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A Spectrum of Historical Thinking: K–12 History and Social Studies Curricula in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how historical thinking is engaged within K–12 history and social studies curricula in Canada. We conducted a content and critical discourse analysis of curricula at the elementary/middle and secondary school levels for each of Canada's 10 provinces. The findings reveal that while historical thinking—as conceptualized by history education scholar Peter Seixas—is present in history and social studies curricula across most provinces, the degree and nature of this engagement varies. We suggest that the ways in which historical thinking concepts are taken up in curricula may be best represented by a spectrum, which ranges from "established" concepts to "selective interpretation" and, finally, to "limited presence." The study concludes by calling for jurisdictions across Canada to take up historical thinking in a more robust way, in an effort to support meaningful inquiry within history teaching and learning.

Keywords*:* historical thinking, social studies education, history education, curriculum analysis

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude a pour objectif d'examiner comment la réflexion historique est intégrée dans les programmes d'histoire et de sciences sociales de la maternelle à la 12e année, au Canada. Nous avons mené une analyse de contenu et une analyse critique du discours des programmes scolaires des niveaux primaire/intermédiaire et

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secondaire pour chacune des dix provinces canadiennes. Les résultats révèlent que, bien que la pensée historique — telle que conceptualisée par Peter Seixas, spécialiste de l'enseignement de l'histoire — soit présente dans les programmes d'histoire et de sciences sociales de la plupart des provinces, le degré et la nature de cette intégration varient. Nous suggérons que les différentes manières dont les concepts de pensée historique sont abordés dans les programmes pourraient être mieux représentées par un spectre, lequel irait des concepts « établis », à l'« interprétation sélective », pour finir par une « présence limitée ». L'étude conclut en appelant les autorités éducatives de tout le Canada à intégrer la pensée historique de manière plus rigoureuse, afin de favoriser une réflexion critique significative dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'histoire.

Mots-clés *:* pensée historique, enseignement des sciences sociales, enseignement de l'histoire, analyse des programmes scolaires

INTRODUCTION

For over two decades, scholars in Canada have indicated that a historical thinking model, as conceptualized by history education scholar Peter Seixas (1996, 2006, 2009, 2017; see also The Historical Thinking Project, 2006; Seixas & Morton, 2013), has been remarkably influential on Canadian K–12 history and social studies curricula. In fact, this model has been taken up in curricula across most of Canada's provinces and territories (Clark, 2018, 2019, 2024; Gibson et al., 2025; Historica Canada, 2021; Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Seixas, 2017).[1] It has been influential in moving history education away from an emphasis on the acquisition of immutable historical facts about key people and events in history (a grand narrative approach) to a view that it is important to understand "how historians transform the past into history…to begin constructing history themselves" (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 3). The historical thinking framework is based on two key ideas. The first is that history and the past are different. The past is everything that has happened, most of which will never be recorded. History is what historians have selected to record (and have evidence to support) from everything that has happened. The second point is that history is based on interpretation of available evidence, keeping in mind that historical accounts are not immutable. Rather, they are dependent on the individual historian's own values, priorities, and interests, as well as extant evidence.

Although it is evident that historical thinking is an element of most history and social studies curricula in Canada, there has been a lack of attention to how these curricula explain or apply the historical thinking concepts. This study took on that task, completing a more in-depth analysis of history and social studies curriculum documents than has ever been conducted in Canada, to our knowledge. The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive commentary on the state of historical thinking in K–12 history and social studies curricula across Canada's provinces and, in turn, identify areas for growth and refinement in future curricula. We asked: To what extent are historical thinking concepts engaged in history and social studies curricula across Canada and what is the nature of that engagement? Our findings reveal that while historical thinking concepts are present in most provincial history and social studies curricula, the degree and nature of this engagement varies.

1 There is no national curriculum in Canada because education is a provincial/territorial responsibility. Most jurisdictions have a social studies rather than a history curriculum at most grade levels. Social studies is an interdisciplinary subject comprised of history, geography, civics, and other social sciences.

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We begin by describing the genesis of the historical thinking approach adopted in Canada and follow this with a discussion of the theoretical framework that guided this study and the methodological approaches we used for analyzing the curricula. In presenting the findings, we highlight how historical thinking is conceptualized within provincial history curricula. We suggest that the ways in which historical thinking concepts are taken up in curricula may be best represented by a spectrum, which ranges from "established" concepts to "selective interpretation" and, finally, to "limited presence." Based on these findings, we call upon all provinces to engage historical thinking more comprehensively in order to support history learning that involves students in meaningful inquiry. We conclude by offering suggestions for approaching historical thinking within future curricula, including explicit and clear discussions of historical thinking, improved pedagogical supports, and increased communication across jurisdictions.

GENESIS OF HISTORICAL THINKING IN CANADA

In Canada, historical thinking has deep roots in the empirical work of researchers in England and the United States (Gibson et al., 2025; Lévesque & Clark, 2018). The Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA) project in England, which examined students' use of second-order concepts such as evidence, accounts, cause, and empathy (Lee, 2014; Lee & Ashby, 2000), was particularly influential. These concepts were not about content (though they require content to function), but they were also not intended to be confused with skills because, unlike skills, they have "value in themselves independent of knowledge" (Ashby & Edwards, 2010, p. 34). Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (2013) asserted that "the six historical thinking concepts make no sense at all without the material, the topics, the substance, or what is often referred to as the 'content' of history" (p. 4). The work in England represented a significant shift to history as discipline, rather than merely a set of facts to be taught in support of a national narrative.

