THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HISTORY IN RECONCILIATION EFFORTS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

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In this essay the author explores the relationship between knowledge of history and efforts at reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. He contends that such knowledge will improve efforts at reconciliation. Therefore, curriculum planners and educators need to be mindful of the importance of including diverse narratives in history teaching in support of that objective. Using national survey data, the author points to the high importance assigned by Canadians to the teaching of Indigenous history. Based on the survey results, he further contends that knowledge about the historic injustices committed against Indigenous peoples does not meaningfully modify citizen's attachment to the country. The health of a democracy can be assessed by its ability to confront difficult parts of the past. Hence the treatment of Indigenous peoples and other communities that have encountered injustices should not be omitted from history courses out of a concern that doing so might undercut national attachment. Canada only stands to benefit from a fair representation of the past, something which will surely contribute to constructive dialogue for the future.

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Canada many Canadians were served a reminder of the historic injustices committed against the country's Indigenous peoples. Though much of the 150th celebrated those things about which Canadians were proud, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples was clearly an important theme over the course of the commemorations. Most Canadians report that they are proud of the country's history, but many Canadians affirm that the historic injustices committed against Canada's Indigenous peoples are a source of shame. A November 2017 survey conducted by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies revealed that over one in three Canadians that say they are not proud of Canada's history identify the treatment of Aboriginal Peoples, relations with First Nations, and residential schools as the things that make them the least proud of the country's history (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: REASONS WHY CANADIANS ARE NOT PROUD OF CANADIAN HISTORY

	Total	Aboriginals / First Nations	French	English	Other
Treatment of Aboriginals / Relations with First Nations	30%	44%	20%	34%	42%
Residential schools	8%	16%	4%	11%	2%
Colonialism / Conquering history	9%	6%	4%	12%	8%
Lies on History / Biased History / Denial of acts committed	9%	9%	20%	4%	3%
Relations with Quebec / Francophones	6%	4%	18%	1%	0%
Genocide	6%	10%	5%	8%	0%
Racism / Treatment of non-whites	8%	2%	2%	10%	21%
Cultural assimilation	3%	1%	6%	2%	0%
Treatment of immigrants	3%	2%	0%	2%	15%

KNOWLEDGE OF CANADIAN HISTORY, DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

The ongoing revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have served as a stark reminder of the abuses of which many members of Indigenous communities were victims. Those revelations drew attention to important aspects of the history of the country about which Canadians were generally unaware. Canadians tend to believe they are knowledgeable about the country's past. Over eight in ten Canadians think they have a good knowledge of the history of Canada according to the November 2017 survey. As revealed below in Table 2, Canada's Indigenous peoples surveyed were most likely to agree they had a good knowledge of the country's history.

TABLE 2: CANADIANS WITH A "GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE HISTORY OF CANADA"

	Total	Aboriginals / First Nations	French	English
Net agree	82%	86%	76%	85%
Net disagree	16%	11%	23%	12%
I don' know	2%	2%	0%	3%
I prefer not to answer	1%	1%	1%	0%

The Government of Canada has described its objective as "working to advance reconciliation and renew the relationship with Indigenous peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership." Most Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians express a strong interest in dialogue. Nearly two in three Aboriginal Canadians and one in two non-Aboriginal Canadians say they are aware of an initiative that promotes dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, according to the November 2017 survey. Three in four Aboriginal Canadians and one in two non-Aboriginal Canadians also say they would be interested in participating in a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. It is important that any such dialogue ensure that there are shared objectives and goals.

In a 2016 report conducted by the CBC called "What Does

Reconciliation Mean to You", an interviewee worried that the notion of reconciliation was thrown around too loosely.[1] Dialogue is a key element of reconciliation and such interaction will benefit considerably from participants that are well informed about the country's history and who can further determine how the lessons of the past can help identify solutions to contemporary challenges.

IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS HISTORY IN CANADA

The November 2017 ACS-Leger survey found some 85% of Canadians in agreement that "when teaching Canada's history, it is most important that we learn the history and culture of Indigenous peoples in Canada." The degree to which the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada is included in provincial history curriculums is rather uneven. Too often, history curriculum provides insufficient information and analysis and references to key historic communities, and some tend to foster certain generalizations. Underlying this is the objective of educators and government curriculum planners when it comes to the teaching of history.

