



MONASH University
Education

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HISTORY TEACHING
IN AUSTRALIA AND CANADA**

FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

History teaching is a puzzle in Australia and Canada. As endless debates about the nation's history play out over museum exhibits, national commemorations and even school textbooks in the two countries, the subject seems more relevant than ever. Despite the eruption of these 'history wars', headlines decrying young people's knowledge are regular reminders of their apparent historical apathy and ignorance. Heated political debates, lively media commentary and countless public forums each document a mounting interest in the nation's past, but this does not seem to have translated into the classroom.

The question is why: why do so many Australian and Canadian students continue to write off their national history as 'boring', when anxious public debates over the past seem to be anything but that? The answer lies in the classroom itself. Wider historical contests fill media space and capture public attention, but do little to explain how history is *taught* and *learnt* in schools. Using interviews from around Australia and Canada, this qualitative research project explores the ways students and teachers think about their nation's history.

Funded by a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council, the project has been led by Tony Taylor and Anna Clark from Monash University, Stuart Macintyre from the University of Melbourne, and Carmel Fahey from the University of Sydney.

Overview of research findings

In their interviews, teachers, students and curriculum officials offered their thoughts on history education in Australia and Canada. Their comments have been divided into five topics for discussion in this report, reflecting participants' concerns about the current state of national history teaching as well as their ideas about how the subject can be taught successfully:

- *The problem of topic repetition*
- *The need for adequate resources and professional development for history teachers*
- *The question of a national approach to history education*
- *The critical importance of the history teacher*
- *Engaging students in the classroom*

Background

Australian history teaching suffers from the popular perception that it is boring and repetitive. Even in 1975 a student commented in a Victorian study that 'We wasted too much time learning Australian history, about which there is very little of interest to learn. It is time we faced this fact instead of trying to pretend that Australia has had a very interesting history' ('News and Notes' 1975). Twenty years later, responses to Christine Halse's research into the state of history in New South Wales secondary schools seemed to match this sentiment. One student lamented that 'we have done Australian history every year since Year 4. It gets pretty boring after a while.' 'We did Australian history in Years 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9', responded another. 'It was boring. I would rather watch paint dry' (Halse 1997).

Students' disinterest in Australian history has been highlighted by a growing number of reports revealing poor levels of historical knowledge. In 1994, the Civics Expert Group published the results of a survey it commissioned that showed young Australians had a very tenuous understanding of their nation's political history and democratic institutions (Civics Expert Group 1994, Print 1995). In 1997, research by the Council for the Centenary of Federation confirmed this national ignorance with even more alarming statistics: only 18 per cent of those interviewed knew Edmund Barton was Australia's first Prime Minister, while 43 per cent of respondents did not even know what federation meant (Taylor 2001). And a 2006 report on the state of civics and citizenship showed that only 23 per cent of year 10 students knew Australia Day celebrated the arrival of the British in 1788 (MCEETYA 2006).

This lack of national knowledge only heightens widespread anxiety over the state of Australian history education. On the eve of Australia Day in 2006, for example, then Prime Minister John Howard decried the teaching of Australian history and called for a restoration of the subject in the nation's schools. Only a 'root and branch renewal' of Australian history teaching could foster a lasting attachment to the nation's past, he said. 'In the end, young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history' (Howard 2006).

This dilemma of disinterested students and alarmist headlines is by no means restricted to Australia. A 1987 report by Chester E. Finn and Diane Ravitch in the US argued that their test results of almost 8000 students revealed a generation 'gravely handicapped' by their own ignorance (Ravitch and Finn 1987). The British *Daily Telegraph* reported significant public concern over results of a survey in which some schoolchildren astonishingly thought Adolf Hitler was Britain's Prime Minister in World War II in 2001 (Lightfoot 2001). And in 2002 the New Zealand historian James Belich protested that more students were studying Tudor England than the history of their own country (Catherall 2002).

Ken Osborne describes a similar context in Canada, where educationists have long criticised history classes for being overly content driven and generally uninspiring; meanwhile, students' reluctance to engage with the subject continues to generate significant public anxiety and unease (Osborne 2003). This perpetual sense of crisis has in effect become self-fulfilling: expectations of what students *should know* continue to be disappointed by their apparent historical disinterest (Sears and Hyslop-Margison 2007). Indeed, as the American history educationist Sam Wineburg wryly noted, 'The whole world has turned upside down in the past eighty years but one thing has seemingly remained the same: Kids don't know history' (Wineburg 2001: 306-307).

