History Education Research Journal

History Education Research Journal

UCLPRESS

Special issue: ***Democratic Resilience and Regression in History Education since 1945***

Research article

Never the two shall meet? Connecting historical and democratic consciousness in Canadian K-12 history textbooks

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Submission date: 3 March 2025; Acceptance date: 23 August 2025; Publication date: 29 October 2025

How to cite
Karn, S., Llewellyn, K. R. and Clark, P. (2025). Never the two shall meet? Connecting historical and democratic consciousness in Canadian K-12 history textbooks. *History Education Research Journal*, 22(*1*), 24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.22.1.24.

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Abstract

This article explores the intersections of historical and democratic consciousness in education, drawing on data from a study of history textbooks in Canada. We conducted a holistic analysis of 18 history textbooks published between 1994 and 2021, authorised for use at the elementary/middle school or secondary level in each provincial jurisdiction within Canada. The findings demonstrate that while many textbooks make assumptions that knowing more about the past leads to the creation of better citizens, historical and democratic consciousness are not fully developed and are largely disconnected from

one another. We also found significant differences in the presence and articulation of historical and democratic consciousness between the oldest and more recently published textbooks, with more recent textbooks engaging with history in ways that promote the development of both historical and democratic consciousness. If we are to support students in becoming historically informed civic leaders in the present and into the future, we argue that all history textbooks authorised for use in Canada must pay greater attention to the connections between historical and democratic consciousness.

Keywords democratic consciousness; historical consciousness; history education; social studies; K-12 education; textbook analysis; Canada

Introduction

Over a decade ago, Canadian education scholar Alan Sears (2011) called for an end to the battle between teaching history and teaching citizenship education. Proponents of history usually position the subject as academically rigorous and as a means of promoting national pride, in contrast to citizenship studies. At the same time, proponents of citizenship education claim that history is prescriptive and exclusive and, thus, fails to teach students how to think critically about the complex world in which we live – in other words, that it is boring and disconnected from students' lives (for example, Osborne, 2011). These battle lines, which continue to be drawn in many parts of Canada, are based on the premise that history and citizenship education are necessarily discrete subjects of study – a premise that is often not the case.

When it comes to school curricula and other resources to support learning, historical and democratic consciousness can be contentious concepts. This is perhaps most evident in the United States, where democracy has become increasingly frayed. Colorado, Florida, Arizona and Texas, among several other states, have put history education in the crosshairs of their war on the political future of the United States. These states have made concerted efforts to censor history curricula and textbooks, so that they are based on seemingly 'uncontestable' facts around a single, patriotic narrative (Westheimer, 2024). To offer one example, in 2023 the state of Florida removed many social studies textbooks from its approved lists. The stated goal was to provide 'materials that focus on historical facts and are free from inaccuracies or ideological rhetoric' (Hernandez, 2023). For example, references to the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer and the Black Lives Matter movement have been removed from replacement texts. Of course, such indoctrination is not new, nor is it limited to the North American context. One need only to look at the decades-long struggle of history professor Saburo Ienaga to have a high school history textbook approved in Japan. The Ministry of Education continually rejected the textbook because of its unvarnished representation of Japan's actions during the Second World War (Foster and Crawford, 2006; Ogawa and Field, 2006; Taylor, 2012).

Though Canada has not yet experienced a textbook controversy on this scale, curricula and resources have been invoked in passionate debates surrounding what and how history is taught in schools (Aukerman, 2024; Granatstein, 1998/2007; Stanley, 2000). These conversations have involved varying views among experts and the general public over the construction of a national narrative, if and how the past should be taught to inform decisions and actions taken in the present and future, and the extent to which history may support civic engagement within a democratic society. In 2021 the province of Alberta introduced a draft elementary social studies curriculum that was characterised by an emphasis on an abundance of arcane acts to be memorised and an absence of diverse perspectives and experiences or attention to the development of a critical historical consciousness (Craddock, 2021). The reaction from educators, parents and the public at large was vociferous and negative.

These conversations continue to occur because, as many scholars demonstrate, history and civics have much in common and, in fact, are needed to develop competencies required for historical and democratic thinking (for example, Barton and Ho, 2022; Barton and Levstik, 2004). Among those scholars who recognise the connections between history and civics, there is general agreement that history must be taught in ways that wrestle with complex narratives of national identity, open pathways to deliberate on the common good and provide exemplars of historical agency (for example, Barton and Ho, 2022;

Barton and Levstik, 2004; Clark, 2008; Cole, 2007; Sears, 2011, 2014; Westheimer, 2024). They call for the development of historical and democratic consciousness in tandem, rather than in opposition. (Of course, the school subject of history is not the only space in which democratic consciousness can be developed. All aspects of a social studies curriculum, including civics education, as well as extramural clubs and activities, could nurture democratic consciousness.)

