

Founding Fathers Fighting to Toppling Tarnished Tributes – The Impact of Social Media, Primary Sources and Equity Education on A “Kids Guide to Canada” Prime Ministers Project

How can we help every student grow to be informed and active Canadians and global citizens?

By Diana Maliszewski

Initial Thoughts

To honour the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, Cathy Beach and Leigh Cassell launched a grassroots project called “A Kid’s Guide to Canada”. The goal, as outlined on their site, <https://akgtcanada.com/> was for “elementary students from every corner of the country ... to collaborate together, and help create the first interactive and multilingual guide to Canada produced by kids and for kids” (Beach and Cassell, 2016, ¶ 3). Although the intention was for students to “investigate, honour, and introduce the land and people of their local home community” (Beach and Cassell, 2016, ¶ 4), I was more intrigued by the overall idea of getting students passionate about embracing and understanding social studies. I had no intention of submitting my family’s Canada 150 passion project but I wrote about it on my blog. (Maliszewski, 2017 July 3) The executive summary of our family Canada 150 project was to imagine what might happen if all the prime ministers of Canada were alive, together, at the same time and in peak health - who would emerge victorious in a fight?

And when I tweeted it, @akgtCanada expressed interest. (A Kids Guide to Canada [@akgtCanada] 2017 July 3)



This meant that I needed to do something about making the project a reality.

Tangent #1

I knew, for myself, that after exploring the U.S. Presidential Death Battle post that inspired my Canadian version (Micks, 2012) that I could only name a very few Canadian Prime Ministers and that one of my very first tasks would be to get acquainted with all who have held the role. I gathered several resources, especially from the children's section of the Toronto Public Library, and started to take notes. How would I remember all twenty-three prime ministers?

Music is a powerful way to access memory. This paper is not meant to prove or refute this point, but research studies "demonstrate that text is better recalled when it is heard as a song rather than as speech, provided the music repeats so that it is easily learned. When students heard three verses of a text sung with the same melody, they had better recall than when the same text was spoken" (Wallace, 1994).

My daughter and I selected a tune that we thought might be familiar, in the public domain, and one that would fit the meter of most of the names. We chose "My Darling Clementine". As I tinkered with the meter, I realized that this tangent – writing a song to help recall the names of all the prime ministers - may have more impact or significance than the original project. I could remember all twenty-three prime ministers with relative ease.

Several considerations were made for length and ease of memorization. I decided not to include honorific titles at all and to only use first names if the meter of the song required it or if, in the case of the Trudeaus, there were two people with the same last name. I chose to use some real nicknames for the prime ministers, and took some artistic license with the fifth and sixth leader's first names. Certain names lent themselves more to a certain section of music and therefore, I had to add a bit of "filler" before resuming the list of names. The extra information was to include rhyming portions to help with memorization as well as for specific recognitions such as the longest- and shortest-serving prime ministers, the first French-Canadian prime minister, and our Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Canada's Prime Ministers (to the tune of My Darling Clementine)

John Macdonald, Al Mackenzie,
Abbott, Thompson, Mackie Howell
Charlie Tupper, fixer upper
Then our first lead Francophone

Wilfrid Laurier, Borden, Meighen
William Lyon Mackenzie King
He stayed longer than all others
'Though he fought with Governor Byng

Richard Bennett, Uncle Louis

St. Laurent, then Dief the Chief
Lester Pearson won the Peace Prize
And gave us the Maple Leaf

Pierre Trudeau, Clark and Turner,
Then Mulroney took the lead
But Kim Campbell lost the gamble
Chretien helped things to proceed

Then Paul Martin, Stephen Harper
Justin Trudeau, Pierre's son
We have named all the prime ministers
It's the end - our song is done

After my daughter and I wrote the song and sang it together, I realized that it would be helpful for my students to learn the song and help share the song with others so they would know more about the prime ministers before they were able to say which leader would win in a Hunger Games style battle. This new plan with the song involved my students more in the creation process. I would survey junior and intermediate to see how many prime ministers they knew (even compared to U.S. presidents). Influenced by Irma Council's book with portraits (2005), I'd seek out twenty-three youth artists who would be willing to work in a club format and for each participant to draw one of the prime ministers. I'd teach some primary division students to sing the song, we'd record the melody, and we'd put it together as one amazing YouTube video.

