

# Fawcett: Curriculum concerns drowned in an ocean of nitpicking



The etymology of the word “curriculum” evokes the idea of a racetrack. The visual metaphor here is of the path marked off for a runner to follow (ever wonder why college classes are called “courses”?). What it implies is the fun but strenuous work of jogging, an ultimate destination to which the athlete is headed, and a reward at the end when the race is completed.

But just what *is* the destination of a school’s curriculum?

I find myself thinking of this as I read the controversy over the new kindergarten-to-Grade 6 draft curriculum that was recently unveiled by the governing United Conservative Party. To read social media, you would think every single aspect of it is absolutely horrifying and objectionable. (Always remember that social media is like a magnifying glass: It makes small things seem larger than they are and easily sets things on fire.) Teachers are denouncing it and proclaiming that they will refuse to teach or use it.

The facts, as usual, are more complicated than this, and, if you ask some of the quieter teachers in your life, you may find them shyly admitting that there’s actually a lot that they like about the new curriculum. I have personally heard teachers express appreciation for how the new Science and Language Arts Programs of Studies are laid out; I’ve also observed some grudging appreciation of the fact that the importance of consent is now taught in every grade—a development Catholics should heartily appreciate. Moreover,

while there certainly are vocal education experts who have criticized it vehemently, let's not ignore that there are also experts who laud it with glowing recommendations.

Obviously, like any draft, this curriculum still needs some work, which means that there are plenty of legitimate critiques to be made. (There was outrage online when it was noted that the text of the curriculum was being changed in response to criticism, presumably by people who had forgotten what the word "draft" means.) The problem is that valid critiques are often lost in a cacophony of triviality.

Some of the issues I've seen raised with the Music curriculum are sound (no pun intended); the fact that Premier Jason Kenney's grandfather is mentioned is not one of them. (Mart Kenney was Canada's longest reigning orchestra leader, his Western Gentlemen were known as "Canada's Number One Dance Band," and he won the Order of Canada. Including him in the Music curriculum may be bad optics, but it is not bad pedagogy, and just because *you* may not have heard of him doesn't mean he wasn't important.)

There's also plenty of snickering online about the fact that imperial units are referred to in the Math curriculum as "Canadian units"—even though this is literally what they are called in the federal Weights and Measures Act. Concerns with genuine merit are being drowned in an ocean of irrelevant and often mean-spirited nitpicking, which is not exactly helpful for hashing out the best possible curriculum for our students' needs.

But the main criticism has been focused on the Social Studies curriculum. Distilling the complaints down to their most laconic essence, the issues people have are that it expects students to memorize a heavy load of irrelevant facts before they are old enough to understand them — in teacher jargon, before it is "developmentally appropriate" for them ("Grade 2 students are expected to learn about the Roman and Mongol Empires!"); that it essentially teaches students to become Christian; and that it is Eurocentric and pro-American and implicitly racist against minorities and Indigenous peoples.

Due to these controversies, several school boards have refused to pilot this draft curriculum. Edmonton Catholic has not made a decision about this curriculum one way or another, which, of course, is a way of tentatively rejecting it.

As incendiary as the discussion on this topic can be, it is nevertheless encouraging that so many people are taking an active interest in the content of the Program of Studies. This is essential for a democracy where parents are the primary educators of their children. T.S. Eliot was not wrong when he wrote, "A nation's system of education is much more important than its system of government."

Further, let's make it clear right now that this is obviously an area where Catholics can disagree. Questions like developmental appropriateness are

ultimately matters of prudential decision, so there is wide room for discussion and debate among the faithful about the merits of this curriculum.

However, our Tradition does have a lot to teach us about teaching, and, in this article, I want to make a few observations drawn from that Tradition that I hope can give this conversation some direction and some structure that I'm afraid it's currently lacking.

A parenthetical note first: A dialogue should involve good faith on both sides, and I am not sure that everyone is approaching this draft curriculum in good faith. Whether justified or not, many teachers (like many other public sector workers) seem to have a bias against anything the UCP does, which results in some questionable and even hypocritical objections.

