

# Reimagining “Active” Participation in Ontario’s History Curriculum

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## Abstract

*How is citizenship education pedagogy in relation to political participation conveyed by specialist teachers in Ontario’s grade 10 history classrooms? This paper explores the ways in which the Ontario 2013 Canadian and World Studies curriculum (CWS) citizenship education framework (CEF) builds students understanding of civic participation. The CEF outlines the requirements for students to become informed and active citizens in society. Two guiding research questions include: 1) How active participation as described in the CEF is mandated in Strand E entitled Canada, 1982 To The Present of the grade 10 academic history curriculum and 2) What spaces and gaps are present that restrict diverse active participation as mandated in the CWS curriculum? My argument is that in collaboration with neoliberal ideology, Ontario’s curriculum reflects an individualistic and multicultural notion of active participation, which has shown to limit certain ethnic groups.*

## 1. Introduction

Citizenship education as described by the Ontario curriculum [21] is an important facet of students’ overall education, by giving them opportunities to learn about what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school. Canadian history education is in danger of disappearing from school curricula as a distinct subject by either blending into the social sciences or being eliminated completely. [16], [26]. A.B. Hodgett’s [14] study sparked my curiosity to research how citizenship education is taught in the history classroom. Hodgett’s [14] concluded that “curricula and textbooks were outdated, students were bored, teachers were barely competent, and lessons were overwhelmingly badly taught” [26]. Current history curriculum reflects a sense of neoliberal discourse of “rationality, competition, and economic imperative, whereby individuals are primarily resources for the economy; [and

arguably] celebrating and appreciating cultural diversity is good for business” [29]. These “recent initiatives are part of an effort to build public interest in Canadian history in preparation for 2017, the 150th anniversary of Confederation [29]. This paper will now reflect on the literature to better understand the growing debate of citizenship education.

Historically, Canada’s first Prime Minister John A. Macdonald proposed that education should “build support for the new political community” [23]. Canada as well as citizenship education evolved and by the post-war era Canada secured its sovereignty and strengthens its civic education via history, social studies and Canadian studies, which “slowly emerged as a pressing pedagogical concern”. Research between the 1960s to the 1990s indicate that the level of citizenship education that was found in schools did not product much of an impact on active participation. One reason as Langton and Jennings in 1986 propose is that the civic curriculum does not provide even a minor source of political socialization or knowledge of active participation. In the following year, Gardner subsequently supports Langton and Jennings claim by arguing, “the presence of political content in the curriculum is no guarantee of its effectiveness in stimulating political thought and activities” [23]. It was not until the 1990s when scholars began to contradict some of those claims. The negative correlation between political content and political activities began to regain momentum by the 1990s when the Ontario government revised the CWS curriculum by implementing Civics as a mandatory half credit course in grade 10. This is one response to stimulate political activities via the curriculum.

By the 1990s the idea of citizenship education was implemented into the curriculum which has subsequently shown an impact on political participation albeit very little. Compelling reports from the Unites States, the United Kingdom and Australia had inspired the Royal Commission on Learning in 1995 to implement mandatory civics and career development in Ontario secondary

schools and by 2000 this curriculum was mandated [23]. The Canadian citizenship education movement has been mobilized by the growing civic deficit in which arguably, Canadian youth particularly, of voting age are subject to being alienated from civic life. For example, in Canada, among eligible voters between the ages of 18-24, 38.8 per cent had cast a ballot during the 2011 federal election (Elections Canada). Voter abstention has been one driving force of key reforms in citizenship education specifically what it means to be active [24], [17], Sears and Hyslop-Margison, 2006 as cited in Chareka and Sears [6]. Nevertheless, citizenship education in Ontario public schools extends beyond the civics course and into other programs including: character and volunteerism to other subject-specific classrooms including history. The push for citizenship education beyond the civics classroom encourages researchers to shed light on the effects on political participation, which continues to remain inconclusive [23].