Tangent #2

I completed most of my research about the prime ministers for my family's battle royal project while I was away on vacation in Maryland, USA in August 2017. During that time, the Charlottesville incident occurred. As explained in news reports (e.g. Al Jazeera News, 2017 August 17), a rally was planned by an ultra-nationalist, white supremacist group, originally to protest the removal of a statue of General Robert E Lee in Virginia. Anti-racist counter-protestors arrived in the city to object and people were injured and killed during the event. The conversation around whether to remove statues honouring Confederate leaders heated up, and in Baltimore, the city nearest to where I was staying, monuments were removed (Campbell and Broadwater, 2017 August 16).

The issue came closer to home when the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) brought a motion during its Annual General Meeting encouraging

school boards to rename schools and buildings named after Sir John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada. As the ETFO media release explained,

The motion recognizes that Macdonald has been celebrated based on an incomplete version of Canadian history. As a central architect of the Indian Act and residential schools, Macdonald played a key role in developing systems that perpetuated genocide against Indigenous people. Passing this motion recognizes the impact this history has on all our students, but specifically on Indigenous students, parents and educators. (ETFO, 2017 August 24)

This led to a lot of debate in the news and online, and led me to re-examine the research I had conducted. I used typical school library reference materials to explore information readily available to students. Most of that research came from secondary sources. My favourite book series for young people on the prime ministers, the “Warts and All” series by Jackfruit Press, made a point of providing a frank portrayal of the strengths and flaws of the selected individuals. What about other publications? Did they “pull punches” by downplaying some of the racist attitudes as just “part of the times”?

For example: In the book *Sir John A. Macdonald, the rascal who built Canada* by Jacqueline A. Brown, the very first two sentences are: “People called him a ‘frightful old rascal’ and ‘the father and founder of this country’. To this day, he is the only prime minister to throw up in the House of Commons, resign for dishonourable behaviour, and take up arms against invading Americans.” (Brown 2006 page 5) When it came to the treatment of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples, the book had mixed opinions. After the Red River Rebellion, “Sir John decided it was best to negotiate with the Metis rather than wage a war. He did not treat Riel like a traitor, and instead, agreed to leave most of the land to the Metis and the First Nations peoples.” (Brown 2006 page 28). Yet when Louis Riel was arrested after the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, “the jury at his trial found Riel guilty [of treason] but recommended that he be treated with mercy. Sir John disagreed. In 1886, Riel and eight other First Nations leaders from the rebellion were hanged” (Brown 2006 page 32). No mention was made of the creation of the residential school system. Other ethnic groups were not treated well – in a separate section it mentioned the Chinese Immigration Act, a discriminatory piece of legislation intended to restrict the influx of Asian newcomers, but this was attributed to the government and not to Macdonald as an individual (Brown 2006 page 33).

I read a lot about Sir John A. Macdonald’s legacy and the recommendation to remove his name from some schools through my Twitter feed and sorted through knee-jerk reactions and thoughtful analysis on both sides of the debate. I bookmarked tweets (Paul G [@onepageeveryday] 2017 August 26) (Hayden King [@Hayden_King] 2017 August 25) and did more listening and thinking than

speaking. One very useful thread by Rachelle Fox used Hansard (records of Canada's parliament) as a primary source for understanding Macdonald's attitudes towards the Chinese and native Canadians. (Rachelle Fox [@Rachelle_Fox] 2017 August 24)

