

A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO ADDRESS YOUTH RADICALIZATION

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ABSTRACT. Schools are increasingly being asked to identify and monitor youth who may be susceptible to recruitment toward radical groups. Rather than asking teachers to identify at-risk behaviors, Dianne Gereluk argues here that a whole-school approach may help to foster belonging and connection among youth that is not additive, but a central component of safe and inclusive schools. Whole-school approaches attend to the different power relationships that occur within the school community, focusing on the classroom environment, the school organization, and the broader school environment. Insofar as radicalization is partly a response to the perception of exclusion and oppression, these factors may go some way toward mitigating the appeal of extremism.

KEY WORDS. youth radicalization; extremism; terrorism; whole-school approach

Troubling indicators of polarizing ideological views among youth are on the rise. Factors contributing to this issue are manifold, as are the prototypes of radicalized youth. I start with the premise that youth radicalization is the “increase in and/or reinforcing of extremism in the thinking, sentiments, and/or behavior of individuals and/or groups of individuals.”¹ A subtle yet important distinction between youth radicalization and extremism is required here. Youth radicalization emphasizes the *process* by which an individual youth or group of youth becomes more extremist in nature, whereas extremism is the *current state* of beliefs of an individual or group “who has a particular perspective to the exclusion of other perspectives or that ... strays from the accepted norms and behaviors of mainstream society.”² Neither case necessarily refers to committing an act of violence, nor does it refer to any particular political, social, or religious movement. Radicalized youth and extremists may or may not commit violent acts. For the purposes of this article, I focus on youth radicalization.

In defending an integrated whole-school approach to reduce youth radicalization, I first outline the predictors and causes of youth radicalization as well as responses that have been implemented to address the issue. I then critique the practice of early identification of at-risk radical youth by teachers. This practice may lead to racial profiling of students and perpetuate systemic racism in schools. Finally, in place of such policies, I advocate for the implementation of

1. David Mandel, “Radicalization: What Does It Mean?,” in *Home-Grown Terrorism: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalization Among Groups with an Immigrant Heritage in Europe*, ed. Thomas Pick, Anne Speckhard, and Beatrice Jacuch (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Fairfax, 2010), 111.

2. Dianne Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism: What Should Be Taught in Citizenship Education and Why* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 7.

a whole-school approach. I propose that schools ought to foster more substantial forms of political deliberation within a broader context of respectful dialogue among students, combined with promoting social connectedness and belonging within the school community. In making these suggestions, I reference some of the challenges Canadian schools currently face, including xenophobic and intolerant voices that threaten to further marginalize racialized minorities, and the simultaneous increase of domestic White supremacist groups.

The whole-school approach purports to provide vulnerable youth with a sense of belonging and empowerment at school to curb the likelihood that they will find solidarity and acceptance in a radical movement. This approach views education from a holistic perspective in mitigating extremism as opposed to an interventionist remedy. In a school that adopts a whole-school approach, the intent is to embed policies and practices that will enhance the ability of all students to identify with and see themselves represented in the school ethos.

PREDICTORS, CAUSES, AND RESPONSES TO YOUTH RADICALIZATION

Part of the challenge in addressing youth radicalization is the complexity of factors that give rise to it in the first place. As I have argued elsewhere,³ no one clear pattern of behavior or motivational basis can account for the rise in youth radicalization.⁴ Some scholars have suggested that ideology is the primary basis for youth radicalization, with environmental and relational factors playing a secondary role in the advancement of extremist views. Others have noted an amplification of extremist ideologies and have correlated this rise with the rise of online platforms that propagate hate.⁵ The omnipresence of social media and microtargeting based on ideology may also account for the influx of extremist ideological perspectives.⁶

3. Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism*; and Dianne Gereluk and Carol-Ann Titus, "How Schools Can Reduce Youth Radicalization," in *Šolsko Polje: Radicalization, Violent Extremism and Conflicting Diversity* 29, no. 5–6, ed. Mitja Sardoč and Tomaž Deželan (2018): 33–50.

4. Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism*; Gereluk and Titus, "How Schools Can Reduce Youth Radicalization"; and Aislinn O'Donnell, "Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent: The Educational Implications of Prevent," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016): 53–76.

5. Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Stijn Sieckelincx, and Micha de Winter, "Parental Influence on Radicalization and De-radicalization According to the Lived Experiences of Former Extremists and Their Families," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 12 (2017): 192–226; and Matthew Costello, Rebecca Barrett-Fox, Colin Bernatzky, James Hawdon, and Kelly Mendes, "Predictors of Viewing Online Extremism among America's Youth," *Youth & Society* 52, no. 5 (2020): 710–727.

