Subversive or Supportive?
Making Curriculum Adjustments to Engage Elementary Students in Doing History

Katherine Ireland – Ph.D. Student, Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

Abstract

In this paper I argue that New Brunswick’s K-2 curriculum history outcomes do not encourage the critical and inclusive study of history, which undermines the curriculum’s stated aims of acceptance and understanding of diversity. I suggest that the curriculum’s suggested activities to meet these outcomes actually promote homogeneity and emphasis on sameness because they marginalize and trivialize non-dominant cultural groups by limiting opportunities for conflict and discussion of difference. I cite specific examples of where the New Brunswick curriculum does this, and review research that suggests conflict in the curriculum actually creates engaging as well as in-depth learning opportunities. I then compare the New Brunswick curriculum’s approach with the recommendations from The Historical Thinking Project, and briefly review the research on history education in the early elementary years. I conclude by suggesting that early and rigorous history instruction in the elementary years is necessary for students to accomplish the history outcomes we expect of them in the later years of schooling, as well as to become citizens who accept and understand diversity in Canada.

Word-of-mouth among educators in New Brunswick schools today suggests that the elementary social studies model, which is commonly called the expanding horizons approach, is not meeting the needs of classroom teachers and is often omitted in favour of the
more heavily assessed mathematics and language arts curricula. The problem I address in this paper regards the history outcomes in *You and Your World*, New Brunswick’s K-2 curriculum. I argue that the stated outcomes in this document related to history are not supported by the suggested activities. Rather than encouraging the critical and inclusive study of history, *You and Your World* emphasizes homogeneity, and presents an emphasis on sameness in lieu of recognition of and appreciation for difference. The provincial curriculum in its current form does not support the inclusion of multiple histories. In addition, both in the activities suggested, as well as in the theory of cognition and learning it prescribes, *You and Your World* suggests that young children are incapable of the kind of abstract critical thought necessary for historical inquiry.

The current New Brunswick K-2 curriculum was adopted in March of 2005. *You and Your World* integrates science, health, and social studies into one curriculum document and is what is commonly called an expanding horizons model: beginning with what is immediately familiar to the child, self and family, and expanding outwards to local community, province, and the wider world. History outside the local area is not part of the curriculum until the later grades, even though many people who live in the local area may have histories that took place outside of the province and outside of Canada. This means that many historical stories that students might identify with will not be taught, and those that are will be most likely taught from a single perspective. This creates a problem that is quite prevalent in the research: when you only know a limited version of history, your ability to think critically about history is constrained. In my experience as an elementary school teacher, the emphasis on sameness in the curriculum troubled me. The literature confirms that this emphasis contributes to the continued existence of marginalization and discrimination of students from non-dominant ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in schools, by marginalizing diverse perspectives in history and emphasizing conformity to a dominant norm (Banks, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Belknap & Hess, 2000; Castro, 2010; Cohen, 1993; Cummins, 1993; Delpit, 1993; Lee & Anderson, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 1998; Stanley, 2006; Zine, 2002). In the study of history this is particularly true; certain historical narratives are more prevalent than others, and can have a powerful influence on children’s sense of identity and citizenship (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Barton, 2001; Peck, 2011; Peck, 2010; Walker, 2005).
The consequences of this emphasis on sameness, according to research with middle and high school students, is that students who come from non-dominant backgrounds – ethnic, linguistic, religious – are disengaged from the history they are learning in school. According to the researchers whose specialize in history and social studies research in schools, students from minority and marginalized groups often have fewer opportunities to see their histories reflected in the curriculum, and these histories are more likely to be represented from a dominant perspective. Peter Seixas (1993), Keith Barton (2001; 2011) and Linda Levstik (2011) report that when students' family histories are not taught in schools, or when these histories do not conform to the dominant narrative, students cannot make connections between what they have experienced outside the classroom and what they are taught in it. As a result, these students have a superficial understanding of history and a limited understanding of their own agency, in addition to feeling excluded and marginalized.