History and social studies (an interdisciplinary subject taught in some of Canada's provinces and territories that includes history, geography, civics and the social sciences) curricula in Canada also call for the development of historical and democratic consciousness, although these terms are rarely used. Perhaps this is identified most clearly in the rationale provided in Saskatchewan's Grade 9 social studies curriculum, which states that the curriculum should:

> help students know and appreciate the past, understand the present, influence the future, and make connections between events and issues of the past, the present, and the future … make students aware that, just as contemporary events have been shaped by actions taken by people in the past, they have the opportunity to shape the future. The ultimate aim is for students who have a sense of themselves as active participants and citizens in an inclusive, culturally diverse, interdependent world. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6)

While this necessity calls for an examination of schooling from policy to practice, at the centre of many of these debates are the resources used by teachers to support student learning. Authorised textbooks are regularly implicated within these wider discussions around history and democracy. Therefore, we must ask important questions of these sources: how do authorised textbooks represent connections between the past, present and future? And to what extent do these textbooks portray history as informing the ways we respond to civic issues today?

In addressing these questions, we examined K-12 history textbooks authorised for use in Canada. While textbooks have been situated at the core of classroom instruction in Canada for decades, even serving as the de facto curriculum in many jurisdictions until the 1960s (Tomkins, 2008), as pedagogical approaches have shifted alongside the rise of a diverse array of resources (including internet resources), the predominance of textbooks within the history classroom has declined somewhat (Taylor and MacIntyre, 2017). Still, textbooks continue to be used by teachers and students. In a recent survey of youth in Canada, the second most common learning activity students reported engaging in during history classes was reading and answering questions from the textbook (58 percent) (Brown, 2024). In the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec, textbooks continue to 'exert a decisive influence on lesson planning (sometimes even being used as substitutes for curriculum) [and] occupy the greater portion of class time' (Éthier et al., 2013, p. 122). Given the continued use of history textbooks, they are, indeed, 'crucial sites for investigation' (Foster and Crawford, 2006, p. 5). Scholarly attention to textbooks is important because they are developed or chosen by educational authorities to enact the authorised curriculum in schools and, therefore, provide insights into the broader society in which they are produced. Furthermore, the information in textbooks is often considered to be 'legitimate' knowledge because it has been sanctioned by those in authority. Finally, students have been found to accept textbook contents uncritically. As one high school student in Canada put it, 'You can't disagree with it … it's what you are supposed to learn' (Seixas, 1994, p. 93).

Although published work in history education often claims that learning about the past, including through engaging in historical thinking, contributes to the development of informed and engaged citizens within a democratic society, there is little empirical evidence to support these claims (Sears, 2011). Furthermore, there has been little consideration of how the resources that teachers and students consult (for example, curricula or textbooks) contribute to temporal and/or civic orientations. This article explores the intersections of historical and democratic consciousness, the theme of this special issue, drawing on data from an examination of history textbooks authorised for use in Canada. We begin by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of historical and democratic consciousness and then move to an analysis of how they are represented in textbooks. We found that textbooks pay attention to either historical or democratic consciousness but are rarely attentive to making explicit connections between these concepts for student learning. We argue that textbooks must pay greater attention to the connections between historical and democratic consciousness if we are to support students in becoming historically informed civic leaders in the present and into the future. After all, a history education that is attentive to 'a complex and nuanced understanding of the nation and its history' (Sears, 2011, p. 356) is

an important factor in building democracies that are participatory, pluralist and deliberative (Barton and Levstik, 2004).

Theoretical framework

A vast literature exists on the meaning of both historical consciousness and democratic consciousness related to education (for example, Abdi and Carr, 2013; Clark and Peck, 2018). In simple terms, historical consciousness refers to an understanding of temporal orientation and democratic consciousness refers to an understanding of civic orientation. We take the position in this article that these concepts are inextricably linked – to be committed to one's role as a member of a civic sphere requires contemplation of how our interpretations of the past shape who we are and what we seek to become.

The use of the term *historical consciousness* can be traced back to nineteenth-century Hegelian discourse to describe a philosophy of history (Grever and Adriaansen, 2019). It was explicitly developed by German historians and history educators, including Jörn Rüsen, in the 1970s. Since that time, historical consciousness has been taken up by scholars in the fields of commemoration, memory studies and history didactics around the world. In the Canadian context, where this research is located, several notable history educators have further developed the field of historical consciousness within education (for example, Clark and Peck, 2018; Duquette, 2015; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020; Seixas, 2004). Drawing on these scholars, we define historical consciousness as an individual and collective understanding of history – how past events, ideas and experiences shape present realities and future possibilities. We turn primarily to the work of Jörn Rüsen (2004), who describes the study of historical consciousness as being about how we make sense of the past, including the content, form and function. Rüsen (2004) reasons that history is not merely a perspective on what has been but is about how people orient themselves in time and within the context of collective memory. He explains that, through temporally rooted competencies, the 'past is interpreted for the sake of understanding the present and anticipating the future' (Rüsen, 2012, p. 45).