So when the Canadian Dominion Institute published the results of its 1997 Canada Day Youth History Survey on the national knowledge of young Canadians, there was predictable public outrage (Dominion Institute 1997). Like Australian students, young Canadians had apparently 'failed' the test on their nation's past. And some headlines proclaimed Canada's future was itself under threat: 'How can a country survive without celebrating its past, without pride in its achievements, without its own national mythology', asked one editorial in the *Edmonton Journal* (Editorial 1997); 'It is not the students but Canadian history courses in our high schools that have failed', lamented Joanne Harris Burgess in the *Globe and Mail*. 'And it is this failure we as a nation cannot afford' (Harris Burgess 1997). Even the prime minister, Jean Cr tien, lamented the state of young people's historical knowledge in a speech to parliament: 'It is unacceptable that our youth know all about computers, but so little about their country' (cit. Granatstein 1998: 147).

Such surveys are indeed troubling reminders of young people's lack of historical engagement. Students' apparent refusal to connect with their nation's history may impede their connection with the nation itself: how can students vote if they don't understand their

country's political institutions? Can they ever understand contemporary Australian or Canadian society if they don't learn its past?

Yet the reasons behind this apparent national ignorance are far from clear. Repeated studies confirm large cohorts are struggling with basic historical and political knowledge, but they don't explain why. Although public debates over the state of national history education prompt plenty of concerned comment, there have been very few voices coming from the classroom itself. For instance, what do students and teachers think about learning and teaching their nation's past? Do they think it should be mandated in schools? And how do curriculum designers consider the place of national history? While these crises of national knowledge dominate public concerns over the subject, this project considers the ways students and teachers engage with Australian and Canadian history in school.

Methodology

This Canadian-Australian project was undertaken to shift the focus of these debates away from anxious (and often parochial) public discussion of historical knowledge back to the classroom itself. By examining the experiences of teachers and students across national, state and provincial contexts, the project places their classroom perspectives at the centre of understanding national history education.

The comparison is appropriate for a number of reasons. In particular, these two countries are (with some notable exceptions) similar educational jurisdictions with comparable histories. Both nations are of similar geographic size and population. They are also multicultural settler-societies dealing with Indigenous rights and reconciliation in their history teaching on the one hand, as well as issues of national identity in a modern pluralist society on the other. And, unlike the UK and Japan for example, the two countries are federations, with regionalised school education systems. This in turn raises significant questions about teaching 'national' histories across broad geographical (and in the case of Québec, cultural and linguistic) areas.

This comparative research is also deliberately qualitative. The project was not designed to test students' historical knowledge, but to listen to what they and their teachers had to say about learning and teaching it. In so doing it gives voice to their classroom experiences, and brings what has been a largely overlooked perspective into debates about teaching national history in Australia and Canada.

The project focuses on the experiences of high school students. First, this is where most Australian and Canadian history is explicitly taught in the respective countries. Furthermore, secondary history teachers are much more likely to have been trained in history education, which is critical to get a professional sense of how to teach the subject well. The middle to upper years of high school are also where students are most likely to have a comparable understanding of their nation's past. In the primary or elementary years, national history usually begins by looking at families and local communities. (It should be added that while this project concentrates on the views of secondary students and their teachers, qualitative research into the early years of school would greatly benefit our understanding of national history education.)

The students were interviewed in small focus groups, rather than individually, to avoid intimidating them during interview process. Alone, students might feel the interview was more like an interrogation or a test than a conversation about learning their national history. Conversely, in too large a group their individual voices might become lost. So the typical group contained about five or six students, and this seemed to provide a fairly good balance between gauging students' individual opinions and generating discussion between them.

In all, 182 high school students ranging from years 9 to 12, along with 43 history teachers and 21 curriculum officials from all eight Australian states and territories, were interviewed for this research (246 in total). A smaller, comparative set of interviews with 78 participants (56 students, 17 teachers and 5 curriculum officials) was conducted in four Canadian Provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, Québec and New Brunswick). Eleven ethics proposals were completed for this project (eight in Australia and three in Canada), as well as various police checks and permissions to visit the schools and conduct the interviews. While teachers and students were given pseudonyms as part of this ethics process, and their schools are not identified, the names of curriculum officials and education department representatives have been kept because their interviews focus on official policy.

