THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING NATIONAL HISTORY IN THE CANADIAN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Since the establishment of public education over a century ago, Canadian educators have continually faced the challenges of teaching a common national history to the younger generations. This paper looks at the implications of these challenges for 21st century history education.

Teaching national history has never been so hotly debated – and contested. For Peter Seixas (2002), the current interest in history can be understood as the unprecedented convergence of deep-rooted factors: the resurgence of memory and heritage practices, the rapid migration and mixing of peoples and cultures, the end of the Cold War and the re-emergence of nations and states, the empowerment of previously disempowered groups, and finally globalization and its technologies. While virtually every country has been affected in one way or another by these factors, Canada presents an interesting case study. Divided by language, region and nationality, the country has historically faced the challenge of accommodating diversity without undermining solidarity and unity. "In our 130-year existence," philosopher Will Kymlicka (1998) observes, "Canadians have managed to build a prosperous, tolerant, peaceful, free and democratic society in what is one of the most ethnoculturally diverse countries in the world" (p. 1).

The purpose of this chapter is to present the situation in Canada history education from a historical perspective. While no country offers a simple "cut and paste" solution, the Canadian educational experience presents an interesting case in point. More specifically, the paper looks at how federalism and nationalism, collective memory, multiculturalism, and historical thinking and consciousness have affected the ways in which history education has been defined and translated into educational policies, curricula, and research practices. Relying on the framework of Osborne (2006), it outlines three related conceptions of history teaching, all of which continue to affect, to varying degrees, Canadian education: nation-building, contemporary studies, and historical thinking.

1. NATION-BUILDING NARRATIVES

Born out of a 19th century compact between the two founding nations – French and English – the country was brought into formal existence at the height of European nationalist movements. Faced with the danger of expansion and civil war in the United States and highly vulnerable to attacks and assimilation, the scattered colonies of Canada could only be brought together for a common purpose. The consequence of this unique trajectory was the establishment of a particular political arrangement and culture that remains to this day.

The British North America Act (BNA Act) of 1867 laid out the terms and agreements of the new Dominion of Canada. While European states were being crafted as unitary nation-states, the Fathers of Confederation drafted a federal arrangement in which the powers were divided between provincial and federal levels. Provincial control of education was central to the Constitution of 1867 – at least for French Canadian leaders. Section 93 of the Constitution not only guaranteed that provinces would have absolute power over education but recognized that French and English minorities (as originally defined in terms of Catholics and Protestant minority rights) were entitled to separate education systems.

Motivated by the new political arrangements and fuelled by decades of colonial education from such reformers

as Egerton Ryerson, Canadian education soon became a political priority. The increasingly industrial, urbanized and multiethnic population of Canada required skilled labour and loyal citizens. Schools, in the words of Ryerson, were seen as an instrument to prepare Canadians for "appropriate duties and employments of life, as Christians, as persons of business, and also as members of the civil community in which they live" (in Axelrod, 1997, p. 25). Public education was seen as a means to socialize Canadians and "imbue them with attitudes designed to make society both productive and governable" (Axelrod, 1997, p. 43). Nation-building was the process through which Canadians would become good workers and citizens.

Despite the fact that the provinces were responsible for education, all Canadian schools were expected to develop a "national consciousness" (Tomkins, 1977). A great part of the school mission, particularly so in English Canadian provinces, focussed on the Canadianization of people and their allegiance to the British Canadian parliamentary system and Anglo-saxon culture. As George W. Ross, Minister of Education for Ontario, once declared: "As Canadians, we should teach more of Canada and in teaching Canada we should teach it as only one colony of the vast British Empire on whose dominion the sun never sets." (in Jain, 1977, p. 42).

Of course, the production and teaching of this grand narrative did not go unchallenged. French Canadians, for one, had also developed their own narrative texts of the country – even before English Canadians – that were instilled in the Catholic school system of French Canada (see Lévesque, 2004). Many of these contradicted the tenets of an English-speaking homogeneous nation founded on the superior virtues of the British Empire. Instead, they focused on the heroic struggle, *la survivance* of the *Canadiens*, and the role of religion and Divine Providence (Bruchési, 1952; Roy, Gauthier and Tardif, 1992).