Historical consciousness in schools, then, is about how students comprehend past actualities to inform what they value and will act upon – it offers narrative explanatory power to make decisions in the present and it serves as a temporal interpretation for change into the future. For example, teachers often ask students to share family histories because those narratives are considered value-laden stories that shape a student's sense of self and how they may choose to act with others (for example, Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook, 2017). But historical narratives equally apply to broader political orientations. James Walker (1985), for example, argues that Canadian identity through public history (and we would include school histories here) perpetuates the North Star myth – Blacks escaped slavery for complete freedom in Canada – to support imaginings of the 'true north' free from American white supremacy and any need for young Canadians to examine colonial and racist policies. In this way, historical consciousness is not only about what students think about the past, but also how students use, engage with and make history. Put another way, historical consciousness is about what student engagement with the past reveals as fundamental to the ways they think about themselves, their communities and their nation states.

While there are debates about how to develop historical consciousness through schooling, what unifies the field is the capacity of historical consciousness to recognise humanity's 'historicity', or in other words, 'the fundamental and radical fact that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings' (Ricoeur, 1981, as cited by Clark and Peck, 2018, p. 3). Historical consciousness in its very meaning is about laying bare the historicity of our role as citizens in a democracy – we have made and will make the civic sphere in which we live together. As such, the development of historical consciousness cannot be extricated from the development of democratic consciousness (for example, Clark, 2011; Sandwell, 2006).

Democratic consciousness is perhaps a harder concept to define than historical consciousness. While the term is used by scholars, there is little consensus on a definition in the field of democracy and education. Rather, the term emerges in relation to scholarship from diverse theorists of democracy, such as American philosophers John Dewey and George Herbert Mead in the early twentieth century and, more recently, German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Drawing their work together, these scholars advocated for democracy as a universal way of life – participatory, deliberative and inclusive – in which individuals engage with others in the public sphere of decision-making and towards a common good (Dewey, 1916; Habermas, 1962/2023; Mead and Morris, 1934). Education scholars have specifically

explored what democratic consciousness means in the Canadian context, usually as it applies to citizenship education, or what is often referred to as civics in schools (for example, Bickmore, 2014; Llewellyn et al., 2007; Sears, 2014; Westheimer, 2024). Drawing on this scholarship, democratic consciousness in education, or citizenship education, may be best defined as understanding the principles, values and actions required for a democratic society, from governance processes (for example, elections, rights and rule of law) to learning about civic culture (for example, justice, equity and pluralist participation). It is critical to note that here we do not refer to a form of citizenship education bound by a universal conception of birthright citizenship that is prescribed by legal boundaries, but rather to citizenship as a collective and social body of people, or citizen polity, that contributes to and can make demands for a democratic community (for example, Patrick, 1999; Scott et al., 2022).

That said, what the development of democratic consciousness requires from civics in schools and the success of schools in meeting those requirements is a source of great contention. On the one hand, a significant body of literature has found that schools treat civic learning as a Foucauldian technology to govern a populace with rules and principles of compliance (Foucault, 1997; Friedrich, 2010). For example, studies have found that civic learning in Canada is overwhelmingly focused on teaching government functions and responsible citizenship, and far less on civic affairs and the role of collective action in holding governments accountable to citizens (for example, Kennelly and Llewellyn, 2011; Llewellyn et al., 2007). On the other hand, to strengthen democratic education, scholars often turn to the Freirean concept of conscientisation, or the ways in which schools must develop a student's critical awareness of oppressive social conditions to enact liberatory change (Freire, 1970; Westheimer, 2024). This is perhaps most clearly articulated through the well-known framework for social justice-oriented citizenship developed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). They explain that civic education for democracy requires that students learn to analyse the root causes of inequitable systems and explore collective strategies for systemic change (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; see also Westheimer, 2024). For example, students may inquire about school-based racisms through an analysis of suspension and expulsion rates and then collectively petition the school board to adhere to alternative approaches to discipline.

While scholars most often address the development of democratic consciousness in terms of critical thinking, dialogue and collective actions in the present, what is less often acknowledged is the requirement for historical thinking. Yet there is an awareness among civic education scholars that history is often treated by nation states as either a tool for or a weapon against citizens' freedoms (for example, Osborne, 2006). Likewise, history education scholars are well aware of the civic function of history when taught as a prescriptive inheritance of tradition or critically as a path to inform new contemporary actions (for example, Clark and Peck, 2018). Acknowledging this interconnectedness, we contend that history holds the capacity to undermine democracy when students' understanding of the past is not explicitly connected to what they value and will act upon in the present and future. Likewise, we suggest that for a democracy to flourish, education must, as Peter Seixas (2004) argues, help students 'turn toward the past to break from it' (p. 22) – or, in other words, understand the legacies of the past and the historical agents who created those legacies to envision themselves as change-makers who create the future. In this article, we ask, how do history textbooks across Canada's provinces address the interconnectedness of historical and democratic consciousness?