6. John Holmwood and Therese O'Toole, *Countering Extremism in British Schools! The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2017); and Mario Novelli, "Education

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Despite the various predictors that researchers have identified as catalysts for increased radicalization, the existence of multiple pathways to extremism “does not preclude the discovery of common trends or features.”⁷ One commonality is “some form of expression of personal trauma as the primary driver of an individual’s descent into extremism.”⁸ In many cases, adolescents are particularly susceptible to extremism due to an inability to find identity, community, and purpose.⁹ Youth who experience a lack of connection with a broader community often experience feelings of displacement and meaninglessness. As a result of this trauma, disempowered youth may turn to extremism to feel respected, important, and valued.¹⁰ Membership in an extremist group can provide the camaraderie that disenfranchised youth crave; “a culture of extremism is often presented as warm and welcoming, even empowering to new recruits.”¹¹ A second commonality among extremists is a perception of grievance, “some form of injustice, oppression, or socio-economic exclusion.”¹² A group of aggrieved people then bond over shared feelings of resentment and anger, which can fuel and propagate extremism.¹³ The group dynamic is thus a key factor in the radicalization process: “Individuals who become extremists do not generally do so in isolation, but in a social context of which groups are an essential component.”¹⁴ Group dynamics also serve to legitimize the extremist mindset. Other members corroborate fringe perspectives and simultaneously discredit other relevant voices.¹⁵ Adolescents are particularly susceptible to the groupthink that is pervasive in extremism, as in many cases they have not fully developed their critical cognitive faculties.

The general pattern of indicators that lead to radicalization create a perfect storm: extremist groups leverage the vulnerabilities of youth who feel disenfranchised, frustrated, isolated, or angered, and offer a sense of valor, heroism, and collective identity. “Secrecy and trust, the intersection between group charisma and stigmatization and minorities of the best and worst are integral to group cohesion, recruitment and retention processes.”¹⁶ The solidarity that a focused ideological

and Countering Violent Extremism: Western Logics from South to North?,” *Compare* 47, no. 5 (2017): 835–851.

7. Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2021), 177.

8. Christian Picciolini, *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020), 15.

9. *Ibid.*, 16.

10. *Ibid.*, xxi.

11. *Ibid.*, 66.

12. Cassam, *Extremism*, 168.

13. *Ibid.*, 174.

14. *Ibid.*, 168.

15. *Ibid.*, 182.

16. Stephen Vertigans, *The Sociology of Terrorism: People, Places, and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 110.

perspective can offer an individual enables that person to become part of a larger movement and feel accepted and included.

Various approaches have been advanced to respond to increased youth radicalization and to combat the adverse effects that it has in schools and communities. Some organizations have created counter-terrorism educational programs, but they often seem antithetical to the ethical, pedagogical implications of schooling.¹⁷ Although such programs are well-intended, it is not clear that they are effective. Many of the indicators of youth radicalization — isolation, rejection, mental well-being, identity — may be better addressed by implementing a robust curriculum within a whole-school approach that attends to disrupting narrow ideologies as well as the greater disenfranchisement and isolation that radicalized youth often experience.

THE PROBLEM WITH TEACHER IDENTIFICATION OF “AT-RISK” YOUTH

Although extremism of any kind, from any group, is to be condemned, the conversations and efforts around deradicalizing youth should not hinge upon teachers identifying at-risk behaviors in their classes and notifying authorities if they see troubling signs. This approach assumes that teachers will consistently intervene and notify the authorities, will have the expertise to accurately identify and monitor at-risk behaviors, and will not unduly target racialized minorities.

The monitoring and surveillance of students has become a recommendation in some jurisdictions, particularly following the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in New York and London, respectively. In 2015, the United Kingdom’s Counter-Terrorism and Security Act imposed the Prevent duty, “a duty on schools to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.”¹⁸ This assigns to teachers a professional responsibility to help children and youth understand the risks associated with terrorism and to develop the knowledge and skills to be able to challenge extremist arguments.¹⁹ The further emphasis of the Prevent duty is a custodial task for teachers to observe children, be attentive to behavior changes, identify those at risk of radicalization, and potentially refer them for external assessment and support. This requires that teachers monitor and survey

17. Christer Mattsson, Nils Hammaren, and Ylva Odenbring, “Youth ‘at Risk’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the European Commission’s Radicalization Awareness Network Collection of Approaches and Practices Used in Education,” *Power and Education* 8, no. 3 (2016): 251–265; and Eleni Christodoulou and Simona Szakács, *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education: International and German Approaches* (Braunschweig, Germany: Georg Eckert Institute, 2018).

18. UK Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, 26.1, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/section/26/enacted>.

19. Department for Education, *The Prevent Duty: Departmental Advice for Schools and Child-care Providers* (2015), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439598/prevent-duty-departmental-advice-v6.pdf.

students, which is described as a form of securitization of students for educational purposes.²⁰

But if the objective of these practices is to create safe learning environments in schools by asking teachers to watch for troublesome behaviors, I argue that these policies have failed to produce their intended effects. Lee Jerome and Alex Elwick found that the Prevent duty disproportionately focused on three themes: Islamophobia, Britishness, and safeguarding. The implementation of the Prevent duty further caused more inconsistencies among teachers who had little support in its conceptualization or implementation, took liberties in its interpretation and enforcement, and were unclear about when to intervene.²¹

The challenge of identifying changing behaviors among students as they relate to radicalization is an unrealistic and unfair burden to be placed on teachers. At best, it requires a level of training and expertise to properly identify troubling behaviors. At worst, it may cause further stigmatization, discrimination, and loss of trust among already marginalized students.²² To illustrate the problems with this approach, consider a common legal duty for teachers to report abuse or neglect. Teachers' duty to report various student behaviors or problems is a longstanding legal requirement, yet there is hesitancy to do so. For instance, in the United States, an estimated 84 percent of suspected domestic abuse or neglect cases are not reported by teachers.²³ Similar studies suggest that this pattern of underreporting is not unique to the US but is a common trend in different parts of the world.²⁴ Some of the reasons stated for underreporting include fear that reporting will damage teacher–child or teacher–family relationships, fear of making an inaccurate report, fear that reporting will escalate the abuse, and beliefs that inadequacies in the child protection system will harm the family or fail to actually help the child.²⁵