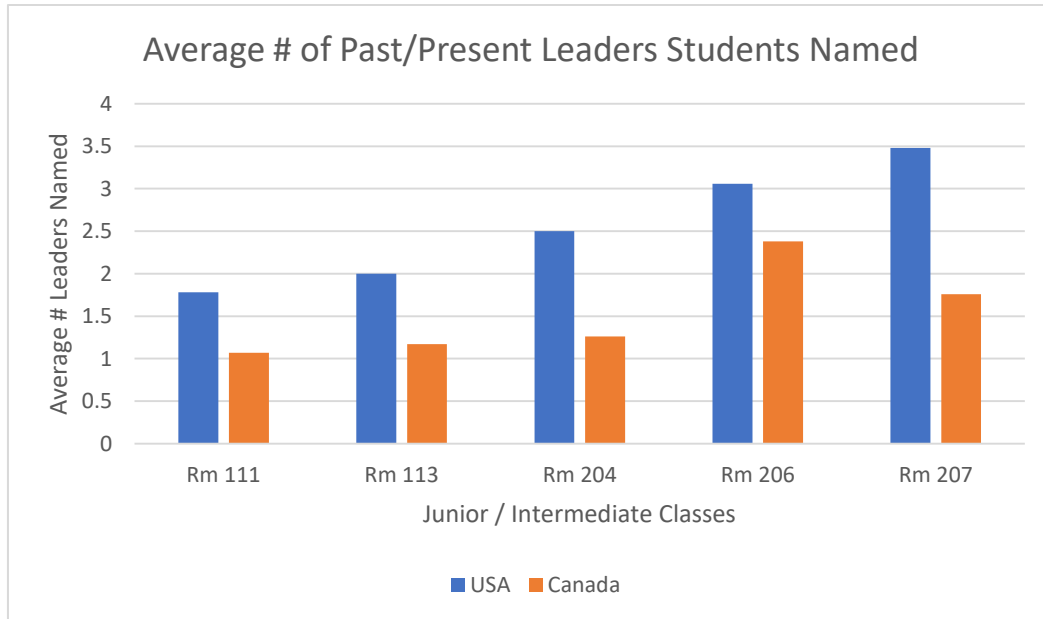


As I read and thought about things, a new, and even more valuable tangent appeared. It is helpful to learn the names of the prime ministers, but it is equally as important to think critically about their role. My new plan was to ask the students "which of Canada's prime ministers could earn the title of most inclusive?" This is not necessarily biased in favour of the most recent prime ministers, as Jay Odjick's tweets about comments by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a Rolling Stone magazine interview highlighted some problematic attitudes by our most recent prime minister about First Nations people. (Veldon Coburn [@VeldonCoburn] 2017 July 28)