Methodology

This research emerged from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant, Thinking Historically for Canada's Future, which seeks to understand the current state of history education across Canada. Between 2023 and 2024, we conducted a study of authorised history textbooks in Canada. In total, we examined 18 history textbooks published between 1994 and 2021. In most cases, we analysed two textbooks from each of Canada's 10 provinces, with one text at the elementary/middle school level and one at the secondary level (see Table 1 for the list of provincial textbooks examined for this article. Note that each jurisdiction is responsible for developing its own curricula and selecting or developing its own resources, including textbooks. With the exception of British Columbia [BC], every jurisdiction creates a list of authorised textbooks. In the case of BC, we relied on our own anecdotal knowledge of the textbooks available to teachers). In some cases, there was overlap between provinces. These textbooks correspond to the same grade levels we previously selected for a study analysing curriculum documents in each province and territory (for more, see Karn et al., 2024).

Table 1. List of provincial textbooks examined for this article

Textbook Citation	Authorised Province	Grade
Antayá-Moore, D., Bain, C. M., Bowman, J., Collins, L., and DesRivieres, D. (2014). *Saskatchewan social studies 5.* Pearson Canada.	Saskatchewan	5
Baldwin, D. (2003). *A nation's first steps.* Weigl.	Manitoba	6
Bennett, P. W., Jaenen, C. J., and Brune, N. (1995). *Canada: A North American nation* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill Ryerson.	New Brunswick	12
Connor, L., Hull, B., and Wyatt-Anderson, C. (2011). *Shaping Canada: Our history: From our beginnings to the present.* McGraw-Hill Ryerson.	Manitoba	11
	Saskatchewan	12
Couturier, J. P. (1994). *L'expérience canadienne, des origines à nos jours.* Éditions d'Acadie.	New Brunswick	11 (French)
Cranny, M., and Moles, G. (2010). *Counterpoints: Exploring Canadian issues* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Canada.	British Columbia	10
Cranny, M., and Moles, G. (2016). *Think history: Canadian history since 1914.* Pearson.	Ontario	10
Fitton, A., Kenyon, R., MacDonald, R., and Parker, L. (2006). *Canadian identity.* Nelson.	Prince Edward Island	8
	New Brunswick	9
	Newfoundland and Labrador	9
Fortin, S., Lapointe, D., Lavoie, R., and Parent, A. (2018). *Reflections.qu.ca: 1840 to our times.* Chenelière Éducation.	Quebec	Secondaire 4
Goodman, D. M., Harding, J. C., and Smith, T. A. (2007). *Voices of Canada: People, places, and possibilities.* Pearson Education Canada.	Alberta	5
Hallman-Chong, S., and Hendricks, C. (2016). *Nelson history 8.* Nelson.	Ontario	8
Harding, C., Smith, T., Meston, J., and Yoshida, D. (2009). *Perspectives on nationalism.* Oxford University Press.	Alberta	11
LeBel, S., Carty, M., and Mercer, G. (2012). *Investigating past societies.* Nelson.	Newfoundland and Labrador	5
LeBel, S., and Orr, J. (2003). *Canada's history: Voices and visions.* Gage Learning Corporation.	Prince Edward Island	12
	Nova Scotia	11
Leblanc, G., and Sarrasin, L. (2007). *Places in time: Adventures in geography, history and citizenship, cycle 3.* Les Éditions de la Chenelière.	Quebec	Secondaire 3
Massey, D., and Shields, P. N. (2001). *Le Canada: Un pays, un peuple* (2nd ed.). Les Éditions de la Chenelière.	New Brunswick	6 (French)
Whitfield, K. L. (2021). *A changing Canada.* Rubicon.	Nova Scotia	8
Woelders, A., Campbell, K., and McClintock, M. (2017). *First Peoples and European contact.* Pearson Canada.	British Columbia	4

https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.22.1.24

Members of our research team began with a comprehensive analysis of more than 100 history textbook studies published since the mid-1990s. This analysis found that these studies are rarely explicit about their methods and methodology, and they often engage in only a narrow range of analysis, ignoring aspects such as sociopolitical analysis (Clark et al., 2024; Llewellyn et al., 2024). Informed by these findings, we designed a holistic textbook analysis methodology, which is attentive to the complex aspects of the textbook (Araujo and Maeso, 2012; Grever and van der Vlies, 2017; Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010; Wenzeler, 2003). Our study includes content analysis (frequency and conceptions of main themes), critical discourse analysis (dominance and usage of keywords, including linguistic codes), didactic analysis (inventory of activities, including pedagogical approach, skill development and purpose), visual analysis (inventory of images and their characteristics) and sociopolitical context analysis (authorship, publisher, publication context, approval process).

Given the comprehensive nature of this analysis, the team needed to use a sampling of chapters for the study (other than for the sociopolitical analysis). Two chapters from each textbook were selected by the Curriculum and Resources Cluster co-leads, Drs. Llewellyn and Clark. The two chapters were selected based on each chapter's relative focus on Canadian history (namely, focus on history in comparison with geography or contemporary issues, Canadian histories emphasised over global issues or international history) and on the inclusion of historical thinking and/or civic engagement concepts (for example, perspectives, evidence, governance, social movements and so on). If more than two chapters fit these criteria, the selection was further determined by a desire for a breadth of historical periods and topics across the textbook analyses.