Arguably, the concerns teachers have expressed in reporting suspected abuse and neglect have parallel implications for the duty to identify youth who may be radicalized. The factors that lead to changing behaviors of radicalized youth

20. Lee Jerome and Alex Elwick, "Teaching about Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation: Some Implications for Controversial Issues Pedagogy," *Oxford Review of Education* 46, no. 2 (2020): 222–237.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Eleni Christodoulou, "'Boosting Resilience' and 'Safeguarding Youngsters at Risk': Critically Examining the European Commission's Educational Responses to Radicalization and Violent Extremism," *London Review of Education* 18, no. 1 (2020): 18–34.

23. John Kenner and Margaret Robinson, "Teachers as Mandated Reporters of Child Maltreatment: Comparison with Legal, Medical and Social Service Reporters," *Children & Schools* 24, no. 4 (2002): 222–231.

24. Meredith Falkiner, Donald Thomson, and Andrew Day, "Teachers' Understanding and Practice of Mandatory Reporting of Child Maltreatment," *Children Australia* 42, no. 1 (2017): 39; and Karmen Toros and Riine Tiirik, "Preschool Teachers' Perceptions about and Experience with Child Abuse and Neglect," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 44, no. 1 (2014): 25.

25. Adrienne Goebbels, Jan M. Nicholson, Kerryann Walsh, and Hein De Vries, "Teachers' Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect: Behavior and Determinants," *Health Education Research* 23, no. 6 (2008): 941.

are more nebulous and amorphous than those of abuse. And the implications of wrongful identification can significantly damage the relations among students, families, and communities. For teachers, the risks of not identifying potential radicalized youths may not outweigh the other perceived risks of wrongfully identified behaviors. Even when teachers do report changes in student behavior in accordance with the Prevent duty clause, there is significant risk that they have an implicit bias toward targeting certain student populations, particularly Muslim students.²⁶

Aislinn O'Donnell noted that the identification of at-risk behaviors tends to focus on the notion of vulnerability — particularly in those most likely to become terrorists.²⁷ Students who express disparate views may be inappropriately viewed as at-risk. For other youth, exploring or debating nuanced or contested contemporary issues may be viewed as too risky, further silencing those voices. Alex Schmid observed that the ambiguity and nuance of what are taken as indicators unnecessarily targets distinct student populations.²⁸ Rik Coolsaet has contended that

many different expressions of an individual's ideas and behaviour were being labelled as signs of radicalisation, and these ranged from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox preachers and the terrorists themselves. Putting these disparate signs together in a box labelled "indicators of radicalisation" emptied the word of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.²⁹

Due to the challenging nature of identification, creating a type of "checklist" for signs of radicalization problematically suggests a certainty that has not been substantiated by any evidence of those who work in counterterrorism. More problematically, "[i]t is not clear what one is permitted to say without being constituted as at 'risk of radicalisation' or as having 'extremist' ideas ... [which leaves students] doubting whether they can speak, viewing their own ideas through the lens of security agendas before weighing them up for themselves."³⁰ If teachers are obliged to identify at-risk student behavior, there is a substantial risk that students will be less likely to publicly discuss their ideological views, particularly if they are still formulating their ideas and if the nature of the discussion is controversial.

The problematic stance of identifying vulnerable and at-risk behaviors perpetuates the systemic barriers of discrimination and racism that are prevalent in

26. Katy Pal Sian, "Spies, Surveillance, and Stakeouts: Monitoring Muslim Moves in British State Schools," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 18, no. 2 (2015): 196.

27. O'Donnell, "Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent."

28. Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013).

29. Rik Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case* (Gent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2015), 5.

30. O'Donnell, "Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent," 61–62.

schools. It further shifts the gaze of the teacher from that of a pedagogical guide to a security guard, undermining the democratic aims and purposes of education.³¹ Arguably, it has the very real potential of creating a system of racialized surveillance for minority populations in schools, who may already be underserved and marginalized in other ways.

Programs that offer brief workshops, or presentations, arguably do little to change a culture or sustain an intended shift in behavior. These programs are sometimes referred to as “parachute programs,” whereby an external agency comes in to chat with teachers after school or present to students through class visits — and then leaves. Illustrative of this idea is ReDirect, a program in Canada that aims to prevent radicalization to violence through community education and awareness as well as prevention and intervention.³² ReDirect’s approach is to educate individuals on the dangers of radicalization and to help people exit radical groups. The agency is associated with the Calgary Police Service and conducts class visits in schools. Although such programs have some benefit, it is unclear whether they make a substantive difference in creating a sustained change to the culture and ethos of the targeted students. Inspirational talks, awareness campaigns, or class visits do not provide the ongoing and nuanced efforts required to change significant ideological stances, nor do they provide the support required to curb extremism. A more pervasive and sustained approach in the school is preferable, as it reaches all students, avoids singling out anyone, is more discrete, and is a preventive, rather than remedial, solution.