Relevant work in the United States has two foci. The first is the disciplinary literacy approach stemming from the work of the American psychologist Jerome Bruner. Bruner (1960) advocated for students to learn the structure of the disciplines—or, in other words, their key concepts and the methods of inquiry employed by mature investigators. In the case of history, students were intended to become mini-historians, examining primary sources and constructing their own narratives. This work was taken up by historians in Canada in the 1960s (Bliss, 1966; Sutherland & Deyell, 1966) with teaching resources containing excerpts from primary documents. This thinking provided a basis for Seixas's work, but The Historical Thinking Project did not advocate for Bruner's goal of producing mini-historians. Rather, the goal is to "provide them [students] with sophisticated tools and understandings that they can use to make sense of the historical narratives, opinions, and arguments they will encounter in their daily lives" (Gibson, 2020, p. 75).

The second area of influential work in the United States involves research by Stanford educational and cognitive psychologist Sam Wineburg and colleagues (2013). Their "Reading Like a Historian" approach highlights three historical thinking heuristics in relation to primary source evidence: (1) sourcing—considering source type, (sub)text, and authorship; (2) contextualization—situating a source in time and place; and (3) corroboration—considering the source in relation to other pertinent sources to increase confidence in the source's accuracy. While there are other international influences in shaping approaches to history education, this work on historical thinking in the United States and England was the most influential on Peter Seixas as he conceptualized and refined his own historical thinking framework in the Canadian context (The Historical Thinking Project, 2006; Seixas, 1996, 2006, 2009, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013), which we now review in more depth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although there is no widely agreed upon definition for historical thinking, Peter Seixas (e.g., 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013) offered a conceptual framework of historical thinking, informed by his work with history educators in Canada. This framework consists of six concepts: historical significance, evidence, continuity and

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change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives[2], and the ethical dimension.

Historical significance considers which events, people, and developments from the past should be studied and remembered (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Significance depends on many factors or criteria, including the purpose of the inquiry and the perspectives of those making judgements about significance. Seixas (2017) contended that historical significance is dependent upon the ability to link the person or event to a larger narrative and it often varies over time.

Evidence focuses on the analysis of primary sources to (de)construct historical interpretations (Seixas & Morton, 2013). It is concerned with how we can use the traces (i.e., the leftovers) of the past to support claims about what happened. Evidence exists in a context—we need to learn something about the place in which the source existed by asking questions of the evidence, which often arise from broader contemporary concerns (Seixas, 2017).

Continuity and change examines how aspects of the past are similar and different over time, and how historical changes are interwoven with continuities (Seixas & Morton, 2013). According to Seixas (2017), "The puzzle is to figure out how much of each there was, for whom, in any particular period in the past" (p. 600). This can extend from continuities and changes across historical time periods or between the past and present. Continuity and change can have both positive and negative consequences.

Cause and consequence addresses who and what influenced historical events, and the effects of those events (Seixas & Morton, 2013). It involves understanding the layers of cause (including human agency) that led to a particular event, and the consequences that rippled out afterwards. Seixas noted that, "Explaining 'causes'...must include both the structures and conditions which were inherited from the past, and the freedom and choice which were at least apparently available in any historical moment" (2017, p. 600)—historical events and circumstances were not inevitable.

Historical perspectives involves viewing the past through the social, intellectual, emotional, and ethical lenses of the time (Seixas, 2006). It is concerned with attempting to understand the beliefs, values, motivations, and practices in the past, which are often different from our own in the present. Part of the challenge is navigating the problem of presentism, which involves imposing present-day ideas and perspectives on the past (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

The ethical dimension requires examining past actions in light of historical and contemporary considerations about the appropriate treatment of others (Seixas & Morton, 2013). It focuses on forming judgements about historical actors whose circumstances are different than ours, considering when and how crimes and sacrifices of the past bear consequences for today, and making decisions about the obligations we have today to respond to these consequences (Seixas, 2017). Therefore, ethical judgements require sensitivity to both historical and contemporary standards.

This historical thinking framework has faced a number of critiques, which may be divided into four categories: disciplinary, epistemological, decolonial, and political (Gibson et al., 2025). Disciplinary critiques question whether connections are made between historical understandings and civic competence (e.g., Edling et al., 2025). Epistemological critiques (e.g., Reeploeg, 2023) are concerned with "hegemonic assumptions about the universal applicability of Western historical epistemologies and disciplinary norms" (Gibson et al., 2025, p. 2). Decolonial critiques address insufficient attention to Indigenous worldviews within historical thinking (e.g., Marker, 2011; McGregor, 2017). Political critiques claim that historical thinking privileges white male experiences (e.g., Dozono, 2022; Evers et al., 2025) and that insufficient attention is paid to the affective dimensions of learning

2 In some cases, Seixas used multiple terms to describe the same concept over time. For example, "historical perspective" (Seixas, 2006) and "historical perspectives" (Seixas & Morton, 2013) later appeared as "historical perspective-taking" (Seixas, 2017). Additionally, "primary source evidence" (Seixas, 2006; Seixas, 2017) was also referred to simply as "evidence" (Seixas & Morton, 2013). For this study, we use the terminology set forth in the model of historical thinking that was operationalized for the classroom (see Seixas & Morton, 2013).