Each research assistant read the selected chapters of each textbook and provided a written report, answering thematic analysis questions based on the holistic methods outlined above. These questions related to the Thinking Historically for Canada's Future project themes of historical thinking (for example, concepts related to historical significance, continuity and change, cause and consequence) (Seixas, 2017; Seixas and Morton, 2013) and civic engagement (for example, concepts related to civic identities, action and systems) (Davies et al., 2023). Following this analysis, the team of research assistants conducted inter-rater reliability checks for completeness and accuracy by having another analyst review, comment on and add to the findings. Once all the textbooks had been analysed and reviewed, the data were coded using NVivo to group concepts and questions across all textbooks.

The original study produced a large dataset from which, for this article, we focused on a subset. For example, we only include the data on provincial textbooks, due to the contextual differences in Canada's Northern territories, where authorised textbooks and resources are developed in consultation with Indigenous Elders and promote community-oriented approaches to civic engagement. (Project team members are in the process of publishing findings from their analysis of the territories' textbooks and resources). Additionally, we have selected data from our critical discourse analysis and content analysis (see Box 1), as visual, didactic and sociopolitical findings are beyond the scope of this article. Most importantly, we focus on questions from our content and critical discourse analysis that directly address the concepts of historical and democratic consciousness. It is from this narrowed dataset that we asked: how have history textbooks in Canada represented the relationship between historical and democratic consciousness over time? Using this subsequent dataset, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo to see what categories emerged (Guest et al., 2013). The themes that emerged included, but were not limited to, connecting knowledge of history to creating better citizens, missing opportunities to connect the past, present and future and prioritising formal politics over community activism. We then applied the definitions outlined in our theoretical framework to group these inductive categories as they relate to democratic consciousness, historical consciousness, or defining the relationship between the two. This article offers a picture of how history textbooks in Canada represent historical and democratic consciousness and the relationship between them.

We note two limitations to this study. First, it is important to acknowledge that textbook content is mediated by both teachers and students. For example, research shows that teachers use textbooks in ways that reflect their own disciplinary content knowledge (Wineburg and Wilson, 2001), the subject being taught (Stodolsky, 1989), beliefs about teaching (Wineburg and Wilson, 2001) and beliefs about how students learn (Kon, 1995). Students also bring their own background knowledge, beliefs and interests to the texts (Beck et al., 1991; Garner and Alexander, 1994). Stuart Foster (2006) notes:

> To suggest that textbook content neatly equates to what teachers teach, or, more importantly, to what students learn would be unwise. How students and teachers understand, negotiate,

> and transform their personal understandings of textual materials is a complex process and not a simplistic one in which textbook content is simply absorbed and then regurgitated by students. (p. 157)

In acknowledging that textbooks are one piece of a larger puzzle of teaching and learning history, we draw attention to the need for future studies that examine the use of textbooks and other resources by teachers and students, and, by extension, the presence of historical and democratic consciousness within the history classroom.

Another limitation of this study arises from our decision to examine a selection of chapters from each textbook and to prioritise the analysis of at least two textbooks from each province and territory across Canada. In making this decision, it is possible that other textbooks or other chapters, which we did not examine, within each textbook may have offered a greater representation of historical and/or democratic consciousness. At the same time, we suggest that it would be problematic to conduct discussions about the importance of history for understanding and acting on civic issues in the present only in relation to certain topics or periods of study. We contend that these connections should be made throughout an entire textbook.

Box 1. Critical discourse analysis and content analysis questions

Critical discourse analysis

- Drawing from the machine assisted keyword findings, what words related to civic engagement are dominant? Is this confirmed in your manual reading of each chapter or were alternate keywords used with similar meaning?
- Drawing from the machine assisted keyword findings, what words related to civic engagement are rare or missing? Is this confirmed in your manual reading of each chapter or were alternate keywords used with similar meaning?
- How do language choices shape the dominant concepts of citizenship and civic engagement in the textbook (for example, illustrations or word linkages of good person versus activist and voting versus protesting)?

Content analysis

- How frequently is civic engagement explicitly referenced as a topic or as an intended outcome of the text? What are examples of where civic engagement is most prominently featured in the chapters (for example, events, people, activities)? Provide at least four to five detailed examples.
- What are the dominant conceptions of citizenship and civics in the chapter (for example, good person, activist)?
- Does the chapter include attention to the concept of historical consciousness? If so, in what ways?
- In what ways is civic engagement tied to historical consciousness (for example, citizens need to know the past to shape the present and future)?