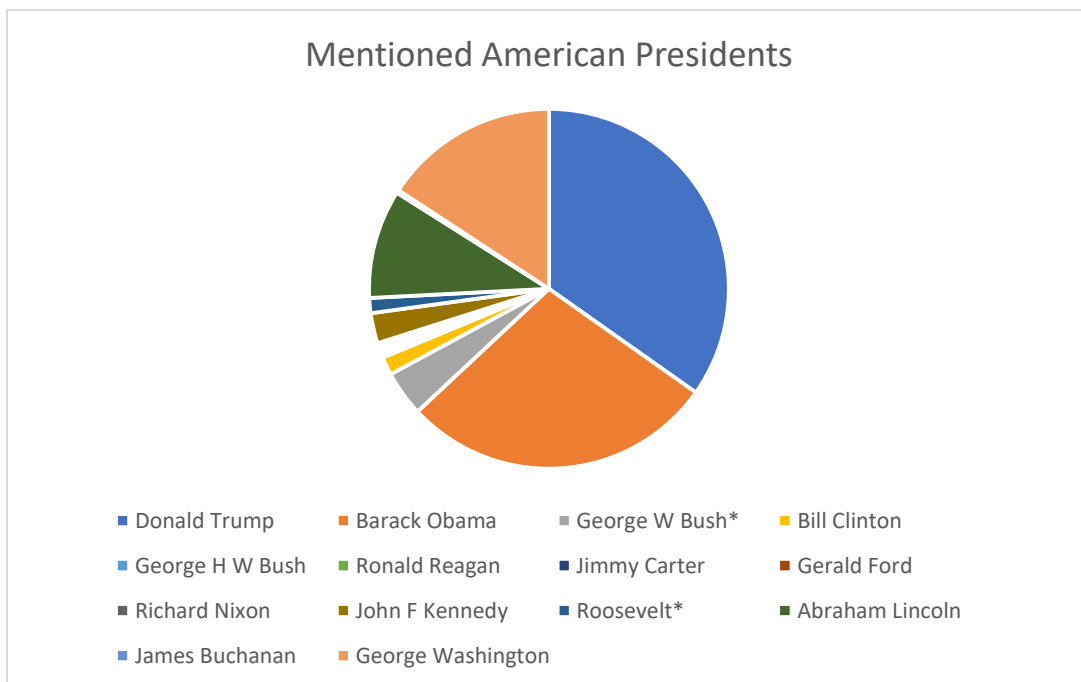


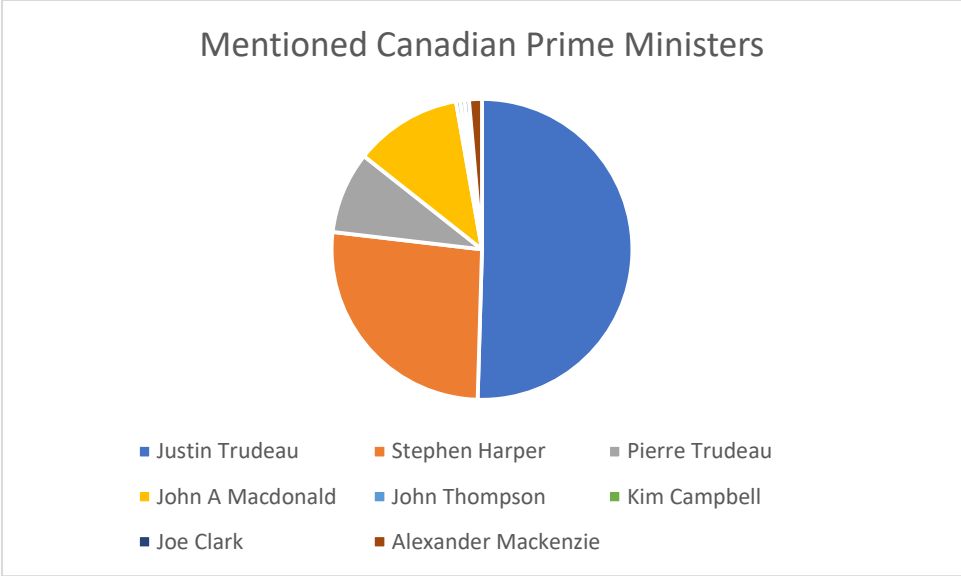
Implementation

During the first week of school, I surveyed the students in Grades 4-8 to determine how many prime ministers they could name on their own. As I predicted, students could name more American leaders than Canadian leaders.