Many of the critiques of this expanding horizons model are based on the idea that it is entirely oriented on the present and students’ immediate circumstances, which limits the perspectives that students can learn. Kieran Egan (1983) suggests: “The present-oriented purpose of socializing which determines relevance from present conditions and experience tends constantly towards reductionism, towards provincializing the alien and different, towards homogenizing the exotic and strange” (p. 204). Jasmin Zine (2002) makes a similar point, noting that there are very often efforts on the parts of schools to recognize other cultures, like multicultural fairs or heritage months, that end up limiting them to a few cultural stereotypes (p. 2). This tendency affects how students view themselves within their school, municipal, provincial, and national communities, and their participation within these spheres. Peter Seixas (1993) emphasizes this tension in his 1993 study:

In a multicultural school population, with students whose families do not share a common historical experience, these disjunctions at best render school history less meaningful, and at worst pose an impediment to students' construction of any meaningful frame of historical reference. (p. 302)

Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2011) also voice their concerns on this topic: “When they [the students] can’t connect what they’re supposed to learn at school to their own schemas, their understanding is notoriously superficial” (p. 15). Some students have
polarized frameworks for thinking about history; the way they learn to think about history in school at one end, and the family and cultural history that they grow up with at the other. Often these differ so greatly in what is historically significant that the frameworks are incompatible (Seixas, p. 305); students struggle to reconcile what is personally meaningful with what they learn about history in the social studies curriculum (Seixas (1993, p. 320). This is a disempowering framework that strips future citizens of a sense of place in their own country. It also limits students’ ability to develop a voice and a purpose for advocating for their community’s needs. Barton and Levstik (2011) note this in their research: “Students who do not see themselves as members of groups who had agency in the past or power in the present, who are invisible in history, lack viable models for the future” (p. 3).

This approach to social studies curricula treats diversity as something that needs to be managed in order to avoid conflict within an otherwise ordered space. Barton and Levstik (2011) point out that this is often the case in schools and argue against it: “Conflict is built into the fabric of our public and private lives. Democracy is rooted in a conflictual model... assuming that conflict is something to avoid misunderstands and misrepresents both the foundations of democracy and the nature of much of the world” (p. 130). Kathy Bickmore (2006) explores this attitude toward conflict in Canadian curricula from Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and Ontario. She found that in Canadian curricula, multiculturalism is equated with harmony, and treatment of conflict and injustice is minimal, with the apparent desire to present these as either in the past, or resolved (p. 359). She notes, though diversity was often mentioned, there was very little international content in the curricula, indicating a disconnect between the language used and opportunities to address specific circumstances (p. 379). This is also the case in New Brunswick’s You and Your World K-2 curriculum. Unit 1 in You and Your World, titled Groups, aims to teach about diversity but fails to clearly explain how students will come to understand, respect and show appreciation for difference. For example, Outcome 1.1.2 states: “Students will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of the similarity and diversity of social and cultural groups” (p. 64). The elaborations of this outcome include:

- Review the definition and characteristics of groups
- Demonstrate an understanding that people join together to form social and cultural groups
- Demonstrate an understanding that within each group there
are certain characteristics that bring people (local, national, and global) together

- Recognize that children (local, national, and global) form a group. (p. 64)

To teach this outcome, the curriculum suggests creating a chart to illustrate the different groups children can belong to such as families, classrooms, and sports groups. It also includes religious and ethnic groups among these. The categories in the chart are: “Name of Group, Who Belongs, Reasons for Joining, Traditions and Customs, Local, National and Global” (p. 64). The perspective behind this approach appears to be that we may better understand others by labeling them, and that we may come to this understanding by making lists of characteristics with which to categorize those who do not fit a particular norm. This perspective is problematic when teaching about the diversity of religious and ethnic groups because it encourages children to use superficial markers such as food and festivals to categorize ethnic and religious groups as more or less like themselves, which Stanley (2006) and Zine (2002) strongly caution against. This approach ignores the subtleties and tensions in categories such as “Who Belongs” and “Reasons for Joining,” which may include serious issues such as forcible inclusion or exclusion from a group due to political or environmental factors for which the curriculum does not provide guidelines to address.

By recommending the following questions for discussion, the document implies that the purpose of this approach is to teach respect for diversity: “What makes a group unique or special? What do groups have in common? What does the word respect mean? Ask students to think about why and how we should show respect for the traditions and customs of particular groups” (p. 64). However, the wording of this section, and that which immediately follows, suggests that finding similarities between ourselves and those who are different from us is how we are able to show respect:

Invite students to brainstorm ways children are alike. Help them identify that all children are part of a type of family structure, all children like to play, all children require some form of education, and all children experience family traditions. Explore ways that children around the world experience such commonalities. For example, discuss how many families around the world celebrate children’s birthdays. (p. 64)

In addition to the misleading view that all children have families,
and access to education and opportunities to play, the wording of the document suggests that the best way to show respect for others is to find ways in which they are like us that we can understand. There is no attempt in the curriculum document to critically examine difference, why there might be differences between groups, and how to show respect for those who are fundamentally more different, than similar.