Findings

In this section, we explore our study's findings related to how history textbooks in Canada's provinces represent the relationship between historical and democratic consciousness. Although many textbooks make explicit or implicit assumptions that knowing more about the past leads to the creation of better citizens, we found that historical and democratic consciousness are often not fully developed and are largely disconnected from one another across most textbooks. Thus, many textbooks fail to demonstrate how understanding the past can inform our values, decisions and actions in the present and future. This being said, there are some promising examples of textbooks that make substantial and meaningful connections between historical and democratic consciousness.

Assumption that knowledge of the past creates good citizens

In our analysis, we found that many textbooks make assumptions about the link between knowing about the past and being a good citizen. The textbooks that include front matter (an introduction or preface) outlining a rationale or purpose for studying history often make explicit statements about the links between history and democratic citizenship. These textbooks explain that understanding history and

developing associated skills is important for becoming 'an active, responsible citizen of Canada' (Harding et al., 2009, p. 5), engaging in 'intelligent discussion' (Cranny and Moles, 2010, p. xi) and preparing for the future (Connor et al., 2011; Fitton et al., 2006). The introductory pages of Ontario's *Nelson History 8* textbook emphasise the importance of applying knowledge about the past to 'make more informed decisions about current issues' as responsible and active citizens (Hallman-Chong and Hendricks, 2016, p. 4). A diagram is also included in this section, which depicts how students should move from a simple remembering of the past towards taking positive action in the present and future. A textbook used in Grades 8 and 9 in three of Canada's Atlantic provinces states that 'issues analysis is a component of critical thinking … and is key to being an informed and active citizen' (Fitton et al., 2006, p. 130). Here, an underlying assumption is that the development of critical thinking skills, through engaging with historical content, will create better citizens. However, questions prompting this type of thinking are absent throughout the chapters we examined in this textbook.

When not explicit, we found that numerous textbooks make implicit assumptions about the importance of learning about the past for becoming good citizens, namely those without front matter (for example, Connor et al., 2011; Cranny and Moles, 2010; Fitton et al., 2006). From our dataset, we can glean that students are expected to gather information about democracy and citizenship by learning about the decisions and actions of prominent historical actors (for example, political leaders) and the qualities considered important for citizenship in the past (for example, war service). Our discourse analysis found that a citizen's role in democracy was overwhelmingly represented through examples related to governance. In fact, 'government/governance/governing' appeared frequently across the majority of textbooks (Antayá-Moore et al., 2014; Baldwin, 2003; Bennett et al., 1995; Cranny and Moles, 2010, 2016; Fitton et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2007; Hallman-Chong and Hendricks, 2016; Harding et al., 2009; LeBel and Orr, 2003; Leblanc and Sarrasin, 2007), in one case over 1,300 times (Connor et al., 2011).

Lack of historical consciousness

Despite finding that many history textbooks explicitly or implicitly associate knowing about the past with being a democratic citizen, the majority of textbooks fall far short of developing students' historical consciousness. In other words, there is a lack of explicit connection between the past, present and future. Rather, textbooks assume that it is sufficient for students to be familiar with historical facts, without much consideration for the value of such knowledge for engagement in civic affairs. Within our dataset, there are rarely prompting questions, statements or activities that guide students to consider ways of making sense of the past that inform the present and future (for exceptions, see Whitfield, 2021; Woelders et al., 2017).

Many history textbooks remain firmly rooted in the past (for example, Baldwin, 2003; Bennett et al., 1995; Couturier, 1994; Fortin et al., 2018; LeBel et al., 2012), which implies that their purpose is to enable understanding history better but not necessarily to position these understandings in relation to present-day issues, events and circumstances. For example, according to a statement made early in *Investigating Past Societies,* Newfoundland and Labrador's Grade 5 textbook, 'We study the past to understand how and why people lived as they did throughout the world. This knowledge helps us to appreciate the achievements and challenges of people who lived in the past' (LeBel et al., 2012: 2). In remaining focused on how students can 'appreciate' the circumstances of historical actors, the textbook fails to discuss how those circumstances have consequences in the present, and, as such, the relevance of knowing this past. Consequently, there is little consideration for the development of historical consciousness within these rationale statements, or throughout the rest of the textbook.

When discussing specific historical themes and topics, textbooks at both the elementary and secondary levels often lack attention to connecting historical events with present-day circumstances or issues. For example, a chapter of New Brunswick's Grade 12 textbook, *Canada: A North American Nation* (Bennett et al., 1995), examines the political and economic consequences of the Great Depression, but it does not extend the discussion to consider contemporary circumstances. The textbook references the significance of the social programmes that emerged during this era 'such as public relief and old-age pensions, that formed the early basis for an emerging bureaucratic, social welfare state' (Bennett et al., 1995, p. 479). However, there is no consideration for how this was the foundation for social programmes that still exist today, or a critical analysis of how they may be expanded to meet contemporary needs for diverse communities of Canadians. Further, a chapter subheading reads 'Capitalism in Crisis' and yet fails

to offer a critical analysis of capitalism during the Great Depression or make contemporary connections to the role of capitalism in upholding settler colonialism and sustaining wealth disparities.