THE WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

Given the complexity of youth radicalization, a silver bullet solution is untenable. Although schools and teachers can help to mitigate the factors that contribute to youth radicalization, the burden is not solely on schools to redress the issue. The root goes beyond school walls into broader public discourses about what it means to live cohesively in society despite people’s fundamentally different political, economic, and religious beliefs. While not exhaustive, I wish to highlight four priority areas. First, I argue that more robust forms of political deliberation ought to be central in the formal curriculum. Second, critical consciousness, engagement, and dialogue help students to be able to express and develop more mature understandings of themselves and others. Third, teachers play a critical role in creating an inclusive classroom environment in order for such issues to be addressed in a respectful and safe manner. Finally, building an institutional school culture that upholds these values helps to model the ways in which we want our students, staff, and community members to act and be held accountable to these democratic dispositions both in principle and in practice. The principles that I put forth not only serve the school in mitigating youth radicalization, but also attend

31. Ibid.; and Damian Breen and Nasar Meer, “Securing Whiteness? Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Securitization of Muslims in Education,” *Identities* 26, no. 5 (2019): 595–613.

32. For more information about this program, visit <https://redirect.cpsevents.ca/>.

to issues of bullying, isolation, and marginalization. Developing a whole-school approach that actively promotes participation, agency, and democratic thinking helps to foster more robust forms of community and belonging. Adopting these methods both within the formal curriculum and within the school creates an environment in which students feel more connected, represented, and respected as part of the wider school ethos.

An integrated, whole-school approach may be more effective at mitigating youth radicalization beyond specific curriculum measures or external agency programs. Whole-school approaches can be especially appropriate and effective in addressing radicalism because they rely on “inclusive processes that involve the diversity of members that make up a community; the active participation of community members and equal ‘power’ relationships, or equal partnerships among community members; and supportive structures such as school policies” that reflect the values of participation and democracy.³³ As such, they have benefits over and above dealing with the issue of youth radicalization *per se*.

POLITICAL DELIBERATION IN THE FORMAL CURRICULUM

We see disturbing trends that ideological views are increasingly polarized, the proliferation of misinformation is becoming more rampant, and social media algorithms are contributing to starker ideological echo-chambers. The concern is that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these influences as they endeavor to create a sense of their own identity in these key developmental years. Without the skills to negotiate and critically evaluate online claims or the source of the information, adolescents are at a heightened risk. Of course, these skills are important not only for students who are susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups but for everyone living and working in a digital world.

For some youth, the attraction to radicalization is in response to a grievance: “the perception of grievance, in the form of injustice, oppression or socio-economic exclusion, is an important factor which makes people ‘receptive to extremist ideas’.”³⁴ Part of the task, then, is to create curricula that critically consider politically and historically contested milestones more robustly. Curricula that more accurately reflect contested historical and political landscapes may help to mitigate youth radicalization by challenging narrow, monolithic narratives, lessening students’ potential anger, frustration, and silencing.

Extremist groups solicit youth toward radicalization in several ways.³⁵ Nationalist terror groups tend to adopt a contemporary rhetoric and narrative that draws upon ideals from the historical past. Other terrorist groups draw from historical

33. Fiona Rowe, Donald Stewart, and Carla Patterson, “Promoting School Connectedness through Whole School Approaches,” *Health Education* 107, no. 6 (2007): 524.

34. Cassam, *Extremism*, 170.

35. Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2007); Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Vertigans, *The Sociology of Terrorism*.

injustices to argue a need for retribution to atone for past injustices. Social platforms target individuals who are both disenfranchised and have low self-efficacy to create a romanticized narrative of notoriety and worth. Youth radicalization often focuses on individuals who feel political or social exclusion.

If the tendency of extremist groups is to recruit individuals who remain on the margins of inclusion and to work to narrow their ideological perspectives, a formalized curriculum may help to disrupt those recruitment avenues. This shift requires a more robust and inclusive curriculum that goes beyond a simplified historical and political narrative, commonly denoting key dates, historical moments, winners, and losers, reducing the complexity of such events to memorizable facts with little basis for context, nuance, or complexity.³⁶ A superficial curriculum that does not delve into complex and contested histories narrows conceptions of citizenship and may serve to heighten the polarization and isolation of some.³⁷ Sigal Ben-Porath has articulated this issue succinctly: "Addressing extremism is thus not simply a matter of introducing or inculcating values, but rather also a matter of helping students develop the skills that would allow them to discern facts from lies and the attitudes required to reject the latter."³⁸

Illustrative of this problem is a proposed Alberta, Canada, elementary social studies curriculum that diverges significantly from the objective of understanding oneself and others in a developmentally appropriate way; instead it presents a colonized interpretation of abstract core knowledge that emphasizes the prominent male figures in history, erasing and silencing many of the historical and contemporary injustices committed against the Indigenous People of Canada.³⁹ The recitation of hundreds of key facts and dates throughout history lacks an understanding of both the way in which children learn and the way in which the curriculum requires engagement and deliberation about the fuller truths that have been silenced and hidden in school curricula. Students cannot move toward shared knowledge, "an integration of extremists into a shared public sphere," unless there is a fulsome account of the historical and political injustices that have led to unresolved frustration, anger, and grief.⁴⁰ Formal curricula must create space for critical and transparent dialogue to bring people and society together. As O'Donnell poignantly notes, "Renewed honest conversations and reimagined curricula would ask how we can respond to, and talk about, violence in the broader lived context of students. These conversations and curricula would find ways of

36. Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism*; and Gereluk and Titus, "How Schools Can Reduce Youth Radicalization."