The “Suggestions for Teaching and Learning” column in the document suggests that in the outcome and related activities, recognizing differences among a variety of cultures is equally as important as recognizing similarities:

This outcome provides a great opportunity to share pictures of and stories about children from around the world. By exposing children to a variety of groups and their customs, traditions and beliefs, they will develop an understanding of the similarities and differences between their experiences and those of others. (p. 64)

Although one of the suggestions for assessment is to “Ask students, through a medium of their choice (i.e., art, drama, piece of writing), to demonstrate a way of showing respect for another group” (p. 65), the document provides no clear link between the suggested activities which focus on similarities, and how children will learn respect for difference; in fact, the wording of the document suggests that this is not respect for difference at all but a disregard for difference in the face of superficial similarities. This approach appears to reduce ethnic and religious difference to superficial differences in clothing, food, and housing, without any attempt to examine more substantial differences in wants and needs, values and beliefs. This approach to learning about diverse cultural groups reveals a limited view of difference that is insufficient in creating a foundation for children to learn respect for and acceptance of difference. This is of paramount importance if You and Your World claims to teach history, which it does in Unit 4, Communities.

According to Barton and Levstik (2004), acknowledging and considering multiple perspectives is key to developing historical empathy (pp. 215-216); Seixas (1993) states that students cannot display empathy without a notion of historical agency. The You and Your World K-2 curriculum is unable to address historical agency because it emphasizes sameness rather than difference, limiting the possibilities for examining multiple perspectives. In the curricula
studied, Bickmore found that the overarching themes of getting along in order to protect the harmonious status quo, because they limit opportunities to address more than one perspective, inequities and injustices in particular, were anti-democratic (p. 365). The document also does not offer suggestions for examining differences and similarities within a heterogeneous group of students. Although I cannot say that the curriculum assumes a homogenous group because this is not indicated, there is very markedly no discussion of how to be both critical and sensitive when teaching about difference in a classroom that may have students from a variety of ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

Though the curriculum is not the only avenue through which students can learn about difference, Bickmore points out that this orientation indicates a broader social attitude towards diversity and difference. She states: “Official curricula do reflect public understanding and political will, and help to shape the resources available for implemented curriculum” (p. 360). Making the point that this strips students of the ability to learn how conflict and injustice have shaped our country, she notes that this also creates barriers against students learning to recognize and take action against injustice by painting dissent and conflict as counter to the greater good and deserving of punishment. This message in the curricula appears to reinforce dominant cultural discourse that positions social cohesion as the ultimate good, and “that implicitly locate problems in certain uncivilized individuals rather than in the struggles for democratic social relations” (p. 373). Counter to the popular social belief reflected in the curricula, research in this area has shown that the status quo-keeping approach is ineffective, while examining conflict and controversy actually fosters a higher level of student interest and engagement (p. 365). What is needed, Bickmore suggests, is a direct approach to involve students in discussions about conflict and inequity (p. 368), a position which Barton and Levstik (2011) also support. They conclude: “Part of developing a sense of one’s own agency is recognizing that there are alternative positions and alternative actions that could be taken” (p. 132). Both Bickmore and Barton and Levstik emphasize examining multiple perspectives as a key factor in the success of this approach, which the You and Your World curriculum does not emphasize.

The Historical Thinking Project is a Canadian organization that has been operating for the past 6 years. The organization works with schools, universities, other educators, such as museums and heritage groups, to implement this approach into their history
education programs. They have established six major concepts that history teaching should address:

- Establish historical significance
- Use primary source evidence
- Identify continuity and change
- Analyze cause and consequence
- Take historical perspectives
- Understand ethical dimensions of history (www.historicalthinking.ca)

This approach is based on the theory that students should do history as historians do, they should explore, inquire, question, investigate, rather than simply digesting what they learn in a textbook (Sandwell, 2005; 2011). The project has made great progress in the 6 years it has been operating, and these concepts have been integrated into all but two Provincial curricula.

The historical thinking concept that You and Your World explicitly deals with in outcome 1.4.1 is identifying continuity and change. The curriculum does address teaching about progress and decline, and the elaborations and suggestions for instruction offer a good variety of options: creating timelines, visiting museums and historical sites, inviting local historians to speak in class, collecting historical stories, examining photos and other artifacts. This also allows opportunities to teach for another historical thinking concept, using primary source evidence. Where You and Your World falls short is in neglecting the other historical thinking concepts.