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(e.g., Gaddis, 2002; Karn, 2024). We note the importance of these critiques and engage with their possibilities for informing curriculum redesign in other recent publications (Clark, 2024; Karn et al., 2024). However, the focus of this article is to shed light on how the historical thinking concepts, as developed by Seixas, have been taken up in curricula across Canada in their present form.

METHODOLOGY

Over a span of almost two years (2021 to 2023), the Curriculum and Resources Cluster of the SSHRC Partnership Grant project, Thinking Historically for Canada's Future, conducted a study of history curricula in Canada. Although there have been other curriculum-based studies of history and social studies conducted within Canada in recent years (e.g., Broom, 2015; Brunet & Gani, 2020; Éthier & Lefrançois, 2012; Godlewska et al., 2017; Lambert, 2018; Miles, 2021; Pashby et al., 2014; Rogers, 2011; Tarasiuk, 2023; Thompson, 2004), these have often been limited in scope, focusing on one province or a single document/grade. Our study involved an analysis of curricula for two grades in each of Canada's 13 provinces and territories (29 curricula total).[3] We selected mandatory curricula that most directly relate to Canadian history (i.e., the greatest amount of content) from both the elementary/middle and secondary school levels for each jurisdiction.[4] Given that education is a provincial/territorial responsibility, the curriculum documents were developed within each jurisdiction and reflect the local priorities and approaches in that region.

We note that curricula in Canada differ because education has been a provincial and territorial responsibility since the British North America Act (now known as the Constitution Act) of 1867. There have been efforts over time to collaborate in the development of regional curricula, for example, the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (2002) involving the four Western provinces and the three territories, and Atlantic region curricula (Departments of Education, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, 1999) involving the four Atlantic provinces. Such collaborative efforts have been met with varied success, particularly when it comes to social studies curricula. For instance, the four Western provinces and territories are fundamentally disparate in terms of their geographic landscapes, economic priorities, political climates, and cultural heritage, which raises challenges for developing common social studies curricula (Richardson, 2002).

For the purposes of this article, we have excluded findings from the northern territories curricula because they are significantly different from the provinces. These curriculum documents are developed in close consultation with Elders and other Indigenous community members and thus are far more attentive to Indigenous knowledges than the historical thinking concepts (McGregor & McGregor, 2017). Project team members are in the process of publishing findings from their analysis of the unique features of the northern territories' curricula (McGregor & Dressler, 2026). The present article, therefore, offers results from an analysis of history curricula implemented in Canada's 10 provinces (see Table 1).

We note that we excluded two provincial curriculum documents, Nova Scotia's Grade 11 history curriculum (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2002) and Saskatchewan's Grade 12 social studies curriculum (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1997)[5] because they were authorized prior to 2006. That year marks the point at which Seixas's model began to be influential in Canada. By that time, he was working closely with history educators and researchers as part of the project that would later become known as The Historical Thinking Project. Indeed, our

3 In New Brunswick, two francophone and two anglophone documents were analyzed since the province has separate language programs with different curricula. In Quebec, the troisième et quatrième secondaire curricula are in one document. In the case of Yukon and Nunavut, three documents were analyzed for each.

4 Our criteria resulted in curriculum selections at the elementary/middle level being from Grade 4 and higher.

5 Nova Scotia has since removed the 2002 curriculum document from its website.

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study shows that, as early as 2006, some Canadian jurisdictions (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006) began to be influenced by this conceptual framework. Given that the Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan curriculum documents were older than 2006, it was unreasonable to expect that these documents would be attentive to historical thinking concepts. Even with these omissions, such a broadly based and in-depth review of history education curricula in Canada is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind.

Table 1
List of Provincial Curriculum Documents Analyzed.

Province	Grade	Document Title	Date
Alberta	5	*Grade 5: Canada: The land, histories and stories*	2007
Alberta	11	*Social studies 20-1: Perspectives on nationalism*	2007
British Columbia	4	*Social studies 4: First Peoples and European contact*	2016
British Columbia	10	*Social studies 10 – Canada and the world: 1914 to the present*	2018
Manitoba	6	*Grade 6 social studies Canada: A country of change (1867 to present)*: *A foundation for implementation*	2006
Manitoba	11	*Grade 11 history of Canada: A foundation for implementation*	2014
New Brunswick	9	*Canadian identities: Social studies 9*	2019
New Brunswick	12	*Canadian history 120*	2021
New Brunswick	6	*Programme d'études: Sciences humaines - 6e année*	2003
New Brunswick	11	*Programme d'études: Histoire du Monde 42211/42212; Histoire du Canada 42311/42312; Histoire de l'Acadie 42411*	2006
Newfoundland and Labrador	5	*Social studies grade 5: Interim edition*	2012
Newfoundland and Labrador	9	*Social studies grade 9: Interim edition*	2011
Nova Scotia	8	*Social studies 8: Renewed curriculum guide*	2020
Nova Scotia	11	*Canadian history 11: Guide*	2002
Ontario	8	*The Ontario curriculum: Social studies grades 1 to 6, history and geography grades 7 and 8*	2018
Ontario	10	*The Ontario curriculum grades 9 and 10: Canadian and world studies*	2018
Prince Edward Island	8	*Social studies: Grade 8 Canadian identity*	2006
Prince Edward Island	12	*Social studies: History 621A Canadian history*	2010
Quebec	11 & 12 (3e & 4e)	*Histoire du Québec et du Canada: Troisième et quatrième secondaire*	2017
Saskatchewan	5	*Social studies 5*	2010
Saskatchewan	12	*Social studies 30: Canadian studies*	1997