The interview schedules were divided into five topic areas, with questions on (i) Local and Regional Histories, (ii) Indigenous Histories, (iii) Federation/Confederation, (iv) The Nation at War, and (v) Contemporary Political History. Respondents were then asked about their attitudes to national history more generally (how they identify with their nation's past and how they think the subject should be taught). These five topics were chosen because they reflect important themes and timeframes in Australian and Canadian history, and because they have generated significant public debates in both countries. It was imperative that the topics be represented in history syllabuses from each of the states, territories, and Canadian provinces so that meaningful comparisons between the jurisdictions could be made.

Ultimately, this qualitative research does not present yet another statistical survey of what students do not know about their national past. The state of young people's historical knowledge is indeed concerning to historians and educators (and even some students), but the classroom perspectives presented here challenge assumptions about *fixing* Australian and Canadian history education by simply doing 'more of it' or returning to 'the basics'. These students and teachers do not question the importance of learning about national history—far from it—but they do have strong opinions about how it should be taught.

Research Findings

1. *The problem of topic repetition*

While Australian and Canadian students overwhelmingly acknowledge the importance of learning about their national history in school, many of them criticise the subject for being boring and repetitive.

Topics such as Indigenous history, federation and confederation, for example, are frequently taught and retaught with little coherence between school or even grade levels. This is by no means a recent problem—many of us can no doubt recall learning repeated history topics in our own school experiences—yet it remains characteristic of history education in the two countries. *Minimising students' experience of topic repetition is key to overcoming their reluctance to engage with the subject.*

When Sal, a year 12 student at a public high school in Perth, was asked whether she enjoyed learning about Australia's federation, for example, her disapproval was clear: 'Maybe the first time, but not for the twenty-seventh time', she said with exaggerated emphasis. 'I think it was beyond the point of whether or not you enjoyed it, it's just knowing it now, because you learn it *every year*, and you just know it.' For Kate, a year 11 student at a public girls' school in Sydney, learning about Australia's federation was just as tiresome. 'Well I think I saw the same film about the states' different railway lines about six

times!', she exclaimed. It's not that it's 'boring,' said her classmate Pia, 'but I think it's because it's so repetitive'.

While Canadian students' attitudes about learning confederation were generally more positive, their experiences of topic repetition are also cause for significant concern. Shara, a year 10 student in Toronto, said that 'The first time we learnt it, it was sort of interesting, but then every year they seem to keep teaching it and it gets really boring'. Evan in New Brunswick felt that learning confederation was reflective of the way Canadian history is taught more broadly: 'See, every year they touch on, like, *the same stuff*, only they go a *little bit* farther with it, so it gets to be repetitive.'

That so many of students complained about topic repetition is worrying; that they're being *turned off* their national history by a lack of curriculum coordination is more worrying still. Curriculum officials certainly are not immune to the problem. As Leanne Iselin from the Queensland Studies Authority explained, this apparently endless cycle of repetition continues to test student interest in the subject:

I'm concerned that we keep repeating the same topic over and over and over again, and we'll do it in year 5, we'll do it in year 7, we'll do it in year 8, then we'll do it in year 9, then we'll do it in year 11, and we're not actually increasing the complexity of what we do with that topic. We're just repeating the content, so you get students that come to you in year 8 and they say, 'Oh, we've done that topic'.

This is not to say history topics should be completed as a 'one off', where students learn a topic such as federation and never revisit it. Of course historical knowledge should grow and develop and deepen over time (Lee and Ashby 2001). *Without any curriculum coherence, however, there is little to ensure that history education is coordinated and sequential.*

Instead of an increasingly complex and recursive approach to national history, then, many students experience a repeated approach. In Toronto, Seth felt that learning about confederation needed to be better organised: 'other things could have been better explained, more elaborately explained', he said. 'I mean, lots of other things are skipped over, whereas there was great emphasis on confederation for several years of history.' Tani, a year 12 student from Darwin, thought Australian history was critical to learn, 'But they've got to spruce it up because I remember learning heaps of Australian history earlier on and I just was so bored by it'. These students don't reject the value of their national history, but they are conscious of the need for better coordinated curriculum.

2. The need for adequate resources and professional development for history teachers

Any effort towards greater curriculum parity also requires corresponding support for teachers. *Adequate teaching resources and professional development are both critical to preventing the endless repetition so many students complain of.* In the case of Indigenous history, for example, it seems many classes are reliant on old materials and approaches that are turning students off the subject.