## 2. Literature Review

Canadian researchers have explored youth's understanding of citizenship education concepts such as active civic participation [13, [6], [16], [31], [28], [14] found that history teaching primarily focused on political and military matters and was absent of controversy. History education arguably, did not make connections to current events and just emphasized the memorization of, among other things, 'nice, neat little acts of parliament'" [16]. Other studies have made a case that citizenship education in Canada has "often been used to impose a narrow view of national culture on all students" [16]. Many scholars have argued, "the primary curricular vehicle for citizenship education in North America...has been the social studies" [16], [18], [22].

The literature suggests that the definition of active participation has evolved and changed among youth. Scholars contend that youth are less likely to focus on 'big P' politics that typically involve institutional and formal participation, for example, voting or joining a political party. Conversely, youth have expressed their interest in 'little p' politics that involve engagement in community activities, volunteerism and service-learning opportunities [11], [41], [2]. There is a marked shift in the way youth in Canada are actively engaged; that is, they are not "generally disengaged from politics, but instead they [are disengaged] towards institutional politics [24],

[40], [27]. There has been much debate in the literature regarding the cause of youth political and active participation citing such factors as Bell and Lewis [1] have argued "alternative political activities, generational effects and the poor reputation of modern politics. Even though there is a need to distinguish between big P and small p politics; those terms continue to be rather ambiguous in the literature.

Conceptions of citizenship education are often ambiguous. Evans [12] argues that "dominant views of citizenship—the civic republican (responsibilities based) and the liberal (rights-based)—offer varied understandings about what it means to educate for citizenship while other perspectives (e.g., communitarian, social democratic, multiculturalist, post-national) further complicate the situation" (413). There are inherent contradictions and understandings of how citizenship is practiced and mandated that reflect the complexity of the curriculum itself. Evans [12] emphasizes the idea that "there has not been a single conception of democratic citizenship that has formed the basis for civic education but rather differing conceptions which exist along a continuum from elitist to activist" (124).

The notion of active citizenship cannot be described as an entity in and of itself. Rather, it needs to be understood within the broader context of the curricular language. According to Kennelly and Llewellyn [19] curricular language emphasizes words such as responsible, dutiful, ethical, and informed. Arguably, curricula documents incorporating citizenship education represent a curriculum shift onto the individual learner rather than the collective. This discourse reflects the way citizens should be responsible individuals to care for themselves within the state Kennelly and Llewellyn [19]. Some scholars acknowledge this conception of active citizenship, which can encourage democratic reforms that will provide numerous opportunities to develop new understanding of citizenship education. Bickmore [4] has argued that some new reforms could identify citizens as being more responsible, deliberative and participatory individuals in society. Active citizenship helps to reinforce the continuing dominance of neo-liberal individualistic ideology. Keeping these competing perspectives in mind, the second part of this paper will examine the language of active participation within Ontario's history curriculum.

Sears and Hughes [16] suggest that Ontario's citizenship education goals are to "equip students to understand and manage change, particularly in regard to understanding and appreciating the role

that diverse cultures have played and continue to play within [Canada] (132). However, Ontario's past history curriculum has emphasized values, experiences, achievements, and perspectives of white-European members of society, which have often excluded or distorted other marginalized groups throughout the world Ontario Ministry of Education [25]. The mandated curriculum contradicts this argument by stating that citizenship education also contributes to making 'good citizens.' The Ontario curriculum [25] states that individuals should understand "the contributions of people from a variety of cultures, races, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities, in the school, community, Canada, and the world." To support the development of a 'good citizen' Westheimer and Kahne [39] have categorized three kinds of types: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. In addition to categorizing the three kinds of citizens; the Ontario curriculum reflects a broad ideological perspective; that of neoliberalism.