At the elementary level, Manitoba's Grade 6 textbook, *A Nation's First Steps* (Baldwin, 2003), explores how different groups of people (for example, women, children or Indigenous peoples) were treated historically, and the laws that have been passed over time to improve this treatment (for example, compulsory school for children and voting rights). However, the textbook does not consider contemporary treatment of these groups within Canada or even acknowledge the presence of Indigenous peoples today. In a further example, *Voices of Canada: People, Places, and Possibilities* (Goodman et al., 2007), authorised by Alberta for use in Grade 5, discusses the history of voting rights in Canada. As described in Chapter 9, 'The work of the Famous Five was an important step in making Canada a fair or just country. These women proved that old laws and old attitudes could be changed. But women still struggled for equal and fair treatment' (Goodman et al., 2007, p. 264). While the text acknowledges that women in the past still had to struggle, it could have noted that, although many exclusionary policies have been removed, exclusionary practices often continue in the present. For example, women continue to 'face systemic barriers to social and economic equality. They are at greater risk of job loss, loss of income, poverty, food in-security, loss of housing, while continuing to face gender wage gaps and still often carrying the burden of caregiving duties' (Malischewski et al., 2025). Within each textbook, the failure to recognise continuities promotes the assumption that these issues are no longer necessary areas for civic engagement in the present.

Lack of democratic consciousness

Although we found some textbooks that support the development of historical consciousness, they often lack substantial engagement with democratic consciousness (for example, Antayá-Moore et al., 2014; Connor et al., 2011; Massey and Shields, 2001). While these textbooks may communicate how understanding the past can inform the present and future, there are few explicit connections for how students may use this knowledge to engage with civic issues today. Generally, the textbooks fail to engage in discussions that speak to students' identities and perspectives, interrogate power and privilege, or encourage agency and collective action.

Within *Saskatchewan Social Studies 5* (Antayá-Moore et al., 2014), historical consciousness is featured prominently in discussions of First Nations' self-government. Over three pages (pp. 194–96), the textbook includes details about Indigenous governance systems that existed prior to colonisation, the creation of the Indian Act in 1876, changes to the Indian Act over time, and current negotiations between the government of Canada and First Nations. In this way, the textbook prioritises informing students about the past to provide context around current Indigenous-led movements for change and self-government. However, there is little to suggest that students are encouraged to think about the implications of these issues for their own civic engagement, such as their responsibilities as Treaty people and the potential for engaging with Land Back movements. These are, to be sure, lost opportunities for the development of democratic consciousness.

Without explicit discussion of the continued need for justice-oriented citizenship in the present, encouraging students to draw connections between the past and present can lead to problematic assumptions that the present is better – or more advanced, just and fair – than the past. For example, a chapter about the history of immigration in *Shaping Canada: Our History: From Our Beginnings to the Present* (Connor et al., 2011) frequently prompts comparative analysis between the past and present. This is done in a way that risks portraying the idea that the present is better than the past because there has been change and advancement in rights and justice for certain groups and communities. There is some discussion of how the past informs the present, as students are guided to analyse historical and contemporary immigration policies to evaluate whether current policies are just or unjust. While this example engages students in thinking critically about present-day policies and their historical precedents, students are not prompted to reflect on the lived experiences shaped by these policies or how they might be improved through collective action in the present.

There are other limitations in how textbooks represent democratic consciousness. We found that textbooks often construct a narrow view of citizenship, especially when discussing historical examples of civic action (for example, Bennett et al., 1995; Cranny and Moles, 2010; Fitton et al., 2006; Leblanc and Sarrasin, 2007). Linguistic choices and examples selected contribute to the impression that, while citizens should be active participants within society, they should behave in a non-disruptive manner:

obeying laws, listening to the government, adhering to norms and upholding the status quo. For example, in a section entitled 'Radical Labour Protest', New Brunswick's Grade 12 textbook labels working-class protests in cities across Canada during the 1920s and 1930s as 'violent' (Bennett et al., 1995, p. 473). Furthermore, a textbook authorised for use in three of Canada's Atlantic provinces uses the word 'rebellion' to describe youth counterculture in the 1960s (Fitton et al., 2006, p. 165). Specifically, in a section called 'Moving Away from Conformity', adults' perceptions about the inappropriateness of teenage music and dance culture are emphasised. Whether in relation to workers' rights or youth expression, these textbooks use language that portrays those who resist norms and fight for change in a negative light rather than highlighting their agency, resilience or commitment to justice.