For example, the curriculum is being lambasted for not teaching about residential schools until Grade 5, in supposed defiance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's request for them to be mentioned in every grade. For this crime, it is accused of effectively being white supremacist. You can agree or disagree with this omission, but it's worth remembering that the NDP draft curriculum also did not bring up residential schools in kindergarten to Grade 4. I don't recall them being accused of racism for that decision. This leads me to suspect that many of the criticisms being hurled would never have appeared if this curriculum had been produced by a different government. In approaching this subject, therefore, let us be fair-minded and honest; this is, after all, our Christian duty.

Coming to the curriculum itself, let's go back to what the word "curriculum" means and ask: What is the destination we are running towards? One way to answer that is to ask: What are our children currently lacking? If we are going to improve the curriculum, what needs does it need to address that it is currently failing to?

The answer, or at least an answer, is that children are ignorant of history. One in five Canadian youths doesn't know about the Shoah (or "Holocaust"). If they're ignorant about the most infamous genocide in history, how knowledgeable do you think they are about Canada's past?

Further, a recent study indicates that 90%(!) of Canadians have been tricked into believing "fake news." This is often blamed on a failure of "critical thinking," but many believers in fake news would deem themselves far more "critical" than the average voter. Is it possible that, without a robust knowledge of history and of what actually happened in the past, people have lost their ability to detect the "ring of truth" (or its absence) in what they see online?

We need a curriculum that can properly address this, which takes us to the first point we should consider: The pedagogical theory of this curriculum.

This curriculum is obviously inspired by the "core knowledge" program of

educator E.D. Hirsch, Jr., about which we will say more later, but it also resembles author Dorothy L. Sayers' proposals for a return to classical education. Sayers was one of the first female graduates of Oxford and an expert in medieval literature, as well as a devout Anglo-Catholic. She had worked in advertising, and, after the Second World War, had recognized how powerfully effective (and, therefore, how dangerous) ads and propaganda were at influencing people. "Fake news," after all, predates digital media.

To protect against this, Sayers recommended a return to what she called "the lost tools of learning" found in the medieval structure of education around what is called the *trivium*, or the "three ways." These "ways" are grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and students had to master this trivium before they could progress to other subjects. The trivium was so common, and so renowned, in the Middle Ages that Dante portrays them as the gates to the Castle of Reason (*Inferno* IV) and St. Bonaventure suggested that there was an analogy between the trivium and the Holy Trinity.

Sayers suggested that the three ways correspond to three stages of human development. Young children are at the "grammatical" stage, though we should understand that "grammar" does not just refer to language but to the facts that give structure to knowledge. For example, as she put it, "(t)he grammar of History should consist, I think, of dates, events, anecdotes and personalities." Why? Because, she observed, children delight in memorizing things at this age. When they are old enough to begin asking questions about them, they will have entered the "logic" stage, where they can be trained to reason properly.

Let's stop and ask a few questions here. Is Sayers right that children can memorize a great deal at this age? Yes, absolutely, and this can particularly be seen in religious communities, where children learn to recite passages from their community's Scripture, often using games and competitions to do so, and often learning a great deal of chronological history, political theory, and cultural knowledge in the process.

Do they often enjoy this memorization? Anecdotally, it seems that, yes, they can and sometimes do. Ask certain children about superheroes or *Star Wars* and you will be bewildered by how many facts they can joyfully retain and regurgitate. (That being said, should learning *always* be fun? Is life always fun? We are, after all, supposed to be preparing students for "the real world." To put it differently: Is running a race always fun?)

Here's the key question: Do they necessarily understand all these facts? The answer, of course, is "no." But here is the dangerous counter-question: Is this necessarily a problem? I have to cautiously venture into suggesting that the answer is "not necessarily." It may be good that they have a lot of facts in the back of their minds so that, when they are old enough to begin thinking critically (which, in my experience, is a bit earlier than people generally recognize) – that is to say, when they enter the "logic" phase – they'll have a

lot of information to draw upon and to use in their reasoning.