2. MULTICULTURALISM AND CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

By the 1960s, a new set of social and educational transformations radically altered the older vision of Canadian history and identity in place since Confederation. On the one hand, new interest in and demand for public education forced political and educational authorities to reassess the goal of schooling. This time, however, reforms had to reflect the needs of Canada's "cultural mosaic" – not exclusively the aspirations of the ruling élite (Porter, 1965). In the province of Ontario alone, the schooling population more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, from 663,000 students in 1946 to 1.3 million by 1960 (Tomkins, 1986). Most of these students were Canadian baby boomers but also non-European immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America with no connection to British and French Canadian culture. Critics became increasingly vocal and organized. They persuasively exposed the racist, sexist, and class-based nature of Canadian education and rightfully demanded equality and recognition (Strong-Boag, 1996). Raymond Breton summed up the issue facing Canadian "others" in these terms: "When communities of people cannot recognize themselves in public institutions… [they] feel that they are strangers in society, that the society is not *their* society" (1986, p. 31).

On the other hand, the nation-building narratives once inculcated in Canadian schools ceased representing and explaining Canada to the diverse population of the country. The old "core myths," as Francis (1997) observes, "no longer explain anything….The story of Canada I learned from my schoolbooks is totally inadequate for understanding Canadian society as it is today" (p. 174). The Quiet Revolution in Québec was the catalyst for a long-needed dialogue and the necessity of reworking the federation to accommodate all Canadians. In 1963, the federal government established a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B&B Commission) to examine existing practices and recommend ways of ensuring wider recognition of the fundamental cultural dualism of Canada. At the request of the B&B Commission, a comparative study of Canadian history textbooks across the country was undertaken. To no surprise, the report (Trudel and Jain, 1970) presented a bleak picture of Canadian history. It concluded that "when we compare the way in which the historical material is presented, again we are in two different worlds… there is unquestionably an English tone and a French tone" (p. 124). In other words, Canadian children were educated in completely different systems depending on their language and religious affiliation.

The celebrations surrounding the Centennial of Canada in 1967 provided an additional impetus for re-assessing Canadian history. A National History Project was established to survey civic education across provincial jurisdictions. Directed by A.B. Hodgetts, the report rhetorically entitled *What Culture? What Heritage?* was the largest and most comprehensive study ever to be conducted on Canadian education. As with the findings of the B&B Commission, Hodgetts' report offered yet another indictment of Canadian history teaching and learning. Courses of study were regional in focus and outdated, textbooks presented a "bland, unrealistic consensus version" of Canadian progress with emphasis on political and constitutional history. Current events, controversial issues and cultural diversity were completely ignored by teachers. Perhaps more appalling, classrooms observed were dominated by "chalk and talk" lectures and textbook memorization and student-centred activities reduced to simple discussions and facts finding worksheets. With this

state of affairs, it is no surprise that many left the school with a negative appreciation of history – and of their own country. "The apathy of the great majority of these students regarding Canadian studies," Hodgetts (1968) concluded, "is taken out of the classroom, and adversely affects their involvement in Canadian affairs" (p. 77).

The initial response of authorities to this situation came from different directions. At the federal level, a series of political decisions were taken, including the adoption of the Official Languages Act in 1969 making French and English the two official languages of Canada. Responding to the concept of "cultural mosaic," the government of Pierre Trudeau abandoned altogether the notion of cultural dualism and implemented instead a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. All these changes – and many significant others such as guaranteed educational rights for French and English minorities – were entrenched in a new Charter of Rights and Freedoms a decade later. Provincial governments soon amended, not without much debate, their own policies and regulations to better reflect the constitutional changes taking place at the national level – resulting in a rather complex and confusing system across the country. Multicultural education, French immersion, and ESL/FSL programs, to name but a few, gradually found their way into the Canadian school systems (McLeod, 1989). "Overt responses of the schools to multiculturalism," Kogila Moodley (1995) observes, "indicate a shift from the earlier assimilation to a greater acceptance of multiculturalism" (p. 804).