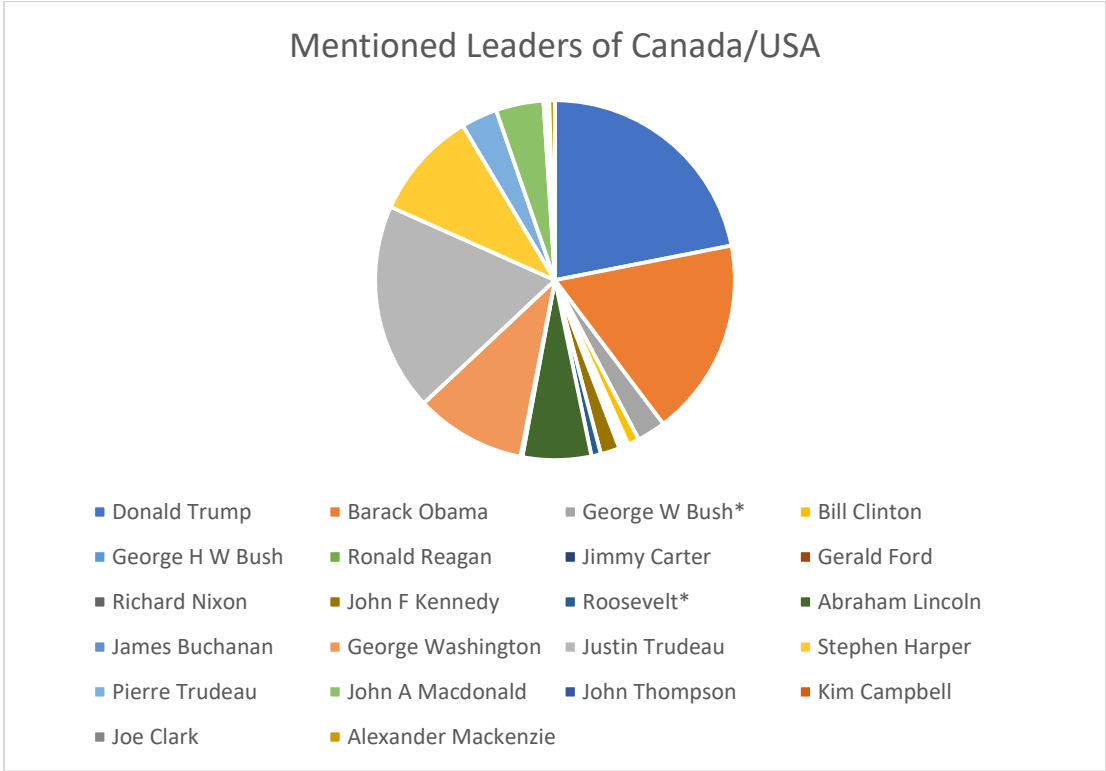


The pre-assessment also indicated that students were more familiar with current or recent presidents or prime ministers than past leaders.





When compared together, the most recognized political figure was Donald Trump. 128 students out of the 141 named Trump. Justin Trudeau only slightly edged out Barack Obama as a recognized leader by the students, with a score of 109 compared to 104 for Obama. In the debrief after the survey, students hypothesized why they could name more American presidents. Some suggested that there were more presidents that have served compared to the Canadian counterparts (45 instead of 23). Others mentioned the larger media and news focus on American politics. Whatever the reason, it was clear that students did not know as much about Canada’s history and leaders.



At the time of this paper's publication, the rest of the lessons have not yet been taught. Subsequent lessons will promote the use of primary source materials when researching and will incorporate social media as a legitimate method of examining dissenting points of view and new perspectives. I plan on introducing Evan Munday's Twitter project, #365Canadians, in which he illustrates a notable Canadian every day in 2017 – his focus is on representing the diversity of Canadians that made a difference (Munday, [@idontlikemunday] 2017). When the YouTube video of the song about Canadian leaders is uploaded, the link to the URL will be shared as an addendum or comment to this paper.

Reflection and Further Questions

This experience has helped me grow as an informed and active Canadian and teacher-librarian. It has reminded me about the importance of hearing diverse viewpoints and consulting primary sources to help form my own opinions. It has inspired me to learn more about my country's history, including the negative legacies. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) requests,

... the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, [should] make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.

I hope that this project will help contribute to that call to action.

My Kids Guide to Canada project left me with more questions than answers.

- How can teacher-librarians introduce students to primary research effectively when the reading level required to disseminate the original texts is sophisticated? I vowed back in 2016 to read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reports (Maliszewski, 2016) but I found it hard to digest. If I struggle with this task, how can my students manage?
- When social media is employed, how can a balanced political approach be attained when so much "personalization" occurs that narrows access to alternate viewpoints?
- What comes first when teaching history – the facts, the engagement, or the critical thinking? Must students know about the prime ministers before having entertaining "what if" conversations? How can we keep student interest alive while providing the foundation for them to eventually question?

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