Haven't you ever had the experience that something you learned without really understanding it suddenly "clicked" for you later on? If you learned the Our Father or the Apostles' Creed as a child, did you fully understand it then? (Do you fully understand it now?) But don't things about it suddenly "click" for you as you grow in knowledge and wisdom? Knowledge and understanding do not have to always go hand-in-hand; sometimes, knowledge should go first, paving a wider track so that understanding can follow more freely.

This, of course, seems terribly out-of-date to some people (not helped by the fact that it is explicitly "classical"), and out of sync with the most recent educational research. Of course, the trend towards more Deweyan constructivism in education was already well-established in 1953 when educator Hilda Neatby wrote her critical book on modern schooling, *So Little for the Mind*; it is not exactly "cutting-edge", either.

But here's another question: Should education necessarily only be based on "current research," or are there certain perennial truths about learning that are always true because they come from unchanging human nature?

Once again, we need to ask what the goal of curriculum is—and remember that running a race is difficult. Philosopher John Dewey favoured moving away from classical education and memorization to constructivism because it was more pragmatic and democratic. But, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, an "aristocratic" education might be exactly what we need for democracy. The Confucian political philosopher Tongdong Bai puts it this way:

*"Paradoxically, memorization and the respect for authorities such as the classics may be a better way to teach students to think critically and creatively than the common practice of critical and creative thinking in the West ... what the latter actually encourages is students' venting their received opinions or frivolous ideas while mastering a classic may help students to transcend their narcissism and myopia and to have something worth rebelling against."*

This is why it is not necessarily illogical to ask students to learn about Greece, Rome, Genghis Khan, Plato, and, indeed, Confucius at younger ages. Does it necessarily need to start as early as it does in the draft curriculum? Maybe not; that's a legitimate topic of discussion (though it seems we may be underestimating our students—and their teachers—in assuming that it's impossible for them to handle all this). But I would argue that it's a step in the right direction towards fixing the problem of historical thinking and the paucity of critical thinking among Canadians.

Moreover, I can't help but note a streak of anti-intellectualism in the people haughtily asking *why* students should learn about these concepts from the past that seem so "irrelevant" to their lives. There

comes a certain point where you can't help but wonder why someone would be so invested in making sure students *aren't* learning certain things. ("I never learned this stuff!" is not an argument that it shouldn't be part of education. Instead, it may be evidence that many of us were poorly educated.)

Another concern Catholics bring to the table is the preferential option for the poor. How are the most marginalized in society benefited by a curriculum?

The aforementioned E.D. Hirsch, Jr.—who, incidentally, is a liberal Democrat—argues that teaching "cultural literacy" in schools is a way to help give disadvantaged students more social mobility. One of the reasons people from marginalized communities stay marginalized is that they don't have the same shared knowledge as their peers, which leads to them being excluded. If everyone shares a basic storehouse of common knowledge, this gives students from "the least of these my brethren" an advantage. Studies have suggested that, for example, African American students who receive a core knowledge-based education tend to have better academic success.

Of course, the concern then becomes whether or not core knowledge is really just a cover for indoctrinating students with white history and culture. This is a valid concern, but is there any evidence for it here?

This draft curriculum is teeming with Indigenous content, not only teaching about the treaty rights and historical mistreatment of our First Peoples, but also about their rich culture and spiritual beliefs. As early as Grade 1, students learn about Indigenous creation stories and their beliefs about the spiritual realm. (This is a welcome challenge to Western secular materialism.) Moreover, not only would students learn about African and Asian civilizations, but would specifically learn about the contributions and marginalization of Chinese, Indian, black, and other minority Canadian communities.