When year 11 students at a public high school in Brisbane were asked whether they had ever studied Indigenous history, Zach exclaimed that they had 'Every year!' Miranda agreed: 'Every year', she said. 'It's always the same stuff too.' Students in both countries are insistent on the importance of teaching Indigenous history, but many are also very critical of the way it is taught. Says Sarah, who teaches at an independent girls' school in Melbourne, the topic 'really does need to be taught strategically, and I think that often it's taught not very well, perhaps with not very good resources'. This means that it's 'taught

and retaught, perhaps done too much at primary school and then the interest wanes by secondary school and that's a problem'.

Even students understand the problems of this patchy approach to the past. Les, a year 10 student at a public school on the New South Wales Central Coast, agreed that Indigenous history was essential to teach 'Although at the moment we learn it bang, bang, bang in year 7, 8, 9 and 10, but too sporadically', he said. 'It needs to be comprehensive.'

Teaching and learning First Nations history in Canada seem to be similarly mixed. While students acknowledged its importance as a topic, many weren't so keen on learning it. As Jia from Vancouver explained, 'We start learning it from elementary school and it's practically the same thing every year.' Teachers also admit there are problems with the topic. Ryan from Vancouver acknowledged that 'sometimes at high school there's this attitude of "Oh, Native people again", because they have had it pretty much every year at elementary school as far as I know'.

Many teachers continue to teach the same material simply because there aren't the resources or the possibilities for professional development to do any different. Indigenous history is the most obvious example that came up in the interviews—because it is such a contentious and difficult topic to teach, teachers end up offering what they're familiar with. Yet teachers also talked more generally about the problems of feeling equipped to teach original and engaging units of work year after year.

David was one teacher who wished he could be more original in history at his public school in central Australia:

I tend to use textbooks but I don't think it's the best way. I think personal experience for the kids—you know, excursions and role-plays—I think that's the best way to do it. But we're a little bit resource restricted here, plus for us to go to any of the wartime sites for example, we have to travel to Darwin and that's two days, extremely expensive, it's a thousand kilometres each way.

Even some students felt their learning and enjoyment was limited by what they had access to. This group from a public senior college in Canberra were scathing about the quality of history resources in their class: 'They need to get some new resources', said Lee. Gunita agreed. 'The videos are shocking,' she said, 'and some of the textbooks, too, are like from 1988, and that's how old we are'.

The issue of resources was much more obvious in public schools, particularly those in disadvantaged or remote areas. While classroom success by no means came down to resource issues alone, teachers frequently felt disappointed they couldn't do more for their classes. And even in those schools with better access to resources there remains the question of how teachers *use* the materials available to them, which requires adequate professional training and support. At a time when the importance of teaching national history is undisputed, adequate professional development and support is essential to ensure it's taught well.

3. The question of a national approach to history education

Despite these mixed experiences in the classroom, teachers, students and curriculum officials from both countries were adamant about the importance of teaching national history in school: all thought it was a fundamental aspect of any school education. (Although that didn't mean they all agreed *how* that national story should be taught.)

At an independent school in Darwin, for example, Annabel insisted Australian history ought to 'be a compulsory component of a broader history subject'. But it shouldn't be too parochial, she added. 'I think only teaching Australian history would be boring and very

narrow minded as well. I think there's a danger of ramming Australian history down kids' throats.' Jessica, a teacher in Brisbane, was similarly uncertain when asked if she thought Australian history should be mandated in school. 'Yes. Yes I do', she said. 'What elements are compulsory then is a much more problematic issue. I wouldn't like to go to a situation where we have a lengthy checklist that has to be signed off on'.

Curriculum officials were just as cautious about teaching national history in a federal education system such as Australia's. Julie Fisher from the Tasmanian Department of Education agreed Australian history is important 'for all students, but I wouldn't like to see a mandated compulsory curriculum that says each grade studies particular things', she considered. 'I think that we still should be leaving that up to school communities to decide what's relevant and meaningful for their students'. The former manager of the Commonwealth History Project, Tony Brian-Davis, was also conscious of the tension between the federal government's 'national picture of what they think should be done' and 'the classroom teacher whose job is to try and make it work'.

Canada's official bilingualism further complicates questions of national history education. Notably, there is no Canadian federal minister of education. And in New Brunswick, for example, the Francophone and Anglophone school systems run parallel, each with their own history curriculum and approach.

The cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Québec means the 'nation' itself is a problematic concept for Canadian history education. Marc teaches at an independent francophone school in Québec, and for him 'national' history teaching means the history of Québec *and* Canada. 'I would say it's both', he said. 'I'm quite sure in Québec we have a different point of view, because, as some people say, in Québec we are supposedly a different nation from the rest of Canada, so we've got our own point of view on a lot of issues, political issues and social issues'.