In recent decades there has been considerable debate amongst history educators and policy-makers about the orientation and purpose teaching history. History educators have placed increasing emphasis on the need to develop critical thinking skills while some governments feel that thickening national identities needs to be a component of the history lesson(s). In a response to the question "Why study history?" eminent social historian Peter Stearns contends that "when we study it [history] reasonably well, and so acquire some usable habits of mind, as well as some basic data about the forces that affect our own lives, we emerge with relevant skills and an enhanced capacity for informed citizenship, critical thinking, and simple awareness..."[2]

A January 2016 survey conducted by Leger Marketing for the ACS asked Canadians to rank various considerations in the study of history by order of importance. Overall, there is rough similarity in the percentage that favor an identity-based rationale for learning history (valuing traditions and identity, recall achievements) and those who opt for elements of critical thinking (use of history to understand the contemporary world, distinguish between good and bad, etc.). As observed below in Table 3, the ACS-Leger survey reveals that Canadians under 35 are more likely to see the critical thinking skills as rationale for the study of history while the 55 plus cohorts are more likely to endorse the strengthening of identity. While the two objectives are not necessarily in competition, the results may provide important insight into what may make history resonate with Canadians across the age spectrum.

TABLE 3: WHEN LEARNING ABOUT OUR HISTORY, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT?

Order each of the following items from most important (1) to least important (6):	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Value the traditions and identity of our nation	33%	18%	23%	30%	37%	43%	39%
Use History to Understand the Situation in the world today	19%	25%	21%	19%	17%	14%	20%
To prevent prejudice - study history so that you can understand other peoples	17%	13%	18%	21%	18%	18%	15%
Distinguish between good or bad, right or wrong in the past	13%	16%	19%	10%	11%	12%	12%
To encourage civic participation and citizenship	10%	16%	12%	11%	9%	6%	9%
To ensure that outstanding achievements are not forgotten	8%	13%	8%	9%	8%	8%	6%

For members of Indigenous communities, the teaching of Indigenous history can be essential towards transmitting the traditions and identity of the community to youth so as to make them aware of the key elements of their heritage(s). Provincial educational authorities generally seek to incorporate common themes into school's history curriculum so as to ensure that all teachers have a shared narrative from which to interpret the past. The interpretation can be made open to

1 See www.cbc.ca/news/Indigenous/what-does-reconciliation-mean-mb-1.3803617.

2 See www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/why-study-history.

analysis on the part of students and certainly educators play an important role in this regard. But provincial curriculum developers will select how they feel it best to include diverse narratives into the curriculum. The choices often depend on the dominant social and cultural context of a particular province and sometimes on specific political considerations of the period. When looking across Canada, the degree of diversity to be included in provincial history curriculums is uneven. This can leave members of certain minority communities feeling that they can't identify with the broader history curriculum as they're not reflected in the narrative. Franco-Ontarians and Quebec Anglophones have observed that their respective province's history curriculum pay scant attention to their historic presence.

The issue of incorporating Indigenous histories and narratives in provincial history curriculums has been the object of much attention over the past two decades and several curriculum planners have indeed responded with considerably greater inclusion and made changes to ensure that the contributions of Indigenous peoples and the difficult challenges they've faced over time be an integral part of students history lessons.

Are some history curriculum developers and policy-makers concerned that a focus on those parts of the country's history that are a source of shame rather than pride will undercut attachment to country or province? To omit difficult historic issues from the curriculum for that reason in a democracy would be untenable. It also would undercut efforts at reconciliation, which require a fair representation of the past. That said, the findings of the ACS-Leger November 2017 survey reveal that awareness of the problematic parts of the past do not eliminate attachment to Canada and pride in its history. The survey reveals that some three quarters of Aboriginals surveyed say they are very attached to Canada – a figure equal to that of English Canadians (some 38% of francophone Canadians say they are very attached to Canada and 41% say they are somewhat attached to the country). As regards pride in Canadian history, some two in three Aboriginal Canadians say they are very or somewhat proud of the country's history compared with 70% of Francophone Canadians and 83% of English Canadians. As revealed in Table 4 below, it is true that those individuals that are least proud of the country's history are least attached to the country. Nonetheless, nearly two-thirds of the latter group say they are very and somewhat attached to Canada.

TABLE 4: ATTACHMENT TO CANADA AND PRIDE IN CANADIAN HISTORY

	"I am proud of Canadian history"			
Attachment to My country-Canada	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Very attached	88.6%	63.9%	46.5%	39.4%
Somewhat attached	10.2%	31.0%	32.4%	25.7%
Not very attached	0.7%	4.3%	16.1%	14.7%
Not attached at all	0.4%	0.5%	4.3%	19.3%
I prefer not to answer	0.1%	0.3%	0.7%	0.9%

CONCLUSION

Successful reconciliation with Indigenous communities can only benefit from knowledge of the past and the teaching of history needs to be mindful of the importance of including diverse narratives in support of that objective. In democracies, such narratives should not be omitted out of a concern that they might undercut attachment to the country. On the contrary and in the long run, all citizens stand to benefit from a fair representation of the past, which will surely contribute to constructive dialogue for the future.