This is another example where valid but smaller complaints are arguably causing us to miss the big picture. People were understandably upset that the curriculum used the potentially dehumanizing term "the blacks" to refer to black Canadians. This is obviously a legitimate concern, but let's not miss the fact that the reason this phrase appears is because the curriculum deals clearly and specifically with the importance and the achievements of black Canadians and Albertans like John Ware. B.C.'s curriculum (which some have touted as being vastly superior to this one) does not include a section on black Canadians; nor does Saskatchewan's. It seems perplexing that a curriculum which is so uniquely inclusive of non-white history and culture is being accused of "whitewashing."

Admittedly, there are Indigenous groups, including the Confederacy of Treaty No. 6 Chiefs, who have expressed disappointment with and rejection of the "Eurocentric, American-focused, Christian-dominant" draft curriculum. This is concerning, and we need to take their objections seriously. Unfortunately,

although the media reports that certain Indigenous representatives *are* dissatisfied, they almost never ask those representatives which specific parts of the curriculum they take issue with, even though this would seem like a logical thing for a journalist to inquire about.

As it happens, other Indigenous activists *have* endorsed the curriculum—including the former Grand Chief of the Confederacy, residential school survivor Wilton Littlechild. There is obviously a difference of opinion here among Indigenous people, and, hopefully, it will lead to a fruitful conversation over the best way to honour our treaty obligations through our curriculum.

This discussion of culture leads to our final topic: Religion. Does the curriculum teach Christianity? If it does, it also teaches Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Sikhism, and, of course, Indigenous spirituality, since these are all included, sometimes right next to each other in the exact same section of the curriculum. (Christianity is not even the first religion mentioned: It comes after Roman mythology and Judaism in the Grade 2 curriculum.)

Yet people are latching on to the presence of Christianity—seemingly, the very fact that it is being included in the curriculum at all, or at least that children are learning about it so early. After all, they (supposedly) don't have the critical thinking skills to avoid being indoctrinated; simply being exposed to Christian teaching at all, even if it is taught sociologically rather than doctrinally, is apparently a risk. (Notice here the unmistakable tone of anti-intellectualism once again.)

Here is the blunt fact: You can't teach about culture without teaching about religion. A community's culture includes its beliefs, which means its religious commitments. Teaching about different cultures without teaching about different religions is like learning to read without learning what a story is.

Moreover, if we're going to raise truly global citizens who are internationally minded and compassionate towards everyone, they are going to need to understand the different value systems that people have. After all, don't we all understand that understanding leads to tolerance? But how can our children be tolerant of different religious communities if they know nothing about different religions and what they believe?

Is Grade 2 too early for this kind of education? To this, I offer the opinion of Northrop Frye, probably Canada's greatest literary critic, who recognized the Bible as the "great code" which every informed reader should be familiar with. In his book *The Educated Imagination*, Frye argued that understanding the Bible is so essential for understanding literature that "(i)t should be taught so early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind,

where everything that comes along later can settle on it.”

What is especially interesting to me is that the complaints about religion in the curriculum come from the same people who complain that the curriculum is “too American.” As George Grant noted in *Lament for a Nation*, the reason British North America was not absorbed into the United States was because the early Canadians wanted a nation that would protect their Anglican and Catholic beliefs. You literally cannot make sense of confederation (and particularly its constitutional protection of religious school rights) without understanding the Christian religion. Ignorance of Christianity makes Canada’s national story incomprehensible, and it’s no wonder ignorance of our history has risen alongside ignorance of Scripture.

Grant himself was a teacher who saw the goal of education as allowing students to transcend worldly concerns in pursuit of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and feared that this was being lost in modern education. If we agree that this is the goal that the racetrack of the classroom should run towards, then there is a lot that is promising about this curriculum. It seems to be an attempt to return to a trivium-based model of education, but which includes Indigenous wisdom traditions like the Medicine Wheel in its grammar.

Maybe you disagree. Great! Dialogue is at the heart of education. Let’s pray that the dialogue over this curriculum is edifying to all—especially to our children.

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