Perhaps the most influential response in education came from the Canadian Studies Consortium, an interprovincial network of regional centres, which established the Canada Studies Foundation (CSF) in 1970. The CSF was innovative in several ways. Responding specifically to the recommendations of the Hodgetts' report, the foundation produced many publications about Canada, sponsored various local school projects across the country, involved over 1000 educators in curriculum development, and provided in-service education to more than 30,000 teachers. Parallel to these, Ministries of Education in every province undertook long-needed curriculum reviews to better reflect the latest research findings and development in education. For Penney Clark (2004), the publication of Jerome Bruner's landmark book *The Process of Education* provided Canadian educators a modern, progressive way of looking at history and social studies. For Bruner (1977), children were not simple assimilators of knowledge but active problem-solvers who could learn the fundamental structure of scientific thinking. His argument rested on the principle that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectual honest form to any child at nay stage of development" (p. 36). The new programs of study mirrored, to various degrees, Bruner's ideas about the structure of the discipline, emphasizing problem-based learning, independent projects, and primary source method.

Focus on child-centred discovery methods also let to another American influence on Canadian education during the period: the promotion of contemporary studies. Some influential neoprogressive educators, such as Donald Oliver and Shirley Engle, proclaimed that disciplines such as history "did not necessarily prepare informed and responsive citizens" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 397). They recommended instead that school subjects be integrated into contemporary studies apparently more palatable to young learners (Newmann and Oliver, 1970). Following these recommendations, Canadian school history gradually lost its prominence in the curriculum (Davis, 1995). Once-popular textbooks proclaiming Canada's progress, such as *Building the Canadian Nation* or *The Romance of Canada,* were relegated to shelves and replaced by less triumphant ones: *Challenges and Survival* and *In Search of Canada.* According to Osborne (2000), "history began to lose its place in the school curriculum" (p. 423) because of a number of converging factors, including a perceived lack of social relevance of history, an increased focus on multiculturalism and anti-racism, a change in teacher education (from disciplinary backgrounds to generalists), and the elimination of provincial examinations and the de-streaming of the curriculum favouring individualized timetables. Whatever the reason, by the 1980s school history had been supplanted in many provinces by other more "relevant" subjects under such appealing headings as Man in Society, Multicultural education, World Religions, and Environmental studies. As historian Robert Gidney (1999) sums it up from his educational research, "the average learner would not accept the statement that 'You must take history because it's good for you'" (p. 103).

3. HISTORICAL THINKING AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The publication of the book *Who Killed Canadian History?* by prominent historian Jack Granatstein in 1998 marked the beginning of a new era in Canadian history education. Declaring that national history was literally dead, killed by a combination of political decisions and educational policies from anti-intellectual bureaucrats, psychologists, social historians and multicultural educators, Granatstein (1998) was the most vocal and perhaps influential critic to demand publicly "a common curriculum of compulsory history courses in the public schools and high schools" (p. 142). Although his argument was highly conservative and much in line with the older nation-building paradigm, his plea came at a strategic moment in Canadian politics. Public debates on the place of history in schools, rhetorically referred to as the "history

wars," more or less revolved around two fundamentally different perspectives.

At one extreme, neo-conservative thinkers like Granatstein and patriotic organizations such as the Dominion Institute presented a pessimistic view of Canadian multicultural society and distrust in youth culture. Editorials and national surveys showing abysmal lack of political knowledge among young Canadians, unable to recall bits and fragments of the collective past, led to emotional outcries in the population. For these "heritage fashioners," the future of the country was at stake. For Québec nationalists, a lack of knowledge of Québec history inevitably meant the assimilation by *les Anglais* and the predictable death of their sovereignist project (see Laville, 2006). Canadian historian Desmond Morton described the situation during the period in these words: "School history has plenty of supporters in contemporary Canada…. [But] the current enthusiasm for school history – heaviest among older and influential Canadians – may not necessarily benefit students. Memorizing a few hundred facts will not, in Fernand Dumond's phrase, persuade the young that they are free 'to *read* history and to *make* it as well'" (p. 60).