Identifying cause and consequence and understanding the ethical dimensions of history become particularly important when teaching outcome 1.4.3, which addresses Canadian Aboriginal history. The suggestions for teaching and learning note: “It is important that the learning experiences avoid becoming a stereotypical study of early Aboriginal peoples. The goal is for students to realize that Aboriginal communities, like all communities, have evolved over time” (p. 102). As in Unit 1, however, there is no clear link between the activities suggested, and the stated outcome. The suggested activities include comparing traditionally Aboriginal lands with current Aboriginal lands, and exploring traditional Aboriginal customs, art, music and games. Though the curriculum states to teach about progress and decline, there is no reference to how these activities will help students explore how and why Aboriginal life in Canada has changed. The suggested assessments
include involving students in an Aboriginal talking circle and asking students to demonstrate their understanding of early sports, games and traditions, which appear to be only superficially related to the stated outcome. Unfortunately, the curriculum outlines what does amount to a stereotypical, superficial study. This may be a contributing factor in teachers’ apathy towards the elementary social studies curriculum.

In a model based on exploration and play, students can engage each other in debates as they explore the evidence, and use the conflicts they encounter in a positive way: to learn. In Kieran Egan’s theory of imaginative education, which is a socio-cultural theory of learning based on the idea that children will develop more sophisticated mental abilities, he calls them cognitive tools, the more experience with the world they have. According to Egan, in teaching history as a discipline, we can help students to expand and refine these tools, much better than we can with the expanding horizons approach by teaching them things they are already familiar with, like families and grocery stores. The story is a tool that children use for organizing and accessing content, and if you know any children, you know that stories are very powerful ways to communicate with them. Stories often carry a great deal of significance for children and they remember stories very well because stories access what children are good at: using their imaginations.

Could a storytelling model for history education work in early elementary? According to Barton and Levstik’s (2011) findings, “talking historically” is an effective way to engage young students with the study of history, focusing on young students’ oral language skills as Egan (2008) suggests. Barton and Levstik (2011) also suggest that role-playing can be used as a form of historical inquiry with young students. If the content is presented as a story to discover, through use of evidence and inquiry, rather than a pre-determined story that students should passively accept, it can create a space that is open and responsive to students’ expressions of identity. Rather than accepting an imposed Canadian identity that they are expected to aspire to, students are free to explore, express and discuss how they relate to what they are learning. In my own research, in which I used Egan’s storytelling model to teach history to a group of Grade One students, the students were able to re-tell the histories they had learned in their own words, and question the tensions and inequities they saw in the stories (Ireland, 2012). This highlights that young students are capable of thinking critically about, and collectively
tackling issues of conflict in history when they are encouraged to talk about who they are and where they come from.

In order for the provincial curriculum to support the historical narratives that children bring to school with them, I suggest that a more explicit emphasis on doing history in an accessible, yet critical, way with students to address multiple historical perspectives is essential. In its current form, You and Your World does not offer a usable framework for doing history within a social studies context, both because the outcomes and elaborations do not offer a sufficiently critical model for doing history and because it offers an inadequate model for teaching about diversity. What understanding of history can children come to when they learn, both implicitly and explicitly, that their culture or heritage is neither normal nor desirable, and that difference is a problem to be managed? According to Morgan-Fleming et al. (2007): “If we are able to see the past through multiple, particular lenses, our sense of history is widened and our potential understandings are increased. Multiple voices of the past can help educate us about our history, inform our present, and (we hope) improve our future” (p. 96). Stanley (2006) also advocates a “re-imagining” in history education, under the premise that “not everyone enters our common spaces under conditions of equality” (p. 47). Stanley emphasizes that in a diverse society, some histories are not unchallenged, but are denied, misrepresented, or simply invisible. The aim, he states, “is to make these histories visible in all their complexities” (p. 47). Stanley describes the diversity of the Canadian experience, emphasizing that all histories be made visible in the teaching of history, so that the experiences of Canadians previously untold may be known, as well as the examination of the reason for their exclusion or misrepresentation in the face of more privileged histories.

The research suggests a need for narrative, for the telling of stories, as the most appropriate way to address difference. How we both view and live cultural difference is an essential component of this. Amy von Heyking (2011) positions history as the arena in which this must occur:

Children’s active and thoughtful participation in a pluralistic democracy requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that only a meaningful study of history can provide. Thinking historically does not just mean thinking about the past; it involves seeing oneself in time, as an inheritor of the legacies of the past and as a maker of the future. (p. 190)
Without strong history support in the K-2 grades, students will not have developed the requisite historical thinking abilities to attain the expected outcomes in anything other than a superficial manner. Whether this is all that is expected of them is another argument altogether, but for the teacher who wishes their students to have a meaningful experience in the social studies classroom, *You and Your World* is insufficient. If primary students are expected to think rationally and critically about complex issues in social studies and develop a sense of their Canadian citizenship, then we simply cannot believe that they are concrete thinkers, in the sense that they can only understand their immediate surroundings. If we truly wish to shed the superficial approach, new models of cognition and learning are required for primary social studies curricula.
References


