

# First Nations representation in the grade 5 Ontario social studies curriculum

Kara DaSilva<sup>1</sup>, Lorna McLean<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

## Abstract

The government of Ontario's grade 5 social studies curriculum places an emphasis on First Nations and the relationships and interactions amongst various Canadian communities. Walt Werner's article "Reading Authorship into Texts" encourages readers to be critical of texts and to question information that is produced (2000). Using four of Walt Werner's eight concepts for interpreting authorship of texts, *representation, gaze, voice* and *absence*, I examined how the history of Canada's First Nations are portrayed in the 2013 grade 5 social studies curriculum and aimed to expose any gaps that I had found. After analyzing the contrasts between the past (Heritage and Identity) and present (People and Environments), in relation to the representation of First Nations in the grade 5 curriculum, it is clear that there is a stereotype depicted in both sections but that the past outweighs the present.

**Research Question:** How are First Nations represented in the grade 5 Ontario social studies curriculum, in particular, in the past versus the present?

*"We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then our identity . . . is fragmented. . . . Such a self lacks access both to itself and to the world. . . . Its sense of history, gender and politics is incomplete and distorted."*

(Tupper and Cappello, 2008, p. 18)

## Background

The *Aboriginal Perspectives Teacher's Toolkit* is a "new collection of electronic resources from the Ministry of Education to help elementary and secondary teachers bring aboriginal perspectives into their classrooms" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Several themes presented in the handbook are the same themes that appeared in my findings of the 2013 Ontario curriculum. Some examples of these are, the cultures and interactions of New France, and the Aboriginal and Treaty Rights. The First Nations political structure is questioned, leaving them in a minority position within the treaties. The power struggle greatly affects the perception and representation of the groups based on the original motives of the European settlers in relation to the fur trade.

Jennifer Tupper and Michael Cappello's *Teaching Treaties as (Un)Usual Narratives: Disrupting the Curricular Commonsense* (2008) supported the analysis of the historical and contemporary importance of treaties. Differing approaches exist and relationships exist between the government of Canada and First Nations people as presented through the different treaties. Tupper and Cappello emphasize the importance of providing students with all the facts and allowing them to come to their own conclusions after creating links to personal experiences. In addition, the historical events as recorded in the current Ontario grade 5 social studies curriculum are generally produced from the colonizer's perspective, which creates an unrealistic and biased portrayal of First Nations.

In terms of social context Werner wants his readers to analyze what is suggested about the broader social values and assumptions of those being portrayed, and to question, dispute, or even reject what they read. Four of the eight categories are of primary concern in regards to the 2013 Ontario curriculum. These include:

- 1. Representation:** What we give meaning to and how we conceptualize and place value on them. Representations are selective; they rest on implied values and unstated preconceptions.
- 2. Gaze:** How the reader is positioned. The implied attitude, value stance, or power relationship towards the people, place or event depicted: colonial gaze.
- 3. Absences:** What is said and not said. For my analysis, I linked absences with gaze because it was difficult to create concrete gaps without using the gaze to determine the position of the reader.
- 4. Voice:** Who speaks About/ For/ With/ To and Whom. A relevant focus for reading these representations is to recognize whose voice is speaking, when, and in what way (2000).

## Methodology

As a way of answering my primary research question, I have chosen to analyze the 2013 Ontario social studies curriculum using four out of the eight analytical criteria as suggested by Werner. I began by coding the data found within the curriculum (both the past *Heritage and Identity* and present *People and Environments*) using the concepts of social studies thinking, according to keywords and/ or themes that were linked to Werner's criteria. Each subsection (A2, A3, etc.) in the *inquiry* and *understanding context* sections were added to one of Werner's categories (*representation, gaze/ absence* and *voice*).

Several of these subsections encompassed more than one of Werner's analytic criteria, therefore I selected the category that best encompassed the Ontario curriculum expectations. Lastly, I compared the past and present sections of the curriculum in attempt to differentiate or compare the portrayal of First Nations based on how they were portrayed and how they are presently being represented in the 2013 Ontario curriculum.