37. Sigal Ben-Porath, *Citizenship under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

38. Sigal Ben-Porath, "Learning to Avoid Extremism," in this issue.

39. *K to 6 Curriculum Renewal* (2023), <https://www.alberta.ca/curriculum.aspx>.

40. Ben-Porath, "Learning to Avoid Extremism."

including the voices of those who are pushed outside and beyond political consideration."⁴¹

A formalized curriculum also requires cultivating democratic skills so that students can speak to contemporary issues that are rooted in broader historical and political phenomena. Diana Hess stresses that this requires a recognition and consciousness about the geographical and temporal nature in which these perennial contested issues are located.⁴² The aim is to create a deeper appreciation and understanding of the nuances that give rise to the contested aspects of a particular issue, the weight and value of the perspectives that proponents and opponents hold, so that discussions relating to extremist issues will lead to more open-mindedness despite their complexity.

Revising the formal curriculum also requires historical transparency. Curricula often present a sanitized version of history that does not accurately address past injustices. Transparency requires a decolonization of the Western White supremacy and privilege that are still commonly depicted in classroom materials and textbooks.⁴³ If change is to be meaningful and substantive, all parties must reckon with the full truths of the past. A full and fair account of colonization and its devastating consequences must be part of classroom deliberations.

At a fundamental level, the official formalized curriculum will determine whether one can redress narrow ideological perspectives and create the preconditions for a learning environment that builds students' dispositions for thinking deeply and meaningfully about the historical and contemporary issues that may exacerbate polarized views. If a curriculum is deficient and does not explicitly focus on robust and relevant shared knowledge, it is unclear whether any other normative recommendations will suffice. Roozbeh Shirazi notes the potential for such a curricular disconnect:

Investigations of the interplay of extremism and schooling should not constitute an analytical field divorced from the critical study of politics, covert and overt military operations, racism, xenophobia, and the contests to delimit who counts as a meaningful political subject in "Western" societies experiencing demographic tension and transition.⁴⁴

If a curriculum does not name historical injustices or explain how these injustices have led to the mistreatment of particular populations and nations, schools will continue to perpetuate historical inaccuracies and will miss the opportunity to understand the anger of those disturbed by colonialism. For example, avoiding

41. Aislinn O'Donnell, "Curriculum as Conversation: Vulnerability, Violence, and Pedagogy in Prison," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 4 (2015): 477.

42. Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (London: Routledge, 2009).

43. Christine Winter and China Mills, "The Psy-Security-Curriculum Ensemble: British Values Curriculum Policy in English Schools," *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 1 (2020): 46–67.

44. Roozbeh Shirazi, "When Schooling Becomes a Tactic of Security: Educating to Counter 'Extremism'," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 11, no. 1 (2017): 4.

the truths of historical racism and systemic discrimination in America further harbors resentment and distrust. Not acknowledging and reconciling the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada through residential schooling harbors a misguided and incomplete telling of what occurred. An inclusive curriculum requires that the nature of the issues not be sanitized. Explicitly identifying historical injustices is a requisite step in allowing mistreated peoples to heal. Conversely, if the formalized curriculum is biased and does not uncover the full truths and complexity of historical and political events, it undermines students' abilities to understand existing systemic barriers and the atrocities that underpin heightened polarization and tension among groups.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND DIALOGUE

If a formal curriculum provides the foundation for more accurate and robust historical and political information, there is a concomitant need for cultivating students' critical consciousness about their own biases and assumptions. This cultivation requires sustained opportunities for students to engage with peers who hold divergent perspectives. By creating a learning environment that cuts across political spectra, and invites and fosters respectful dialogue, students will be better able to understand and communicate with one another. Providing children with the agency to have facilitated dialogue may be a strong determinant in creating more political engagement and deliberation among students.⁴⁵

Critical consciousness includes the acknowledgment of one's own positionality and awareness of the systemic imbalances and oppression that are prevalent in society. On this view, teachers and students have a concomitant responsibility to challenge common biases that perpetuate inequality and disadvantage. Creating awareness and making explicit examples of systemic discrimination and oppression may help heighten awareness, understanding of one's own positionality, and commitment to redressing some of the ways in which certain individuals are marginalized. Illustrative of this approach is the use of counter-stories to challenge mainstream "stock" stories that perpetuate commonly held assumptions and stereotypes.⁴⁶ Further, having students reflect on their own identity, potential biases, and assumptions assists in both understanding and reflecting on their personal responsibility in remedying current inequities. It may also challenge dichotomous thinking and allow students to engage with the subtleties of different perspectives.

A second consideration in creating engaging and trusting pedagogical spaces in schools is the cultivation of moral engagement among students. If critical deliberation is to be part of the curriculum, there is a need to ensure that each student is valued and heard. As Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelinck note in their

45. Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess, "Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization," *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 14–47.