Connecting historical and democratic consciousness

Within our textbook analysis we did locate some outliers, or textbooks that made robust connections between historical and democratic consciousness. Nova Scotia's Grade 8 textbook, *A Changing Canada* (Whitfield, 2021), discusses the recent history (between 2010 and 2020) of timely topics such as climate change and environmental degradation, Indigenous water and land protectors, and community organising and activism. Notably, the textbook frames all discussions with a series of questions that prompt students to consider how they might apply new learning in their own lives and communities. These questions appear as reflective statements embedded directly within the content (for example, How can I make decisions to help sustain the environment?, p. 17), as well as through 'Making Connections' feature boxes that focus on creating meaningful, local connections to the present (for example, What actions has your school taken to reduce its impact on the environment?, p. 16). Although, at times, the historical component can be lost amid the focus on contemporary circumstances, this textbook offers an important example of how recent history may be used to inform democratic consciousness.

Perhaps the most effective example of a textbook that highlights the relationship between historical and democratic consciousness is found in British Columbia's Grade 4 textbook, *First Peoples and European Contact* (Woelders et al., 2017). The text is structured around rich inquiry questions that prompt students to consider why learning about the past matters and how they might act on their learning. Chapter 6, titled 'Our Relationship with the Land', offers understandings of civic engagement that bridge the past, present and future. For example, there are extensive discussions of various decisions people have made about the land during different times and by diverse groups, particularly around Treaty making. Students read about historical and present-day Treaty negotiations and learn from the experiences and worldviews of Indigenous peoples local to British Columbia. The guiding questions included throughout are strong because they encourage students to think about the implications of past decisions for the present, and how this knowledge may be used to inform decision-making in the future: 'What is our responsibility to past and future generations?' and 'How can we judge actions that took place in the past?' (Woelders et al., 2017, pp. 174–5). Suggested activities also engage students in addressing an environmental issue impacting their community and considering the steps they can take to promote awareness and effect change. This emphasis on collective action, through a carefully scaffolded process, promotes a version of democratic consciousness that is historically and community-minded.

Discussion

If, as we contend, a key purpose of history education is to support students in becoming historically informed citizens who participate within a democratic society, then a focus on the development of historical and democratic consciousness is paramount. Yet our study found that history textbooks in Canada's provinces lack attention to historical *and* democratic consciousness, and, most importantly, the relationship between them. Considering these findings, we argue that a more robust articulation of each is required in history textbooks, while explicitly drawing attention to how they are interconnected. The development of historical consciousness requires much more than knowledge of the past or drawing comparisons between people and events in the past and present, which our data showed is most dominant in history textbooks. If focused on encouraging students to orient themselves in time and in relation to collective memory (Rüsen, 2004), textbooks could better support students in using their knowledge of history to inform their actions and decisions in the present and to make history themselves. Likewise, democratic consciousness involves more than simplistic descriptions of government and

democratic processes in ways that uphold the status quo, as we found in many of the examined textbooks. There are opportunities for history textbooks to support learning for social justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) by presenting history as relevant in the present and future and promoting awareness around the need for systemic change to address inequities and oppressive social conditions.

We are encouraged by our findings that demonstrate some progress has been made over time. When we compare the findings between the oldest and more recently published textbooks, we note significant differences in the presence and articulation of historical and democratic consciousness. Some of the oldest textbooks (Baldwin, 2003; Bennett et al., 1995) severely lack attention to either historical or democratic consciousness. Recall, for instance, that a textbook still authorised for use in New Brunswick (Bennett et al., 1995), published three decades ago, remains firmly rooted in the past and lacks a critical analysis of how events, circumstances and decisions taken in the past have ongoing legacies in the present. Beyond relaying a series of historical facts, as is the approach in this textbook and those contemporary to it, it offers very little in the way of developing students' historical or democratic consciousness.

In contrast, the most recently published textbooks, *First Peoples and European Contact* (Woelders et al., 2017) and *A Changing Canada* (Whitfield, 2021), stood out in our analysis because they did, in fact, engage with history in ways that support the development of historical *and* democratic consciousness. With these textbooks, it seems there may be a recognition among their authors and authorisers that history is made meaningful in the present and that engaging with the most pressing issues of our time should be at the heart of history education. For example, in these two textbooks, discussions of the relationships among humans and the land over time – including Treaty making and environmental issues – bridge the past, present and future and call attention to the responsibility to participate as change-makers. Responding to calls for truth and reconciliation among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (for example, TRC, 2015), as well as youth calls for urgent action on climate change (for example, Vamvalis, 2023), requires a history education that is attentive to these issues. Pedagogical resources, including textbooks, can and should enable teaching and learning about history in ways that support the interconnectedness of historical and democratic consciousness.

This study has yielded significant insights into how history textbooks in Canada represent historical and democratic consciousness. These findings have important implications for informing the future development (or revision) of Canadian history textbooks in Canada. We maintain that history textbooks could support historical and democratic consciousness among youth by being more explicit about how understanding the past can inform more robust civic actions taken in the present and future. If this aim is realised, textbooks will not only make an essential contribution to the teaching and learning of history but will also support the development of democratically conscious young people.

Funding

This research was supported by funds from Thinking Historically for Canada's Future, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant, under the leadership of Dr Carla Peck, University of Alberta.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many graduate research assistants across Canada who were involved in all aspects of this textbook study.

Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the authors on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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