provided following the provincial curriculum remains a requirement for publicly funded schools—would be a significant improvement for students in both Ontario and British Columbia, much more significant steps should be taken. For example, the Core Knowledge Foundation, set up in 1986 by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a well-known education writer, publishes excellent curriculum guides in a variety of subjects, including history (Core Knowledge Foundation, n.d.). Unlike what we see in Ontario and British Columbia, the Core Knowledge curriculum guides are detailed and specific, replete with historically significant names, places, and events. While the Core Knowledge curriculum focuses on American history, it should not be difficult to develop Canadian history curriculum guides that take a similar content-rich approach.

Another important reason for providing more content in the curriculum is to help students improve their reading comprehension skills. There is strong research evidence of a causal relationship between background knowledge and reading comprehension (Hirsch, 2016). Simply put, the more that students know about a topic in a book or an article, the more likely they are to be able to understand what they are reading. It is important for students to gain a solid grasp of Canadian history so that they can understand modern-day articles and books that assume this background knowledge.

As shown in this study, both Ontario and British Columbia students are being poorly served by their governments. They deserve better than to have substandard curriculum guides imposed upon them. Instead of wondering who killed Canadian history (as Jack Granatstein asked more than 25 years ago), we should start asking how we can restore Canadian history in our schools. The first step toward meeting this challenge will be providing teachers with more comprehensive and balanced curriculum guides.

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