Such complication characterised the responses of teachers and curriculum officials during the interviews. Despite the diversity of their opinions, many were at pains to point out that *the nation's story cannot be reduced to a simple national narrative to be taught in schools*.

For their part, students also believed learning about their national history was important—indeed, most thought it should be mandatory—but they included two important caveats: students don't want to study national history during every year at school; and they want to study history *beyond* their own nation.

Alex, a year 12 student from Adelaide, said that Australian history should be compulsory, but 'Not all the way through', he added. At an independent girls' school in Canberra Caitlin agreed Australian history should be compulsory 'maybe not like the whole school, but for a little bit', she said. Yasmin, who goes to an Islamic school in western Sydney, also thought Australian history 'should be compulsory' but needs to be taught 'so that it's not just limited to Australia'.

Canadian students were similarly supportive of mandatory national history—so long as it wasn't narrowly parochial. A group of Toronto year 11 students unanimously agreed that Canadian history should be compulsory in school. 'A more global history would be better though', Seth added. 'I mean, I don't see why it has to be focussed purely on Canadian history. It just seems to limit our scope of knowledge, I guess, if we're only studying Canadian history.' Nick, a year 12 student from another Toronto school, thought that 'if world history was made mandatory in grade 10 and Canadian history in grade 9, they'd be introduced to all aspects of history and perhaps gain further interest.'

National history is clearly held to be important in the classroom, but these comments also show *there is little point mandating the subject if does not engage students and teachers*.

4. The critical importance of the history teacher

While the 'national story' occupies so much public discussion and debate, it is in the much smaller space of the classroom where young people come into contact with their nation's past. *And for students and teachers alike, it is the history teacher (even more than the content of the lesson) that determines whether the subject works or not.*

Keira, who goes to a public high school near Darwin, admits she's 'just not into history', but did make this concession: 'I reckon like a really enthusiastic teacher would do it well', she said. 'But if you get like a real boring teacher that everyone hates, no one's going to listen. If you get a really good teacher that everyone likes then everyone will want to listen.'

For these school students, what they liked and didn't like in their history classes so often came down to this one factor. Jackie, a year 10 student from Perth, said that 'If you've got a good teacher that enjoys it it's much better for you because you can relate to them'. For Simon in New Brunswick, his teacher managed to make the subject enjoyable. 'We've got a pretty tight teacher', he admitted. 'Like history sucks, but she's pretty cool.' His classmate Caleb agreed: 'She makes it worth it'.

For their part, history teachers also couldn't help but notice the importance of simple passion for getting their students interested in the subject. History is 'my life', says Terry, a teacher from Vancouver. 'I'm so involved in it, you know. It helps me understand the world at the same time I'm teaching it.' In Toronto, Paula is just as devoted: 'I love it, I love it. I love teaching, period'. Mary in Brisbane thinks 'you can make anything alive and interesting if you find it alive and interesting'. For Jenny, another Brisbane teacher, the vital ingredient for a great class is also personal interest. 'I think what you've got to have is passion', she said. 'If you're interested in the subject you'll find a way of getting into it with the kids. So you find something that excites you and therefore then you transfer that excitement.'

While a number of teachers talked about the need to be 'passionate' more generally, others commented specifically on the critical importance of being *trained in history* in order to teach the subject well. Sally teaches at a public high school in rural Victoria, and strongly advocated proper history training for history teachers. 'Well if I had my way, the main thing is that we'd have trained history teachers teaching history', she said. 'I think our courses are really good but what we're lacking is trained history teachers and I think that's a real concern.'

Cameron in Perth also stressed the importance of expertise in history for those teaching the subject. 'I think that the teachers that teach history also need to know their subject and they also need to know how to teach it', he insisted. 'You can't just get someone who is an English teacher or someone who's from another subject area and get them in to teach history because unless they're specifically trained in how to teach it well then it's not going to be enjoyed by the students.'

The issue of teacher expertise is significant in Australia and Canada, particularly in those jurisdictions where the subject is taught within amalgamated units such as Social Studies or Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). There are instances of very strong history programs within Social Studies and SOSE, but these courses have undoubtedly legitimated, and even institutionalised, the practice of non-history teachers heading history classes (Taylor 2007).