Ontario's curriculum design reflects a broader neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes that an active citizen is both rational and informed [16]. The neoliberal sway of Ontario's history curriculum is two fold: firstly, it reflects a particular ideological function that supports individual responsibility and obligations to oneself and the nation. Secondly, many scholars have argued that the revised terminology reinforces the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism, which promotes individualism and excludes collective action. Historically, the Ontario Government under Premier Mike Harris brought about significant changes to education in Ontario; for example, in the late 1990s the government introduced "a new, half-year high school Civics course... mandating high school students to complete 40 hours of extra-curricular community service before graduation...[and introduced the] Ontario Character Development Initiative, explicitly framed as citizenship education. This new addition to the Ontario Curriculum formally mandates co-curricular character education activities, focusing on individual character traits rather than social or political institutions, in every school Bickmore [4].

The different conceptions of citizenship education in Canada emphasize the importance to develop the capacity for critical participation in society and knowledge of national history. Arguably, citizenship education is important because it will help youth be responsible, active and informed citizens in society. The Ontario

curriculum explicitly states out to give students the opportunity to develop "what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school. It is important for students to understand that they belong to many communities and that, ultimately, they are all citizens of the global community" [25]. Currently, citizenship education is taught through the Canadian and World Studies curriculum via history. The goals of citizenship education go beyond teaching youth to cast a ballot; as Milner and Lewis [23] propose, if that was the only goal, it could be achieved through compulsory voting and less on curriculum reformations.

Scholar St. Denis [38] argues that the subjective choices of what to include and exclude are often at the expense of discussing the influence of Aboriginal people and racialized immigrants. St. Denis [38] identifies Canadian multiculturalism as the root problem of ongoing cultural marginalization and dominant grand narratives. Osborne [26] would agree with St. Denis [38] about the potential dangers for national narratives in history education and has questioned the traditional grand narratives as enormous and utterly overwhelming...written from every conceivable subject position, every conceivable theoretical perspective-that has destroyed forever the possibility of a single, unifying narrative of national identity" (589).

There is a growing body of literature that illustrates how democratic citizenship education in Ontario reflects diversity and pluralism. Bickmore [5] argues that "diversity of identities and viewpoints, and significant citizen agency" is important to strengthen diversity. In collaboration with neoliberal ideology, Ontario's curriculum reflects a more individualistic notion of active participation. For example, looking directly at the Ontario History Curriculum [21] we find that the importance of history is to help students fulfill their role as informed and responsible global citizens. Scholar Bickmore [5] has argued that, the "notions of agency...tend to embody individualism, rather than highlighting collective/cumulative capacity to influence social structure" (361). Arguably, historical narratives may be necessary to support forms of political life yet; those aspects of 'political life' remain unclear.

For much of Canada's history, diversity and multiculturalism are defining features, yet Peck [26] argues that, "diversity education remains superficial and limited" [30]. The Canadian trend to implement diversity has shown "increased

autonomy for national minorities; a move away from policies of assimilation of immigrants toward integration; and greater recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples” [20]. The need to implement these three forms of diversity is faced with the rise of globalization and Canadian pluralism. These factors have ushered in changes to Canada’s educational policy from “an emphasis on assimilation, to more contemporary efforts to promote understanding of, and respect for, diversity” [30]. Ontario has shown changes in its educational policy to account for the changing composition of its inhabitants. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education [25] argues that by 2010, French-language schools were more welcoming to French-speaking and non-French speaking immigrants. The curriculum has mandated more inclusivity of ethnic diversity because of the changing composition in Ontario; however, what does that mean for the relationship between diversity and citizenship education? Does diversity in the classroom impact the instruction and accessibility of active participation? The idea of diversity is yet another factor that this paper will speak too.

Since the mid twentieth century, public schools in English Canada promoted a homogenous nation built on common culture, language, values and practices. Peck [31] argues that this type of public schooling was “decidedly assimilationist ... [and] ... largely unsuccessful in unifying the population” (66). As Canadian scholar Levesque [21] argues, Canada was mainly divided along the survival of French-speaking Canadians while English-speaking Canadians preserved their language, culture, and religion (58). Ontario has attempted to include the marginalized and once excluded groups in the curriculum, which has resulted in a pluralistic framework (Sears, Clark and Hughes, 1999, 113). However, does the Ontario history curriculum represent and create spaces for active participation of those marginalized and excluded groups? This question will be explored later in this paper. Canada’s cornerstone of diversity may in fact perpetuate notions of colonialism and social conflict. In the 1990s, Canada coined the phrase, ‘social cohesion’ to maintain a “conflict-free society where citizens put their trust in the state and work on their behalf” [30]. Yet, the very idea of diversity challenges how social cohesion is practiced. These two factors can either prevent “young people from new immigrant communities [from] getting in trouble...[or may create] ethnic enclaves [which could lead] young people to criminality or extremism” [30]. As well, these two factors could