46. Kate D'Arcy, "Using Counter-Stories to Challenge Stock Stories about Traveller Families," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 20, no. 5 (2017): 636–649.

contribution to this symposium, if a student does not have a moral connection and relationship with their peers, there is a significant danger of that student becoming morally disengaged.⁴⁷ This disengagement necessarily has implications for those youth who become increasingly radicalized. Albert Bandura suggests that students who become morally disengaged may be at heightened risk for having extremist thoughts or engaging in extremist actions,⁴⁸ which may manifest in a number of ways. For instance, individuals will not usually commit a harmful act until they have justified in their own minds the morality of their actions. In some cases, individuals justify their harmful actions by characterizing them as utilitarian, having a purpose beyond themselves in service of advancing a cause that they deem is more important than the current suffering that they experience. In other cases, their harmful thoughts or actions are obscured by their not fully understanding the repercussions of their acts and diffusing their responsibility for the collective act led by a radicalized group. This thinking is further exacerbated by not seeing how their complicity is part of a broader mandate toward harm. In its place, Bandura suggests that there is a distortion or disregard of consequences — a distinct disconnect from one's moral actions.

The element of creating connection is not to be underestimated in fostering a sense of belonging, connection, and engagement with others. Christian Picciolini recalls the sense of isolation and disconnection from peers by former extremists who were recruited into radicalization as adolescents, drawing upon their insecurities of feeling isolated:

For twenty short minutes — a lifetime to me as a teen — the bald man in tall, black combat boots stayed with me in that stinking alley, connecting with me until I felt important and respected. Knowing I felt undervalued, he told me I mattered. It was the first time in my young life that I felt someone — anyone — saw me.⁴⁹

Central to this reflection is the observation that as a youth, the individual felt invisible, not seen, not valued. Picciolini states, “At the core of every radicalized individual I have ever met is one commonality: they sought to fill the emptiness caused by traumatic life experiences with something to mute or mask their pain.”⁵⁰ The vulnerability of feeling connected — a “quest” to find “meaning and identity”⁵¹ — may be a critical factor in whether youth become morally disengaged and attracted to radicalization.

Increasingly more attention is being given to dialogic pedagogies. Specifically, dialogic pedagogy creates pedagogical opportunities that fulfill four outcomes:

47. Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelinck, “Creating Caring and Just Democratic Schools to Prevent Extremism,” in this issue.

48. Albert Bandura, “Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency,” *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2003): 101–119.

49. Picciolini, *Breaking Hate*, xxix.

50. *Ibid.*, 16.

51. De Ruyter and Sieckelinck, “Creating Caring and Just Democratic Schools to Prevent Extremism.”

- a. Pupils and teachers address authentic problems and play an active and agentic role in the joint construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning;
- b. Pupils are empowered to express their voices, resulting in the interaction of multiple perspectives;
- c. Pupils and teachers adopt an open and critical stance toward knowledge claims; and
- d. The classroom community is characterized by respectful and caring relationships and inclusive and reciprocal participation norms.⁵²

The emphasis of dialogic pedagogy is twofold. First, it emphasizes an egalitarian, democratic learning environment where students can find their voice and agency. Second, however, the nature of the engagement requires a cognitive challenge and ethical space to ensure accountable participation by all members of the classroom community. It requires not only the invitation to speak, but also the active role of the teacher to ensure that students on the periphery *can* do so. The next section addresses the teacher's role.

The classroom should provide an opportunity for students to express themselves, hear others, and see beyond themselves. Robust engagement in classrooms requires connection, relationships, and trust. Conversely, without purposeful and sustained opportunities to do so among their peers, there is a potential outcome of vulnerable students feeling further removed, on the periphery, and undervalued.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

For students to be seen and represented in the curriculum, teachers must ensure that students have agency and feel valued. Teachers are uniquely positioned to leverage their authenticity and advocacy to create spaces for students to be present and to be heard, and to invite them to participate in critical conversations. In working with former Irish Republican Party political prisoners, O'Donnell reports that one of the men commented that they could "'smell' it off you if the teacher does not want to be there."⁵³ Providing the ethical space for students to feel valued and heard in the classroom helped those who were largely distrustful of authority and the institution.

Many believe that if teachers do not make an explicit and conscious effort to create inclusive, safe learning environments, they are complicit in furthering systemic barriers against racialized minorities.⁵⁴ Much has been written about the strong correlation between student voice and engagement in the classroom.

52. Julie Snell and Adam Lefstein, "'Low Ability,' Participation, and Identity in Dialogic Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 55, no. 1 (2018): 47.

53. O'Donnell, "Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent," 65.

54. *Ibid.*; and Dustin W. Louie and David Scott, "Examining Differing Notions of a 'Real' Education within Aboriginal Communities," *Critical Education* 7, no. 3 (2016): 1–18.

Students' contributions to their learning journey can foster stronger connections with their teachers and peers, recognition and acknowledgment of others' values, and openness to their opinions and perspectives. For instance, William McCorkle contends that teachers can disrupt intolerant stances and structure diverse interactions to deconstruct anti-immigrant attitudes, thereby addressing the increasing xenophobia toward immigrant students. Having concrete and diverse social interactions with peers may help youth to break down tensions that are targeted toward a particular group.⁵⁵

If the role of schools includes the creation of more deliberative spaces in classrooms for students to better understand the complex and nuanced aspects of historical and contemporary issues, then there is a concomitant role for teachers to be more aware of colonial agendas that still dominate school curricula.⁵⁶ Parallel conversations about the lack of a sense of place or belonging among those who have remained on the periphery and who do not feel represented in the schools they attend are common for equity-deserving groups. For some, this lack of representation affects their sense of trust and safety among their peers and educators. For others, it affects their willingness to see the value or importance of remaining in school.