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Our study employed a content and critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology (Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Lazar, 2007). Our content analysis included a quantitative accounting of the number of pages or passages on a subject and a qualitative evaluation of how a particular subject matter was represented, in order to assess the relative emphasis of our selected themes and the nature of their treatment (Foster & Burgess, 2013). Our critical discourse analysis included a quantitative analysis of the frequency of keywords (i.e., the six historical thinking concepts and associated words, such as continuity and change, and progress and decline) and a qualitative assessment of that "language in use" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 1) to make visible the opaque ideological and regulatory elements of history curricula language that construct expectations for learning (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011). The boundaries between content and CDA analysis are porous, as both are attentive to representation, themes, and language, especially when using both quantitative and qualitative methods for each. That said, content analysis enabled us to see what was or was not present in the curricula, while CDA encouraged us to look at how concepts were used and the attributed meanings of such language in the documents. For example, our content analysis demonstrated that in relation to the historical thinking concept of continuity and change, words related to continuity were either missing or far outweighed by change. In concert, our CDA analysis demonstrated that the concept of change was often paired with themes of technological innovation or the advancement of human rights. Both these omissions and language pairings suggest that history curricula are focused on progress narratives of the Canadian nation state.

Teams of research assistants (RAs) examined the full curriculum document with content and CDA analyses in hand to further answer thematic questions (e.g., How does the curriculum explain and/or apply historical thinking? How does the curriculum explain and/or apply the concept of the ethical dimension? Is the ethical dimension made explicit, or is it simply assumed?). To assess the validity and completeness of each analysis, the teams conducted an inter-rater reliability check, which involved having another analyst review, comment on, and add to the findings.

Once all the curriculum documents were analyzed, the data were coded using NVivo to group concepts across all documents. While the findings provided a breadth of information about historical thinking, what emerged from the data were clear strengths and limitations in the curricula. From that initial coding, we conducted a secondary, inductive analysis using NVivo that grouped data related to the historical thinking concepts into three categories: "established"—concepts that are prominent and align with the framework; "selective interpretation"—concepts with key aspects that could be more fully developed; and "limited presence"—concepts that were implicit or completely absent.

FINDINGS

As our analysis of history and social studies curricula was framed around understanding how historical thinking is conceptualized generally, in addition to how the various concepts of the framework are engaged, we report our findings around these two aspects. We begin by highlighting general conceptions of historical thinking within provincial history curricula, which are typically presented in relation to inquiry and critical thinking, historical methods, and citizenship education. Then, we move to discussing the findings around the six historical thinking concepts, which we place along a spectrum representing the extent to which they are engaged within curricula.

General Conceptions of Historical Thinking

In the majority of provinces, historical thinking approaches to history education are present in curricula, even if they may not always be explicit. However, we found that most documents do not provide a clear definition of historical thinking, or a rationale for its pedagogical significance in history and social studies education. In some cases, despite the curricula being developed during a time when historical thinking approaches were becoming more prevalent in Canada (Clark, 2019), historical thin-

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king is completely absent or infrequently used to guide approaches to learning (for example, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). For those provincial history curricula that do centre historical thinking approaches, we identified three main ways in which historical thinking is conceptualized: (1) as part of broader inquiry and critical thinking approaches, (2) as derived from disciplinary methods, and (3) as important for developing qualities of good citizenship.

In Canada, most jurisdictions teach the subject of social studies at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels. We found that many documents emphasize critical thinking and inquiry skills and processes, broadly speaking, as they apply to all disciplines that make up social studies, including history (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, 2018; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006, 2010). For example, in Prince Edward Island's Grade 8 and Grade 12 curricula (Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006, 2010) historical thinking concepts are not prominent. There is a significant emphasis on the importance of history for addressing contemporary social problems through inquiry and critical thinking. In other cases, such as British Columbia's Grade 4 and Grade 10 curricula (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, 2018), inquiry processes and skills are discussed alongside historical thinking concepts.

In addition, historical thinking is often positioned as one of many disciplinary thinking competencies, alongside geographical thinking, civic thinking, and others. Within the documents that feature historical thinking, this approach to history education is described as closely tied to methods derived from the discipline of history. According to curricula, by engaging with various concepts, or ways of thinking about the past, students can develop their historical understanding. For instance, Newfoundland and Labrador's Grade 9 curriculum (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011) draws heavily from Peter Seixas's conceptualization of historical thinking and even cites some of this research in the appendix. Perhaps the strictest adherence to disciplinary methods comes from the francophone curriculum documents in Quebec (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017) and New Brunswick (Nouveau Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation, 2006). In the Quebec troisième et quatrième secondaire document (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017), the term "historical thinking" is not used, but an overall goal is for students to gain "a set of intellectual skills that allow them to distance themselves from the past and to use a method of critical analysis, the historical method" (p. 5). Similarly, in New Brunswick's Grade 11 francophone curriculum (Nouveau Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation, 2006), the term "méthode historique" is used when referring to students evaluating, comparing, analyzing, and interpreting primary and secondary source information and communicating their findings accurately and efficiently.

