

Reflections on the Ministerial Order on Student Learning released by Minister Adriana LaGrange on August 6, 2020

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For some background, you can read my reflections on the report released by Minister Adriana LaGrange on January 29, 2020 *Curriculum Advisory Panel: Recommendations on Direction for Curriculum* [here](#).

On August 6th, 2020, after taking five months to revise the draft Ministerial Order that was included in the above-mentioned document, Minister LaGrange released a new [Ministerial Order on Student Learning](#).

Many concerns arose as I listened to the [press conference](#) and read the new Ministerial Order:

1. The Minister began the press conference by repeating the falsehood that the previous curriculum revision process was conducted under a veil of secrecy and lacked transparency. I addressed this in my previous analysis (linked above) but since she used this as the justification for a new Ministerial Order and curriculum, I will address it again:
 - In the process initiated by the NDP, hundreds of teachers and other experts (with teachers holding a strong majority) were involved in writing the draft curriculum. Hundreds of people working on a project - that's the opposite of "secret."
 - In a statement available [here](#), the Minister of Education claims that "In February 2020, more than 8,500 Albertans, including education partners, gave feedback on the draft ministerial order during a public engagement" and the Minister claimed today that subject matter experts were also consulted. While the NDP was in power, the UCP regularly admonished the then government for not releasing the names of the people involved in the curriculum development process. Yet, this government has also not provided to the public a list of organizations or people (beyond the Advisory Panel) who were consulted.
 - Today, Mr. McBeath likewise noted that [8 500](#) Albertans provided feedback on the draft Ministerial Order developed by the Curriculum Advisory Committee that he chaired. In contrast, consultation under the NDP included responses from over 32 000 Albertans in 2016 alone, and Janet French from CBC notes that over time, [100.000 people](#) engaged in providing feedback while the NDP were in power. Is this new math? Does 8 500 now equal more than 32 000, or 100 000?

2. The second falsehood repeated by the Minister is that “inquiry learning” is the same thing as “constructivism.” **It is deeply concerning that the Minister of Education does not understand this educational concept.**
 - Nowhere does the scholarly literature on “constructivism” equate constructivism with “discovery” or “inquiry” learning alone. Constructivism is a theory of learning that acknowledges that students come into any learning situation with prior knowledge and experiences that shape future learning. It rejects the notion that students are “blank slates” and it also rejects the “banking model” of education that assumes that all students need to do to learn is crack open their head so that teachers can deposit knowledge in it.
 - Constructivism honours the prior knowledge and experiences that students bring with them to their learning. Teachers who teach through a constructivist lens work hard to understand students’ prior knowledge - including any misconceptions they may hold - and plan learning experiences accordingly. Constructivism does not dictate one type of pedagogy or teaching approach. Students can construct understandings through a variety of teaching and learning strategies including reading, listening to a teacher or guest speaker, discussing concepts and problems with peers, independent work, and group work, among others. An important feature of a constructivist teaching approach is metacognition. At a very basic level, metacognition asks students to reflect on their thinking and learning, including how they’ve come to understand certain concepts, and how and why their thinking has expanded and changed.
3. The third falsehood that the Minister repeated today is that a focus on literacy and numeracy is “new.” This is false. The [*Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Provincial Curriculum \(Programs of Study\)*](#), published in 2016, prioritizes literacy and numeracy across all curricular subject areas. Why the Minister continues to peddle this lie is baffling.
4. The Minister (and the Premier before her) have regularly claimed that they are going to rid the curriculum of “bias.” Here, they are particularly focused on the social studies curriculum.
 - No curriculum is bias free. Every policy document (including curriculum) reflects the values and priorities of the people writing it. Importantly, people are not neutral, even if they claim to be. Such claims of neutrality usually fall flat once the person begins speaking (or writing) and their values and priorities become clear. If you watch the press conference (link above), listen to how many times the word “should” is used. “Should” is a clear indication of a person’s values, which (repeating for those in the back) are not neutral.
 - When pressed today (and previously) for examples of bias, the Minister failed to provide any. Instead, she and her press secretary, Colin Aitchison, have pointed to a few worksheets and handouts that they had been sent by some parents. None of these documents appear in the curriculum itself. Plus, we don’t know the provenance of these examples. So it could be the examples come from one or two teachers. There is no evidence to suggest that these sources are used by

more than a few teachers in the entire province. And they may not even be used anymore at all. Anecdotes are not evidence, Minister LaGrange.