Diverse representation is vital, so that students can be reflected in the curriculum and in the stories that are used in the classroom. The choices that teachers make in the selection of literature that is reflective of the diversity of people in society is a strong contributing factor of students being seen and reflected in an inclusive learning environment. Having visual art in the classes and hallways is also an explicit symbolic representation of the ways in which schools can create an inclusive space. The judgments made by teachers about the representation of racialized minorities, women in history, or non-Western perspectives will influence the conditions for creating safe deliberations in the class.

Consider, for example, that when there is an influx of newcomers in a school, it is not uncommon for there to be a distrust of those newcomers.⁵⁷ If one is an outsider, one's assumptions and perspectives are commonly called into question by peers, creating more suspicion and distrust for both the outsider and others in the classroom. The starting perspective is that those newcomers are the "other," and if there is a discord between the groups, the onus is on them to change. Thus, if critical deliberation is to be part of the curriculum, there is a necessity to ensure that each student is valued and heard, without fear of reprisal. Diverse forms of representation in an inclusive learning environment help not only to disrupt

55. William McCorkle, "The Rationale and Strategies for Undermining Xenophobia in the Classroom," *The Social Studies* 109, no. 3 (2018): 151–166.

56. Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

57. Anne Reuss, "The Researcher's Tale," in *Prison(er) Education: Stories of Change and Transformation* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2008).

narrow ideological perspectives, but also to create more inclusive, welcoming spaces.

SCHOOL INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Deliberately attending to the ethos of a school (the formal and informal school structures) via a whole-school approach enables a school to curate and enforce its own values and expectations. The school culture and ethos may inform how effectively the school can disrupt the potential radicalization and polarization of views among divergent groups. By cultivating a school environment where freedom of expression and democratic values are promoted, an entire community, through the whole-school approach and formal curriculum, can engage in dynamic political discourse and can unite to deradicalize the disenfranchised.⁵⁸

In Canada and in the United States, those who are often vulnerable to radicalization are not minorities but rather Whites who are susceptible to White supremacism. In fact, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in its October 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment*, wrote that it is “particularly concerned about white supremacist violent extremists who have been exceptionally lethal in their abhorrent, targeted attacks in recent years.”⁵⁹ In Canada, the Proud Boys, a violent White supremacist, chauvinist fraternal group that has gained traction in recent years, was classified as a terrorist group on February 3, 2021.⁶⁰ What is common among extremist groups, notwithstanding where they fall on the political spectrum, are members’ feelings of alienation, futility, frustration, and estrangement from modern society. A school ethos must then simultaneously amplify diverse perspectives and foster a culture of tolerance among the student body.

An increased effort to address systemic discrimination and racism in schools is occurring in Canada. For instance, in Ontario, the *Accepting Schools Act* notes in the preamble that for all students to feel safe at school without intimidation or insecurity, a whole-school approach is required.⁶¹ The Nova Scotia Department of Education has similarly advocated for a whole-school approach to develop strong emotional relationships between students and teachers, and among students generally:

We must engage entire communities, work to change longstanding attitudes, and begin to teach principles of empathy, respect, inclusiveness, and diversity from the very first day of school This approach embraces the whole school community, which means involving all students, all teachers, staff, administrators, parents, neighbours and any other

58. Ben-Porath, “Learning to Avoid Extremism”; and Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson, “Promoting School Connectedness through Whole School Approaches.”

59. US Department of Homeland Security, *Homeland Threat Assessment: October 2020* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2020), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf, 4.

60. Public Safety Canada, “National Security, Listed Terrorist Entities, Currently Listed Entities,” first listed on February 3, 2021, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrnt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx>.

61. Accepting Schools Act, 2012, SO 2012 c 5: preamble, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/s12005>.

members of the school community, and it will impact the daily functioning of the school, including all school curricula, policies and programs. A successfully implemented whole school approach will profoundly affect the atmosphere of a school, or the “school climate,” providing a sense of safety, dignity, belonging and wellbeing to all members of the school community.⁶²

In adopting a whole-school approach, the aim is to see the interrelated elements of students’ cognitive, mental, emotional, and social health with the hope that it will both mitigate the social alienation some students feel and promote the collective and social aims of what it means to belong in a school.⁶³ Extremist groups focus on vulnerable youths’ need for significance, a narrative to which they belong, and a network that creates a sense of belonging. A whole-school approach, to be successful, must then attempt to fulfill these needs.⁶⁴ Individuals who struggle with tolerating ambiguity or uncertainty, and who feel systemically rejected, are at greater risk of radicalization: “Insecure or distorted life attachment and the quest for (re-)constructing a secure place in life by deficient life skills may put individuals onto the path to violent extremism as a personally sensible yet deeply distorted and socially destructive way of own and common life.”⁶⁵

What is entailed, then, in trying to create inclusive whole-school environments? Much has been written on this subject as the approach has been applied to redress not only school radicalization, but also more commonly bullying and the marginalization of particular student populations. At a fundamental level, whole-school approaches attend to the different power relationships that occur within the school community, focusing on the classroom environment, the school organization, the ethos, and the broader school environment. Together, the intent is to actively create more democratic participation and decision-making processes both within the classroom and in the entire school community.⁶⁶ The goals are to redress dominant power dynamics among students, particularly between those in the mainstream and the periphery; to foster diverse representation and participation; and to have students see that their voice and agency are part of the school discourse. In a similar vein, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that articulated this sentiment, emphasizing the important role that young

62. A. Wayne MacKay, *Respectful and Responsible Relationships: There’s No App for That, The Report of the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying* (Halifax, Canada: Government of Nova Scotia, 2012), 87.