Lastly, we found that historical thinking is often connected to the development of well-informed, active citizens. The skills and competencies students gain as a result of engaging with various concepts (e.g., evidence, perspectives) are positioned as useful for the present and future, as students address contemporary social problems. For example, Alberta's Grade 5 and Grade 11 curricula (Alberta Education, 2007a, 2007b) emphasize the importance of historical thinking for fostering citizens who make informed judgements and inquire into new perspectives. As the Grade 5 document states, "Historical thinking…helps students become well-informed citizens who approach issues with an inquiring mind and exercise sound judgement when presented with new information or a perspective different from their own" (Alberta Education, 2007a, p. 9). In the case of Manitoba's Grade 7 curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006), particular emphasis is placed on the connection between historical perspective-taking and citizenship: "As they reflect upon diverse perspectives, personal narratives, parallel accounts, and oral and social histories, students develop the historical understanding that provides a foundation for active democratic citizenship" (p. 10).

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Engaging the Historical Thinking Concepts

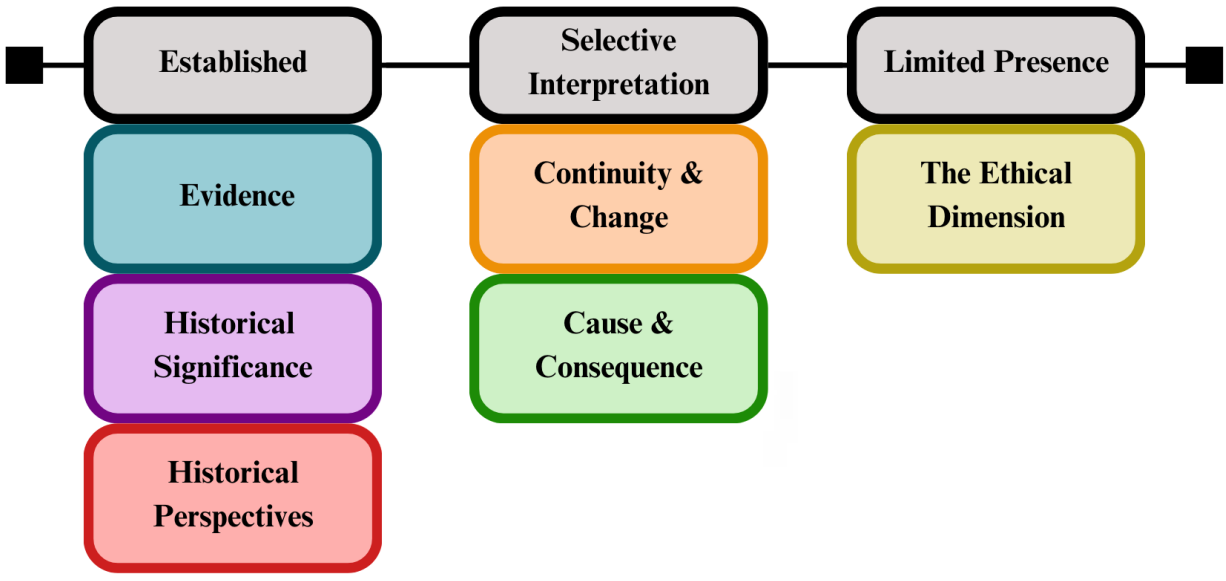
Beyond these general findings, we identify a spectrum of ways in which historical thinking concepts are represented in history and social studies curricula across Canada (see Figure 1). First, we examine the "established" concepts, or those that are prominent across the provincial curricula and align with the framework. Second, we explore the "selective interpretation" of some concepts with key aspects that could be more fully developed within curricula. And finally, we consider those concepts with "limited presence" in the documents, either because they were implicit or completely absent.

Established. Three of the six historical thinking concepts are established across most curriculum documents, in that they were explicitly discussed and clearly defined. Those concepts are evidence, historical significance, and historical perspectives.

Evidence is a central concept in most of the curriculum documents. In fact, it is included even when the historical thinking framework is absent or not well-developed—it can stand on its own. In the Alberta Grade 5 (Alberta Education, 2007a) curriculum, students are expected to consider evidence from multiple perspectives and to situate their findings within the historical context. The Manitoba Grade 11 curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014) points out that primary sources must be examined in their historical contexts to derive inferences and fully understand events. In Saskatchewan's Grade 5 curriculum (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010), the use of evidence is discussed in relation to critical thinking, which "involves the use of criteria and evidence to make reasoned judgments" (p. 4). The Quebec troisième et quatrième secondaire curricula (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017) outline the types of primary source evidence that may be available to students. They provide a series of questions to ask when analyzing sources and indicate that the process is not linear. We note, however, that some processes involved in the interpretation of primary sources, including sourcing and corroborating, could be further developed in the curricula.