also limit Canada’s practice of diversity in citizenship education. Now, this paper will elaborate on the representation of active participation in the Ontario history curriculum.

### **3. Reimagining Active Participation in History Classrooms**

A central feature of Canadian pluralism “is an activist conception of citizenship in which every citizen, or group of citizens, will have the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to participate in civic life” [30]. Beyond these definitions, there is significant variation on what constitutes active citizenship education. Sears and Hughes [16] have broadly identified two approaches to teaching citizenship education: passive and active. The former encourages loyalty to the nation state through the acquisition and understanding of national history. The latter, encourages young people to be engaged with issues at a local, national and global level. Young people are taught to be more empathetic toward others and to help their local, national and global community become a better place. In 2006, Kennedy further distinguishes Sears and Hughes [16] conception of passive citizenship as: one, a concern to teach national identity and history while the other is seen through ones loyalty, obedience and patriotism for the nation. Kennedy argues that passive citizenship is more than just knowing ones national history it also involves the values and actions that one has toward the nation. As cited in Kennedy (2006) there is a consensus of three elements, that can strengthen citizenship education, these include an individuals values and dispositions, skills and competences and knowledge and understanding [10]. Ross (2012) argues that ones values, skills and knowledge are necessary for active citizenship while knowledge alone will only satisfy passive citizenship. This comprehensive exam will outline the critiques of how active citizenship is implemented in the Ontario history curriculum in Part B. I will now discuss how Herbert and Sears’ [15] contextualized four domains of citizenship education to represent the complexity of how teachers implement the curriculum.

Due to the page restraints, this paper will focus exclusively on active participation as described by the framework and what groups of people in the community have been included and excluded in the curriculum. Arguably, Ontario’s history curriculum presents spaces of improvement and this paper will identify those spaces and gaps. The

purpose of the CWS curriculum is to create, "...responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school" [25]. In Ontario, the curriculum objectives have begun to "explicitly incorporate 'active' commitments, including inquiry-based learning and community engagement alongside more traditional pedagogies of procedural and legislative content" [19]. The connection between 'responsible and active citizens' can imply that citizenship education "performs a particular ideological function...it serves to remind young would-be citizens that any rights they may be entitled to in Canada...come with obligations to the state" [19]. The support mechanisms of research including funding and resources remain weak and fragmented in Ontario. For example, the Canadian government participated in phase 1 of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study. However, they declined phase 2 (Sears, Clarke and Hughes [17]. By the late 1990s, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and Statistics Canada decided to include citizenship education in its first round of commissioned papers for the pan-Canadian Educational Research Initiative [8]. However, [17] argues that Canada neglects to "build any substantial research capacity in citizenship education ... we [have seen] little or no chance of moving anytime soon to evidence-based' reform in the field" (305).

According to Kennelly and Llewellyn [19] young people under the age of 25 are "chronically disinterested in, incapable of, or apathetic about fulfilling their civic duties" (897). In response to this unceasing problem, the response of the Ontario Ministry of Education was to incorporate a citizenship education program into its curricula. Ontario has seen a "notable shift in priorities, emphasizing active citizenship over students' passive learning of legislative procedures" [19]. For example, the key idea *decision-making and voting* is haphazardly referenced in Strand E and any association to voting or active participation was not directly referenced. However, indirectly the idea of decision-making was numerous implied. In my analysis, I used the phrases: 'assess their significance for' which appears four times and the following words 'describe some/various/contributions' which appears eight times collectively and 'explain' which appears four times and 'identify' which appears three times to indicate the implication of decision making. However, the quantity does not reflect the quality of decision making in the classroom. In the

history curriculum, there are missing voices that can perhaps provide opportunities for active participation. The curriculum mandated decision making and influence by requiring students to "assess their significance for (different) people in Canada...analyze interactions from various perspectives...identify (describe) key developments and issues that have affected the relationship between...what impact did Canada...what role do you think" [25]. However, do these skills translate to active participation beyond the classroom?