63. Katherine Weare, *Promoting Mental, Emotional and Social Health: A Whole School Approach* (London: Routledge, 2000).

64. Arie W. Kruglanski and Preben Bertelsen, “Life Psychology and Significance Quest: A Complementary Approach to Violent Extremism and Counter-radicalisation,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2020): 1–22.

65. *Ibid.*, 14.

66. Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson, “Promoting School Connectedness through Whole School Approaches.”

people should play as active participants in decision-making processes, peace processes, and conflict resolution.⁶⁷

A whole-school approach necessarily needs to be reflected across the school in its leadership, organization, and governance structure: “A whole-school community approach is more likely to succeed if the school’s leadership and management style is democratic, if communication and relationships among all members of the school community are dynamic, and if goals and values are shared among all interested parties.”⁶⁸ It requires all staff members to commit to actively creating opportunities for connection and association among the student body. How the approach is implemented will need to vary in order to be relevant and attentive to the local political and social context. On a broad level, having a strategic plan that creates more diverse, inclusive, and safe spaces for all members within the school walls is central. Reflective of this principle are policies and practices that are attentive to diverse representation of staff and parents in administration and governance. The approach should attend to disrupting implicit bias and power differentials among particular populations and supporting learners who may be at risk of diversity-related underachievement, marginalization, and exclusion. It also entails an attentiveness to the microaggressions that occur: staff–staff, staff–parent, staff–student, or student–student. How the school commits to a whole-school approach, both in its official policies and in the actions that reflect that commitment, are critical components for creating a whole-school ethos and culture that is reflective of its diverse community members.

Ideally, whole-school approaches foster engagement with parents and the broader community members, so that they too feel that they are an integral part of the school community and environment. This inclusion is particularly salient in cases where parents and community members have been conspicuously absent in the life and ethos of the school. In Canada, for example, not including Elders and Indigenous community members would indicate a disingenuous relationship toward reconciliation, given over a century of genocide of Indigenous children in Canadian residential schools. Without a substantive and sustained commitment to working in and with Indigenous communities, any attempts to create a safe and inclusive school environment for Indigenous students and their families cannot occur. Creating an inviting, welcoming space for community members to participate in the school culture, deliberations, and decision-making helps to reposition and reimagine schools as sites for community-building to break down systemic racism. This greater inclusion can both enhance the support mechanisms in youth development, security, and belonging, and reduce potential systemic barriers that have marginalized some youth populations.

67. United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2250” (2015), available for download at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/814032?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>.

68. Helen Cowie and Dawn Jennifer, *Managing Violence in Schools: A Whole-School Approach to Best Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 32.

Parental and community integration is, however, complex, and the broader community's beliefs may differ from the strategic objectives of a whole-school approach. In a sociopolitical milieu where parents have prejudicial views against underrepresented students, those views may undermine the inclusive school ethos. Illustrative of this disruption is the increasing number of school board meetings that are open to taxpayers in American jurisdictions. In some cases, the school meeting is appropriated by various protest groups, commonly furthering extremist polarized ideologies that undermine the values of fostering safe and inclusive schools central to a whole-school approach. In such cases, there is justification in protecting the diversity of students within the school walls by challenging the public discourse if the broader community promotes hate and intolerance. While parental and community support of an inclusive school environment is ideal, I raise this possibility simply to acknowledge the practical difficulty of being inclusive of the broader community while also ensuring that the school site is fostering a safe and inclusive environment.

CONCLUSION

Youth radicalization is unlikely to be eradicated. Highly sophisticated terrorist organizations have a multitude of ways in which to recruit and retain youth for their organizations. However, schools can disrupt these attempts — not only for disenfranchised youth, but for all youth who do not feel a sense of belonging or engagement with their peers, school, or community. The principles that I have outlined reflect the ways in which schools need to be more attentive to the diverse student populations they serve, cultivate more democratic dispositions within the classroom, and foster a strong sense of belonging within the school community. A whole-school approach requires substantive and meaningful opportunities for students to participate, engage, and be active in decision-making processes. It further requires school leadership to actively engage with students, families, and communities in creating a welcoming and inclusive space. Such an approach should not be considered an additive duty solely to reduce youth radicalization. Rather, the purpose should be to help all students feel a deeper sense of trust, dignity, and engagement with their peers. In this way, a whole-school approach impedes youth radicalization while also reducing bullying, dismantling systemic discrimination, and addressing broader forms of isolation and disengagement among students. Although a formalized curriculum will be beneficial, it will be insufficient unless the whole school commits to creating a place of inclusion and belonging for all students. If part of the reason that youth gravitate toward radicalization is a sense of isolation or disenfranchisement, then educational stakeholders must be attentive to the ways in which they make students feel part of the school ethos and culture.