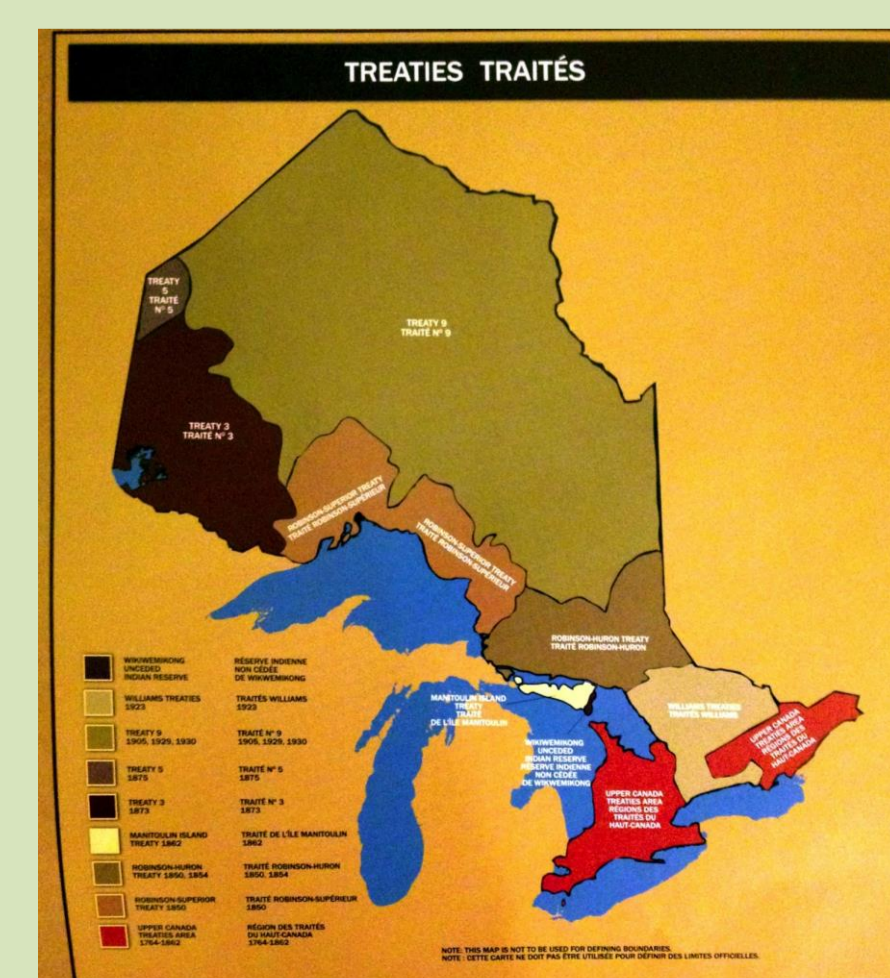
## Results

PAST				
A) Heritage and Identity: <i>First Nations and Europeans in New France and Early Canada</i>				
		Representation	Gaze/ Absence	Voice
A2: Inquiry: Perspective Interrelationship	A2.1	X	X	X
	A2.2	X	X	X
	A2.3		X	X
	A2.4		X	X
	A2.5	X	X	X
	A2.6			X
A3: Understanding Context: Significance Interrelationships	A3.1	X		X
	A3.2	X	X	X
	A3.3	X	X	X
	A3.4	X	X	X
	A3.5	X	X	X
	A3.6	X	X	X
	A3.7	X	X	X