Hahn [13] elaborates on how and the kind of citizenship education may influence what citizens know and do. Hahn [13] argues, citizenship education in Canada reflects "differences of First Nations, anglophone, and francophone groups, as well as recent immigrants to a multicultural society". Rather than generalizing across differences, Hahn [13] also argues that researchers have focused on the "individual learners ... [and] have explored children and youth's understandings of concepts such as rights and freedoms, ethnic diversity, civic participation, and historical significance". Does the history curriculum provide a space to explore these concepts in relation to creating active citizens? For example, the history curriculum reflects abstract concepts of indigenous knowledge that does not reflect a particular historic event and remains disconnected from any substantial meaning to Canada's cultural, historical and social context. For example, in just one instance, the history curriculum specifics "E2.1 describe some significant ways in which Canadians have cooperated and/or come into conflict with each other since 1982" and it is only under the sample topics where "political protests over Aboriginal title and land claims" remain to be seen. The phrase 'describe some' represents a level decision making to support active participation. However, at what and to whose expense is active participation being taught in the classroom? There are spaces where the curriculum can be used to negotiate the biases and social injustice of indigenous knowledge.

There are spaces in the curriculum that can be used to negotiate meaning for diversity and difference. However, I do not think those spaces adequately create meaningful knowledge for active participation in the classroom. As an example, for one specific expectation in the curriculum, from the suggested 22 topics of discussion, the *Metis Nations of Ontario* is the only space for indigenous knowledge and First nation's education. The word 'aboriginal' is only mentioned three times regarding three different

aspects including: rights, title and people. How can educators provide and create spaces for indigenous knowledge that will not further marginalize active participatory education? First nations education is arguably, marginalized into the subjugated groups within history education. As the literature suggests, the idea of discussion and deliberation are some of the cornerstones for active participation. The curriculum should serve as a tool to curtail the silencing of voices in the classroom instead of perpetuating the marginalization. Scholar Evans [12] acknowledges pluralist and inclusive dimensions of citizenship however, “laments that a variety of groups (e.g., feminists, First Nations peoples, working class groups) in Canada have largely been ignored in conversations about citizenship in education” (413). If Ontario is promoting and mandating diversity, why are a variety of groups largely ignored in and about citizenship education? Another question that resonates is how can scholars define ‘active’ and what does this entail?

The spread of neo-liberalism in Ontario ushered in the idea of multicultural politics that were viewed as a “political strategy ....to address contesting language, cultural, and land claims within the nation” [30]. Multiculturalism can be compared to a form of colonialism according to St. Denis [38], who has outlined its shortcomings including the creation of social divisions, the emphasis of social inequalities and function to silence the ‘other’ including both Aboriginals and racialized immigrants [38]. In strand E2.3 of the grade 10 history curriculum, students are to “describe contributions of various individuals, groups, and/or organizations to Canadian society and politics since 1982 ... and explain the significance of these contributions for the development of identity, citizenship, and/or heritage in Canada” [25]. This expectation is important because it is the only one that focuses on First Nations in a myriad of other expectations that are mandated. If this expectation is taught, who (which individuals and groups) remain active in this discussion and does it promote active participation as mandated in the citizenship education framework?

St. Denis [38] provides both complementary and contrasting perspectives on the impact of multiculturalism in the Ontario curriculum, which brings the notion of an equitable curriculum to the forefront. If multiculturalism was used to silence the voices of Aboriginals and racialized immigrants the counterargument would equalize the playing field by claiming that “Aboriginal people [and racialized immigrants] are not the

only people here...we can’t only focus on one culture...[and that] Aboriginal content and perspectives are to be regarded as merely one perspective among many” [38].