While many teachers have studied history at university or have even completed honours or postgraduate degrees in history, many are also required to teach the subject with minimal or no training in history method. Whether history is taught as a discrete discipline or not, *it*

is critical that teachers have appropriate training and expertise in the subject in order to counter those problems of repetition and rote learning in history classes.

5. Engaging students in the classroom

How is history best taught in the classroom? Responses to this question were remarkably similar: *students and teachers want a subject that allows them to be critical, to reconcile different points of view, and to use their imagination, rather than recite 'what happened'.*

Stephen teaches at a Catholic boys' school in Adelaide and talked openly about the skills of critical analysis he hoped to instil in his students: 'I like students to think, I like them to be critical thinkers. I like them to question what they're being fed, and even question what I might say to them as well'. For Geoff in Toronto, what he liked about history was its openness for contingency and contention: 'in history, you can really take a look and ask, "OK, was this right? Was this wrong? Why did they do this? Did they do it with any understanding?"—you know, that sort of thing that you can really stop and question.'

It is perhaps to be expected that the views of these experienced teachers present quite a demanding and sophisticated understanding of the subject. Yet students were also adamant that's how they like to learn history. In Vancouver, a group of year 11 students discussed how they learnt history best:

Ju: Debates.

Jing: I think the worst way is just to have the students sit there and the teacher spitting out facts, expecting you to absorb it like that. I think that's the *worst* way you can do it.

Ju: I like debates because of the fact that you have your own opinion and everyone's involved, everyone's like screaming out stuff—'no you're wrong' or 'no you're right'—and then the teacher will be like, 'ah, no, that's not exactly it', and we'll talk a little bit about it and then you can go back to the debate. So everyone gets involved, and you know when you're having fun you kind of learn, right?

Australian students also enjoy a more critical approach to the subject. Rick from Canberra liked learning history using 'a combination of approaches'. Ryan, a year 12 student in New South Wales, said he liked the fact that 'everyone's allowed to have their own opinions' in history. 'Like, you're allowed to have yours – I don't care – as long as you can kind of back up your evidence.' For Martin in Perth, engaging with different perspectives in class also made the subject interesting. 'I think history's all about viewpoints,' he said. But if 'you just write down notes on the board it's only one viewpoint, and kids are going to come and do a test on one viewpoint – so it's all going to be the same'.

By contrast, *students frequently criticised teaching approaches that rely too heavily on rote learning.* While they acknowledged there was a place for learning 'the facts', they felt an over-emphasis on content took the interest out of the subject.

The last thing students want are teachers who 'are just doing it because they know they have to', says Felicity, a year 10 student from Canberra. Or a classroom where the students are 'just looking at words and copying them down', says Lily. 'They almost don't go into my head – they just go from my eyes to my notes.' *Students understand the importance of knowing the facts about their nation's past, but they also want historical narratives, discussions and debates, and creativity in the classroom.*

Summary of key points

- *Minimising students' experience of topic repetition is key to overcoming their reluctance to engage with the subject.*
- *Without any curriculum parity or coherence, there is little to ensure that history education is coordinated and sequential.*
- *Adequate teaching resources and professional development are both critical to preventing that endless repetition so many students complain of.*
- *Many teachers continue to teach the same material simply because there aren't the resources or the possibilities for professional development to do any different.*
- *The nation's story cannot be reduced to a simple national narrative to be taught in schools.*
- *There is little point mandating national history if does not engage students and teachers.*
- *For students and teachers alike, it is the history teacher (even more than the content) that determines whether the subject works or not.*
- *It is critical that teachers have appropriate training and expertise in history method in order to counter those problems of repetition and rote learning.*
- *Students and teachers want to learn history in a way that allows them to be critical, to reconcile different points of view, and to use their imagination—rather than recite 'what happened'.*
- *Students frequently criticised teaching approaches that rely too heavily on rote learning.*
- *Students understand the importance of knowing the facts about their nation's past, but they also want historical narratives, discussions and debates, and creativity in the classroom*

Conclusion

These interviews provide a window into the ways students and teachers engage with their nation's past, or disengage from it, in the classroom. There is understandable public concern about the state of young people's knowledge in Australia and Canada. Yet we also know from their interviews that only teaching 'the facts' won't bring them any closer to the past.

Students are sick of repeated topics and boring material; they want engaging teachers who love what they do and can bring imagination to their lessons. For their part, teachers and curriculum officials also want the subject to come alive in the classroom, and to be as relevant and interesting as they feel it can and should be. This research project does not challenge the importance of teaching history in school, but insists that for students to connect with their nation's past, it has to be taught well.

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