Historical significance is also a central concept in most of the curricula. This concept is interpreted in two ways. First, it appears simply as what is important for students to learn, in a pre-determined way (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). The second, and more common, approach is to portray significance as something that varies according

Figure 1
A Spectrum of Historical Thinking



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to both individuals and various groups and depends upon certain criteria (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a). For instance, historical significance is a core concept in Ontario's Grade 10 history curriculum. Using criteria that are provided, students are required to "determine the importance of (an issue, event, development, person, place, interaction, etc.) in the past" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 104). Significance is determined by the impact on a group of people, whether its effects are long-lasting, and its relevance in the present. Importantly, students are also expected to be aware that what is historically significant for one group may not be for another.

The curricula generally express an openness to *historical perspectives*—that is, consideration for diverse, multiple perspectives and experiences in both the past and present. The curricula are attentive to avoiding presentism when examining different perspectives; in other words, not judging historical actors solely from a contemporary perspective (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, 2018b). In British Columbia's Grade 4 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016) curriculum, students are prompted to "Construct narratives that capture the attitudes, values, and worldviews commonly held by people at different times and places" (p. 1). In doing so, students focus on language and different viewpoints; for example, by comparing the "discovery" and "exploration" of North America from European and First Peoples' perspectives. In Manitoba, the Grade 11 curriculum offers a detailed description of historical perspectives:

> Taking historical perspectives means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past. At any one point, different historical actors may have acted on the basis of conflicting beliefs and ideologies, so understanding diverse perspectives is also a key to historical perspective-taking. (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014, p. 32)

With this definition, the curriculum highlights the complexities involved in taking historical perspectives while emphasizing the importance of considering multiple and diverse perspectives when attempting to understand events and circumstances in the past.

It is fair to say that the historical thinking concepts of evidence, historical significance, and historical perspectives are widely established across provincial curricula. These concepts are the most clearly evident and explicitly defined and engaged throughout the documents. However, other concepts are less well represented.

Selective interpretation. Our analysis identified the selective interpretation of two historical thinking concepts—continuity and change, as well as cause and consequence—when compared with how these concepts were originally defined by Seixas. Overall, these concepts appear frequently across the provincial curriculum documents, but key aspects of the concepts have been omitted entirely or are less frequently engaged.

When analyzing interpretations of *continuity and change*, we found that, across the documents, change is far more prevalent than continuity (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006, 2010). In fact, some curricula simply refer to this historical thinking concept as "change" and omit continuity altogether. A particularly telling example is Prince Edward Island's Grade 8 curriculum (Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006), in which the main history unit is titled "Decades of Change." This document emphasizes historical changes over the course of the 20th century, while mostly ignoring continuities. This document and those cited above for having a similar emphasis on historical change position continuity as less important for understanding the past and drawing comparisons

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between different time periods. Additionally, the emphasis on change over time (e.g., technological innovation, advancement of human rights) contributes to the construction of progress narratives, which we found to be pervasive within provincial curricula (e.g., Alberta Education, 2007a; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019; Nouveau Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation, 2006; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006, 2010; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010).

While discussions of *cause and consequence* were common in the curricula, they rarely featured the notion of agency, which is a key aspect of this concept. In some cases, few historical actors are mentioned by name in the curriculum documents (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2012; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020), thus portraying the idea that history just "happened." For example, Manitoba's Grade 6 curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006) mentions "Canada's" role or impact as a historical actor, rather than naming specific people or groups. On the other hand, in New Brunswick's Grade 9 anglophone curriculum (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019) there are guiding questions about who (i.e., individuals and groups) caused things to happen the way they did. Manitoba's Grade 11 document (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2014) also alludes to agency by including discussions of historical actors who promoted and resisted change. These approaches hint at the idea of historical agency, even if the concept is not directly mentioned.

Limited presence. Across all the documents, the least discussed historical thinking concept is *the ethical dimension*—it does not appear consistently in curricula, and when it does appear, the concept is often only implicit. Within some documents, the ethical dimension is not considered in any meaningful way, aside from brief mentions of students developing a sense of ethics as a result of learning about the past (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017; Nouveau Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation, 2006; Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010;Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). In Ontario's Grade 8 and Grade 10 curricula (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, 2018b), the ethical dimension is the only historical thinking concept that is excluded as a key concept. Rather, it is more implicitly engaged, particularly when prompting students to avoid applying present-day ethics and values to the past. Often these brief or implicit references to the ethical dimension are made in relation to discussions of historical and contemporary issues of fairness, injustice, and wrongdoing.

In other cases, the curriculum engages the ethical dimension more explicitly to highlight the concept's potential to demonstrate for students the relevance of history in the present. For example, Alberta's Grade 11 curriculum (Alberta Education, 2007b) engages students in examining actions taken in the past from both historical and contemporary viewpoints. Students are expected to "engage in problem solving and conflict resolution with an awareness of the ethical consequences of decision making" (p. 2) and become involved in "practical and ethical issues that face their communities and humankind" (p. 1). In British Columbia, a curricular competency for Grade 4 and Grade 10 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, 2018) involves the ethical dimension, as students "make reasoned ethical judgements about actions in the past and present and assess appropriate ways to remember and respond (ethical judgment)" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 1). In each case, however, discussion of the ethical dimension is largely limited to the opening pages of the document.