Ross (2012) argues that the notion of citizenship education is seen as a social construct that is rooted in the diverse range of regimes, identities and political scenarios. As cited in Ross (2012) Davies and Issitt suggest that active citizenship should move “beyond the confines of the nation state”. This is not a new idea in which case as cited in Herbert and Sears [15], the term multiple citizenship emerged and by 2006, this idea was supported by many scholars whom argue that there are variations in what constitute active citizenship that reflect a nations historical development and national identity. If Aboriginal perspectives are to be regarded as just one culture among a myriad, than why is aboriginal content scarcely mandated in the history curriculum? How can active participation be equally applied to these marginalized cultural groups if they are not provided a fair space and opportunity in the mandated curriculum?

The history curriculum mandates a space to understand diversity and multiculturalism. Can the history curriculum ensure diversity and overcome marginalization to teach for active participation? What does this space look like? Kymlicka [20] posits that, Canada has “not only legislated but also *constitutionalized*, practices of accommodation” (374). However, the history curriculum should not only purport an understanding of difference but, “also a willingness to adapt, to accommodate and to advocate for accommodation” [30], 65). Arguably, in the history curriculum there is space to advocate for accommodation that extends beyond an understanding of difference. To understand diversity students should learn to make decisions and better understand the complexity found in society for active participation. For example, the key idea *decision-making* was haphazardly referenced in Strand E. Any association to voting or active participation was not directly referenced. However, the indirect meaning of decision-making was implied many times. As a teacher, if the curriculum does not mandate decision making than no matter how much autonomy I have, I will not be able to incorporate decision-making in the classroom. Spaces must be created for teachers to use the curriculum to teach decision-making and influence within the suggested topics that are explicit as these are just two corner stone topics for active participatory education.

As scholar Bickmore [5] elaborates, history education seems to focus on social cohesion rather than on “close encounters with uncomfortable knowledge”. History education in Canada continues to be battleground for the inclusion of controversial topics, issues of multiculturalism and the acceptance of pluralism. Active participation is also represented with the notion of ‘influence’ and from my analysis the curriculum mandates students in two ways; one, to understand various factors that have influenced Canada’s identity, individuals, groups, organizations, and/or events and two, how Canada influences and is influenced from various regions including Quebec, Aboriginal communities and the United States. There is no reference to active participation in a global context. To what extent is the Ontario curriculum bias toward teaching a hegemonic, neoliberal focus of white colonial grand narratives? If Ontario’s only instruction of ‘influence’ is limited to how Ontario/Canada is influenced by for example, Aboriginal, Quebec and the United States, than students acquisition of active participation is also limited. This limitation reflects the earlier discussion of who and what is explicitly excluded from the curriculum.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper sheds light on two questions; first, how active participation as described in the citizenship education framework is mandated in Strand E entitled Canada, 1982 To The Present of the grade 10 academic history curriculum? Second, what spaces are present that disallow for diversity as mandated in the CWS curriculum? The literature suggests that different conceptions of citizenship, as articulated by Westheimer and Kahne [39], have influenced the scope of Ontario’s history curriculum and its mandate to teach active participation as articulated in the citizenship education framework. From my analysis, I argue that in collaboration with neoliberal ideology, Ontario’s curriculum reflects an individualistic, pluralist and multicultural notion of active participation, which has shown to limit certain ethnic groups namely, First Nations and racialized immigrants. There are evident spaces in the history curriculum that can be used to better negotiate meaning for active participation through for example, the use of *decision-making and influence*. Arguably, the history curriculum somewhat mandates active participation as described by the citizenship education framework however, there are explicit limitations that restrict

the instruction of certain groups that further marginalize them in society. Therefore, this paper has given me an opportunity to question my own assumptions, ask questions and challenge my research by posing new questions.

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