- **It is shocking and frankly unacceptable that the Minister of Education and her press secretary do not understand the difference between *curriculum* and teaching and learning *resources*.**
- In other press conferences and during the election campaign, the phrase the Minister and Premier used was that they wanted to rid the curriculum of “left wing ideology.” Again, the Minister and Premier have been, repeatedly, unable to come up with examples of “left wing ideology.” Is it left wing ideology to think that all people are of value and equal? Is it left wing ideology to ask that previously ignored, devalued, and purposefully omitted histories be included in our social studies curriculum? Is it left wing ideology to think that environmental stewardship is as important as resource extraction, or any other human influence on the environment? Is it left wing ideology to affirm children’s human rights and acknowledge that children want to make the world a better place? If so, colour me a left wing ideologue.

5. Today, Mr. McBeath, the Chair of the [Curriculum Advisory Panel](#), spoke specifically about history in his remarks to the public. I am a specialist in history education. Mr. McBeath’s comments are antiquated and do not reflect current scholarship in K-12 history education. This scholarship began in earnest in the UK in the 1970s and North American scholars have built a strong foundation of research since the mid-1990s. It continues to be an area of incredible growth in educational research, teaching, and learning.

- Mr. McBeath stated that history teachers do not focus on literacy (or numeracy). In fact, there is a well-established body of scholarship on teaching literacy in the context of history education.
- Mr. McBeath stated that history should be taught “sequentially” and not thematically. Historians are already commenting via social media that that is exactly the opposite of what good history teaching looks like (here’s one [example](#)). Thematic teaching enables students to establish connections across events and understand large concepts. For example, when teaching about “revolution” students might study examples of revolutions from around the world, leading to a rich understanding of what all revolutions have in common and what made each revolution unique. You need historical knowledge to engage in such analysis but it doesn’t always mean a sequential approach is necessary.
- Mr. McBeath further stated that teachers should not “oh, let’s drop in on Friday and we’ll study a little bit about Vietnamese cooking and next Monday we’ll be back, we’ll be back in England, and on Thursday we’re going to be back in Saddle Lake reserve out by St. Paul” (starts at 12:51 of the press conference). I don’t know what fantasyland Mr. McBeath is living in, but there is not a curriculum in Alberta that looks like this and there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that any teacher in Alberta is teaching like this. This is a shameful insult to teachers and the comment about Vietnamese cooking sounded, frankly, racist. My research in history and citizenship education focuses explicitly on how students’

ethnic and cultural identities shape their learning in these subject areas and for the Chair of the Curriculum Advisory Panel to dismiss culture as something that is unworthy of study is despicable.