It is rare for curriculum documents to carry discussions of the ethical dimension through to the specific topics and guiding questions for study. One exception can be found in Manitoba's Grade 6 curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006), in which there are some topics that elicit ethical responses, such as internment in Canada during the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust. Within Nova Scotia's Grade 8 curriculum (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood

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Development, 2020), the ethical dimension is mainly taken up in relation to Indigenous issues and experiences. Some guiding questions include: "What were the moral and ethical issues of assimilation?" (p. 11) and "How can Canadians redress past wrongs?" (p. 29). When applied in this way, the ethical dimension may be included in the curriculum as a way of promoting healing and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. This supports a key aspect of the ethical dimension—making decisions about contemporary obligations to respond to historical injustices. However, aside from these exceptional cases, which may be used as examples for others to follow, most curricula we examined did not engage the ethical dimension of history in a substantial or sustained way.

DISCUSSION

Historical thinking plays an important role within history and social studies curricula across Canada's provinces. While there are frameworks that have been implemented elsewhere (e.g., Lee & Ashby, 2000; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Wineburg et al., 2013), we focus on the framework proposed by Peter Seixas because it continues to garner national resonance. As we acknowledged earlier, the framework has indeed been contested in Canada, particularly for its limited acknowledgement of Indigenous worldviews (Marker, 2011), its emphasis on disciplinary methods rather than the ways that history can be "personal and meaningful to one's life" (Cutrara, 2020, p. 59), and its academic focus that can ignore what historian Gerald Friesen (2011) refers to as the "sense of wonder" (pp. 210–211) that students bring to the study of history. Still, Seixas's historical thinking framework has been taken up by Canadian provincial curricula, albeit each in its own way, as our study has demonstrated.

Our findings show that curricula across Canada's provinces conceptualize historical thinking in a variety of ways: as part of broader discussions of inquiry and critical thinking, as emerging from the methods of the history discipline, and as important for developing informed and active citizens. We note that curricula often draw from a combination of these ways of conceptualizing historical thinking, which illustrates the interconnectedness of these definitions. However, some of these connections—for example, the idea that historical thinking leads to the development of more informed and active citizens—have not been well-documented within empirical research in Canada (Sears, 2014). Emerging research indicates that youth may see a connection. The preliminary results of a National Youth Survey in Canada, conducted by the Thinking Historically for Canada's Future project, reveal that a majority of youth see the value in learning about the past to understand why things are the way they are today (71 percent) and to develop critical thinking skills (62 percent), though fewer are making connections between learning about the past and making change in their communities (55 percent) or seeing themselves as someone who can make change (51 percent; Brown, 2024). We include these findings here to highlight the need to position the results of our curriculum analysis in relation to other studies that represent the voices and perspectives of teachers and students in the classroom.

Our study also found that the way in which the historical thinking concepts are taken up in curricula represents a spectrum, ranging from "established" (those that are prominent and align with Seixas's framework) to "selective interpretation" (those that have aspects which could be more fully developed) to "limited presence" (those that are implicit or absent). Positioning each of the six historical thinking concepts (Seixas, 2006, 2009, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013) along this spectrum aids in identifying areas of strength as well as improvement within curricula across Canada's provinces. While it is difficult to assess the reasoning behind the relative emphasis of each concept within curricula without interviewing those involved in their design, based on research in the field, we may assume that those with a more limited presence (e.g., the ethical dimension) may be avoided due to their perceived political nature (Milligan et al., 2018; see also Pollock, 2017 regarding Ontario's 2013 and 2015 curricula).

The established concepts—evidence, historical significance, historical perspectives—contribute to the overall strengths of historical thinking within curricula. The consistent focus

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on locating sound *evidence* that represents diverse perspectives and interpreting that evidence to construct contextualized understandings about the past, is essential for supporting the development of critical thinking in a time of rampant disinformation (Haydn, 2017). In helping students to recognize that views on what is significant to know about the past vary across individuals and communities, *historical significance* promotes the construction of more diverse stories about the past. This is in line with calls from scholars in Canada to disrupt hegemonic, nation-building historical narratives within history education (Anderson, 2017; Karn et al., 2024; Ng-A-Fook & Milne, 2014). Furthermore, drawing attention to diverse and multiple *historical perspectives* can foster empathy (Karn, 2023) and contribute to a history education that is more attentive to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

As our findings demonstrate, other concepts were not as widely established and were interpreted selectively or were limited in their presence. These concepts should be included more substantially in curricula to enhance teaching and learning history. For example, the concept of *continuity and change* focuses—almost exclusively in some cases—on change. This serves to reinforce Western progress narratives (Lévesque, 2008; Marker, 2011), which our study found are pervasive in history and social studies curricula. A more substantial focus on continuities within curricula can better highlight the continuing impacts of settler colonialism and the longstanding legacies of historical harms. By accounting for both continuities and changes, history curricula can offer more nuanced understandings of the past.