At the other end of the debate were a relatively small but important number of scholars, educators, and organizations long dedicated to education. Building on the forward-thinking works of British and other European didactics scholars, and paralleling Bruner's earlier notion of the structure of the discipline, they advocated a fundamentally different conception of school history. Instead of viewing it as a political tool for citizenship activism and heritage practice, they conceive history as a form of knowledge and way of thinking about the past (Lévesque, 2008). Perhaps the most influential thinker was Peter Seixas, Canada Research Chair in Historical Consciousness. For Seixas (2006), it is far from clear that "a resurrected, monumental narrative, the construction of a simple public memory, can meet the felt needs for a usable past that will help orient young people for the future" (p. 14). What is more appropriately needed, in his view, is a history education that will aim for a higher standard, the development of students' "historical consciousness". Seixas defines the concept as a critical interpretation of a usable history necessary for understanding the meanings of the past for contemporary purposes. To become historically conscious, students must be able to articulate some sophisticated answers to key questions in history:

- How did things get to be as we see them today?
- What group or groups am I a part of? What are its/their origins?
- How should we judge each other's past actions?
- Are things getting better or are they getting worse?
- What stories about the past should I believe in? On what grounds?
- Which stories shall we tell? Why?
- Is there anything we can do to make things better?

Unlike the tenets of collective memory, the approach to historical consciousness does not provide a simple, uncontested path to nation-building. Rather, it offers a critical link between past, present, and future as envisioned by citizens. Perhaps more importantly, its goal is not to shape a people through the teaching of a common narrative memory but to shape students' minds so they become more conscious historical thinkers. Historical consciousness can be a valuable idea to education inasmuch as it provides a conceptual framework to study how learners develop progressively their own narratives and understanding of the nature of history. It also helps, more broadly, to make sense of people's orientation in time and personal engagement with cultural artefacts of the collective past.

The proponents of historical thinking and consciousness have had, so far, a relatively influential role in Canadian educational research. Three recent examples can serve as evidence of this new direction: the Benchmarks of historical thinking school initiative (see www.historybenchmarks.ca), the national survey Canadians and their Pasts (www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca), and the establishment of The History Education Network/Histoire et éducation en réseau (www.thenhier.ca).

CONCLUSION

The development and often unfriendly coexistence of the three competing approaches to history education delineated here offer some valuable lessons to consider: (a) nation-building narratives are central to identity and national history, (b) school history needs to be relevant to be meaningful, and (c) students no less than adults are unable to create their own histories without deep understanding of the nature of history.

Since the invention of public schooling, school history has always placed nation-building as fundamental to its mission. Regardless of the debates on the issue of nationalism, the narrative of the nation remains a valuable enterprise for communities in democracy. But as Canadians know too well, the development of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) sharing a national narrative is challenging. People may share institutions or a common territory but inhabit different historical realities. The challenge for 21st century democracy is precisely to devise structures that allow for the development and dialogue between multiple narrative accounts of the nation without

undermining unity and solidarity. This challenge, as Stanley (2006) points out, is to enable us "to construct a narrative that explains how it is that we come to inhabit common spaces, and to allow others to see and engage with these narratives" (p. 47).

This is the second lesson to be learned: history needs to be personally relevant in order to be meaningful. Students often leave school without deep knowledge of or interest in the collective past as a result of poor school history programs. It is not, as Conrad, Létourneau and Northrup (2009) illustrate in their recent survey on "Canadians and their pasts," that people have no interest in or engagement with the past. On the contrary, most Canadians are engaged in a variety of historical activities, ranging from visits to museums, to entries in journals or diaries, through to family photographs and artifacts preservation to watching historically-based movies. The educational movement for contemporary studies in the 1970s was rooted in the cognitive belief that programs of study had to be presented in a didactical way that addresses present-day issues of concern to students. People feel most connected to history when they encounter the past in engaging, familiar and intimate ways. What this suggests for educators is to create programs that will allow students from increasingly different backgrounds, nationalities, and experiences to see themselves – and their personal interests and concerns – represented in their history classroom. Teachers must enable children to explore and reassess their own past, to construct their own narrative accounts, and perhaps more importantly to analyse how their personal histories intertwine with those of the communities they inhabit.

But this approach to school history is only successful if students are exposed to the nature of history as a discipline with its own procedures, standards, and mode of inquiry. Indeed, people cannot adjudicate between competing narratives of the past or even (re)construct their own usable histories without some appreciation of how such narratives are constructed and disseminated. "The challenge for history education," Seixas (2006) observes, "is to devise ways to introduce young people to these same historical tools, processes, and ways of thinking, not in order to make them mini-historians, or to give them an early start on academic careers; rather, to help them make sense of who they are, where they stand, and what they can do… (p. 21). Far from exacerbating ethnic, cultural or linguistic divisions, such an approach to history can provide "a common public forum for the discussion of divergent historical views and experiences" (Seixas, 1997, p. 169).

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