- Mr. McBeath, and the Minister of Education, seem to be confusing history with social studies. Alberta has a long history of being a “social studies province”. This means that students take “social studies” from K-12. There are some optional history-focused courses but most of these curricula have not been updated for decades. “Social Studies” includes history, geography, anthropology, archaeology, political science, sociology, among other social science disciplines. The goals of “Social Studies” is to help students understand how knowledge is constructed in each of the above-mentioned disciplines and to develop civic competencies. **If the Minister of Education intends to transform the Social Studies curriculum into a History curriculum, this would be a massive shift and Albertans deserve to be informed of such a change.**
- The Ministerial Order states that *“The development of literacy and numeracy will be reinforced, enriched, and supplemented by the study of Alberta, Canadian, and world history, geography, mathematics, science, technology, philosophy, literature, languages, mental and physical wellness, and the arts, **which shall be taught with specific factual content, quality original texts and sources where applicable, and measurable outcomes.**”* As an expert in history education pedagogy, I agree that facts are important. However, it’s how students engage with factual information that matters. In a time when almost everyone has a computer in their hand, back pocket, or backpack, students can easily look facts up. What we need to teach students is how to evaluate and critique the evidence they encounter. If you want to kill students’ interest in history, force them to memorize a long list of facts, to which they’ve attached no meaning, and then give them a test. They’ll forget more than they learned and will not be developing their historical or critical thinking skills. Anyone can memorize a list of facts. It doesn’t mean they understand what those facts mean.
- Further to this point, in history education, it’s important to understand that there are different types of concepts. “Substantive” concepts are things like “constitution”, “prime minister”, and “the War of 1812”. “Procedural” concepts are how we “do history” - working with historical evidence, analyzing causes and consequences, assessing the historical significance of people, events, and developments, understanding continuity and change over time, understanding historical perspectives, and making ethical judgments. Together, these two types of concepts make up a person’s ability to “think historically” and a “historical thinking pedagogy” teaches substantive concepts alongside and through procedural concepts. For example, teachers might help students understand “continuity and change” by studying concepts such as “revolution” or “gender and society” or “technology” and they would help students understand that while things may have changed rapidly in one part of the country or world, those same things may not have changed (or changed as rapidly) elsewhere, or for everyone. Mr. McBeath and Minister LaGrange seem wholly unaware of this international

research. I hold a \$8.6 million Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant called "[Thinking Historically for Canada's Future](#)." I would happily hop on the LRT to meet with the Minister to brief her on this topic.

6. The Ministerial Order states that "*students will demonstrate mastery in foundational, subject-specific content, and a familiarity with and appreciation of the great works and ideas of world history, with an emphasis on the cultures and institutions that have shaped the history of Canada.*" This sounds like code for Western knowledge to me. If this government is truly committed to Truth and Reconciliation, as they claim to be, then this would have been the ideal place to make that commitment, to demonstrate that Indigenous Knowledge Systems have a place in Alberta's school curricula.
7. At the end of the Ministerial Order, the following sentences have been tacked on: "*All students will see themselves, their families, and their communities in the curriculum, with space in the curriculum for the study of local traditions, history, and geography, including Alberta's Francophone history. Students will develop an understanding of and respect for the histories, contributions, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in Alberta and Canada, including Treaty Rights and the importance of reconciliation.*" To call this an improvement from the draft Ministerial Order is an act of charity. The January 29, 2020 draft didn't mention Francophone or Indigenous peoples at all. These sentences are all the Minister of Education could manage this time around.

What else? Well, there is a slight reduction in the focus on "work readiness" compared to the January 29, 2020 draft, although Mr. McBeath's comments about used car salesmen and a family member who was laid off from The Gap at the press conference today belied his true feelings about this (thanks, Grandpa!). His comments about honesty and integrity were insulting to Alberta's youth. See my note above about no such thing as neutrality....

It is shocking that, in the current social environment, that anti-racism and anti-colonialism are not included in the new Ministerial Order. These are concepts that cut across curricular areas and the Minister of Education has failed to show leadership on these issues by omitting them entirely from the new Ministerial Order on Student Learning.

In sum, I used to be very proud of Alberta's Social Studies curriculum, and would refer colleagues from across the country to it as an example of progressive, leading-edge curriculum design (a curriculum that was, by the way, developed between 2005-10, while conservative governments were in power). I fear that will no longer be the case. We don't yet know how the draft curriculum will be revised to align with the new Ministerial Order but if the focus is (and it is) on transmitting a body of knowledge to students, rather than honouring students' prior knowledge and experiences and actively engaging them in their learning, then I fear I will be embarrassed, not proud, of what our curriculum has to offer.