When it comes to *cause and consequence*, the most significant area for improvement relates to historical agency, as our analysis reveals that this concept has largely been overlooked within curricula. This may be a possible consequence of agency being positioned as part of cause and consequence within the Seixas framework (Seixas, 2006, 2009, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013), rather than standing as its own concept as it did in earlier iterations (Seixas, 1996). As a result, in some cases, historical events are represented in curricula as occurring solely due to broader social and political conditions, rather than being attributed to historical actors, and especially those from marginalized groups. The concept of agency may be further expanded, in line with discourse around the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives within history education. For example, Arapaho scholar Michael Marker (2011) called for a recognition of the agency of plants and animals in history, beyond their uses as resources for human exploitation. This is but one way that agency may be brought to the forefront of discussions around cause and consequence in history curricula.

In categorizing *the ethical dimension* as having a "limited presence," we suggest that curricula across Canada's provinces could do more to highlight the significance of this concept for reinforcing history's relevance in the present. Raising ethical questions about the past is essential for informing our values, decisions, and actions in the present and addressing the issues and challenges we face today (Karn et al., 2024). Not only does this involve explicitly engaging the ethical dimension as a key concept (that is clearly defined, and threaded throughout), but it also involves providing more support for teachers on how to approach the ethical dimension so that they are able to openly discuss presentism with their students to help them navigate the tensions between historical and present-day contexts, and sensitivity to both historical and contemporary ethical standards, values, and assumptions (Miles & Gibson, 2022; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Stipp et al., 2017). We hope that changes to provincial curricula will result in moving the ethical dimension further along the spectrum toward becoming well-established.

While we argue that all jurisdictions should engage with historical thinking as a fruitful way to approach history teaching and learning, we are not calling for a national curriculum. We acknowledge that education is a provincial responsibility and that each province should have curricula that reflect its unique characteristics, based on local or regional goals, priorities, and histories. However, we suggest that these goals can still be achieved with curricula that comprehensively engage historical thinking; to do otherwise is to miss rich opportunities for students to engage in meaningful inquiry around issues relevant for today. For example,

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excluding the ethical dimension from Ontario curricula (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, 2018b) may deny students the opportunity to engage with the ethical dilemmas that confounded people in the past and to use those experiences to enrich their understandings of the decisions we face today. In the case of Manitoba (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006), failing to clearly and consistently attribute historical events and circumstances to the decisions and actions of real people ignores their agency in bringing about change—and, in so doing, limits possibilities for learners to consider their own agency in shaping the present and future.

We also acknowledge that the historical thinking concepts will continue to change and expand over time. Peter Seixas did not intend that the six concepts in his framework be static, and in fact, he altered them over the years (e.g., Seixas, 1996, 2006, 2017). Currently, the wider Thinking Historically for Canada's Future project is re-examining the six concepts, informed by the aforementioned critiques in Canada and abroad, with the purpose of making them more responsive to the needs and interests of contemporary learners. We await the results of this work with eager interest, while noting that this article deals with the historical thinking framework in its current iteration. We cannot predict how historical thinking will evolve as time goes on, but hope that future curricula will be revised to align with such changes.

CONCLUSION

While some jurisdictions in Canada are in the process of updating their history and social studies curricula—a process that takes time for development and implementation in classrooms—we stress the need for these documents to be regularly updated, particularly those we found to be lacking in their historical thinking approaches. We call for a more fulsome inclusion of historical thinking across all jurisdictions to support inquiry-based approaches to learning that engage students in actively constructing history and considering its meaning in the present and future. This involves the explicit use of the term "historical thinking" within curricula, providing clear and accessible definitions of related concepts, and including a rationale for this approach to teaching and learning history (e.g., sustaining engagement, improving understanding).

Across most documents, we recommend embedding increased pedagogical supports—while also continuing to provide space for teachers' professional judgement, choice, and creativity. Some curriculum documents offer examples of this balance. For instance, we found Manitoba's Grade 6 curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006) to be particularly useful in offering pedagogical support for teachers, through the inclusion of suggested activities and assessment tools. Likewise, Newfoundland's Grade 5 curriculum (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2012) includes activity sheets, case study activities, and primary source suggestions within an appendix. When it comes to pedagogical support, this document is exemplary because it is detailed (186 pages in length), yet well-organized and accessible for educators. We also point to Ontario's Grade 8 and Grade 10 curricula (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, 2018b) as exemplars because they offer sample questions that teachers might pose to generate rich conversations among their students.

To support efforts for improving how historical thinking is taken up by curricula, we suggest that more meaningful and sustained communication across provinces is needed. A starting point is for all provinces to be aware of our study's findings relative to one another, in an effort to illustrate ways of enriching their own approaches to historical thinking. These efforts can be further supported through national organizations and professional development opportunities that bring together history educators, researchers, and curriculum developers. For example, the Social Studies Educators Network of Canada (SSENC) is an organization that seeks to "advocate and build capacity for high-quality social studies education by facilitating networking among educators and engaging with partners across Canada." [6] Another venue for communication across jurisdictions is the Virtual Historical Thinking Institute. These are online professional development sessions for

6 www.ssencressc.ca

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history educators, facilitated by leading researchers in partnership with Canada's History.[7]

Curriculum policy documents are central to classroom instruction. They lie behind the day-to-day classroom experience for students, informing the resources teachers select, the activities in which students engage, and the outcomes by which their progress is assessed. It is, therefore, imperative that careful attention be paid to how curricula represent what and how students should engage with history.

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