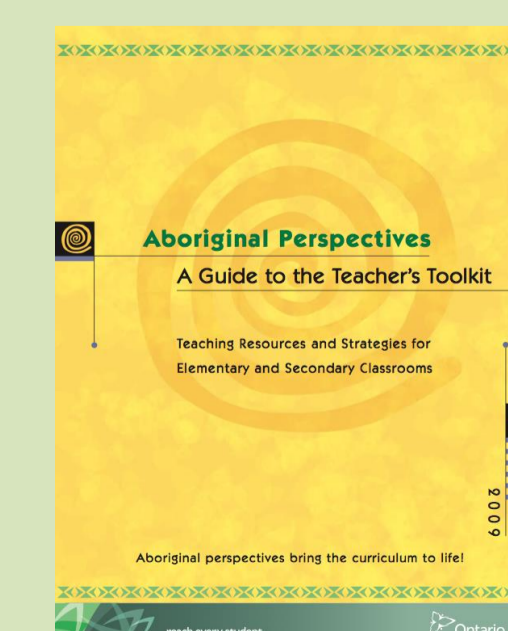
**Figure 1: A visual representation of Werner's themes as applied to the 2013 grade 5 Ontario social studies curriculum of the past.** First Nations were an important part of the foundation of New France and the settlement of the Europeans ; this is made clear by the equal distribution of 'X's' in Werner's four categories.

PRESENT				
B) People and Environments: <i>The Goal of Government and Responsible Citizenship</i>				
		Representation	Gaze/ Absence	Voice
B2: Inquiry: Perspective	B2.1	X	X	X
	B2.2		X	X
	B2.3		X	
	B2.4			
	B2.5			
	B2.6	X		
B3: Understanding Context: Significance	B3.1	X	X	X
	B3.2	X	X	X
	B3.3		X	
	B3.4			
	B3.5			
	B3.6	X	X	X
	B3.7	X		

**Figure 2: A visual representation of Werner's themes as applied to the 2013 grade 5 Ontario social studies curriculum of the present.** There are very few references to the influence of First Nations in the curriculum, which is made clear in the empty spaces in Werner's categories.



**Figure 3: The division of treaties across Ontario.** Taken from The Government of Ontario website 2013.



**Figure 4: Aboriginal Perspectives Toolkit**  
Source: Ontario Ministry of Education (2009)

## Discussion

In comparing both the past and the present sections of the Ontario Grade 5 social studies curriculums, First Nations are portrayed as people who are highly involved in the arts and who have very little political influence in contrast to the Europeans. There are two main differences found between the past and the present as described below.

### A) Past- Heritage and Identity: *First Nations and Europeans in New France and Early Canada*

The opposing perspectives of the interrelations make it easy to draw distinct line between the two groups.

- Europeans were characterized as being a powerful and well-educated
  - Artefacts are symbolic of formal education: maps and journals
  - Official governmental structure
- First Nations are described as being weak and unknowledgeable
  - Artefacts are symbolic of informal education: arts and crafts
  - Free thinkers, highly involved in the arts and absent from any type of structured government
  - Suppression and misunderstanding from early interactions speaks to the later generations being viewed as inferior

### Present: B) People and Environments: *The Goal of Government and Responsible Citizenship*

- Very little information to support the contributions of First Nations
- The participation and role of First Nations in Canada's governmental structure and Canadian citizenship is underrepresented
- No mention of the political relationship between the Canadian government and First Nations reserves and to what extent First Nations are given full rights to the treaties

## Conclusion

The objective of the 2013 Ontario social studies curriculum is to engage students to be active citizens and to have a thorough knowledge of the selected material, however there is a lack of accuracy in the representation of First Nations and their relations with the Europeans. Both students and teachers should be made aware of these misrepresentations. Firstly, teachers are responsible for facilitating instruction and encouraging the understanding of concepts in realistic and engaging ways. Moreover, in using a variety of pedagogical resources and approaches, teachers are able to shed light on a variety of perspectives using a change in voice and gaze. Secondly, by exposing the gaps in the research, teachers are able to encourage students to create their own narratives based on their acquired knowledge.

After analyzing the contrasts between the past and present in relation to the representation of First Nations in the Grade 5 Ontario social studies curriculum, it is clear that there is a stereotype depicted in both sections; there is more information provided in the past (Heritage and Identity) rather than the present (People and Environments). Werner's themes helped expose the lack of information that is provided; this could allow for further research to be conducted on First Nations representation in the Ontario curriculum.

### Acknowledgements

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### Reference List

Available upon request.